

From the 20th to the 21st Century : The People's Republic of China

Sunday 9 February 2020, by [PARKER Ian](#) (Date first published: 29 January 2020).

The People's Republic of China (PRC) was founded in 1949 following a protracted liberation struggle headed by the Chinese Communist Party under the leadership of Mao Zedong, who was chairman of the party until his death in 1976. This liberation struggle had five key elements which are intertwined, but which we need to conceptually disaggregate if we are to make sense of what happened over the next seventy years, if we are to make sense of the nature of the Chinese state now.

Contents

- [‘Marxism’ and Marxist Analysis](#)
- [Marxism as a belief system](#)
- [In the Progress of Human \(...\)](#)
- [...and out in the city](#)

The struggle was, first, an explicitly modernising enterprise involving educational projects, battles against semi-feudal superstition, foot-binding and so forth, and continuing in the tracks of the bourgeois-democratic developments in the early years of the twentieth century. These cultural-political developments saw, for example, the emergence of a women's suffrage movement way in advance of many other countries. There was the implantation of ideas from the Western Enlightenment tradition which include those of Hegel and, of course Marx.

It was, second, a national liberation struggle, reasserting the independence and pride of the Chinese people against invading forces, most notably, of course, the Japanese, who had carried out horrific massacres, at Nanjing to note only one of the most well-known examples. The negotiations, and failed attempts to form 'National Revolution United Fronts' with the Kuomintang, entailed bloody failures. The Kuomintang, the 'Chinese Nationalist Party' under Chiang Kai-Shek, butchered communists while negotiating with the imperial powers. It was the Communist Party that emerged as the dominant nationalist force.

The third element, which needs to be untangled from basic national liberation in China in 1949, is that it was an anti-imperialist struggle. The revolution entailed the beating back of the imperialist Japanese invasion forces, and the driving out of the Kuomintang into Taiwan, where Chiang Kai-Shek ruled until 1975; he died a year before Mao. The Kuomintang was ejected from the island of Hainan in the south in 1950, the year that Tibet was formally incorporated into the People's Republic. The British, a powerful colonial presence that allied with the Kuomintang against the Communist Party, was confined to Hong Kong, and the Portuguese confined to Macau.

With the fourth element we arrive at one of the main political contradictions, which was then to provide one of the hallmarks of Mao's rule and of so-called 'Maoism'. This is the rural, peasant-based element of the struggle. There was a contradiction between Western Marxist emphasis on urban industrial development as the context and motor for communist politics, on the one hand, and the

Long March that Mao and his comrades engaged in through the mid-1930s, a long march through the countryside which led them to strategise the struggle as involving the encirclement of the cities. A hallmark of Maoism was to become its praise of peasant struggle.

Finally, fifth, there is a national and international element of what we could call 'rebel Stalinism'; this term to attempt to capture the way that, on the one hand, the Chinese Communist Party was indebted to the apparatus of the Third International directed from Moscow, and, on the other hand, had to break from Stalin's advice. The advice was that the disastrous National Liberation United Front be maintained with the Kuomintang in order to bring about a bourgeois-democratic revolution instead of a socialist one, which, in line with Stalinist 'stage' versions of historical development, would have been premature.

So, the political organisation of the Communist Party was still Stalinist, with top-down military discipline that had been necessary to liberate the country, but Maoism was to emerge as an international force on the world stage with the victory of the revolution there. The 1949 seizure of power was a world-changing event. But the world has also changed in the seventy years since that revolution. There is a contradictory process of resistance and adaptation to the international context that needs to be grasped if we are to understand China now and the prospects for Marxism there.

'Marxism' and Marxist Analysis

Leap forward seventy years; where is Marxism in China now? In a peculiar way, the fate of Marxism as a crucial practical-theoretical resource for Mao and his comrades, mirrors the fate of Marxism in the advanced capitalist countries, in this respect; while there are myriad leftist groups, including different competing remnants of the Third International here in the West, much Marxism as such has been transformed into an academic speciality. It is kept alive in the universities, and that's not only a bad thing, but it is too often enclosed there, and so turned into a scholarly abstract theoretical enterprise instead of a practical one geared to link understanding with political struggle. And so it is in China, where there is occasional lip-service to Marx in public arenas, but few statues of Marx or Engels, or even, today, of Mao. You can buy tourist kitsch images of Mao and hammer and sickle souvenirs in the cities, but the one place where you can be sure to find 'Marxism' is in the Schools and Colleges of Marxism inside the universities.

And that's what I know of it. I've visited China a number of times over the past fifteen years. I remember the year of the first visit, 2004, because that was the year Jacques Derrida died, something that was cause of some shock and upset among the academics in the conference in Hangzhou, capital of Zhejiang province in the south of the country. I mention it because that conference on linguistics and critical discourse theory saw figures like that, deconstructionist philosophers, as more important than Marx or Marxists.

My most recent visit, in December 2019, was to a more explicitly Marxist context. I was paid by Guangxi University for Nationalities, for travel and accommodation, to speak at 'The 46th Discipline Forum of the National College of Marxist Theory Discipline' (maybe it loses something in translation), the subtitle for which was 'International Academic Symposium on', and this next bit was in scare quotes, 'New Development of Socialism in the 21st Century and Progress of Human Civilization'. That's what I will mainly talk about here, and I'll use it as a peg on which to hang other reflections on what I've made of China in different visits.

You need a political frame to make sense of what you are told, and it's this political frame that underpinned my paper at the conference on 'Socialism in the next century' [1], which is probably why it got a polite quiet reception. It is a political frame that includes three moments of analysis

from within the tradition of the Fourth International, which was founded in war-torn Europe in 1938, just over ten years before Mao came to power. This dissident revolutionary Marxist tradition, and an organisation that explicitly broke from Stalinism, is my implicit, and sometimes explicit, point of reference for the debates occurring in China before, during and after the revolution. It gives us three key texts, books that have been influential on me, at least.

The first text is a book by Wang Fanxi [2], who ended his life in Leeds at the end of 2002. The book published in Hong Kong in Chinese and then in English in the mid-1990s, is called Wang Fan-hsi: Chinese Revolutionary, Memoirs 1919-1949. Wang Fanxi was born in 1907, and compiled these memoirs in the 1950s while in exile in Macau. The memoirs trace his political journey from being a member of the Chinese Communist Party in the 1920s, a supporter of CCP co-founder Chen Tu-hsiu who resisted Moscow's orders to take distance from the Kuomintang and who was then displaced by Mao, who was a more obedient Stalinist apparatchik. Wang describes encountering Trotskyism during his time in Moscow in the Communist University for the Toilers of the East, and then his return to China in 1929, the formation of the Chinese Left Opposition, imprisonment during the 1930s and then expulsion to Macau in 1949.

The Trotskyists in China were isolated, caught between the Kuomintang and the Stalinised Communist Party. Along with Peng Shuzhi [3], who was once on the Political Bureau of the Communist Party (who became a Trotskyist, was imprisoned by the Kuomintang, fled to Saigon after 1949, and then ended up in exile in the United States), Wang was an important figure in the Fourth International, keeping the revolutionary Marxist tradition alive, reflecting critically on Maoism, and paying the price. We can see in Wang's memoirs and in the debates with Peng Shuzhi, questions raised about what Trotsky's theory of permanent revolution meant in Chinese context, and whether they had themselves been mistaken in putting their energy only into urban proletarian movements. In some important respects, Mao was right.

The second text, and it reflects a second moment in the Fourth International's engagement with Maoism is the Italian scholar and activist Livio Maitan's book published in English in 1976 as *Party, Army and Masses in China: A Marxist Interpretation of the Cultural Revolution and Its Aftermath* [4]. Here in his book there is a history of the revolution, and a balance sheet of the Cultural Revolution which lasted for about ten years, from 1966 until Mao's death, and then the final defeat by the party apparatus of the so-called 'Gang of Four' led by 'Madame Mao', his fourth wife Jiang Qing.

That Cultural Revolution, especially in its first phase, seemed to chime with and inspired some of the 'New Left' movements around the world, reenergising Maoism as a political current. On the one hand, it raised again the question of the peasantry as a revolutionary force, and was an important player on the far-left, along with Trotskyism, particularly in radical versions of 'Third Worldist' politics that struck a distance from the capitalist West and the Soviet Union. On the other hand, the Cultural Revolution raised questions about the anti-bureaucratic potential of the mobilisation of the young Red Guards; the extent to which they were being used by one wing of the bureaucracy, that of Mao and then the Gang of Four, and the extent to which there was a dynamic to that movement that posed a threat to the bureaucracy as such, something that revolutionaries should be participating in.

The third text brings us almost up to date, a book by Au Loong Yu, *China's Rise: Strength and Fragility* [5]. Au describes the fundamental shift in class relations in China since 1949 with rapid industrialisation and the appearance of an urban working class. That working class is divided between those working in the state sector, those working in the service sector, which is rapidly expanding with the production of consumer goods, entertainment industries and new social media, and the role of migrant rural workers who provide cheaper labour living in vast barrack complexes run by large corporations.

Since the 1990s the Chinese Communist Party oversaw two waves of privatisation. Small and medium-sized State Owned Enterprises were privatised first, while the larger enterprises were aggregated into joint stock companies. Then urban and suburban land was privatised, something which put more pressure on rural migrant workers who were unable to afford accommodation, even when restrictions enforced by the 'Hukou' household registration system were relaxed. There are thus, Au Loong Yu argues, two forms of capital accumulated and managed and then invested in China now: There is capital which is individually owned by the bureaucrats, figures like Jack Ma, founder of the Alibaba online retail and ecommerce group who is a multimillionaire and member of the Central Committee of the party; and there is collective capital owned and organised according to the needs of the different government departments and regions. There is an increasing flow of capital from one realm to the other, with corruption scandals symptomatic of the too-fast access of collective capital by individuals and an attempt to rein in competitors who threaten social cohesion. Recently, the inflow of capital from émigrés in Hong Kong and Taiwan has been at least matched by an outflow of capital into the West.

One of the most interesting aspects of Au Loong Yu's book, and his day-to-day work – he is an activist based in Hong Kong, and so vulnerable to the recent proposals to enable extradition of evildoers to the mainland – is the fracturing of social cohesion, not only through individual millionaire bureaucrats fleecing the system, but through the many thousands of acts of resistance documented by *China Labour Bulletin* [6], including mass strikes, by rural and urban workers each year. With the recent slowdown of economic growth these have been fewer, and focused on resistance to closures. This has led to two quite different 'critical' responses inside the Chinese Communist Party, with a group of neoliberals advocating full-scale privatisation, protection of private property and 'globalisation' of the economy on the one hand, and, on the other, a left-nationalist current that calls for a more intense crackdown on dissidents and securitisation of the state apparatus.

There has been much debate about 'social credit' as a gathering of data about consumer trustworthiness, but these debates inside the party apparatus could spin the emphasis either on to economic-focused free-market grounds or on to direct political control, of who can access what services and who can travel where. At the moment it is both, which leads Au Loong Yu to suggest that the most accurate characterisation of the system now is as a form of 'bureaucratic capitalism'.

Marxism as a belief system

So what do 'Marxists' in the university Schools and Colleges of Marxism make of this, and how do they attempt to justify what is going on?

Well, first of all, Marxism in China is not a political praxis, an analysis that is dialectically and intimately linked to changing the world. On the contrary, Marxism operates as a kind of social glue. In this way, I suppose you could say that it still functions as a political praxis, but one concerned with order rather than change.

A sidestep for an example of this: In 2009 I was at an academic psychology conference in Nanjing where we were treated to the most reactionary mixture of US-American laboratory-experimental psychology – rats in mazes, human beings turned into cognitive-behavioural mechanisms, that kind of thing – and so-called 'indigenous' Chinese psychology, which was basically Confucianism. The Confucius Institutes around the world funded by the Chinese state are a manifestation of this reclaiming of a philosophical system that emphasises the importance of people knowing their place and showing obedient willing submission to their elders and betters, and, as far as Confucius was

concerned, of women to men.

One paper in that Nanjing conference traced out similarities between Confucius and the French philosopher Michel Foucault. Both, we were told, focused on duties and obligations, and on the way that power relations operated in a micro-managerial 'capillary' manner, linking surveillance with the inculcation of a sense that we needed to speak to those accorded power in a way that maintained power relations. It was an interesting talk, but with one thing missing, which I pointed out; Confucius endorsed and aimed to strengthen these power relations, while Foucault's historical analysis was critical of them, emphasising, in his famous phrase, that 'where there is power there is resistance'. The speaker looked at me dumbfounded, as if that had never occurred to him, and he avoided me afterwards.

During this last visit in 2019 I agreed to teach a session in the School of Marxism at Guangxi University of the Nationalities the day after the conference, because I wanted to see what the students made of it. Students from different disciplines, whether from the social sciences or natural sciences, are required to take classes in Marxism alongside their main topic. This is the case in every Chinese university, and this is what the Schools and Colleges of Marxism are up to.

Last year at a College of Marxism in one of the universities in Beijing I asked students who were based in the College, taking Marxism as their main topic, what they would do when they finished the course. They laughed and said, 'teach Marxism'. I asked one of the lecturers, an economist, whether they thought China was capitalist, and they said 'yes, of course it is'. In this class in Guangxi University, I was co-teaching with another comrade academic, Alpesh Maisuria, a Marxist who had also been invited to speak at the main conference. The Dean of the School of Marxism sat in on the class, and after we spoke about praxis and class struggle, the Dean intervened and said 'we need to learn about Marxism because it is our belief system'. When we tried to set up the session as a discussion of what they knew about Marxism, the Dean advised against this, saying 'they want to be told'. This had pretty well set the frame for what the agenda was in the main conference, which was to promote, we were told, 'socialism with Chinese characteristics'.

There is an aspect of surveillance and control that makes any attempt to get behind the screen of state ideology extremely difficult, surveillance and control in China that is expressed in forms of management of a visitor's experience of the country. Sometimes that surveillance and control is well-meaning and benevolent rather than deliberate and sinister. The visa application process, now outsourced to a private company, is more of the latter, laborious and intrusive, asking for detailed information not only about where you intend to go, but where exactly you went last time you visited China. The former, friendlier micromanagement of your time in academic settings, is more common.

At a 2011 conference on contemporary capitalism in Hangzhou [\[7\]](#), for example, I was told that we would all be taken down to the West Lake for an early evening meal in one of the restaurants. I said that I had stayed in Hangzhou before and would like to follow one of the canal-side paths to the lake myself, and I would meet them there. We had been relayed to the conference site, some hours away, from the hotel on coaches early in the morning, and I'd had enough of that kind of mass transport. Our coach driver who had brought us down from Nanjing had a hard time navigating the traffic, and some chaotic cross-cutting of road-lanes, shouting at one point that 'these people drive cars as if they are bicycles'. We had a back and forth argument in which my assigned student guides insisted that this solo walk that I was insisting on was impossible, and that I would get lost, it would be dangerous, and so on. I said I really want to walk to the lake on my own, and eventually the penny dropped; they said 'Oh, you need private time', I agreed, and that did the trick. I walked to the lake, went to the wrong restaurant, and arrived at the meal two hours late, causing great panic meantime.

The West Lake was much changed since my previous visit seven years before, this is a feeble excuse

for my mistake, I know, with private coffee shops, including Costa Coffee, sprung up around the edge, and incredible obvious commercialisation of it as a tourist site. There has, in short, been amazingly fast modernisation of previously quasi-rural parts of the country; skyscraper-strewn cities like Shanghai are now the rule instead of being the hyper-developed exception. And so it was in Nanning, site of the 2019 'New Development of Socialism in the 21st Century and Progress of Human Civilization' conference.

Nanning is the capital of Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region in the far south of the country, a 'second tier' city, and so relatively small compared with first tier cities [8] like Shanghai and Beijing; it is about six million, a sprawling smoggy metropolis that is known, I was told, as a 'green city'. The campus was quite leafy. A philosophy student who was sent to meet me at the airport, he liked Heidegger, told me that in China there was 'too much development, too many people'. Another student who took over to show me round the Guangxi University for Nationalities campus was more positive, praising the development and modernisation that Marxism had made possible. As an 'autonomous region', Guangxi, which is about the size of the UK, contains a significant minority population, the Zhuang and other groups, whose cultural artefacts are on display in the museum on the riverside, but the name of this academic institution, 'University for Nationalities', has another meaning too.

Nanning is the nearest urban metropolis to the border with Vietnam, and the university operates as staging post for academic contacts with Indochina, with visiting students from Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia. And here is one crucial link between modernisation, nationalism and a peculiar twist on the anti-imperialist heritage of the Chinese revolution. I will come to that, and the way it manifests itself in debates about 'Marxism' in a moment, so let's turn to the conference.

In the Progress of Human Civilization conference...

There were introductions to the theme of the conference by local worthies, party members, and School of Marxism faculty heads, before 'photo time'; visiting guests – that's us outside China along with Marxism College visitors from other parts of China – sat on chairs at the front and other local speakers stood on the steps at the back. The introductions emphasised what they called 'the integration of Marxism and traditional culture' and links with 'south east Asia' culture, arguing that 'socialism with Chinese characteristics' shifts the balance of power between capitalism and socialism globally. We were reminded that this is the 70th anniversary of the founding of the PRC, and advised that 'during the event our university will provide quality services for you'. One visiting apparatchik from outside Nanning said that they felt 'very excited about the event', telling us that it 'will be recorded in the history of Marxist theory discipline'. What is socialism? 'Socialism is the product of the contradictions of human development', culminating in 'Xi Jinping thought', which provides 'a new viewpoint for world socialism'; General Secretary Xi Jinping shows us that 'we need to provide a Chinese solution to world problems'.

A keynote address before photo time by Professor Song Jin was designed to set the tone for the day, and was on, this is the title displayed on the screen, 'The Cognitive Logic for the International Dissemination of Achievements in Localization of Marxism in China'. There was a quick run through the history of the Opium Wars, that is, nineteenth-century British imperial import trading of opium against Chinese resistance – the Brits don't come out of this well, to say the least. It was a potent telling reminder that anti-imperialist struggle has a long background history to what eventually happened in 1949. This brought us to the 'contemporary history of China', sideswipes at the Kuomintang and present-day Taiwan, with the lesson that 'promotion or propaganda must run alongside military power'. This 'revitalisation of China' must involve, 'the promotion of development

theory', and 'telling good stories about China internationally'.

What is to be done? Professor Song Jin said 'we need to win over foreign media', and promote Marxism and socialism, and aspects of that struggle include showcasing 'good research in China'. We build on the observations of Deng Xiaoping, Party Chair from 1982 to 1987, he said, the first of which is the importance of 'development', and the second here is that 'It doesn't matter what colour the cat is as long as it catches mice'. This brings us, as the conclusion of the talk, to the 'three philosophical questions addressed by Xi Jinping, which are 'Who am I, where do I come from, and where am I going?'

After photo time I gave my talk, after which there was no time for discussion, and then there was an extra lengthy intervention by an elderly comrade wearing a grey cap who rambled around a number of different issues before he was told by the chair to wind up; these included reference to the 'failures that can be seen in the Soviet Union', Deng Xiaoping's shift to 'peaceful development', the founding of over 500 Confucius Institutes to promote Chinese culture, 'Chinese soft power' and 'Chinese traditional medicine'. This guy spoke about his visit to Vietnam; 'they made the mistake of privatising land', whereas China has 'succeeded in managing urbanisation'. This was one of the few points in the day when interventions shifted gear from rather abstract distanced commentary on how good Marxist theory was to directly political comments.

A talk from a Russian academic on 'The Post-Soviet School of Critical Marxism', which was helpfully printed in the conference book we were handed at the beginning of the day in Russian, spoke of 'the tradition of socialism preserved by the great power, China', and then went on to mention some more interesting stuff and theoretical reference points, including Bertell Ollman, István Mészáros, Lucien Sève and David Harvey, though it was unclear how exactly they were being put to work. The 'Post-Soviet School' which has developed over the past 25 years, with Alexander Buzgalin as a key figure, includes focus on the development of global 'late capitalism', 'qualitative changes in the nature of the economy', 'corporate manipulation', the role of 'simulacra' and limits of capitalism. There wasn't time either for the speaker, Olga Barashkova, to elaborate on this, or to do much more than praise Marxist theory in China, invite people to visit her institute in Moscow and look forward to future research links.

At least here we were talking about Marxism, as such, but in a way that was 'about Marxism', and how important that was as a belief system, rather than actually being Marxist as such. Indicative of this distanced relationship to what was supposed to be the central theoretical framework for the conference was a paper included in the conference book by Meng Liangqui from the Nanning School of Marxism on 'Mapping Knowledge Domains Analysis on Marxism in 21st Century' which was using CiteSpace, a software package for mapping dominant trends in research. 'Journal Co-citation analysis' identified key texts in 'Marxism studies', though it is not clear what criteria defined the field, but it included as top 'research fronts' the following top ten keywords: 'Marxism, capitalism, state, politics, history, socialism, globalization, revolution, power, and Marx'.

This kind of list is perhaps what drives the jargon-generator style conference and publication titles produced by the Colleges and Schools of Marxism. The top five text resources from the 'co-citation analysis' were *New Left Review*, *Capital*, *Antipode*, *Historical Materialism* and *Theory and Society*. Top author citation counts ranked in the top five, Marx, Marx (so he got the top two slots), David Harvey, someone only identified as 'anonymous' and Antonio Gramsci. As regards top documents from the citation analysis, these are Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks*, Marx's *Capital*, Lukács's *History and Class Consciousness*, Hardt and Negri's *Empire* and Laclau and Mouffe's *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*.

This is interesting not so much for what the analyses throw up, but for what the point of the analysis

is and the role it plays within 'Marxism Studies' in China. We know that Chinese academics have, over the past years been noticing what the key debates are in Marxism and have been translating key texts into Chinese. Until recently these texts have only been available to the party cadre, but the work of the Schools and Colleges of Marxism in each university indicate that the texts have now been so successfully enclosed within academic space that they no longer pose a threat.

Our participation, we Marxists from the West flown in to an academic conference, is obviously part of this phenomenon. What could we possibly say in this context that could be a threat; we were being used, and we knew it. In any case, the dominant language of higher education being English has further insulated the population from possibly dangerous subversive ideas. We know that some young scholars in these university-based institutes have been punished and, in some cases, been arrested and disappeared after putting the ideas they have been reading about into practice. Demonstrations by Marxist academics in support of the Jasic Technology strikers [9], for example, have been violently suppressed.

It was now becoming clear that there was to be no time for discussion after the papers, and what little wriggle-time there was would be plugged up with unscheduled speakers, now Professor Xinping Xia who followed up on the Russian talk by speaking about the way the Russian School was borrowing from Chinese Marxism, and then, a weird move, about the functions of the Chinese Army in protecting the development of socialism. There were aspects of these extra interventions, where the speakers spoke without notes, that felt, especially through the simultaneous head-set translation, like slow rap; the ideological preoccupations of the moment were coming into the head of the speaker and blurted out into the conference. This particular speaker went on to describe the publication in Russian of an 'Encyclopaedia of Chinese Spiritual Culture', and the importance of Confucius as 'an organic part of socialism with Chinese characteristics', of 'traditional culture'. It was good, he said, that 'the Soviet Academy' was more open than the West to the rational nature of China's success rather than simply treating it as an inexplicable 'miracle'.

The other British speaker, Alpesh Maisuria, was more successful than me in keying into some of these preoccupations and to the theoretical level of the conference, speaking about the importance of alleviating poverty and the way that neoliberal capitalism relies on mystification, making it seem that communism is no longer feasible. Then we were quickly brought back, in another unscheduled intervention by a visitor from Hainan Normal University, to a brief review of and praise for the Russian Post-Soviet Critical School, warning that 'critiques of the Soviet Union that focus on Stalin have some Western themes'.

This brings us to the significant strategic location of Nanning and the Guangxi University for Nationalities; context for a talk from a Vietnamese academic, and another from Bangladesh. These talks were also sandwiched between extra interventions, which again squeezed out any time for questions and discussion. Pham Thi Chauhong began by tracing the origins of democracy to ancient Greece, its development in the thought of Marx and Lenin, and then the role of the Vietnamese Communist Party, VCP, in promoting 'socialist democracy' which blossomed in 1986 with the 'collective ownership for the labouring classes'. After 1986, she said, the VCP has protected 'peoples rights and interests'; 'we improved inner-party democracy' and 'leadership efficiency', rectifying, for example, the 'balance of power between prosecutors and courts' and acknowledging the role of competition and entrepreneurship which are 'popular issues among youth', moving to a 'market-oriented economic system with socialist characteristics' which includes attention to 'cyber-information security and development of e-governance'.

The talk by the Bangladeshi speaker was more interesting and indicative still. The speaker, Mostak Ahamed Galib, was actually not living in Bangladesh but working in the School of Marxism in Wuhan University of Technology. The son of a diplomat in Beijing, he had remained in China. His paper was

on 'The peaceful rise of China through "Belt and Road" initiative [10] with a special focus on people to people partnership'. The Belt and Road Initiative, also known as 'One Belt, One Road', comprises road and rail and sea-route trade routes through six 'economic corridors' which link China to the world, and which link developing countries directly to China through infrastructure development loans, the infrastructure for which is designed to increase trade.

We were told that the Belt and Road Initiative now involves, six years after it was announced by Xi Jinping in 2013, 138 countries as a 'cooperation platform' and as a 'welfare centric initiative'. You get the picture so far that there was not to be a whisper of criticism of this, and in fact the intervention at the conference was focused on rebutting criticisms of it. The main criticism is that it draws other countries, including Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia, but also way beyond, into a 'debt trap', with strategically important countries provided loans which then mean that they are in debt to China. We do see this around the world, including in Latin America [11].

No, this is far from the case, we were told, and the guy was shouting into the microphone now, because what the Belt and Road Initiative does is lift 7.6 million people out of extreme poverty, and the loans are taken out as a free and open contract. This is, he said, 'a win-win cooperative project'. Again, no questions or discussion, but afterwards when I pressed him on this, he admitted that there had been problems with some of the loans so far, but that was because Chinese entrepreneurs who didn't understand local contexts had made some 'bad deals'. This was, he said, very different from what Xi Jinping intended, and rules were now being tightened up, with more training for state-owned and private enterprises. This contract model of the Belt and Road Initiative driven by 'development' and profit imperatives illustrates well how China, from being resistant to imperialism, is now up to its ears in it, part of imperialist penetration of capital and commodification into every corner of the world.

This was all of a piece with the message that came through in the other papers after lunch; that development was bound up with China being able, as one speaker put it, to 'stand up', 'enrich the people' and 'make the country stronger'. Another speaker, Professor Chen Yuan, asked the telling question, whether it is possible to avoid capitalism, and argued that 'Chinese socialism' has not escaped capitalism, but that we need to think again about the historical order between capitalism and socialism if we want to find 'a new direction for human civilization progress'.

Another speaker gave his paper very quickly in the afternoon, apologising that he had to leave early to travel back to his own university because he had a 'performance review meeting' the next day. I felt for him, only late on managing to resist pressure from the conference organisers to take a long flights with multiple stops to arrive on Saturday in time for the Sunday conference and leave China to go home on Monday. I have the sense from talking to Chinese academics, that the pressures on them there make the complaints from Western academics about their own workload pale into insignificance. The world of an academic is more of a piece with that of hard-pressed, suicidal party apparatus bureaucrats [12].

There were now brief talks, these in Chinese, eight minutes each, about 'global governance' and the 'ecological sense of being as part of Xi Jinping thought'; 'ecologically', we were told, 'we need to improve the environment'. There were complaints that China was being blamed for CO₂ emissions when actually the problem was the result of 400 years of development in the capitalist countries, and so the burden should be shouldered by the capitalist countries. This would be a 'crisis transfer' way of dealing with the problem. Confucius and 'traditional Chinese culture' was evoked again a number of times, as was the importance of 'coordinating Chinese language with the world'; 'we should tell good Chinese stories'. Is Confucius socialism, one speaker asked? No, says Xi Jinping, and so we need to clarify what traditional Chinese culture is, and regard it as 'socialist Chinese culture'. If we want to break through 'traditional thinking', someone else said, we need to 'criticise

ourselves', combat 'wrong ideas'. Yes, one speaker said, there was corruption, but that could be changed by changing the mindset of the leadership and 'old and backward practices', replacing these with 'evaluation criteria for inputs and outputs'.

There was to be no time for debate, everything seemed stitched up. Alpesh Maisuria and I complained bitterly about this at lunchtime, and convinced the organisers to open up a space toward the end of the afternoon session for what they called a 'Q & A' which would replace the coffee break. (The morning coffee break included biscuits and cakes and bananas and mandarin oranges and fresh lychees, product of this sub-tropical region of the country.) This is where a surprising eruption of politics into academic debate occurred. There was a good deal of heat in the discussion around one of the short papers that had been given late in the afternoon which had the title 'Revalorization of the Chinese Nation and Tranquility'.

Basically the argument of the paper went as follows. The historical suffering and liberation of the Jewish people could have lessons for China, raising a question as to whether they, the Jewish people, could be liberated as 'Jews' or as 'human beings'. The Jewish people were isolated, and isolated themselves, and their liberation was through asserting 'Jewish ideology' by establishing the state of Israel. We could learn from this, for 'it threw light on Chinese people and revitalization of the nation'. In the additional Q & A session, there were many objections to this narrative, but mainly on the basis that the history of the Chinese people was entirely different, and their national identity forged through anti-imperialist struggle could not be reduced to that of another different people. There was some discussion of the problem of Zionism as itself an ideology that could be oppressive to the local population, Palestinians, something I pointed out, but this was quickly skirted over, and we moved into the closing talk on, you will be amazed to hear, 'socialism with Chinese characteristics'.

...and out in the city

Translators always have something interesting to say about meetings they are brought in to work at, and this was no exception. Alpesh and I posed for photos with the translators when the conference was over. They said they were a bit anxious about the quality of their translation into English, which was actually really very good, and they apologised that they had not had sight of the papers in advance, only being brought in very late on, arriving that morning and expected to launch into action. They had to work freelance, had background academic study in politics and languages, and now they were forced to compete not only with the state enterprises but with a proliferation of private companies that employed people and offered translation services at impossibly low rates to organisations. Academic organisations like the School of Marxism in Nanning were expected to outsource its work. This was privatised precarious zero-hours work.

Alpesh commented that during our visit to the city centre the previous day we had not encountered any homeless people. The translators smiled and said that this was probably down to what they called 'urban management'. There are gated communities in Nanning, as there are in Beijing. Travelling out to the edges of the very efficient clean new metro system on the south, north and west of the city, I could see different kinds of community. In some cases, those near the university, they were more typically middle-class, while at the edges and in the south of the river centre away from the shopping malls these were enclosed poorer spaces with checkpoints. At the farther south edge of the city were timber yards and shacks where workers and their families lived with farm animals.

Shopping malls in Nanning were, as in Beijing and Shanghai, glitzy consumer heavens, with KFC and Starbucks. Around the local mall area close to the university there were cheaper open-air

restaurants in the car-parks, and in one of these there were pictures of Mao on the wall, a rare sight, and a reminder not only that such imagery is not common now, but also that to display such pictures must indicate some decided political choice on the part of the owner, a reminder that there are still such decided political choices, one of those permitted by the regime.

Closed-circuit cameras are everywhere, and we know that there is sophisticated face-recognition technology that enables the authorities to track the movements of the population. Social credit surveillance [13], for example, is actually already present in Western capitalist countries. It is a function of capitalism, and an indication of how far and fast China is travelling, and in what direction. Regime-friendly justifications for social credit [14] include that Chinese citizens positioned as consumers are happy to buy into it. However, there are still spaces in China where this kind of surveillance is not necessary. When I was able to get out to the edges of the city on the metro, I walked in near-countryside. As evening draws in, the flash of the cameras is more evident, more intrusive, a reminder that everyone is watched, or is reminded that they may be watched; surveillance culture in action. The time for pedestrians on the zebra crossings, by the way, was just a little less than necessary; the car is becoming king.

China is a successful capitalist country [15], success built through a revolutionary break with its history of dependence on imperialism, and on a reassertion of its national independence through the unifying force of a party apparatus that was itself built with the help of a foreign power. Marxism itself is part of that heritage of Western Enlightenment developmental modernisation, but now absorbed and harnessed to the needs of the state, as have been the rural forces that made the revolution, absorbed and harnessed to a rapidly urbanising country.

In the process, the contradictions of which Marxism speaks, class struggles, are displaced onto the notion of 'development' as such, an ideological process which conceals, seals over, the real contradictions that are still present, and which are actually intensifying as a gap increases between the super-rich at the head of the party apparatus and the rest of the population.

Every radical social movement, ranging from those that make claims for their own national identity against the Chinese state, as in Xinxiang [16], to the #metoo and LGBT movements, and including a nascent trade union movement, are present in China now. That will put pressure on the 'Marxists' confined to the universities to make a connection with the real world, a process that Marxists around the world should play some part in, in debate and in solidarity.

Ian Parker, January 2020

P.S.

- FIIMG, Fourth International in Manchester Group. JANUARY 29, 2020:
<https://fiimg.com/2020/01/29/peoples-republic-of-china/>
- This is one of the Socialisms series of FIIMG articles:
<https://fiimg.com/socialisms/>

Footnotes

- [1] Available on ESSF (article 51998), [Marxism - Ten aspects concerning socialism in the next century](#).
- [2] <https://www.marxists.org/archive/wang-fanxi/index.htm>
ESSF (article 51999), [Problems of Chinese Trotskyism](#).
- [3] <https://www.marxists.org/archive/peng/index.htm>
- [4] <https://www.versobooks.com/authors/2121-livio-maitan>
- [5] <https://www.iire.org/node/708>
- [6] <https://clb.org.hk/content/state-labour-relations-china-2019>
- [7] ESSF (article 23414), [China studies Marxism: twelve pro-capitalist lines](#).
- [8] <https://www.visualcapitalist.com/31-chinese-cities-economies-big-countries/>
- [9] <https://www.ft.com/content/fd087484-2f23-11e9-8744-e7016697f225>
- [10] https://www.eu-china.net/uploads/tx_news/Broschuere_Silk_Road_Bottom-Up_2017_01.pdf
- [11] <http://www.whitewolfpack.com/2013/04/ecuador-to-sell-third-of-its-amazon.html>
- [12] <https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v41/n11/long-ling/diary>
- [13] https://consent.yahoo.com/collectConsent?sessionId=3_cc-session_c7857162-1ea3-47ca-aab4-3283622c3c4c&lang=en-US&inline=false
- [14] <http://theconversation.com/hundreds-of-chinese-citizens-told-me-what-they-thought-about-the-controversial-social-credit-system-127467>
- [15] <http://www.internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article751>
- [16] <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/11/16/world/asia/china-xinjiang-documents.html>