

On the High Compatibility of Marxist Dialectical and Comprehensive Thinking with the Best of China's Traditional Culture

Published as: 2023 论马克思主义辩证思维和整体思维与中华优秀传统文化的高度契合性 (On the High Compatibility of Marxist Dialectical and Comprehensive Thinking with the Best of China's Traditional Culture) 译 嵯明亮 (Translated by Zhuo Mingliang) 《世界社会主义研究》(World Socialism Studies) 2023 年第 7 期, 84-93+116 页。

In the last couple of years, we have come to hear much of the following expression: the basic principles of Marxism combined with China's concrete practice, and combined with China's fine traditional culture (马克思主义基本原理同中国具体实际相结合、同中华优秀传统文化相结合). To my knowledge, the "two combinations" were initially mentioned in General Secretary Xi Jinping's speech at the centenary celebrations of the CPC, on 1 July 2021. Not long afterwards in 2021, I was involved in organising a conference with international scholars and Chinese scholars, and the Chinese scholars – more specifically, some of China's leading Marxist scholars – were already discussing the "two combinations." The "two combinations" were mentioned again in the General Secretary's report to the CPC's Twentieth National Congress, held in October 2022, and here we find some elaboration on their meaning. However, the most significant exposition of the "two combinations" appeared in a recent speech at a Symposium on Cultural Inheritance and Development, held on 2 June 2023.

The following analysis is written by an Australian-born professor of Marxist philosophy. To explain a little, since it is important for the reader to know some information about the author: my parents were immigrants from the Netherlands in the 1950s, and I was born in Australia but have a Dutch and not an Anglo-inheritance. I sometimes say that my citizenship may be Australia, but my nationality (民族) is Dutch. I am a member of the Communist Party of Australia and have taught and researched in

Australian universities for almost thirty years. However, since my specialisation is Marxist philosophy, I have also taught in China since 2013, initially part-time and now full-time. Although my first visit to China was in 2007, I have engaged ever more deeply since 2013, studying in depth Chinese Marxist philosophy, socialism with Chinese characteristics, and the relations between China's traditional philosophy and Marxist philosophy. And I have done so with a background in the works of Marx and Engels, Western Marxism, and Soviet Marxism. Apologies to the reader for this detail, but it is important to understand the background to the subject matter of this article.

The following reflections are organised in four sections. The first section will present some thoughts on the elaboration of the two combinations in General Secretary Xi Jinping's speech at the CPC's Twentieth National Congress in 2022. The second section provides my own observation on a distinctive contribution from China's traditional culture and philosophy that has found deep resonance with Marxism: dialectical – and thus comprehensive – thinking and action. The third section exegetes and analyses the significant explanation of the “two combinations” in a speech by Xi Jinping at a symposium on cultural inheritance and development, which was held on 2 June, 2023. After discussing Xi Jinping's five points concerning the combination of Marxism with China's fine traditional culture, I emphasise two implications: the relationship between old and new; and the relationship between modernisation and traditional culture. The final section is the conclusion, and here I am concerned with dialectical relation between following one's own path in light of a long and distinctive history and being more deeply engaged with and more broadly open to the world.

1. Explaining the Two Combinations: Report to the CPC's Twentieth National Congress

The initial explanation of the two combinations was made in the General Secretary's report to the CPC's Twentieth National Congress in 2022.¹ In this report, Xi Jinping pointed out:

¹ 习近平，高举中国特色社会主义伟大旗帜 为全面建设社会主义现代化国家而团结奋斗——在中国共产党第二十次全国代表大会上的报告（2022年10月16日）《求是》2022/21，http://www.qstheory.cn/dukan/qs/2022-11/01/c_1129089160.htm

Chinese Communists are keenly aware that only by integrating the basic principles of Marxism with China's concrete realities and fine traditional culture and only by applying dialectical and historical materialism can we provide correct answers to the major questions presented by the times and discovered through practice and can we ensure that Marxism always retains its vigour and vitality.

Let us exegete this quotation by taking each part in turn. The first part of the sentence concerns "integrating the basic principles of of Marxism with China's concrete realities and fine traditional culture." The process of integrating or combining Marxism with a country's specific or concrete realities is well-known, and it is something that attentive international students of Chinese Marxism have taken to heart. We can say that this has been an awareness and reality in China since the late 1930s, when Mao Zedong observed that China's long and rich history, from Confucius to Sun Yat-sen, is a precious legacy that Marxists need to study, understand, and assimilate. Only then can Marxism take on national form in light of specific conditions. Indeed, there is no such thing as abstract Marxism, but only concrete Marxism in light of the specific realities of a country. In this respect, General Secretary Xi Jinping is emphasising and developing further in the new era a well-established feature of Chinese Marxism.

However, this quotation includes and then develops an important new integration or combination: with China's fine traditional culture. Perhaps we can say that this second combination is both new – in terms of being explicitly identified – and has been a reality for some time now. In other words, the specific realities of today or of the recent past are also deeply influenced by the long cultural tradition. At the same, the combination with China's fine traditional culture has its own distinct emphases. As the report to the CPC's Twentieth Congress points out:

Only by taking root in the rich historical and cultural soil of the country and the nation can the truth of Marxism flourish here. With a history stretching back to antiquity, China's fine traditional culture is extensive and profound; it is the crystallisation of the wisdom of Chinese civilisation.

Marxism can flourish only if it takes root among the people, who inherit the rich historical and cultural soil of a country. Indeed, with a century of experience to consider, it is very clear that there are distinct features of China's culture that welcomed Marxism, that

were germane to Marxism's emphases, system, and program. In this speech, General Secretary Xi Jinping identifies the principles and concepts of China's traditional culture as it has been crystallised in the consciousness of the people: pursuing common good for all; seeing the people as the foundation of the state; governing by virtue; discarding the outdated in favour of the new; selecting officials on the basis of merit; promoting harmony between humanity and nature; ceaselessly pursuing self-improvement; embracing the world with virtue; acting in good faith and being friendly to others; and fostering neighbourliness. These ways of viewing and living in the world "are highly consistent with the values and propositions of scientific socialism."

Each of these values from the Chinese cultural tradition could be discussed in some detail, but I would like to focus on "discarding the outdated in favour of the new [革故鼎新]." It is not simply a question of "wiping the slate clean" and beginning again; rather, this process involves a careful analysis of what is attached to old social forms and no longer relevant, and what is of quality, what is essential for cultural identity and continuity. It is the latter that persists in the new social form and can be developed further, and even taken to a higher qualitative level. I will have more to say on this question in the discussion below of the speech on cultural inheritance and development from June 2023, but for now let me emphasise how this process of discarding the dross and developing the essence, identifying what is useful and beneficial, is embodied in the Chinese translation of the German *Aufhebung*: 扬弃. In other words, this dialectical process ensures, as Xu Fengzhen puts it, that "China's fine traditional culture is full of vitality."²

By now I have moved onto the next part of the quotation above, which observes that it is also necessary to apply "dialectical and historical materialism." This phrase is very significant for international students of Marxism, especially in the West. Why? It indicates that Chinese Marxism inherits the full tradition of Marxism, that Chinese Marxism is very much part of the mainstream of Marxism. I emphasise this point here, since there was a curious move in Western Marxism to isolate Marx and turn him into a solitary thinker.

² 徐奉臻, "两个结合论" 的理论贡献和实践要求 《大连理工大学马克思主义学院云端国际学术会议: 世界视野下的人类文明新形态, 中国大连 2021 年 10 月 29-31 日》, 编辑 屈宏, 宋良和薄国强, 大连: 大连理工大学马克思主义学院, 2021 年 10 月, 第 344 页.

This was done by separating Engels's from Marx and blaming Engels for “distorting” Marxism. The result was that the mainstream of Marxism that actually developed – through Lenin, Soviet Marxism, and then Chinese Marxism – was cut off. This is a potentially long story, so I refer the reader to a couple of recent articles ³. One outcome of this curious development in Western Marxism – which has by now unravelled and come to an end – is that Marxism was defined only as “historical materialism.” By contrast, the General Secretary's emphasis – and, I would add, the emphasis of Chinese Marxist scholarship – is that Marxism entails both dialectical materialism and historical materialism, which we also know as scientific socialism. As readers will know, Xi Jinping has made this point clear on a number of occasions ⁴.

Of relevance for the report to the CPC's Twentieth Congress is that the “two combinations” are dialectically related in a number of ways ⁵. On the one hand, concrete realities and traditional culture are distinct entities. Concrete realities concern the stage of development of economic and social factors; traditional culture is the soul and backbone of a community, and concerns material, spiritual, and systemic factors, along with what may be called life and value assumptions of society as a whole. On the other hand, concrete realities and traditional culture are related in many ways. As mentioned, the specific realities of today or of the recent past are the result of the longer cultural heritage – and here 文化 has a more comprehensive sense than what is captured in the English word “culture.” Further, culture is never a fixed reality, set in stone for all ages. While there is a cultural deposit or essence, culture itself is constantly developed, transformed, and adapted in light of ever-changing realities. To paraphrase Marx in “The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte,” we may not choose the culture and conditions we inherit from our forebears, but we can also act to develop and transform what we have inherited.

³ Roland Boer, “A Truncated Marxism: On the Ideological Structure of Western Marxism”, *Fudan Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences* 16 (2023): 145–70; Roland Boer, “The End of Western Marxism? On the Unravelling of an Ideological Structure”, *Fudan Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences* 16 (2023): 123–43.

⁴ 习近平，辩证唯物主义是中国共产党人的世界观和方法论《求是》2019年第1期，http://www.qstheory.cn/dukan/qs/2018-12/31/c_1123923896.htm，习近平，坚持历史唯物主义不断开辟当代中国马克思主义发展新境界《求是》2020年第2期，http://www.qstheory.cn/dukan/qs/2020-01/15/c_1125459115.htm。

⁵ 张允熠 张弛，从“一个结合”到“两个结合”：马克思主义中国化的新叙事《思想理论教育》2021年第9期 10–16 页；孙力，“两个结合”：马克思主义中国化的规律揭示《思想理论教育》2021年第9期 17–24 页。

How is Marxism to be combined and developed in light of China's long and rich cultural history, which is one of the most admired cultures in the world? The answer here too is dialectical. By "dialectical" I mean the way Marx and Engels (by standing Hegel on his feet) developed a materialist dialectics that challenges the Western tradition's tendency to see everything in terms of "either-or." The term they deployed is *Aufhebung*, which entails both negating and transforming so that what is *aufhebt* is taken to a qualitatively different level. To pick up an earlier point, with specific reference to traditional culture: it is necessary to discard the dross, the feudal and bourgeois relics of a cultural tradition, and draw out the essence so that it may be transformed in and through Marxism (captured with the Chinese 扬弃).

The final part of the quotation I am exegeting observes that only in this way "can we provide correct answers to the major questions presented by the times and discovered through practice and can we ensure that Marxism always retains its vigour and vitality." As the General Secretary has observed on a number of occasions, China's experience proves that "Marxism works." However, I would like to emphasise the phrase that "Marxism always retains its vigour and vitality." In other words, through its concretising in light of China's specific realities and its combination and integration with China's fine traditional culture, Marxism is constantly renewed and verified. To quote Xu Fengzhen, "It is not only necessary to transform [化 *hua*] China through Marxism from the perspective of inheritance and open up a new realm of sinified Marxism, but it is also necessary to transform [化 *hua*] Marxism through China from the perspective of development, so as enrich and develop Marxism itself."⁶ Here another phrase that has become common in recent times captures this renewal and vitality of Marxism: Marxism adapted in light of China's specific realities and the needs of the times (马克思主义中国化时代化).

2. Dialectical Thinking and Comprehensive Action

This section functions as a transition between the section above and the one to come, which concerns Xi Jinping's speech on cultural inheritance and development. Here I

⁶ 徐奉臻, "两个结合论" 的理论贡献和实践要求 《大连理工大学马克思主义学院云端国际学术会议: 世界视野下的人类文明新形态, 中国大连 2021 年 10 月 29-31 日》, 编辑 屈宏, 宋良和薄国强, 大连: 大连理工大学马克思主义学院, 2021 年 10 月, 第 345 页.

would like to discuss an observation of my own, based on extensive and in-depth research on Chinese Marxism for more than a decade. Allow me to begin here with a quote from a famous short poem: 横看成岭侧成峰，远近高低各不同。不识庐山真面目，只缘身在此山中。 Difficult to translate, so let me paraphrase: you may look at Lu Mountain from many angles, near and far, high and low, but you cannot see the true face of the mountain if you are inside. I have actually visited Lushan in Jiangxi Province, and experienced its complex history, but I quote this brief poem to point out that in some cases foreigners can see something, can view a situation from a distinct perspective, that those who are inside assume and do not see.

In this case, I refer to a whole Chinese cultural and philosophical assumption that is so distinct and so different from the Western cultural tradition: dialectical thinking and comprehensive action. I have researched Mao Zedong's textual notes when he and his comrades were studying Marxist philosophy during the time in Yan'an (1935-1937), I have read many times the lecture notes on dialectical materialism, and especially the essays "On Contradiction," "On Practice," and "On the Correct Handling of Contradictions Among the People." One cannot avoid noticing Mao Zedong's active engagement with all this material, since he saw the connection with China's long cultural assumption that one must think dialectically and act comprehensively. His many annotations and notes are full of examples from China's long history and culture, while at the same time seeing them in a new light through Marxist analysis.

When international friends and colleagues ask me how to understand China and Chinese Marxism, I say: contradiction analysis, which is both a major development of Marxist dialectical analysis and a contribution from China's long cultural and philosophical tradition. When they ask me what they should study, I say: begin with Mao Zedong's reading notes and annotations, his lectures on dialectical materialism, and the three important essays mentioned above; move on to study the works of Deng Xiaoping, Jiang Zemin, and Hu Jintao; and then study very carefully the many speeches, articles, and volumes by General Secretary Xi Jinping. By this process, I suggest, they will come to

understand dialectical analysis and comprehensive action.⁷ I also suggest that should spend some time in China, learn the language, engage with people to experience the cultural assumptions, pay close attention to the way Marxism and China's incredible traditional culture have a distinct chemistry, a spark that is quite unique.

Whenever I listen to a speech by General Secretary Xi Jinping and whenever I read the texts of these speeches, I am constantly struck by the way each sentence, each expression, each statement is so thoroughly dialectical and comprehensive. Things that oppose each other also complement one another, each opposition is also a relation, all things in the world may run their different paths and yet they are also related, the need to consider all aspects of a situation, the way all aspects are related – these and many more are the very ways of thinking that one encounters. And when I research Chinese scholarship, the whole discourse framework is in terms of dialectical thinking and considering all aspects of a problem. Chinese readers will of course see this as the normal way to view the world, but for a foreigner this dialectical thinking and comprehensive action is a distinctive feature that comes out of the long Chinese cultural and philosophical tradition.

More specifically, when this long cultural and philosophical tradition met Marxist dialectical analysis there was a spark, a distinct fit that meant that Marxism would indeed take root in China. Of course, some of the formulations that come out of the Chinese tradition can have some metaphysical dimensions, especially when we think of *yin-yang*. This is precisely where Marxism comes into play, for its resolutely materialist approach, its ability to stand an idealist and metaphysical approach on its feet – as Marx and Engels already did with Hegel's philosophy – has enabled elements of China's cultural tradition to be transformed and renewed.

I hope the reader appreciates this perspective from a foreigner who was brought up in the West, who is a stranger in the West, and who lives and works in China. To recall the brief poem about Lushan, sometimes one who who views the mountain from outside can see things that those who are in the mountain assume as normal and thus cannot see.

⁷ Roland Boer, *Socialism with Chinese Characteristics: A Guide for Foreigners* (Singapore: Springer, 2021), 55–84.

3. Old and New: The Question of Modernisation and Traditional Culture

In this third section, the focus is on General Secretary Xi Jinping's speech at the symposium on cultural inheritance and development, in early June of 2023. Let me begin with a quotation: "The best inheritance of history is to create a new history; The greatest respect for human civilisation is to create a new form of human civilisation." In many respects, this quotation captures what I would like to emphasise in this section: the relationship between old and new; and the relationship between modernisation and traditional culture.

3.1 Liberation of Thought: Exegesis of the Five Points

In the speech concerning cultural inheritance and development, Xi Jinping makes five points, which comprise the most comprehensive elaboration on the "two combinations" that we have seen thus far.⁸ To exegete for a few moments:

The first point emphasises that for any integration or combination to work, the two sides – especially if they come from different sources – must be a "good fit with one another" so as to "ensure an organic combination." This point really sums up what we have examined earlier: the way in which the essence, the principles and values of China's traditional culture have a significant resonance with scientific socialism (see section 1). I would add here my observation in section two, where I emphasised that the good fit, the mutual interaction and renewal of China's traditional culture and Marxism has taken place in light of dialectical thinking and comprehensive action.

The second point concerns the "mutual achievement" of creating a "new cultural life form" that has an "organic unity." This point broaches the question of the relationship between modernisation and traditional culture, by observing that there is a two-way process in this mutual achievement: Marxism has become China's Marxism, and China's fine traditional culture has become modern. Indeed, this new culture has "become the cultural form of Chinese modernisation." I will return to the question of modernisation

⁸ In what follows, I draw on a report of the speech that was initially published by 新华社 but may also be found here: https://www.gov.cn/yaowen/liebiao/202306/content_6884316.htm.

and traditional culture below, save to observe here the crucial role of Marxism in the process of renewal and development.

The third point also concerns modernisation and culture, but now it does so by considering past and present, or old and new. The point speaks of the road of socialism with Chinese characteristics: the foundation of this road has been bolstered, the road has become far longer in light of historical depth, and it has become broader in terms of the breadth of China's traditional culture. At the same time, while Chinese civilisation has given Chinese-style modernisation – that is, through Marxism's profound effects of renewal – a profound heritage, this modernisation has also modernised and strengthened Chinese culture. I hardly need to point out the inescapably dialectical form of this observation.

When we come to the fourth and fifth points, there is a greater emphasis on the “second combination.” Thus, while the process of integration and combination opens up greater space for innovation, the “second combination” is described as another “liberation of thought.” This clause, of course, echoes Deng Xiaoping's most important speech on liberating thought and seeking truth from facts.⁹ Now, however, the emphasis is on making “full use of the precious resources of China's fine traditional culture” so as to explore future-oriented theoretical and institutional innovation. To a Western reader, this may be a little difficult to understand, since traditional culture in the West is usually seen in conservative terms, as something that does not change or at most changes very slowly in terms of what is seen as “natural” way. The point by the General Secretary has two aspects. To begin with, China's traditional culture, and indeed Chinese civilisation is extremely innovative, and this “determines the enterprising spirit of the Chinese people.” Further, the way one engages with this traditional culture is to “uphold the old and yet not return to the old.” In other words, the task is one of both preservation and renewal, and continuing the essence and continually innovation, because this culture is itself profoundly innovative.

The fifth point identifies the fact that the combination of the basic principles of Marxism with China's fine traditional culture has brought to the fore and consolidated

⁹ 邓小平, 解放思想, 实事求是, 团结一致向前看 (1978年12月13日) 《邓小平文选》第二卷, 北京: 人民出版社, 2008年, 140-153页.

China's "cultural subjectivity" or identity, and that this is manifested in the Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for the New Era. All of this has led to "new heights": in adapting Marxism to China's conditions and the times; in grasping the laws of development of Chinese civilisation; in the CPC's understanding of China's path, theory, and system; in the confidence in history and culture; and in the dialectical process of promoting cultural innovation in the context of inheriting China's fine traditional culture.

In light of these observations, it should be no surprise to anyone why Marxism took such deep root in China's cultural soil a little over a century ago. Perhaps we can say that this rich cultural soil was highly receptive to the seed of Marxism, which grew and flourished and brought about the New China.

3.2. The Problem of Old and New

Out of these five points, I would like to discuss in a little more detail two aspects: the relation between old and new; and the relation between modernisation and traditional culture. In terms of the question of old and new, this is a perpetual problem for Communist Parties that seek – as is still the case in many countries – to replace the old system and set out on the socialist road. It has also been a problem faced soon after a proletarian revolution, when a Communist Party has been able to come to power, and must consider how, in light of difficult conditions, what the best way forward is for beginning the road of socialist construction.

History is a good guide on such matters, so let us consider the experience of the Russian Revolution and the years that followed. The Bolsheviks were faced with a crucial problem: how should they relate to what had gone before, to their own cultural tradition? At a philosophical level, a revolution is predicated on the real freedom of dispensing with the old system that has been overthrown and building anew. Debates turned on whether the old should be obliterated along with the former ruling class, and an entirely new culture – along with a new society – should be constructed in its place, or whether one should seek to engage with the former culture and transform what was worth subsuming (*aufheben*) in light of the new. At a more pedestrian level, it may be asked: what are to be the building blocks of the new order? In Russia, for instance, there was the whole

Proletkult movement of the 1920s, along with the immense outburst of creativity in all spheres that influenced the world over. In China, it would be possible to trace such an impetus back to the maelstrom of debates of the early twentieth century, and especially some aspects of New Culture Movement, in which some called for abolishing the Chinese script and all of the cultural associations that came with it.

Ultimately, this constant temptation is quite undialectical, for the new is never constructed on a *tabula rasa*. Instead, one must build the new with the various preserved and salvaged pieces of the old, thoroughly sublating them in the process. After the October Revolution, debates raged on precisely this matter, with Anatoly Lunacharsky, for one, arguing strenuously that the revolution exercises an *Aufhebung* on the past, abolishing, preserving, and transforming all that was best of the past. As for Lenin, he may have tended towards the clean revolutionary break in some of his material before the October Revolution¹⁰, but it is notable that after the revolution he came to see matters somewhat differently: “We are not utopians who think that socialist Russia must be built up by men of a new type; we must utilise the material we have inherited from the old world”¹¹.

By now, the reader will expect that my answer to this problem is to emphasise a dialectical process. As Xi Jinping has said on earlier occasions, “Chinese Communists are neither historical nihilists nor cultural nihilists.” Instead, the “fertile soil of China's fine traditional culture” is “constantly updated and advances in step with the times” precisely through Marxism¹². I would suggest that the phrase “fine traditional culture [优秀传统文化]” may also be understood in terms of “the best of traditional Chinese culture.” In this sense, the phrase embodies this process. It is not simply the whole of China’s traditional culture (which included outdated feudal dross), but its excellence, its essence, its crystallisation, that is taken forward, developed, and renewed. The essence constantly

¹⁰ V. I. Lenin, “The Heritage We Renounce”, in *Collected Works*, Vol. 2 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1960, 1897), 491–534; V. I. Lenin, “The State and Revolution: The Marxist Theory of the State and the Tasks of the Proletariat in the Revolution”, in *Collected Works*, Vol. 25 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1964, 1917), 385–497.

¹¹ V. I. Lenin, “Session of the Petrograd Soviet, March 12, 1919”, in *Collected Works*, Vol. 29 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1965, 1919), 24.

¹² 习近平, 《在纪念孔子诞辰 2565 周年国际学术研讨会暨国际儒学联合会第五届会员大会开幕会上的讲话 (2014 年 9 月 24 日)》北京: 人民出版社 2014 年, 第 12 页.

needs to drawn out, refined, and developed at a new level (the more literal sense of 扬弃 *yangqi*).

3.3. Modernisation and Traditional Culture

The second item I would like to emphasise is the relation between modernisation and traditional culture. The question of China's traditional culture has come ever more to the forefront in light of China's stunning achievements in terms of its own path of modernisation. Over the last few years, I have heard and read much concerning the distinct features of this path of modernisation, and especially its world-historical significance. However, I see no need to repeat them here.

Instead, I would like to begin with a common question from Western observers in light of their own experience of modernisation. A common perception among Westerners is that traditional culture is challenged and undermined by modernisation. Obviously, this is part-and-parcel of the Western tendency to see contradictions in terms of either-or, in this case, as either traditional culture or modernisation. At the same time, this is also the experience in Western countries that have modernised (and are now in decline). For example, the process of making the individual primary and seeing society as simply a collection of individuals has destroyed the old Western cultural assumptions of the common good. The old value of "loving your neighbour as yourself" has become of simply "loving oneself" with the negative consequences that are now so obvious. Indeed, the growing assessment is that the West has lost its way and has hit rock bottom. It has not yet found a way to dig deep into its own cultural past to find new and different ideas for renewal. Let me put it this way, the West has a long way to go and many struggles ahead of it before it learns to remove the dross and develop a new cultural essence. By the time it does so, the world will be a qualitatively different one in which the few Western countries of the world will need to find a more modest place.

In my discussions with colleagues and friends in China, and in my research I find a completely different approach to modernisation and traditional culture. We have already seen this dialectical approach in the discussion of the five points from General Secretary Xi

Jinping's speech on cultural inheritance and development. However, let me quote here from an insightful piece published in *Qiushi*:

Chinese-style modernisation is the continuation, and not the elimination, of the modernisation of ancient civilisation; it is a modernisation that grows from the land of China, and not one that rigidly imitates the modernisation of other countries; it is the result of civilisational renewal, not the product of civilisational rupture. Chinese-style modernisation is the new life of the old country of the Chinese nation, which will surely promote the rejuvenation of Chinese civilisation.¹³

中国式现代化是赓续古老文明的现代化，而不是消灭古老文明的现代化；是从中华大地长出来的现代化，不是照搬照抄其他国家的现代化；是文明更新的结果，不是文明断裂的产物。中国式现代化是中华民族的旧邦新命，必将推动中华文明重焕荣光。

Note especially the observations that Chinese-style modernisation results in the renewal of civilisation and does entail a rupture, a break, or a rift with ancient civilisation. Even more, it is the new life of the old country and is thus crucial for promoting rejuvenation. This is a far cry from the Western experience and perception that traditional culture is undermined through modernisation.

Here I would like draw on experiences from a recent research field trip to Xizang. On this research field trip, I noticed everywhere the comprehensive development and modernisation that has and is still taking place: in terms of economic development, ecological civilisation; energy supply; infrastructure in terms of rail, road, and telecommunications; education; life expectancy; common prosperity, and so on. But I would like to emphasise the way this comprehensive modernisation has also led to both the preservation of Xizang's unique cultural heritage, as part of China's overall cultural heritage, and its renewal. In an article concerning the research field trip, I wrote:

Culture relies on the strength of the economic base. When the economy is growing and is strong, culture and education can flourish and innovate. Conversely, the increase in an educated and cultured work force means that the economy can strengthen even more.

Further, while there is always a strong sediment in culture, providing the worldview and

¹³ 《求是》杂志评论员 担当新时代新的文化使命 建设中华民族现代文明 《求是》 2023/12 http://www.qstheory.cn/dukan/qs/2023-06/15/c_1129694568.htm

assumptions of the people, each generation contributes in a creative fashion to reshaping the culture that they inherit and then hand on to the next generation. In other words, in light of Xizang's incredible economic development, the culture of Xizang is flourishing as never before. Indeed, Xizang's own culture is a significant contributor to what we know as China's fine traditional culture as a whole.¹⁴

Indeed, the role of Marxism in enabling such a renewal is the emphasis of a recent piece by Zang Fengyu, the dean of the School of Marxism at Renmin University of China.¹⁵ He observes that given the deep influence of Chinese traditional culture on the mindset and assumptions of Chinese people, the CPC had given great attention to the role of this cultural tradition. At the same time, the taking root and spread of Marxism in China over the last century had also transformed the way of thinking and values of the people in China, and that this has been done by examining this cultural heritage with scientific rationality and endowing it with renewed meaning in light of the times. Further, Marxism is able to dig deep into the foundations of China's traditional culture, reinterpret it in the spirit of "seeking truth from facts" and grasp the objective laws of civilisational development so as to find the scientific path for realising a new form of human civilisation. It is precisely Marxism, or rather, Marxism adapted and developed in light of China's specific characteristics, that has enabled China's traditional culture make the move from pre-modern to modern. Finally, Zang Fengyu observes that culture is an ever-flowing stream (I would emphasise here the 化 character in 文化). However, self-renewal requires cultural vitality so as to develop with the times and indeed express the spirit of the times. Only by renewing and carrying forward the "living things" in traditional culture can we respect and inherit the traditional culture.

Professor Zang concluded by quoting Xi Jinping: "the best inheritance of history is to create a new history; the greatest respect for human civilisation is to create a new form of human civilisation." He continues that it is precisely because the CPC has upheld cultural identity or subjectivity and emphasised the new culture of the Chinese people that the CPC has been able to lead the people to take China from being backward top

¹⁴ Roland Boer. 2023 'What I see first-hand in Xizang: The region is flourishing with ecological and economic development'. *Global Times*, 25 May 2023, p. 6. <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202305/1291498.shtml>.

¹⁵ 臧峰宇：马克思主义基本原理同中华优秀传统文化相结合的内在机理《学习活页文选》2023年第23期。

constructing a civilised and advanced China. Thus, China's fine traditional culture is now able to move towards and contribute on the world stage to a new form of human civilisation, which – with one more dialectical turn – also enables the modernisation of Marxism in China.

In sum, culture by its very nature is both a process of passing on the essence and constant renewal and creative transformation. Modernisation and traditional culture are – from a Chinese dialectical perspective – two necessary components of the whole process.

4. Conclusion: Following One's Own Path and Engaging More Deeply with the World

By way of conclusion, I would like to address the question of following one's own path in light of a long and distinctive history as a way of being more deeply engaged with and more broadly open to the world. Again, for Westerners and their either-or framework this relationship is usually seen as either following one's own path or being open to the world. You can't have it both ways, they think. But we have come a point where Western ways of thinking have lost traction and are no longer so influential.

A far more productive way of viewing the relationship comes from General Secretary Xi Jinping's speech in June 2023. As reported, he began by identifying some key features of China's 5000-year continuous history: long historical continuity, which one needs to understand so as to understand China of the past, present, and future; inherent innovation, in terms of being enterprising and fearless in facing new challenges; the unity and integration of all nationalities in China, in terms of territorial, social, political, and civilisational unity. These three items – continuity, innovation, and unity – mean that China must follow its own path of development, modernisation, and cultural renewal. I would add here that socialist countries have always seen comprehensive self-sufficiency as a core element in following the socialist road. Any socialist country that abandons such self-sufficiency does so at its own peril.

Now we move a number of items from China's 5000-year history that have an international focus. First, the inclusiveness of Chinese civilisation, with its many diverse areas and many nationalities, means that China by its very nature engages with the rest of

the world in a spirit of exchange, interaction, and openness. We may put it this way: the microcosm of China's civilisational history shapes the macrocosm of engaging with world civilisations. Second, there is an inherent peacefulness and desire for peace in China's long history. Historically, the only wars in which China has engaged have been ones that took place during internal breakdown (think of the Warring States period), or happened during times in which the borders of the country needed to be secured. Simply put, China has not sought to invade, occupy, or colonise another country and impose its will and some form of hegemony on other countries. This remarkable history means that international engagement is for the sake of peace, for stability, exchange, and the development of an international order that is truly democratic and treats every country as an equal.

The reader will note that these features of Chinese civilisation – continuity, innovation, unity, inclusiveness, peace, and open engagement with the rest of the world – have moved from following one's own path to openness to the world. In other words, both features are inherent within the history of Chinese civilisation. It is not either-or; instead, it is both-and. Yet it also more than this: the ability to interact and exchange with the different civilisations of the world can take place only when one has dug deep to identify one's own unique cultural identity and subjectivity. Following one's own path is the very means for engaging on the world stage.

I would like to close by considering Marxism. Earlier, I mentioned that socialist countries have always emphasised self-sufficiency as a core feature of socialist construction. At the same time, Marxism – and thus communism – is an international movement. (As I write, communist parties in many countries of the world are experiencing significant growth.) I would like to suggest that the relationship between self-sufficiency, and indeed not interfering in each other's affairs, is a dialectical one: only by becoming concrete in the particular conditions of a country, only by creatively combining with the different cultural histories in each country, is it possible to engage internationally in the communist movement in a way that genuinely learns from the experiences and struggles of one another.

References

- Boer, Roland. "A Truncated Marxism: On the Ideological Structure of Western Marxism". *Fudan Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences* 16 (2023): 145–70.
- Boer, Roland. *Socialism with Chinese Characteristics: A Guide for Foreigners*. Singapore: Springer, 2021.
- Boer, Roland. "The End of Western Marxism? On the Unravelling of an Ideological Structure". *Fudan Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences* 16 (2023): 123–43.
- Boer, Roland. "What I see first-hand in Xizang: The region is flourishing with ecological and economic development." *Global Times*, 25 May 2023, p. 6.
<https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202305/1291498.shtml>.
- 邓小平. 解放思想, 实事求是, 团结一致向前看 (1978年12月13日) 《邓小平文选》第二卷, 北京: 人民出版社, 2008年, 140–153页.
- Lenin, V. I. "Session of the Petrograd Soviet, March 12, 1919". In *Collected Works*, Vol. 29:19–38. Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1965.
- Lenin, V. I. "The Heritage We Renounce (1897)". In *Collected Works*, Vol. 2:491–534. Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1960.
- Lenin, V. I. "The State and Revolution: The Marxist Theory of the State and the Tasks of the Proletariat in the Revolution (1917)". In *Collected Works*, Vol. 25:385–497. Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1964.
- 《求是》杂志评论员. 担当新时代新的文化使命 建设中华民族现代文明 《求是》 2023/12 http://www.qstheory.cn/dukan/qs/2023-06/15/c_1129694568.htm.
- 孙力. "两个结合": 马克思主义中国化的规律揭示 《思想理论教育》 2021年第9期 17–24页.
- 习近平. 高举中国特色社会主义伟大旗帜 为全面建设社会主义现代化国家而团结奋斗——在中国共产党第二十次全国代表大会上的报告 (2022年10月16日) 《求是》 2022/21, http://www.qstheory.cn/dukan/qs/2022-11/01/c_1129089160.htm.
- 习近平. 辩证唯物主义是中国共产党人的世界观和方法论 《求是》 2019年第1期, http://www.qstheory.cn/dukan/qs/2018-12/31/c_1123923896.htm.
- 习近平. 坚持历史唯物主义不断开辟当代中国马克思主义发展新境界 《求是》 2020年第2期, http://www.qstheory.cn/dukan/qs/2020-01/15/c_1125459115.htm.
- 习近平. 《在纪念孔子诞辰 2565 周年国际学术研讨会暨国际儒学联合会第五届会员大会开幕会上的讲话 (2014年9月24日)》北京: 人民出版社 2014年.
- 徐奉臻. "两个结合论" 的理论贡献和实践要求 《大连理工大学马克思主义学院云端国际学术会议: 世界视野下的人类文明新形态, 中国大连 2021年10月29-31日》, 编辑 屈宏, 宋良和薄国强, 大连: 大连理工大学马克思主义学院, 2021年10月, 339-345页.

臧峰宇：马克思主义基本原理同中华优秀传统文化相结合的内在机理《学习活
页文选》2023年第23期.

张允熠 张弛，从“一个结合”到“两个结合”：马克思主义中国化的新叙事
《思想理论教育》2021年第9期10-16页.