

INNOVATIVE MARXIST SCHOOL IN CHINA

Comments by International Scholars
on Cheng Enfu's Academic Thoughts

John Bellamy Foster (US), Gennady Zyuganov (Russia),
Tony Andréani (France), Hiroshi Onishi (Japan),
Alan Freeman (Canada), Nguyen Minh Hoan (Vietnam), et al.



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The Philosophical Economist: The Contribution of Cheng Enfu

Roland Boer

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Abstract: This study of the immense contribution of Cheng Enfu focuses on philosophical questions and implications – hence the title ‘philosophical economist’. It begins with the core question of the Marxist method: how we should understand the relation between the basic principles of Marxism and the specific judgements made in particular circumstances. By way of illustration, I focus on Cheng Enfu’s reworking of the theory of value. The second part considers the deployment of contradiction analysis in three cases, namely ‘dual circulation’, before and after 1978, and the relations between planned and market economies. The third part seeks to answer a few questions concerning Cheng Enfu’s proposals concerning the three stages of socialism and his emphasis on public ownership and the planned economy. The final two parts deal with Cheng Enfu’s international engagements and the role of the engaged Marxist scholar.

The focus of this study of Cheng Enfu is philosophical, specifically in relation to the long task of the construction of socialism. Why this dual emphasis? Let me begin with socialist construction: Marxism experiences a qualitative shift from before a proletarian revolution to the construction of socialism after such a revolution, from a Communist Party seeking power to exercising power. As Lenin once observed, gaining power through a proletarian revolution is relatively easy; seeking to construct socialism is exponentially more complicated. However, the study of how Marxism is deployed for the purpose of socialist construction remains much under-studied outside socialist countries. Hence my focus in this study.¹

Second and in relation to philosophy: Marxist philosophy is my expertise and so I read the works of Cheng Enfu from this perspective. Cheng Enfu himself is not averse to making a philosophical point, mentioning frequently that he maintains a lively interest in the humanities and especially philosophy, which is what one would expect from a leading intellectual in a country where Marxist philosophy is China's honed and 'special skill' (Xi 2013d, 404; 2020, 5). Indeed, a philosophical approach enables me to find a path through the immense range of topics to which Cheng Enfu has contributed during his lifetime. If one peruses the online repository of some of his more important works,¹ one comes across socialism with Chinese characteristics, contemporary capitalism, and contemporary world socialism. More are to be found: structural reform, social hot spots, policy analysis, and participation in state affairs. Or we may recast these topics in light of his published works, with not only the collection of selected works, but also the reconstruction of the study of Chinese economics, the relation between economic theory and government policy, and the nature of academic thinking. I have not even mentioned the many speeches and reports delivered in many, many places. Clearly, it is impossible to engage with the sheer breadth and depth of Cheng Enfu's work in the space of a single chapter, so my guiding light is Marxist philosophy with a focus on constructive proposals for the building of socialism.

The following analysis begins with the crucial distinction between basic principles and the actual or realistic problems with which Marxism must deal.² Here I focus on the specific example of Cheng Enfu's reframing of the Marxist theory of value. The next part analyses some key examples on the deployment of Marxist contradiction (or dialectical) analysis, focusing on the relatively recent economic policy of 'dual circulation', the way we should understand the two periods of before and after 1978, before and after the reform and opening-up, and the relations

1 The material, organised into major categories, may be found here: www.xinmapai.com/Index/index.html.

2 The online collection of Cheng Enfu's works uses this distinction to organise a significant amount of material – now as basic theory and actual or realistic problems).

between the institutional forms of planned and market economies within a socialist system. The latter questions leads into the third topic, which concerns Cheng Enfu's much-studied proposal concerning the three stages of socialism before communism can be achieved. On this matter, I do raise a few questions and also seek to find their answers. Since my focus is on what should be of interest for scholars outside China, in the next section I deal with Cheng Enfu's international engagements, seeking to 'tell China's story well'. I close with some reflections on the engaged scholar.

I. Basic Principles and Specific Judgements: The Theory of Value

A staple of Marxism is that it is not a dogma, but a guide to action (Engels). More specifically, Marxism has its basic principles (基本原则) and the specific application of these methodological principles to deal with distinct problems in specific locations. How do we understand the relation between principles and judgements, between method and solutions? It would be tempting to identify a list of basic principles, derived from the work of Marx and Engels: labour theory of value (and thus surplus value); class analysis; base and superstructure; economic determination in the last instance, and so on. Then we may consider specific instances, whether the Soviet Union in the 1920s and 1930s (from 'state capitalism' and the NEP to the 'socialist offensive'), or China in the 1970s and 1980s (the launch of the reform and opening-up), and so on. The outcome would be relatively unchanging principles that are valid at all times and places, and specific judgements that are made but can later be seen to have been contingent on a particular time and place.

Tempting as such an approach would be, it rapidly descends into what Engels describes as a 'doctrinaire and dogmatic' approach, as something which 'having once been learnt by rote, is sufficient as it stands for any and every need' (Engels 1886, 578). Or, as Lenin put it: 'only hopeless pedants could set about solving the peculiar and complex problems arising merely by quoting this or that opinion of Marx about a different historical epoch' (Lenin 1899, 16). A more dialectical – and thus Marxist – approach is to focus on the development of the basic principles themselves. As Cheng Enfu observes: 'the basic principles of Marxism can undergo development and innovation in light of the development of practice and the deepening of theoretical understanding' (Cheng 2020, 102; see also Cheng and Yu 2013). Even the basic principles need constant deepening and development, in light of the theoretical implications of specific solutions for particular problems. While the dialectic of theory and practice is a staple of Marxist methodology, Cheng Enfu's proposed list of basic principles is informative: he speaks not only of Marx's labour theory of value, the cycle of surplus

value, and theory of reproduction, but also of Lenin's theory of imperialism, of the theory of state and revolution, Deng Xiaoping's primary stage of socialism, and indeed the socialist market economy that found a tentative manifestation in Eastern Europe and is fully realised in China. Clearly, these basic principles move well beyond an ossified set of ideas gleaned purely from the texts of the founders. They arise from a living tradition, in which the basic principles themselves are under constant development in light of practice and deeper theoretical reflection.

Many are the examples one may use, but let us go to the heart of the matter: the labour theory of value. With the distinction between use value and exchange value, and then the identification of surplus value produced by workers as the key to capitalist exploitation, the Marxist articulation of the labour theory of value is clearly a staple, a basic principle. However, Marx and Engels developed this theory of value in relation to a capitalist system and not a few political economists have seen it as restricted to this system. A question is left begging: does the labour theory of value apply to socialist construction and the socialist system, and if so, how? Those with no experience of socialist construction may be tempted to answer in the negative. But this is to abdicate one's responsibility as a Marxist scholar.

Cheng Enfu follows in a tradition that has already from the 1950s recognised the need for a theory of value in socialist construction (Stalin 1952). But he goes much further, especially in light of developments in China's socialist market economy. In a series of important studies, Cheng affirms that the labour theory of value is an inescapable part of universal category of a market economy (Cheng, Wang and Zhu 2005; 2019; Cheng 2007, 16–21; see also Freeman 2019). If one seeks to deploy a market economy within any system – including a socialist system – one must include the labour theory of value. But how should such a theory be understood? Cheng renders Marx's definition as follows: 'all labour that directly produces material and immaterial goods for market exchange, as well as labour that directly serves the production and reproduction of labour goods, including the internal management labour of natural and legal entities and scientific and technological labour, are value-creating labour or productive labour' (Cheng 2007, 16). Actually, this definition already implies an extension of Marx's theory beyond the areas to which he devoted his attention, which are: a) production of material goods in industry, agriculture, construction, and so on; b) transport or circulation of goods. Moving beyond Marx, Cheng argues that the production of value is far more extensive: c) the production of 'intangible spiritual' goods, by which he means activities that contribute to cultural vitality, such as education, research, art and literature, media publication, and so on; d) 'service labour' involved in vital activities, such as medical care, health, and sports; e) management and direction of enterprises, in the sense that it involves the management of socialised labour, along with the surplus

value that arises from private ownership; f) changes in the objective and subjective conditions of labour (leading to complex outcomes depending on where changes are located), but the main direction of increases in the complexity, proficiency, and intensity of labour will have an improving effect on the total value of goods and the total social value.

Cheng is not yet done. While the production of value by the many dimensions of labour is the core of the new theory, it is not the only area where value is produced. Thus, he brings into play the questions of wealth and distribution, in terms of the 'total factors involved in wealth production' and 'distribution according to work'.³ The former designates non-labour areas such as land, resources, finance, ecology, which together concern the production of use value in the relation between people and material objects, while the latter draws into play the important definition of socialism already from the Soviet Union in the 1930s: from each according to ability, to each according to work. At the same time, one must also keep in mind other forms of distribution: work through market mechanisms may be the primary form of distribution, but it is not simply an interaction of private individuals. As Alan Freeman (2019, 6) points out, the neo-classical economic focus on the private individual distorts analysis. Instead, the public or state role in distribution plays a crucial role in insuring that extreme disparities do not emerge. Together, these three – living labour, wealth, and distribution, form a whole, with labour the core.

What is the effect of this 'new proposal of the creation of value by living human labour'? The first is that the theory of value can be extended to all forms of labour. Implicit here is the Chinese approach to identifying many different forms of labour whereas the term worker is a specific form of labour involved in industrial production. Cheng's theory seeks to extend the labour theory of value from the latter to the former, embracing all forms of labour. Thus, the traditional Marxist analysis of surplus value in the context of capitalist exploitation may be appropriate for a capitalist market economy, but to restrict it to such a usage is both a dogmatic form of Marxism and a retreat from its potential for socialist construction. For the sake of the latter, Cheng seeks to rework the labour theory of value – now as the creation of value by all forms of living labour – for the sake of socialist construction. Second, Cheng's theory has a clear emphasis on what may be called the common good: the three areas of labour, wealth, and distribution are not for the sake of individual aggrandisement by selfish individuals (the inescapable assumption of neoclassical economics (Cheng 2007, 21–24)) but for the social whole. Third, it follows that

3 See the effort to derive the socialist principle of 'from each according to ability, to each according to work' from the texts of Marx and Engels (Du and Cheng 2017, 48–49, 50–51). For a detailed study of the origins of the wording of the principle in the Soviet Union of the 1920s and 1930s, see my earlier study (Boer 2017, 30–36).

this theory of value applies not merely to the socialist market economy, but to the whole of socialist society. To set some background: in earlier research, I identified a difference of emphasis among Chinese researchers on this question (Boer 2021, 130–31). Some argued that the labour theory of value should be restricted to the market economy component within a socialist system, while others argued that it could be extended to embrace social or public value. I would suggest that in his effort to rework the labour theory of value, Cheng Enfu moves into the latter camp,⁴ especially with his emphases on intangible spiritual production, vital service labour, management of enterprises, and the desirable process of an increase in ‘total social value’. Or, as he proposes elsewhere, the ‘Gross Domestic Welfare Product’, or GDWP, which draws together the areas of economy, nature, and society in order to determine a comprehensive ‘final gross welfare product’ (Cheng and Cao 2009; Cheng 2020, 101).

To sum up: at a philosophical level we see here the interaction of theory and practice. Marx and Engels’s initial theory of value may have arisen from their analysis of capitalist market dynamics, which has led to one of the major basic principles of Marxism. But it does not become ossified at this theoretical level,⁵ for now it is applied to the qualitatively distinct process of socialist construction, which in turn leads to further theoretical elaboration. All of this takes place without negating the initial basic principle.

II. Contradiction Analysis

The summary of the previous section was deliberately framed to raise a distinct feature of Marxist philosophy: dialectical analysis, or, as it is also known in China, contradiction analysis. I do not need to elaborate here on the development of such analysis, from Lenin to Mao Zedong, since I have done so elsewhere (Lenin 1915; Mao 1937; Boer 2021, 55–78). Instead, I am interested in the way Cheng Enfu deploys contradiction analysis, focusing on three specific examples.⁶

4 Although see below in relation to the stages of socialism, where Cheng identified the law of value in relation to regulation according to the market.

5 The theory of value also undergoes development in the continuing analysis of capitalist exploitation, but this is distinct from analysing socialist construction.

6 Cheng deploys such analysis in contrast to the extremist or ‘either-or’ approaches of capitalist economic schools (Cheng 2021, 1–2). I have chosen three examples out of a potentially larger number, which include: relation between socialism with Chinese characteristics and scientific socialism; the ‘organic unity’ of theory and practice, specific conditions and the global, the historical and the logical; and the proposals concerning ‘self-interested and altruistic economic man’, and ‘the double constraints of resources and needs’ in the article mentioned in the previous section (Cheng 2007; Zhang and Cheng 2015, 51; Du and Cheng 2017, 46–47, 53–55).

Dual Circulation in Light of Dialectical Materialism

To begin with the most recent: the policy of ‘dual circulation’, which was proposed in 2020 and became a core feature of the Fourteenth Five-Year Plan that was in the final stages of development at the time. A spate of studies surrounded the policy, among them a widely-read article by Cheng Enfu and Zhang Feng (2021).⁷ The article explicitly points out that its focus is a dialectical analysis of the context and policy itself, especially since the bulk of studies published up until that point had tended to focus on the China-US ‘trade war’. By contrast, Cheng and Zhang emphasise that the policy of dual circulation explicitly takes internal circulation as the mainstay, and domestic and international cycles as mutually reinforcing one another. In this formulation, we already find the invocation of contradiction analysis, especially the need to identify not merely the primary contradiction, but also the primary aspect of a contradiction (Mao 1937, 320–27).

The primary aspect is, obviously, the internal or domestic cycle. This brings us to the second feature of contradiction analysis: internal causes play the decisive role (Cheng and Zhang 2021, 110). In the classic articulations of dialectical materialism, we find that qualitative change takes place internal to a process, while quantitative change (increase and decrease) is mainly influenced by external forces.⁸ It follows that the decision to emphasise dual circulation was not primarily due to external pressures, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the effort from a declining USA to ‘contain’ China, but due to internal factors. For Cheng and Zhang the new policy is an inherent requirement of the new development stage. Deploying the key analytic factors of internal production, circulation, distribution, and consumption, and their overall purpose of meeting the needs of all people for a better life, Cheng and Zhang point to the considerable advantages in terms of China’s workforce (900 million) and growing middle-income group (more than 400 million), the reality that it is the only major country to have a complete industrial chain, and China’s global leadership in more and more areas of technological innovation. In light of these developments, the time is ripe for a new stage of high-quality development. A new stage it may be, but China also has a new policy-guiding primary contradiction: ‘between unbalanced and inadequate development and the people’s ever-growing needs for a better life’ (Xi 2017, 5). Obviously, much remains to be done, such as ensuring development in the more remote areas that have lagged behind, in filling

7 The general framework is not new, since Cheng (in light of emphases by Xi Jinping) has for some time been emphasising self-reliance as the mainstay and enhancing openness through such self-reliance (Cheng 2016, 6).

8 This emphasis already appears in Lenin, the classical development in the Soviet Union, and then the further development of contradiction analysis with Mao Zedong (Lenin 1915; Mitin et al. 1935; Shirokov and Iankovskii 1932; Mao 1937).

the remaining gaps in core technologies, in green development, and in ensuring socio-economic well-being for all and the associated need to improve distribution so as to share prosperity. The authors argue that the new policy will enable China to address problems that have lingered from the rampant and uneven growth of the 1990s and early 2000s (Cheng and Zhang 2021, 113–15). All of these are – it needs to be emphasised – primarily internal issues. External factors, which contribute to the internal but are secondary, may be summarised as the inherent ‘disadvantages of the basic economic, political and cultural systems and of state governance in Western countries’, as revealed starkly with the COVID-19 pandemic (Cheng and Zhang 2021, 109).⁹ In order not to be subjected to the impact of such inherent weaknesses in capitalist economies, China needs to ensure economic security and greater strength. Indeed, if China is to become a ‘strong socialistically modernised country’, it must do so on the basis of internal development (Cheng and Zhang 2021, 112).¹⁰

Third, they deploy the category of unity of opposites to characterise the relations between domestic and international cycles (Cheng and Zhang 2021, 111–12). Given the inescapable connections between these two cycles, the purpose is to manage their relation so as to be mutually beneficial. As for China, it has become the largest manufacturing country in the world, and the scale of import and export is also the largest. Clearly, China is crucial for the international cycle, contributing over 30 percent of the total and is thus the world’s major economic driver. Echoing Mao Zedong’s (1957) urging to ‘correctly handle’ contradictions, Cheng and Zhang (2021, 111–12) speak of ‘properly handling’ and ‘correctly handling’ the contradiction between domestic and international cycles so that they become not mutually detrimental, but enhance one another through heightened efficiency and quality. A question lingers: what has happened to the point from dialectical materialism that while the unity of opposites is temporary and contingent, the struggle of opposites is eternal (Mao 1937, 327–33)? Perhaps we can understand the emphasis on the unity of opposites as a way to respond to the reality of struggle between a fading West and an increasingly strong China in the context of a multi-polar world in which China has many friends. And in that multi-polar context, the aim should be to manage contradictions so that they are non-antagonistic. A tall order, perhaps, but the aim itself and its realisation would – in the context of international relations – entail the Marxist and indeed socialist principle of non-antagonistic contradictions.

9 So also with a widely-read study of the unrest in Hong Kong in 2019, in which the focus is primarily on internal causes: Hong Kong’s capitalist economic system, governance, and education (Cheng and Ren 2019).

10 The quotation from Xi Jinping at this point also echoes China’s experience of semi-colonial humiliation: ‘In the whole history of humankind, no nation or state has ever been able to realise strength and rejuvenate itself by relying solely on external forces or blindly following others; doing so inevitably leads to failure or subordination to others’ (Xi 2013c, 29).

Before and After 1978

A second example of immense relevance for those outside China is how one should understand the relations between the period before and after the reform and opening-up. This is a major turning point, and it is – notably – one that pertains to the economic base. To set the problem: should the reform and opening-up be seen as the negation of the period from 1949 to 1978, or does one use the former period to negate or deny the latter? In Chinese Marxist parlance, to deny one or the other is a dual form historical nihilism, which is defined as denying the leadership of the Communist Party, suggesting that Marxism is out of date and that China has abandoned Marxism (Zheng 2008; Zhu 2016). Instead, the two periods should be seen in a dialectical relationship at a number of levels. The first level is one of building on the foundations, or in terms of inheritance and development (Cheng Enfu's preferred approach). Thus, the pre-1978 period moved beyond the initial tasks of abolishing the old system of comprador capitalism, colonialism, and the relics of feudalism, and may be seen as the 'first economic miracle' in the following terms: significant development of science and technology, an independent industrial and national economic system, the development of education, culture and health, population growth (in numbers and life expectancy), great improvement in socio-economic well-being, and in China's emergence in international affairs, all the way from the UN to increased appeal in and engagement with developing countries, which comprise the vast majority (Cheng and Cao 2019, 6–8). The post-1978 period built upon such foundations to enable China to reach the level it has attained today: the value of industrial output and foreign exchange reserves are the highest in the world, China's economic aggregate is second in the world, while education, culture, health, and socio-economic well-being have improved from being adequate to moderately well-off, and Hong Kong and Macao have been returned. Thus far, I have drawn from a key article (Cheng and Cao 2019; see also Cheng 2018, 2–3; 2020, 99–101), which emphasises the achievements of the pre-1978 period, especially in light of a tendency in some quarters to denigrate this period.

Thus far, we have an approach to before and after 1978 that works primarily in terms of building on the foundations. A question remains: if the pre-1978 provided significant economic, social, and cultural foundations for the reform and opening-up, why was the latter inaugurated? Why not continue with the former approach, with its centrally planned economy and accelerated public ownership? Answering this question brings us to another level of analysis, now in terms of the dialectical relation between liberating and owning the forces of production. I will have more to say about this question a little later, so let me focus on what is pertinent here: the pre-1978 period assumed a causal relationship, in the sense that the

way to liberate productive forces was through accelerated public ownership. The assumption in this case was that the core contradiction of socialist construction – between the forces and relations of production – required profound adjustments in the latter. As it was later put, Mao Zedong too was concerned with liberating the forces of production (as we find especially in observations from the 1950s and early 1960s), but his methods were not always appropriate. It follows that the post-1978 period approached the dialectic from another angle: it was precisely the forces of production that needed the most attention, since they had not developed as expected and were clearly stagnating by the 1970s. The stunning results of this emphasis on liberating the forces of production are obvious today (see above), but they also led to a spate of new contradictions in terms deteriorating conditions for workers, environmental degradation, and a gap between the CPC and the people that produced corruption and lack of trust in governance. I suggest that we should understand the renewed emphasis since 2012 – when Xi Jinping was elected general secretary of the CPC – on ‘taking the people as the centre’, on socialist democracy, on common prosperity, and on ensuring that no-one is left behind, as a further unfolding of the dialectic of ownership and liberation of productive forces. In fact, Cheng and Cao (2019, 6) speak of a new or third stage marked by these emphases.

Finally, we may draw on Xi Jinping for an overall dialectical perspective on the pre- and post-1978 relation (Xi 2013b; 2019). He observes that there are three important aspects to understanding this crucial economic and political question. To begin with, the period before 1978 laid the necessary groundwork for socialist construction, while the period after 1978 enabled a far greater development so that China has not fallen into the disaster the befell the Soviet Union. Second, ‘although the two historical phases are very different in their guiding thoughts, principles, policies, and practical work, they are by no means separated from or opposed to each other’. In this light, many good proposals were put forward in the initial period, but they were executed poorly at the time and required the reform and opening-up for their realisation. Third, the two periods require proper evaluation. Thus, the pre-reform period should not be used to deny the experience of the reform period itself, and vice versa. Instead, the conditions for the reform can be found in the pre-reform period, so much so that the ‘exploration of socialist practice after the reform and opening-up is the persistence, reform and development of the previous period’ (Xi 2013b, 22–23; see also 2019, 2–3; Wang Weiguang 2014, 16–17).

Market and Planned Economies

A third example concerns the staple conclusion of Chinese scholarship that planned and market economies are institutional structures or forms within an overall socialist system that determines their nature. This position has been clear since the 1990s (Boer 2021, 115–38), although it remains rather unknown outside China.¹¹ There are a range of potential dialectical formulations of the relations between planning and market: manifestations of the contradictions between the forces and relations of production; a market as a universal and the particular nature markets take within specific systems; or the dialectical sublation (*Aufhebung*) of planning and market emerging in China today (Huang 1994; Yang Xiaojie 1994; Zhang Hui and Zhuang 1994; Gao and Zheng 1996; Zhang Xuekui 2009).

Cheng offers at least a couple of other approaches. The first is to distinguish between the fairness of planning and the efficiency of the market, stressing that they should interact in a way to ensure the ‘mutual promotion and interchange of fairness and efficiency’ (Cheng 2007, 26–29; see also Yang Jinhai 2009, 175). The second moves on from the previous point and distinguishes between two forms of regulation entailed in planning and market (Cheng 2016, 4–5; see also Cheng and Wang 2020, 28–29). In itself, this point is not restricted to Cheng, but he specifies planning as the role of the state in terms of the ‘law of proportion’ (fairness in allocation and distribution in order to ensure that all benefit), while regulation according to the market is determined by the law of value.¹² How do these two forms of regulation interact and influence one another? Planning influences the market by macro-control so as to ensure maximal market functions in the allocation of resources, while the market can ensure efficiency in state regulation. Ideally, the interaction of the two components should lead to even higher functionality and efficiency in government and market roles, so much so that one can speak of the better role of the government and the decisive role of the market as an ‘organic whole’.

Two caveats need to be noted. The first is that Cheng insists that the very definition of a socialist system entails that planning is the mainstay and the market is an auxiliary. This point differs from the more mainstream position that the very nature of a market component, as also planning, is determined by the overall socialist system. For Cheng, it is precisely planning (and, as we shall see, public ownership) that is the determining feature of the system as a whole. Second, Cheng sees the socialist market economy as characteristic of the primary stage of socialism, but not of later and more mature stages of socialism.

11 Thus, to confuse a market economy with a capitalist system is a category mistake; so also is it a category mistake to confuse a planned economy with a socialist system.

12 Note the slight difference with the earlier treatment of the law of value.

III. The Question of Stages

The previous point brings us to the question of stages. I am particularly interested in a landmark proposal from the late 1980s and early 1990s concerning the three stages of socialism (Cheng and Zhou 1988; Cheng 1990; 1992).¹³ I will not go into the details and the context of this proposal here, since it is well known.¹⁴ However, what is of interest is that as the stages proceed – over a long period of time – it is suggested that there should be a full transition to public ownership and a planned economy.¹⁵ Obviously, these cannot be attained overnight and require a long time to mature, and Cheng has been a foremost interpreter of what the ‘mixed ownership economy’ means in terms of integration and government economic policy during the long primary stage of socialism (Cheng and Xie 2015b). Even in the context of this primary stage of socialism, he is keen to emphasise that public ownership is the mainstay of the ownership structure and is the foundation of the whole economic system, and indeed determines the nature of socialism with Chinese characteristics (Cheng 2016, 3; Cheng and Wang 2020).¹⁶ For Cheng, the degree of public ownership determines the socialist nature of the system, and all other forms of ownership should be subsidiary.

A number of questions arise, and Cheng is fully aware that his three-stage proposal remains controversial, especially in light of the clear position that China will remain in the primary stage of socialism for a long time to come (Cheng W. 2013; Yang Chengxun 2016).¹⁷ But I would like to focus on a key question: what about

13 This proposal differs from other theories of stages, in terms of the three stages of revolution and the various stages of 500 years of world socialism (Cheng 2021; Cheng and Yang 2021). Whereas these proposals are retrospective, Cheng’s stages of socialism are prospective.

14 To summarise: Primary stage: various types of public ownership (with private ownership as secondary) + market-based distribution according to work + country. Intermediate stage: diversified public ownership + diversified distribution according to work + dominance of planned economy (with auxiliary market regulation). Advanced stage: public ownership alone + distribution according to work + completely planned economy. The final stage is Communism: public ownership alone + distribution according to needs + completely planned economy (Cheng 2020, 101–2).

15 Elsewhere, Cheng identifies three core features of fully-developed communism: public ownership, fully planned economy, distribution according to need (Cheng 2021, 7).

16 The second article cited here stresses particular features – especially section six – of a more wide-ranging decision from the CPC’s nineteenth Central Committee’s fourth plenary (CPC Central Committee 2019). In section six, the decision itself speaks of public ownership as the dominant role, with various forms of ownership existing side by side. It also sees distribution according to work along with various modes of distribution, as well as the socialist market economy as an integral component of the whole.

17 These include: 1) In light of the theory of three stages, what happens to the initial 30 years of the New China, with its old-style central planning and accelerated public ownership? 2) How do we account for public (state) ownership in capitalist systems? Cheng argues

Marx and Engels's emphasis on the liberation of productive forces? Let us reconsider an important text from the 'Manifesto of the Communist Party', a text that Cheng is also wont to quote:

The proletariat will use its political supremacy to wrest, by degrees, all capital from the bourgeoisie, to centralise all instruments of production in the hands of the State, i.e., of the proletariat organised as the ruling class; and to increase the total of productive forces [Produktionskräfte] as rapidly as possible (Marx and Engels 1848, 481).

The first part of this crucial sentence is well known, and indeed often quoted in isolation from the second part (italicised). Clearly, for Marx and Engels, both ownership and liberation of the productive forces are needed for the socialist project. In other words, both the relations and forces of productive are equally important.¹⁸ To be sure, one can find many texts from Marx and Engels that emphasise ownership and thus the relations of production (Du and Cheng 2017, 47–48), but one can also find texts that stress the liberation of productive forces. For example, in his exposition entitled 'Karl Marx', Engels writes:

The productive forces of society [gesellschaftlichen Produktivkräfte], which have outgrown the control of the bourgeoisie, are only waiting for the associated proletariat to take possession of them in order to bring about a state of things in which every member of society will be enabled to participate not only in production but also in the distribution and administration of social wealth, and which so increases [steigert] the productive forces of society [gesellschaftlichen Produktivkräfte] and their yield by planned operation of the whole of production that the satisfaction of all reasonable needs will be assured to everyone in an ever-increasing measure (Engels 1877, 109).

that these are subordinate to private ownership and profit-making. However, during economic crises and recessions, capitalist systems will typically increase state ownership of – or at least support of – finance and industry as a way of managing the crisis. When the crisis is deemed to be over, these entities will once again be sold to the private sector. 3) Public ownership is a notable emphasis among Western Marxists and indeed in Communist Parties in Western countries. However, the risk of an over-emphasis on public ownership is that can lead in capitalist countries to misdirected campaigns for 'nationalisation' per se, thereby missing the question as to whether this takes place in a capitalist or a socialist system. It also means that one risks judging, for example, whether Scandinavian capitalist states have socialist elements purely on the basis of levels of state ownership. It may be that Cheng has answered these questions in other works.

18 Of course, the forces of production include human labour, but the relations of production concern the interaction of classes and thus the ownership of productive forces.

Both ownership and liberation, both relations and forces of production, are crucial for any socialist project – as Engels also emphasises elsewhere (Engels 1847, 377; 1878, 263–64). While this is not some ‘golden mean’, the brevity of the statements does leave open the possibility of various interpretations: are these proposals relevant only after the initial seizure of power through a proletarian revolution? Is there a causal relationship between one or the other term? Marx and Engels were very careful to note that they had no experience of the actual construction of socialism, with a Communist Party in power, so they stressed that the actual results could be determined only from actual experience and ‘only scientifically [*nur wissenschaftlich*]’ (Marx 1875, 22), and that to ‘attempt to answer such a question in advance and for all cases would be utopia-making’ (Engels 1872–1873, 21, 77). I suggest that the best way – in light of the overall method developed by Marx and Engels – is to see the relation between the ownership and liberation of production forces as a dialectical relation: the one needs the other, while at the same time not being the sole cause of the other. We may approach this dialectical relation methodologically and historically (see above), but the question remains as to why Cheng Enfu emphasises ownership and its associated planned economy so resolutely.

To be sure, he does mention the liberation of productive forces from time to time, noting that it is ‘one of the components of the essence of socialism’, and seeking to define it in terms of scientific and technological innovation (Cheng 2016, 1–2). At the same time, he is quite clear that such liberation is the ‘fundamental task of the primary stage of socialism’, in the sense that economic construction enables the material and technological foundations of socialist society (Cheng 2016, 1). In this light, he argues that the current approach to liberating productive forces – along with mixed ownership and the socialist market economy – should fall away with the later and more mature stages of socialism.¹⁹

As to why he makes this move, a number of potential answers emerge. To begin with, it may be that he tends to see the causes of the liberation of productive forces in light of prevailing conditions. Thus, in the primary stage of socialism and the need to improve the socio-economic well-being of all, both markets and planning are necessary. But when prosperity has been attained, it may be that he sees the planned economy and its associated public ownership as the basis for liberating productive forces further. Second, since Cheng is convinced that mature socialism and indeed communism are all about public ownership and a planned economy, this would mean that the dialectical relations between efficiency and justice, markets and planning, are relevant only in the primary stage of socialism. If so, then the question is what happens to the universality of contradictions, and their inevitable presence in later stages

19 This sense is enhanced with the tendency to turn the question of liberating productive forces into an emphasis on public ownership (Cheng 2018, 5–6).

(so Mao Zedong). Third, and as a way of answering these questions, I suggest that dialectical analysis may well be present in the more mature stages of socialism, albeit in an unexpected way: the dialectical transformation of the oppositions in the primary stage of socialism – planning and market, public ownership and various other forms of ownership – leads to a higher level of the ‘collective economy’. This argument is implicit in studies of the rural economy, in which the move to a new level or ‘second leap’ entails a qualitatively distinct form of collectivism and public ownership (Zhang Yang and Cheng 2018). It is certainly not a retreat to the accelerated collectivism of the first 30 years of the New China, with the attendant assumption that the reform and opening-up becomes a Chinese-style NEP (analogous to the Soviet Union in the 1920s). It is also not a devolution of existing conditions – collectively-owned land and household responsibility system – to purely private farming. Instead, it may be seen as a collectivism of a new type, enabled by the conditions of the reform and opening-up and realising their potential in the form of common prosperity and well-being. At this point, we connect with the arguments noted earlier, that China is already moving into an *Aufhebung*, a dialectical sublation of both old-style planning and markets as they have been hitherto known.

A fourth answer also presents itself: historical conditions in China. When the three-stage theory was initially proposed in the late 1980s and elaborated in the early 1990s, it was a contribution to an immense debate concerning the principles and practice of the socialist market economy. As the 1990s and then the following decade proceeded, with their resolute emphasis on liberating the forces of production, the problems of such an over-emphasis became apparent: worker unrest, income disparities, environmental degradation, and a growing gap between the common people and the CPC (Zan 2015, 43–44). In this context, Cheng Enfu has warned regularly of the dangers of moving towards too much private ownership, which would undermine the principle of common ownership, allow domination by foreign investment and risk monopolies (Cheng and Xie 2015b, 59–60). In the process, we find insightful proposals concerning the diverse forms that public ownership may take in stages of socialism. A single form of public ownership is certainly not realistic, nor indeed particularly Marxist. Instead, we find – among many forms – state-owned enterprises, cooperatives, collectively owned farm land, and even the public dimensions of private enterprises with their CPC units and social responsibility reports. We also find an emphasis on the constant reform of SOEs so as to ensure that they become hubs of innovation and remain core drivers of the economy. But have Cheng Enfu’s warnings concerning the drifts of the 1990s had effect? This would seem to be the case in some respects, especially in light of the new stage emerging in the last decade, with its reassertion of public ownership as the core, justice, equality, income distribution, poverty alleviation, and core socialist values.

IV. International

A significant feature on which I would like to dwell for a moment is Cheng Enfu's international engagement. A mind such as this would never be content to be restricted to Chinese concerns, no matter how important and complex they are. But it is not merely a matter of Cheng Enfu's personal desire to engage internationally, for an even more important reason is that China has stepped onto the centre of the world stage as a 'great power' in all respects. That China faces new contradictions and problems in this situation should be obvious, but it also creates immense opportunities for new 'win-win' engagements.

For Cheng Enfu, this level of activity has resulted in a range of studies. For example, if one considers the website devoted to his works, one finds sections devoted to analysing developments in capitalist countries, as well as the nature of world socialism today.²⁰ There are also important studies that, for example, reiterate the point that China should 'boldly learn' from the advanced experiences of other countries, but that it should never 'never rigidly imitate, let blindly worship foreign goods and ideas' since china's own conditions and the socialist path are key (Cheng and Tan 2016, 16).

However, I would like to focus on a specific feature of Cheng Enfu's internationalisation: new levels of proletarian and Communist solidarity in light of persistent misrepresentations of China by some international Marxists; and the way this internationalisation may be seen as an expression of cultural confidence in Chinese Marxist discourse, indeed that Chinese soft power is determined by Marxism and its Sinicization (Cheng 2012; Cheng and Li 2019; Cheng 2020, 102). As some of his studies show, and as Cheng has himself personally experienced when visiting, speaking in, and responding to questions in some other parts of the world, there remains considerable misunderstanding and indeed deliberate misrepresentation of Chinese socialism. I refer not so much here to the old club of former colonisers known as the 'West', but more specifically to some irresponsible Western Marxists. We all know the standard questions: is not China capitalist? What about the workers? What about the new 'middle class'? And what about 'human rights'? One can imagine Cheng becoming somewhat weary of the repetition of the same questions over and over (as have some of us when facing similar audiences). The Western Marxists who ask such questions and assume they 'know better' than Chinese Marxists such as Cheng Enfu, manifest forms of 'Orientalism' (Said 1978), as well as siding in international class conflict with the international bourgeoisie that has built its wealth on colonising countries such as China, and indeed perpetrating crimes against humanity in the process.

²⁰ See <http://www.xinmapai.com/Index/lists/catid/9.html> and <http://www.xinmapai.com/Index/lists/catid/10.html>.

How does one respond? One necessary response is careful and detailed presentation of the facts, highlighting the ever more obvious advantages and indeed superiority of China's socialist system.²¹ Another is to build new networks of international Marxist cooperation. Along with others, Cheng has been particularly busy in this regard: the establishment of World Association of Political Economy (WAPE) more than a decade ago, taking part in 'China Road' forums in Europe and Russia, taking part in and fostering the increasing amount of translations of key Chinese Marxist works on political economy, and indeed the whole range of aspects of China's socialist system. These are concrete manifestations of 'cultural confidence', of communicating how 'Chinese discourse' works, and indeed of 'telling China's story well' (Yang Weimin 2017; Zhou Yinzhen 2017; Wang Hailiang and Wang Yonggui 2020).²²

On a very specific note, Cheng Enfu has been instrumental in establishing two English language journals: *International Critical Thought*, published by Taylor and Francis, and *World Review of Political Economy*, published by Pluto press. There are more and more other ventures, developed by other scholars, such as book series with Springer and Brill. But let me stay with the journals. These may be seen in part as a response to the fact that some of the key Marxist journals in English are dominated by liberal Marxists with an 'Orientalist' tendency, which means that they take an anti-China and thus anti-communist editorial approach. One has no chance of getting an article published in such a journal if one seeks to present facts about socialism with Chinese characteristics. Hence the new journals fostered by Cheng Enfu, which are increasingly becoming major forums for Marxist research publications. Indeed, the fact that there is an increasing number of scholars seeking to publish in these journals indicates that their launch a decade or so ago was well overdue.

Two questions arise. First, is this a new direction for Chinese publications, or is it a transitional phase? I ask this question because Xi Jinping has made clear in his important speech on philosophy and the social sciences from 2016 that Chinese journals and presses should seek to become the leading places in the world for international research. They should become the first choices for scholars seeking publication, rather than journals and presses located in the old and fading West. The answer to my question is 'yes' on both counts: it is a new direction, but it is also a transitional phase until the major presses for publishing leading research are located in China.

21 While Cheng Enfu has been a consistent critic of the shortfalls and problems China faces, always offering proposals as to their solution, he has also consistently spoken of the clear advantages of China's socialist system (Cheng and Xu 2020; see also Zhou Zelong 2020).

22 The impetus comes from Xi Jinping, who has often spoken of the need to 'tell China's story well and make our voice heard' (Xi 2013a, 156; see further 2016, 9; Xu 2014).

Second question: is it enough? Here, I suggest that the two journals are only a beginning. It is a good beginning, with full-time paid staff working on the journals, rather than the voluntary nature of Western scholarly journals. But the journals cover only two aspects of Marxism: its theory and its political economy. So my proposal: the next step should be to establish international journals in at least the six sub-disciplines of Marxist study in China, with appropriate titles and fully resourced.²³

V. Conclusion: The Engaged Scholar

This study of Cheng Enfu has sought to emphasise the more philosophical dimensions of his work as a Marxist political economist, and it has done so with a specific focus on the period of socialist construction. At the beginning of my study, I observed that these two themes guided my way through Cheng Enfu's works that I have read. There may seem to be quite a number of references list below, but these still comprise only a fraction of the total output of a long and productive life as a Marxist scholar. I must admit that I also consulted a few efforts to provide a comprehensive definition of Marxism in light of its nearly two centuries of history and development (Cheng 2020; see also 2018, 1–2; Cheng and Wang 2018). In these works, written in light of the actual deployment of Marxist methods in the context of socialist construction, we find that Marxism is far more than an intellectual enterprise that hopes for a better world (as one finds in contexts – Western and other – where capitalism and its liberal ideology predominates). For Cheng Enfu, Marxism has its main body of basic principles and specific judgements, becoming concrete in specific contexts (Sinicization being only one example); entails a robust mutual interaction between scholars and Communist Party leaders; provides policy advice and guides policy-making; constantly innovates in light of the actual experience of socialist construction and development; is focused on social realities, people's well-being, and values; and is international, offering a distinct model of globalisation. The reader will see that a number of the items I analysed in the bulk of my study come from these efforts at a comprehensive definition of Marxism.

Indeed, it is the final item from Cheng Enfu's definition that I would like to emphasise by way of conclusion. It concerns the engaged scholar. To set the background: given that Chinese philosophy (哲学) has a history of maxims from the dialogues of sages rather than the construction of abstract systems of thought, it means that philosophy is not the 'mere pursuit of intellectual understanding' or the pleasure of constructing systems of thought, but is devoted to the 'activities

23 For readers outside China not aware of these sub-disciplines, they are: Basic Principles of Marxism; History and Development of Marxism; Studies of Sinicized Marxism; International Marxism Studies; Ideological and Political Education; Basic Studies of Modern and Contemporary Chinese History.

and realities of life'. Philosophy, and thus scholarship itself, exists as a way of life, is integrated with life and seeks to improve life (Chang 2018, 18; see also Wang Haifeng 2018, 24). As Xi Jinping observes, the great achievements of philosophy and the social sciences have been created in 'answering and solving the major problems faced by humanity and society'. Researchers live in a real society, so much so that without flesh-and-blood human beings, philosophy 'would have no attraction, appeal, influence or vitality' (Xi 2016, 6). Thus, scholarship is not seen as divorced from everyday realities. Instead, the engaged or organic intellectual is the norm, focused on solving the major problems of the day. Theirs also is the responsibility of training 'the builders of socialism and their successors, who will be well developed morally, intellectually, physically and aesthetically' (Xi 2018, 1–2).

Cheng Enfu is such a scholar, for whom Marxism is the over-arching framework for all education and scholarship. More specifically, Marxist scholars should be strategic social scientists of the working class: guardians of the truth, brave in innovation, engaged in planning for the country, prepared to fight for Marxism, and excel in guidance. These five perspectives are certainly a challenge to the crumbling ivory towers in the West, but also to Communist intellectuals in capitalist countries. How are these five perspectives to be realised? Be vitally interested in one's task, suggests Cheng in advice to younger scholars. But also: aim high, for the higher the goal, the greater the motivation; cultivate thinking, for it is the soul of research; materialise thought in concrete works; and, in terms of one's approach to research, liberate thought in the search for truth with utmost rigorousness. Why should a Marxist scholar be so? Such a scholar takes the 'position of the working class and its vanguard as the core, and organically combines it with the positions of working people, broad masses of the people, the Chinese nation and China as a whole, and the people of the world and all humankind' (Cheng 2020, 107).

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