

The Guiding Light for the Communist Party of China and the Cause of National Development

Roland Boer

Renmin University of China, School of Philosophy

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In the General Secretary's report to the CPC's Twentieth National Congress in October, 2022, we find the following observation: "We have established the Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era." The initial phrase "we have established" is the key here, since it has been five years since the Thought was initially proposed at the CPC's Nineteenth Congress. In what follows, I propose to analyse what this means, specifically from the perspective of a foreigner who has been deeply engaged with China for well over a decade.

More generally, the Thought has become the basis for upholding and developing socialism with Chinese characteristics, and has become the guiding light for advancing the cause of the Communist Party and China as a whole. More specifically, after providing some background, I focus on four items that stand out from an international perspective: the "two combinations," in the sense that Marxism has been integrated or combined with China's concrete conditions and its fine traditional culture; the comprehensiveness of the "six musts"; China's role on the world stage; and

the increasing interest by a new generation of young people in the way the CPC has “achieved a new breakthrough in developing Marxism in light of the Chinese context and the needs of our times.”

1. Background: An International View

The preliminary task is to provide some background. The analysis that follows is by a foreigner who has researched in depth socialism with Chinese characteristics for a decade. The major outcome of this research was a book that has gained a relatively wide readership: *Socialism with Chinese Characteristics: A Guide for Foreigners* (2021). The reason for undertaking this research was to understand what makes China tick, why Marxism is the *kanjia benling*, the stock-in-trade, the special and honed skill for looking after the country. In other words, in order to understand China today, one must understand the central importance of Marxism, and especially Marxist philosophy.

The awareness of the foundational role of Marxism in China is slowly dawning on more and more foreigners. There are many factors that play a role in this growing awareness, such as the deep-seated and intractable problems in capitalist countries, and the fact that China has stepped onto the centre of the world stage. But a key factor is Xi Jinping’s report at the CPC’s 19th National Congress in 2017. On a personal note, I was in Beijing at the time and listened to the whole speech as it was broadcast live. As the speech unfolded, one gained an increasing sense of its far-reaching importance. This was, of course, the moment when Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics in the New Era was initially proposed and laid out in detail. And from that time onwards, more and more international observers began

to see that Marxism is foundational in China. Perhaps one can say that these “observers” had not been “observing” very well until that point in time. Indeed, for anyone who had paid serious attention to China over the years, the role of Marxism would have been obvious all the way through.

Since the CPC’s 19th National Congress, the Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era has been summed in terms of the 10 affirmations, the 14 commitments, and the 13 areas of achievement. This Thought has indeed been established, while at the same time undergoing constant development and elaboration. When we turn to General Secretary Xi Jinping’s speech at the CPC’s 20th National Congress, we can see significant further developments. While Chinese scholars have discussed these developments already at some depth, it is also very important for international scholars and students of Marxism to pay attention.

2. The Two Combinations

The first substantial topic concerns the “two combinations.” As is well known, these were identified earlier, at the CPC’s Centenary in 2021, and have the sense of persevering in integrating or combining Marxism with China’s concrete realities and in combining Marxism with China’s fine traditional culture. Much has been the scholarly work in China concerning the “two combinations,” but allow me the following observations based on the elaborations in the report at the CPC’s 20th National Congress.

First, the two combinations express a reality since Marxism first took root in China. In 1938, 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. For international students of Chinese Marxism, it is this insight that has struck home: it is through the process of concretising Marxism, of applying Marxism in light of distinct conditions, that Marxism becomes a truly international movement.

However, what was often missing from the purview of Marxists in other parts of the world is the fact that a country's or a region's cultural heritage also plays a significant role in the way Marxism is concretised. They tended to see "concrete conditions" only in terms of economic, social, and political realities, and tended to neglect cultural factors – indicated above in terms of "precious legacy." They will need to study more, especially since the General Secretary's report to the CPC's 20th National Congress makes it very clear that the combination, the adaptation, the concretising of Marxism is with *both* the actual conditions – answering real problems with solutions in light of objective laws – of the country *and* China's fine traditional culture.

Second, the formulation is dialectical in a number of ways. 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. For example, the specific realities of today or of the recent past are the result of the longer cultural heritage – and here "*wenhua*" 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.

Third, and from an international perspective, exactly 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. We may also put it this way, 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). As the report to the CPC’s 20th National Congress observes: “Our traditional culture espouses many important principles and concepts, including pursuing common good for all; regarding 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 well-known 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]” since it relates to the earlier point concerning *Aufhebung*: 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. It is the latter that persists in the new social form and can be developed further, and even taken to a higher qualitative level.

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. Comprehensiveness and the “Six Musts”

In the speech under consideration (from the CPC’s 20th National Congress), soon after the elaboration of the “two combinations” comes a significant further development of Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era: the “six musts.” These entail: the people as first or supreme; self-confidence and self-reliance; preserving the fundamental principles of Marxism while innovating; a problem-oriented approach; systemic thinking; and a global vision.

The history of Marxism attests to the importance of each of these “six musts,” and they are indeed “musts” and not merely recommendations or suggestions. Marxism is not for a small ruling elite, but always places the vast majority, workers and peasants, that is, the common people, above all else and seeks to improve the lives of all; when countries have set out on the socialist road, they have found that economic self-sufficiency is vital, along with the quiet long-term confidence that socialism is qualitatively better than capitalism or feudalism; Marxism has always been a guide for action and not a fixed dogma, with basic principles and a constant process of specific judgements and innovative actions; indeed, Marxist methodology is a methodology for solving problems, especially on the long socialist road; it does so effectively because it is a comprehensive approach; and in a dialectical relation with self-reliance, Marxism has always been an international movement with a global vision.

However, two items in particular stand out for an international observer: the need to think and act in a systemic fashion, and Marxism’s global vision. I will deal with the first in the remainder of this section, and the second in the next section.

In regard to systemic thinking, for those brought up and educated in a Western context – as is the case with the present writer – the overwhelming tendency is to compartmentalise, to bracket problems into discreet categories, to think in terms of one aspect or angle and assume that this one aspect can provide a solution.

The first lesson for such a person to learn is that Marxism itself is a comprehensive system. Towards the end of his life, the Hungarian Marxist, Georgy Lukács spoke of the importance of the “universality” of Marxism,

which it “gains from its derivation of the organic from inorganic nature and of society from the organic realm through the category of labour.” Lukács was here engaging in some self-criticism of his youthful work *History and Class Consciousness*. In this work, he had assumed that Marxism was restricted to the analysis of social forms and not nature. After much further experience, research, and reflection (in the Soviet Union and later in Hungary), Lukács came to realise the mistake of earlier work. In particular, he realised that Marxism must be a comprehensive and universal system, with the ability to analyse inorganic matter, nature, and human society. Indeed, in the quotation above, Lukács is alluding here to Engels’s *Dialectics of Nature*, and it was precisely in the maturity of the method Marx and Engels had developed through their whole lives that a comprehensive system of thought and action emerged. Of course, we now know this as scientific socialism, as dialectical materialism and historical materialism.

The second lesson for a foreigner to learn is that Chinese Marxism is a direct and mainstream heir to the comprehensiveness of the system Marx and Engels first developed, and which has now been enriched in so many ways. Anyone who takes the time and effort to research Chinese Marxism will soon find an emphasis again and again on comprehensiveness, on the need to consider all aspects, of the way the whole and parts should be understood in relation to one another. Of course, this is the way the world works, in which everything is “interconnected and interdependent,” a complete system that is constantly evolving and developing. It follows that to understand and interpret the world we need a comprehensive system of analysis; but it also follows that to change the world we need arguably an even more systemic perspective.

We may go further. Let me put it this way: in the *Analects* we read that “If a man takes no thought about what is far off, he will find troubles near at hand.” The saying is brief, but it already expresses 2,500 years ago the need to take a wider purview, to take into account what is further afield in order to understand a specific detail near at hand. Here may be seen the seed of a distinctly comprehensive approach to understanding and transforming the world, which has become part of the Chinese cultural worldview. Let me now quote from General Secretary Xi Jinping’s report to the CPC’s 20th National Congress. He speaks of the importance of the ability to understand “the present from a historical perspective, look beyond the surface to get to the crux of issues, and properly manage the relationships between overall and local interests, between the present and the future, between macro and micro concerns, between primary and secondary issues, and between the special and the ordinary.”

A few observations on this longer quotation. We can see that is an heir to the observation from the *Analects*, and is thus another feature of the Chinese cultural tradition that has resonance with Marxism and can indeed be developed further in the context of Marxist methodology. However, while the quotation from the *Analects* concerns what is far and near, the report to the CPC’s 20th National Congress mentions a comprehensive range of dialectical perspectives: present and historical past; present and long-term prospect of the future; surface and crux or depth; overall and local; macro and micro; special and ordinary; and primary and secondary contradictions. Note that I have put here the primary and secondary contradictions last in the list, since I want to emphasise, from an international perspective, the importance of contradiction analysis as a new chapter in the development of

dialectical materialism. Why make this point? As mentioned earlier, Chinese Marxism is a manifestation of the mainstream of Marxism, since it incorporates and develops further all of the insights from what may be called the Marxist tradition.

4. On the World Stage

In this section, I would like to pick the last of the “six musts,” namely, the need for a global vision. As mentioned earlier, China has stepped onto the centre of the world stage. Nearly every news outlet in the world has almost daily items on China. Even though some still need to gain a more informed and balanced understanding, the attention in itself is a testament to the fact of China’s global importance. These days, every move China makes has world-historical significance.

As readers will know, this reality did not happen overnight. Decades of hard-won gains in China’s economic development have laid the foundations for international engagement. Many indeed are the international initiatives: the Belt and Road Initiative and its inter-linking with regional projects around the world; the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, which is becoming the most important of such organisations in the world; the global development initiative; the global security initiative; developments in global governance; win-win; a community of shared future for humankind; an alternative model of modernisation for developing countries; a new form of human civilisation; and China’s crucial major country diplomacy with Chinese characteristics. The list could go on, and a full list would be long indeed, but I would like to make three points concerning China’s internationalisation.

First, a question arises: how should a country approach internationalisation? Should it seek to copy another model that has been dominant in the past, or should it seek a way of doing so that remains true to its own accumulated cultural wisdom? The answer to this question should be obvious. As the report to the CPC's 20th National Congress observes: "We will stay firmly rooted in Chinese culture," which entails refining the "defining symbols and best elements of Chinese culture" and showcasing them to the world. This also requires deploying Chinese "discourse and narrative systems" so as to tell China's stories, to ensure its voice is heard, and that what is presented is "credible, appealing, and respectable." Not only do these observations sum up many statements to this effect in the last ten years, but they also indicate a distinct cultural confidence on the world stage. Of course, such a cultural confidence does not exclude other cultures, but rather includes keeping an open mind and the need to draw inspiration from the best achievements of human civilisation in many other parts of the world.

Second, the question of Marxist internationalism. For this writer, this is a notable and important theme. As a socialist country for which Marxism is the *kanjia benling*, the special and honed skill for looking after the country, it is both no surprise and a necessity that internationalisation is also what may be called a Marxist internationalisation. From its first moments, Marxism and indeed communism has always been an international movement. The vision has always been global, the theory and practice have always been focused on human liberation, and the organisation has always been international. This does not mean that a Marxism from one country seeks hegemony over Marxism in other countries, but it does mean fraternal, open, and long-term cooperation.

A further question arises: how does Marxist internationalisation relate to self-reliance and self-sufficiency? Earlier, I pointed out that economic self-sufficiency – that is, in terms of the crucial economic base – has always been a core policy of countries setting out on the socialist path. This self-reliance means the ability to produce sufficient food for the population, a complete industrial chain from heavy to light industry, technological innovation, and so on. History has shown that socialist countries should not and cannot become dependent on capitalist countries. On the other hand, Marxism is also an international reality, with a smaller or larger presence on every inhabited continent. How do these apparently contradictory terms relate to one another? Much could be said here, so I will restrict myself to one point: it is precisely through the self-reliance of socialist countries that they can engage with capitalist countries without becoming subject to the latter, and at the same time they are able to relate to other socialist countries in terms of their respective emphases on self-reliance.

However, we need to emphasise that the source of China's internationalisation is Marxism. On this matter, there is an important section in the report to the CPC's 20th National Congress. It speaks of Chinese-style modernisation offering the whole of humanity a new option for achieving modernisation, of the contribution by the CPC and the Chinese people in providing to humanity valuable Chinese insight, input, and strength to help to solve common challenges, and of the contributions to peace and development. The key, however, is the following: "Scientific socialism is brimming with renewed vitality in 21st-century China." This is the source of China's internationalisation.

Third, both of these related approaches are certainly not easy, especially now as the world experiences a period of qualitative change and faces many challenges. Engaging internationally by drawing on Chinese culture and Marxist internationalisation are complex and challenging tasks. The problem may be put in the following terms, deploying the distinction between the economic base and the superstructure – where we find culture, politics, philosophy, and so on. Engaging on the world stage in terms of the economic base is relatively easy, despite the efforts at interference by a small number of countries. Mutually complementary economies will engage deeply with one another, and the economic bottom line is what keeps international businesses seeking to deepen or begin their involvement with China.

However, at the level of superstructure international engagement takes longer and is somewhat more complex. Mutual understanding takes much patience and much listening. Learning to focus on what is held in common and putting aside differences until they can be dealt with constructively takes time. Discourses and narrative structures from culture to culture differ, cultural assumptions are not the same, ideological and political frameworks can differ markedly, and so on. Simply put, engaging at the level of the superstructure is a more difficult and time-consuming task. Of course, the bedrock is provided by the economic base, and with significant and patient effort the superstructure will eventually follow.

Conclusion

By way of conclusion, I would like to make two points. The first concerns an interesting and significant development. Since I have returned to China, I have noticed that there are more international students – even from

Western countries – coming to China to study Chinese Marxism, and especially Marxist philosophy in China. Needless to say, the preparation for such study requires significant preliminary effort in learning the Chinese language, which all foreigners agree is the most difficult language in the world to learn. Readers may wonder why this development is taking place. One reason is that China has stepped onto the world stage and that, as a result, Marxism in China has undeniable global importance.

Another reason concerns the dire situation in capitalist countries. Perhaps the best indicator is that in capitalist countries trust in governance, public institutions, and the news media is consistently below 50 percent and in some countries below 40 percent. This means that the majority of people in Western countries no longer accept the dominant ideology, and this is particularly true of young people. In light of these conditions, it should be no surprise that there is a growing interest in Marxism, and that Communist Parties in Western countries are growing – admittedly from a rather small base after the devastating period of the 1990s and 2000s. This is the context in which a small but growing number of young people are coming to China to study Chinese Marxism and Marxist philosophy in China.

The second point to be made in this conclusion concerns what these young scholars have come to study and seek to understand. At some level, they already know that Marxism is what makes the New China tick, that one simply cannot understand China today without understanding the crucial role of Marxism. But they want to understand how and why Marxism is the inescapable foundation and guide for China's socialist path. We may put it this way: they are seeking to understand 马克思主义中国化时代化. In other words, it is not merely the "sinicisation" of Marxism, or the development of

Marxism in light of China's specific context, but also how Marxism has developed and continues to develop in light of the needs of the times.