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A New Socioeconomic Formation?

Philosophical Reflections on China's "New Projectment Economy"

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ABSTRACT

This article seeks to provide a more comprehensive philosophical framework for the proposed model of a "new projectment economy" in China. Developed by a research team of political economists and social scientists, the "new projectment economy" offers an innovative theoretical framework in an attempt to interpret facts on the ground in China. However, what is needed is more extensive philosophical analysis of what is at stake. Thus, the article has two main sections. The first provides a critical overview of the move from the "old projectment" as initially proposed by the Brazilian economist Ignacio Rangel, as well the key points of the "new projectment" in relation to China. The second main section turns to connect the proposal of the research team with Chinese Marxist philosophical analysis, in terms of the development of contradiction analysis, a reconstruction of China's economic history since 1949, and a proposed dialectical transformation (*Aufhebung*) of both plan and market in the new era. Further engagement by the "projectment" research team with Chinese scholars and policy-makers should be the next step, for this would lead to mutual enrichment through complementarity and difference.

KEYWORDS

new projectment economy; China; Chinese Marxist scholarship; contradiction analysis; dialectical transformation

1. Introduction

This study offers philosophical reflections on the proposal that China is in the process of establishing a new socioeconomic formation that in its most recent developments is known as the “new projectment economy.” A couple of terms in this opening sentence need some further explication. To begin with, the “new projectment economy” is a model being developed by a research team to understand what they see as the latest phase of a qualitatively new socioeconomic formation¹ that began to emerge in China since 1978. Initially, the formation in question was described as a “socialist market economy” and it continues to be so described by many scholars and students of Chinese development. The proposed “new projectment economy” is distinct in the sense that it provides a model for understanding the most recent manifestation of this socioeconomic formation. The theoretical foundation of the “new projectment economy” is the initial work of the Brazilian philosophical economist Ignacio Rangel, who provides the source of a new vocabulary and indeed a new theoretical framework to understand the evidence arising from concrete practice. For the research team existing categories are inadequate, whether from neoclassical, heterodox, or even Marxist political economy.²

As for philosophical concerns, there are a number of reasons for approaching the material from this angle. To begin with, some recent studies produced by the “projectment” research team explicitly engage with philosophical issues, especially in seeking to understand the constitutive inability of Western scholars to understand “Chinese (and global) developments”, and in the very effort to produce a new model to understand what is happening in China. Further, philosophical issues are implicit in the whole project not least because Rangel’s own studies from the 1950s were a product of both economic and philosophical considerations. Finally, philosophy – and especially Marxist philosophy – is front and centre of Chinese analysis of developments. On this point, I can indicate why the project initially drew my attention and why I have studied the material with interest: in earlier work, I undertook some painstaking research on Chinese developments since 1978 and I did so primarily on the basis of Chinese language research results. As my research progressed, it became clear that Marxist philosophy is the 看家本领 *kānjiā-běnlǐng*, the special skill or stock-in-trade for looking after the household (China). This is the case not merely for philosophical specialists, but also for economists, sociologists, policy makers, and economic planners. Indeed, an implicit agenda for this whole study is the need for the “projectment” research team to engage more fully with Chinese researchers.³

1 For a detailed analysis of the category of “socioeconomic formation” and its relation to “mode of production,” see Gabriele and Jabbour (2022, 45–60).

2 Examples include the hypotheses that China is undergoing a prolonged New Economic Policy, as was found in the Soviet Union in the 1920s; that China is still in the long transition stage from a capitalist system to a socialist system; or – most waywardly – that China has since 1978 instituted a type of “state capitalism.”

3 The research team is made up of Brazilian political economists and social scientists (their names will appear in the references) and seems to have a number of tasks: providing informed advice to the president of the New Development Bank (BRICS Bank) based in Shanghai; enabling Brazilian researchers and policy makers to come to a scientific and properly informed understanding of Brazil’s primary trading partner and indeed global partner – through BRICS11 and the BRI – directly involved in the qualitative changes taking place in the world today; and finally in challenging the declining quality of scientific analysis found in what is left of the West.

Apart from this introduction, the present study contains two main sections, followed by a conclusion. The next section concerns a critical overview of developments from the “old projectment” as proposed by Ignacio Rangel to the “new projectment” economy. The relative detail of this section is necessary, since it is important to come to grips with the proposal as fully as possible. At the same time, I seek to draw out the more philosophical dimensions with a view to the next section. In this following section the concern is with contradiction analysis as it has developed in Chinese circles, with the purpose of relating contradiction analysis to the proposals of the “projectment” research team. This task entails an overview of the theoretical history of contradiction analysis, its deployment for understanding Chinese economic development since 1949, and then a presentation of arguments that the integration of the two institutional forms or components of plan and market within a socialist system have led to what Marx and Engels described as an *Aufhebung* (扬弃 *yángqǐ*) of both: a dialectical transformation in a way that has both negated the earlier terms and transformed them into a qualitatively new level and form. The conclusion stresses the importance of an active mutual engagement between the “projectment” research team and Chinese scholars and policy-makers, since such an engagement would be fruitful.⁴

2. Developing a Theoretical Model: New Projectment Economy

In this section the focus is on how the proposal for a “new projectment economy” arose. This entails an initial overview of the initial proposal by Ignacio Rangel and the analytical tools taken up by the “projectment” research team. There follows a presentation of how the research team sees the major economic developments in China since the mid-1990s and especially since 2008, since these led the team to propose the new model. Throughout, I seek to draw out the philosophical implications with a view to later analysis.

1) From the “Old Projectment Economy”

The identification of the “new projectment economy” may be seen as a result of new empirical data seeking an adequate theoretical framework. In the linear syntax of written sentences it is somewhat difficult to express the dynamic nature of the constant interaction between theory and practice: the research team argues that as a historically new socioeconomic formation is being constructed in China, scientific theory must constantly be renewed for the sake of understanding. Both are in a constant process of transformation, and it is the task of scholars not merely to produce new and adequate theories so as to guide action, but also to take account of the whole process itself.⁵

Finding existing terms, concepts, and categories inadequate, the “projectment” research team has been drawn to the initial proposal of Ignacio Rangel (2005),⁶ which

4 The “projectment” research team also engages in the related task of redefining socialism. While of great interest, this topic is beyond the remit of the present study.

5 Rangel deploys a unique version of the Kantian phenomenon and noumenon to speak of this dynamic: practical economic developments become the phenomenon, while theories and categories for analysing and guiding economic development become the noumenon. Both develop in interaction with one another over time (Jabbour, Dantas, and Espíndola 2023, 515–16).

6 The following analysis is based on a number of overlapping sources with distinct emphases (Jabbour et al. 2023, 771–76; Jabbour, Dantas, and Espíndola 2023, 515–18; Jabbour and Moreira 2023, 556–58; Jabbour and Capovilla 2023b, 13–16).

they call the “old projectment.” The empirical building blocks for Rangel’s proposal came from three developments after the Second World War: the qualitative changes that had emerged with large-scale planning in the Soviet Union since the 1930s, which enabled it not only to shoulder the heaviest burden in defeating Nazi Germany, but also to recover and leap ahead in scientific innovation; the emergence of Keynesianism in Europe as it sought postwar reconstruction; and the deployment of financial capital for large-scale projects and public goods such as the welfare state. For Rangel, the “projectment economy” was a result of the intersection of these three vectors.

A number of key and interrelated concepts arise in this initial proposal: cost-benefit; reason or rationale in terms of both employment and the process of moving from one disequilibrium to another; and a distinct definition of utility. We may put the relations between these concepts in terms of a series of logical steps. First, cost and benefit: this is the point at which Rangel began, as he sought to define these two terms as precisely as possible. The key question here is benefit “for whom,” or “for whose benefit”? Second, in the process of defining the relationship between cost and benefit, reason must play a crucial role. Third, in the interaction between reason and cost-benefit a common denominator must be found: utility, or usefulness for society. Thus wealth is defined as the “quality that things have of being useful for society.” By now we have the answer to the earlier question concerning “benefit for whom?” Finally, these concepts and their inter-connections are the core components of planning or the “projectment economy.”⁷

A number of questions of a more dialectical nature arise from this summary. In terms of reason or rationale, I am most interested in the question of disequilibrium: as the “projectment” research team points out, Rangel was interested in how “development tacticians” manage the reality of disequilibria. To be clear, disequilibria are not to be avoided; instead development “takes place following the introduction of causes of new disequilibria of a special kind” (Jabbour et al. 2023, 776). For planners, the skill involved in managing the leap from one disequilibrium to another does not come easily and here technology plays a crucial role. While technology is one cause of disequilibrium (the other being distribution of resources among industries), technology also becomes a rational instrument for planning the leaps between disequilibria: “projects come to planning via leaps from one disequilibrium to another until the moment when technology becomes an instrument fundamental to the attraction that the rationale can exert on the production process” (Jabbour et al. 2023, 776; Jabbour, Dantas, and Espíndola 2023, 517). I will return to this point when discussing contradiction analysis.

In terms of utility, we should note that while Rangel sought to rescue this concept from the distortions of the neoclassical economists, of more interest are a couple of factors. To begin with, utility is separated from value and becomes the basic aim of plans and projects. This is another way of speaking about use value in contrast to exchange value, as we can see in the way Rangel defines utility (now extending the quotation from

7 This paragraph has been constructed on the basis of the succinct summary by Jabbour, Dantas, and Espíndola (2023, 516): the primary features of the project economy concern “the role played by planning in the allocation of national production factors and resources. Hence the term ‘reason’ as something to be constructed in the search for an appropriate balance between costs and benefits. This desirable balance between costs and benefits is reached through subordinating the project to the material and spiritual needs of the nation and of the whole population that the project affects.”

the previous paragraph): wealth is “the quality that certain things have of being useful to human society... Things’ utility is a relationship between them and society or people. They are useful when human beings can satisfy their needs through them” (Rangel 2005, 267). It follows that with utility as the basis for economic calculations, planning is undertaken in a conscious and rational manner for the sake of producing use value, or value of use to society as a whole. To quote: “*projects* have the role of producing *utility* in which the cost-benefit relationship is synthesised in the form of *wealth to be apprehended socially*” (Jabbour et al. 2023, 774).

Further, there is the dialectical tension embodied in the opposition of “accounting for the firm” and “social accounting.” Rangel and the research team emphasise that the former is characterised by short-term returns for shareholders and profit for the firm with little concern for social benefit, while the latter is concerned with the need for long-term planning and calculation of the benefit for society – and it should be added for the environment. There are two ways we may understand this contradiction: one approach would emphasise the need to move away from “accounting for the firm” so as to focus on “social accounting.” In a capitalist context, one may perhaps understand this emphasis since “accounting for the firm” is dominant in that context, but it does lead to an imbalanced emphasis on use value, social accounting, and the consequently one-sided definition of socialism in terms of ownership of the means of production. A more dialectical way of approaching the contradiction is to find a way in which both types of accounting play a role. Here I broach a larger topic concerning the relations between plan and market, so I will leave this discussion for later. However, it is important to emphasise that – on my understanding – even the “old projectment” sought a way forward that incorporates both types of calculation.

To sum up: in this initial subsection I have sought to present the main features of the “old projectment,” which arose from three vectors after the Second World War and which emphasised cost-benefit, rationale, and utility as the cornerstones of a new type of planning. The dialectical aspects of Rangel’s proposal have also been emphasised since he was in many respects both a philosopher and an economist, or better a philosophical economist with a notable dialectical approach. As one example, Rangel observes that projectment “is at the same time macro- and micro-economic theory and practice; it is theory and practice; it is an appreciation of the particular in the general, of the concrete in the abstract, and confirmation of the abstract in the concrete” (Rangel 2005, 362).

2) To the “New Projectment Economy”

We need to keep in mind that the research is still a work in progress. For example, in an article published in 2021 the terminology of “market socialism” and “new socio-economic formation” is to the fore and very little is said of the “new projectment economy” By contrast in material published only a couple of years later the “new projectment economy” is a central category (Jabbour, Dantas, and Espíndola 2023; Jabbour et al. 2023). Overall, the terminology is more precise in the most recent studies.

The research team calls the initial model the “old projectment” since it was proposed at a particular historical juncture. In this subsection, I seek to summarise the “new pro-

jectment” as it relates to China.⁸ The basic principles may have been provided by Rangel’s initial efforts, but the facts on the ground today are quite new and thus require an engagement between the basic principles and concrete realities. While my main concern is with the “new projectment,” we need to be clear about how it fits within a longer pattern. For the research team, the initial steps towards a new socioeconomic began in 1978 with the launch of the reform and opening-up (Jabbour, Dantas, and Espíndola 2021; see also Jabbour and Dantas 2017). Moving well beyond the tentative experiments in Eastern Europe with “market socialism” (Boer 2023a), China began in the first years after 1978 to develop a “socialist market economy.”⁹ By the late 1990s and especially after 2008, this new socioeconomic formation began to take on the shape of what the research team calls a “new projectment economy.” In other words, the “new projectment economy” is the more recent and clearer manifestation of this socioeconomic formation. This recent phase is my concern, especially major institutional changes in the 1990s, the eleventh five-year plan of 2006–2010, the turning points of 2008 and 2019, and the recent achievements in terms of poverty alleviation, pandemic management, urban and regional planning, high-speed rail, etc..

To begin with the 1990s,¹⁰ the first step was taken with the ninth five-year plan (1996–2000), which laid out reforms for what became known as state-owned enterprises (SOEs).¹¹ The key was to transform them from the protected environment of a rigidly planned economy to becoming viable in market conditions. With reforms emphasising improvements in efficiency and management, merging or folding nonviable enterprises, hard instead of soft budget constraints, and disruptive innovation, the initial contours of a new type of planning were being laid out so that SOEs could become the backbone of the national economy. This was only the beginning of an ongoing process, which has come to ensure that the SOEs are key and efficient economic drivers, hubs of innovation with increasingly global consequences, and that their influence runs through the arteries and capillaries of the economic system.¹²

8 In between the “old” and “new,” the “projectment” research team sees the intervening period as a detour or step backwards. The period in question is the failed neoliberal project and the “Washington consensus” of unfortunate memory, running from the late 1970s to its nadir in the 2008 financial crisis. For the team, this period was a major setback for scientific activity, scholarly analysis, and human development, leading to philosophical irrationalism. When the contours of China’s path became clear after 2008, “projectment” could once again become a focus of analysis (Jabbour and Capovilla 2023b, 16). An alternative historical analysis is that the whole neoliberal project with its various catchwords was a desperate and failed effort to halt the long-term decline of capitalist economies since the late 1960s. By 2008 they had flat-lined and the implications are becoming increasingly obvious (Freeman 2023; Roberts 2016; Lauesen 2024).

9 The terminology is very specific, since the socialist system determines the nature of the market institutional form (see below).

10 In this section I draw on a few useful overviews (Jabbour, Dantas, and Espíndola 2023, 506–14; Jabbour and Capovilla 2023b, 4–13, 16–20; Jabbour, Nova, and Vadell 2024, 7–9).

11 These significant steps are found in part four of Premier Li Peng’s work report to the National People’s Congress in March of 1996 (Li Peng 1996). This report was preceded by the ninth five-year plan proposed by the Central Committee in September of the previous year, where paragraph 26 is relevant (CPC Central Committee 1995).

12 The number of SOEs varies depending on the way of counting them: as of the beginning of 2023 there were 131 in total: 98 managed by the SASAC and known as “Central enterprises [中央企业 *zhōngyāng qìyè*],” 26 run by the Ministry of Finance, 3 cultural enterprises managed by the State Information Office, and 4 other functional enterprises. Each has thousands of subsidiaries.

A series of steps followed in relatively rapid succession. In 2003 the State-Owned Assets Supervision and Administration Commission of the State Council (SASAC) was established with the task of both managing and continuing the reforms of the industrial SOEs in light of the principles of a socialist market economy for the sake of the common good. Not long afterwards the eleventh five-year plan of 2006-2010 included a project to establish a country-wide system of technology and innovation that included SOEs, non-public enterprises, financial institutions, and university research centres. Here we encounter not so much a state-driven form of planning and innovation (top-down) and more a whole-of-society integrated approach that arises from China's millennia-long cultural assumptions. Almost twenty years ago we find the foundations for profound innovations in areas such as 5G (and now towards 6G) internet, big data, artificial intelligence, quantum computing, space exploration, aerospace industry, and much more.

The steps continued. By the 2008 financial crisis China had the wherewithal to leverage its by now highly efficient SOEs and development banks to launch a fiscal package to the tune of four billion yuan. This was not a reckless package, with money going into the pockets of those who already had more than enough. Instead, by this time there was already the capacity and skill to plan and coordinate thousands upon thousands of projects at the same time to achieve targeted results. To be added here is not only the emphasis on the continuing reform of the SOEs,¹³ but also the speed and prowess demonstrated in harnessing informational technology, especially big data and artificial intelligence,¹⁴ in managing the Covid-19 pandemic from late 2019 to the end of 2022 (a challenge well beyond the capacity and ability of the few Western countries of the world). We also saw the deployment of these new planning instruments in tackling the last “hard nuts” in the alleviation of absolute poverty by the end of the 2020 in the face of very trying circumstances.¹⁵ These would seem to be only the beginning, especially if one considers “Made in China 2025,” which was launched in 2015,¹⁶ the ambitious fourteenth five-year plan of 2020-2025 (Jabbour and Moreira 2023, 552–56), and the 2035 and 2049 goals.

Clearly, these relatively recent developments have caught the eye of the “projectment” research team. At times, the team also provides specific case studies with the obligatory

13 See, for example the important 2013 Central Committee decision on deepening reform (CPC Central Committee 2013, paragraph 7), the 2018 guide on assets and liabilities of SOEs issued by the Central Committee Office and State Council Office, and the three-year reform of the Central Enterprises launched by the SASAC in 2020 (https://www.gov.cn/zhengce/2018-09/13/content_5321717.htm, https://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2023-01/18/content_5737661.htm and http://english.www.gov.cn/statecouncil/ministries/202301/18/content_WS63c75e6bc6d0a757729e5c4d.html. accessed 2 January 2024).

14 Along with the state and productive forces, science and technology have never been viewed with much suspicion in countries subjected to Western imperialist deprivations. Instead, as Domenico Losurdo (2008, 46–48) has emphasised, these three have always been seen as keys to development and a way out of chronic poverty. To be added here is the identification – in light of the “four modernisations” – of science and technology as productive forces in their own right (Deng [1978] 2008, 86–91; see also Jabbour and Capovilla 2023a, 5).

15 Given these rapid developments, the team's proposal may well indicate the realisation of Oskar Lange's initial proposals from a rather different time concerning the necessary calculations needed for efficient planning in light of including a “market instrument” (Lange 1936; 1937; Jabbour and Moreira 2023, 552; see further Boer 2023a).

16 “If this plan achieves its goals, China will probably become the greatest technological power of this century” (Jabbour, Dantas, and Espindola 2023, 521).

statistics: the growth in numbers and diversity of jobs and wages, given that a core feature of the “old projectment” was the problem of overcoming unemployment (Jabbour et al. 2023, 778–81); monetary sovereignty and the system of state banks, which can issue credit and outlay funds with impressive and targeted efficiency (Jabbour et al. 2023, 781–84); the rolling out of comprehensive infrastructure, from roads through coastal quays to high-speed rail, with the latter now comprising a network of more than 40,000 kilometres; a national system of urban and regional integration, in which the four major centres – Pearl River Delta (Greater Bay Area), Yangtze River Delta, Greater Chongqing, and Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei – are linked across the country with regional centres; and the development of new “model socialist” centres such as Shenzhen and the Xiong’an New Area, which are notable for their integrated urban planning, green development, quality of life, and new forms of socialised ownership (Nova, Jabbour, and Cambuhý 2023, 79–89).

To sum up: these developments over a relatively short period of time have led the “projectment” research team to seek out Rangel’s initial theory and reinterpret it in response to real-time data. More than 60 years after the initial proposal and in light of the qualitative changes taking place, the model obviously needs to be revised and updated. As we have seen, the team draws the conclusion that the sum total of what has been happening in China since 1978 is a new socioeconomic formation and that its more recent manifestation requires a new model and vocabulary. They also argue that these developments constitute a redefinition in light of concrete practice of socialism itself, or more correctly, the nature and direction of the socialist road.

3. Contradiction Analysis

Thus far, the aim has been to provide a somewhat comprehensive overview of the research results of the “projectment” team, with an eye on philosophical questions to be addressed in this section. For example, I noted that Rangel’s inherently dialectical approach enables a connection with “contradiction analysis”; that managing the shifts from disequilibrium to disequilibrium opens up the question as to how we should understand the shifts in 75 years of economic development in China; and that the contradiction between “accounting for the firm” and “social accounting” opens out into the plan-market relation. In these examples and more Chinese contributions can provide some distinct angles. In order to see how this may be possible, we need to understand contradiction analysis (as a development from dialectical materialism) and how it assists in understanding Chinese economic developments. This is the task of the following section, in which I seek to connect the work of the “projectment” research team with Chinese Marxist scholarship.

1) Background: An Overview of Contradiction Analysis

The initial task for understanding the relevance of contradiction analysis as deployed by Chinese scholars and policy makers is to consider its earlier history: from Marx and Engels, through Lenin and the full flowering of Marxist philosophy (dialectical materialism) in the Soviet Union of the 1930s, through Mao Zedong and the study circle in Yan’an in 1935–1937, to contradiction analysis in policy-making today and the developments of Marxist philosophy in the last few decades (Boer 2021b, 55–84). In what must be a brief survey, the following points are relevant for the present analysis.

Let us begin with a note from Lenin (1920, 391): “Antagonism and contradiction are not at all the same thing. Under socialism, the first will disappear, the second will remain.” This initial distinction is crucial for understanding the task of socialist construction: while antagonism – between classes, between the forces and relations of production – will disappear during socialism, contradictions will be very much present. Through other writings by Lenin (1916a; 1916b) and by Soviet-era philosophers who drew heavily on Marx and Engels, the categories of antagonistic and non-antagonistic contradictions would come to be deployed for analysing history and society, as well as for planning.¹⁷ The next major phase took place in the Red Area around Yan’an, China, in the mid-1930s. During the relative respite of 1935-1937, after the Long March and before the Anti-Japanese War of Resistance resumed in earnest, the circle around Mao Zedong launched themselves into studying the most mature and well-developed Marxist philosophy of the time. This took place in the context of extensive translations, publications, lectures, reading groups and more, much of which was concerned with nothing less than Marxist philosophy as it was to be understood in the concrete historical conditions of China.

Out of the works produced at the time (Mao [1937] 1986; [1937] 1991b; [1937] 1991a), of most interest is Mao Zedong’s active engagement – manifested in copious notes and comments – with the books he studied (Mao 1988; see also Knight 1990). From this material, the following relevant themes emerge. First, Mao was particularly interested in the universality or comprehensiveness of contradictions. All aspects of a situation must be considered: one begins with the whole and only in this way can the specific problem be addressed properly. However, the whole in question is by no means unified, since it entails multiple contradictions: the many aspects to be considered relate to one another as contradictions. While we find here one of the many intersections between Marxism and the long Chinese cultural tradition, it is also a historical reality in a large country with a long history, very diverse regions and nationalities, and the revolutionary process and struggle against Japanese imperialism at the time. These contradictions may be understood as non-antagonistic or antagonistic (so Lenin), and they may also be understood in terms of a primary contradiction and many secondary contradictions (so Mao Zedong). Further, the relations between contradictions is a dynamic process (Jabbour and Capovilla 2023a, 16). Non-antagonistic contradictions may become antagonistic and vice versa, the primary contradiction changes over time, and the relation between the primary and secondary aspects of a contradiction shifts depending on circumstances.

A couple of quotations illustrate how – in the eyes of the authors – these apparently abstract formulations made sense of historical developments. The first comes from Soviet-era Marxist philosophy: “If in developed socialism there were no contradictions – contradictions between productive forces and relations in production, between production and demand, no contradictions in the development of technique, etc. – then the development of socialism would be impossible.” This means that only “in virtue of the internal contradictions of the socialist order can there be development from one phase

17 All of this took place in the framework of a well-developed and still insightful philosophy of dialectical materialism and its application as historical materialism. As a sample of Soviet-era works, I cite here some of the works that were studied by Mao Zedong and his study circle in Yan’an (Mitin et al. 1935; Mitin 1936; Shirokov and Iankovskii 1932b; 1932a).

to another and higher order” (Shirokov and Iankovskii 1932b, 150; 1937, 175). The second comes from Mao Zedong’s analysis of contradictions under the early conditions of socialism in power: “Socialist society grows more united and consolidated through the ceaseless process of correctly handling and resolving contradictions” (Mao [1957] 2009, 213). If we recall Rangel’s emphasis on the need to manage the process of moving from one disequilibrium to another, then we may say that Rangel too belongs to the tradition of contradiction analysis and is perhaps able to provide some further insights.

Second, since the late 1930s contradiction analysis has become a crucial feature of policy making – which has distinct relevance for the “projectment” research team’s focus on innovative policy moves since the later 1990s and especially since 2008.¹⁸ While Mao Zedong may initially have identified the new primary contradiction in 1937 as having changed from the struggle with the Guomindang to the anti-Japanese struggle, since 1949 only three primary contradictions have been identified. The first was in 1956, the second in 1981 (after the loss of direction during the “Cultural Revolution”), and the third coming 36 years later in 2017: “between unbalanced and inadequate development and the ever-growing expectation of the people for a better life [美好生活 *měihǎo shēnghuó*].” Primary contradictions such as these are not produced out of thin air, for they require detailed and careful analysis of the many aspects of a situation. Further, this primary contradiction shapes all manner of policy making, including long-term planning, five-year plans, new projects, adaptations to changing circumstances, and much more. We should also note the date of the most recent primary contradiction: it comes as a result of developments since 2008 and especially the “new era” beginning in 2012. While the “projectment” research team notes the importance of the most recent primary contradiction (Nova, Jabbour, and Cambuh 2023, 72), my purpose here has been to provide a theoretical framework for understanding how China has come to this point.

Third, a distinct emphasis arises from the initial forays of Soviet-era philosophers on the question of qualitative change and was taken much further by Mao Zedong: the self-movement of qualitative change and the qualitative differences between different processes and their internal contradictions. In other words, the causes of qualitative change are to be found internal to a process, and this process will have its own distinct contradictions. Mao denies neither the role of external causes, nor the internal-external dialectic, but he emphasises: “internal cause determines the necessity of change in things, not external cause” (Mao 1988, 201). Further, it is only through the “intrinsic attributes of each stage that the nature of the process will develop” (Mao 1988, 49).¹⁹ While this aspect of contradiction analysis would come to provide the philosophical foundations for the Chinese characteristics, specific conditions, and concrete realities of Marxism in China (Mao [1938] 1991, 658–59), I am interested here in the implications for the proposed “new projectment economy.” These implications will become clear in section 3.3.

18 For a detailed study of the principal contradictions since the time of Mao Zedong until today, see Jin Zhenglian (2017).

19 In the essay “On Contradiction” this point would come to be expressed as the particularity of contradictions (Mao [1937] 1991b, 308–20), which emphasises the distinctive conditions in countries that have long cultural histories.

In this section, I have emphasised that contradiction analysis assumes that one deals with all aspects of a situation²⁰ and that the process is one of constant dialectical transformation. In this light, I also gave attention to policy making in terms of the determining role that a primary contradiction plays. These points lead into the next section concerning the history of economic developments in China. I also emphasised the internal nature of qualitative change, which will come to the fore in the section that follows and concerns the dialectical transformation of plan and market into a new form.

2) Philosophy of Economical Development

In this section the concern is with understanding the economic development of China since 1949 in terms of contradiction analysis. Here I seek an explicit connection with Rangel's emphasis on the need to manage the process of disequilibria or what is also known as "creative destruction," the constant need to move through contradictions in socialist construction, and on what the "projectment" research team describes as a "constant process of systemic reforms to face new contradictions, unprecedented for a new type of political power" (Jabbour and Capovilla 2023b, 18; see also Jabbour, Dantas, and Espíndola 2023, 506–7, 520–21).

More specifically, the methodological underpinning for what follows comes from Marx and Engels: "The proletariat will use its political supremacy to wrest, by degrees, all capital from the bourgeoisie, to centralise all instruments of production [*Produktionsinstrumente*] 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] 1974, 481; [1848] 1976, 504). To their credit, the research team sees the relationship of the two parts of this oft-misunderstood sentence²¹ – ownership of the means of production and liberation of productive forces – in a dialectical way (Jabbour and Capovilla 2023a, 12–13; Jabbour, Nova, and Vadell 2024, 10; Nova, Jabbour, and Cambuhy 2023, 71).²² At times the two aspects work together and at times they are in tension with one another, requiring reform of the laggard. This dialectical interaction provides a framework for interpreting the history of economic development in China (Boer 2021a).

We may identify three main stages: 1949–1978, 1978–2012, and 2012 until the present. The first stage followed liberation in 1949 and was concerned with dramatic transformations in ownership of the means of production in order to liberate productive forces. The model followed was that of the Soviet Union after 1917: the way to overcome the contradiction of capitalism between socialised labour and the private ownership of the means of production was to socialise the means of production. Historically, this move has been

20 In this light, the "projectment" research team should revise its tendency to see Chinese developments as primarily state-driven, and more specifically as CPC-driven – the two are not the same (Boer 2023b, 182–83)). Instead, the process is multi-faceted and takes a "whole-of-society" approach. There are rare occasions when they mention the comprehensive and integrated nature of China's modernisation (Jabbour et al. 2023, 778; quoting from Lo 2020).

21 The most imbalanced understanding is to focus on the ownership of the means of production and ignore the increase of productive forces. Further, an undialectical approach is to see such ownership as the cause of the liberation of productive forces.

22 The team also makes an insightful addition: "The 'little by little' of politics and the 'rapidly as possible' increase in the productive forces... are the logical inscriptions of the dialectical mediations necessary for the construction of socialism" (Jabbour and Capovilla 2023a, 12).

applied successfully in the initial stage of socialist construction: abolition of bourgeois and landlord private property, industrialisation in light of chronically under-developed economic conditions, agricultural collectivisation, and a centrally planned economy. The result was the “first economic miracle”: China moved from being one of the poorest countries in the world to significant economic development, increase in population and life expectancy, improvements in science and technology, foundations of an independent industrial and national economic system, improvements in education, culture, and health, and China’s reemergence on the international stage, especially in relations with developing countries (Cheng and Cao Lei 2019, 6–8; Jabbour, Nova, and Vadell 2024, 5–6).

The second stage, from 1978 to 2012, is when the process of managing the contradictions of socialist construction comes to a head. The relations of production with their high levels of public ownership and collectivisation, along with Soviet-style central planning, had reached a limit point in terms of enabling the liberation of productive forces (Boer 2023c, 375–76). Despite all of the advances, poverty was still endemic, and non-antagonistic class contradictions slipped into antagonistic struggle in the later 1960s. Economic development was stalling and creative solutions were needed. The solution for liberating productive forces was the reform and opening-up. As Deng Xiaoping (1980, 311; 1980, 310) pointed out: the “development of the productive forces... is the most fundamental revolution from the viewpoint of historical development.” For Deng “poor socialism” is not socialism, since socialism should develop the productive forces, improve the country’s strength and the people’s lives. To invoke the earlier point concerning the dynamics of qualitative change internal to a process, the reform and opening-up was a response to internal contradictions. This period saw the difficult task of combining planning and market institutional forms within a socialist system, public ownership and non-public ownership, and major incentives to “liberate thought” and find creative and innovative solutions to problems. It should be no surprise that the “projectment” research team has focused much of its attention on this period, initially from 1978 and especially from the mid-1990s. The team has, along with other scholars, noted the significant achievements of the reform and opening-up: in stepping onto the centre of the world stage, China contributes most to the global economy, and it has the world’s only complete industrial chain, with both industrial production and monetary reserves the highest in the world (Jabbour et al. 2023, 781–84). Further, the country has developed the largest internal market, continued the long process of improving its systems of education, health, and welfare, and saw Hong Kong and Macao return (Cheng 2018, 2–3).

The third stage is known as the “new era” and is now seen as beginning in 2012. However, as with the previous stage the problems began somewhat earlier. Already by the 1990s the reform and opening-up was beginning to reveal a series of new contradictions, which may be attributed to an over-emphasis on liberating productive forces. In the midst of China’s economic success, widely-studied problems became apparent in the “wild 90s,” all the way from job insecurity, through a widening gap between rich and poor, environmental degradation, and a profound gap between the CPC and the common people, to ideological disarray concerning China’s future direction (Boer 2021b, 93–97). These contradictions carried on into the first decade of the next century and would not be addressed systematically until the “new era” from 2012.

On this matter, we encounter a characteristic feature of uneven development or – to quote Ernst Bloch (1935 [1991], 104–17) – the “contemporaneity of non-contemporaneity” (see also Jabbour, Dantas, and Espindola 2021, 24). As we saw earlier, the ninth five-year plan of 1996–2000 already instigated the first of a series of reforms of SOEs that would lay the foundations for the new era from 2012. Even more, the periodisation I have proposed may be questioned as being a little too neat. I refer here to an implication of the “projectment” research team’s emphasis on China’s significant and innovative response to the global financial crisis of 2008: it may be said that the new era had already begun in that year. However, it is with the years following 2012 that we begin to see the clear deployment of contradiction analysis: in the face of the mounting contradictions of the reform and opening-up, the response was not to wind back the clock to before 1978; instead the approach was to see the contradictions as incidental rather than systemic to the reform and opening-up. The answer was to “deepen reform” (CPC Central Committee 2013). As a result, the new era has seen the SOEs become efficient hubs of innovation with a renewed role as backbone of the economy (contributing to over 50% of China’s total economic performance). Other results have been well-documented: a total of 800 million people have been lifted out of absolute poverty, with almost 500 million in a “middle-income” group; a welfare system continues to be improved for 1.4 billion people; the rich-poor gap has ceased to widen and is now decreasing; the socialist rule of law and democratic system have been notably strengthened; huge strides have been taken in ecological civilisation; and the results of a thorough rectification and reform of the 96-million strong CPC are ever more apparent.

Given the material presented here, one would hardly expect that this most recent phase is the final resolution of contradictions, for contradictions are inherent to the process and new ones are bound to arise. But we are at the time of writing in the relatively early days of this third stage or new era. Many are the formulations of this stage (Cheng and Cao 2019, 6), but I suggest that we may now add “new projectment economy” and that Chinese scholars and should engage with this research. Indeed, the purpose of this proposed historical schema has been to provide a wider historical and deeper theoretical framework, based on existing Chinese research, for the proposals of the “projectment” research team. A question remains: what is “new” about the “new projectment economy”? Here I mean “new” not in relation to Rangel’s “old projectment,” but “new” in relation to China’s path.

3) Aufhebung of Plan and Market

The purpose of this final section is to show how Chinese debates provide a distinct angle on the newness of the “new projectment economy.” These debates were particularly noticeable in the 1990s, which were at one and the same time the “wild 90s” and witnessed the first moves, especially with the ninth five-year plan of 1996–2000, to what we see today. Debates turned on how the relation between plan and market should be understood – assuming here the well-established point that a “market economy” should not be associated exclusively with a “capitalist market economy.”²³ For Chinese scholars,

23 This misleading equation was initially proposed by the godfather of neoliberalism, Count Ludwig von Mises (1932, 142): “the alternative is still either Socialism or a market economy.” The deception lies in the category mistake, assuming that socialism entails a planned economy with

a plan and market are structural components or institutional forms (体制 *tǐzhì* or 体系 *tǐxì*)²⁴ of a comprehensive system (制度 *zhìdù*) that shapes the nature of the components.²⁵ As an influential study by Huang Nansen (1994, 5) puts it: “There is no market economy institutional form that is independent of the basic economic system of society.”²⁶

Debates over the relations between plan and market may be distinguished in terms of two main approaches: seeking a non-antagonistic balance between them and identifying an *Aufhebung* of both (the term will be clarified). The search for a balance assumes a flexible combination of both plan and market (Liao 2008; Gu 2019). Some earlier proposals distinguished between macro- and micro-management, in the sense that “the market is the foundation and national macro-control is the guide” (Peng 1994, 14). For Yang Jinhai, plan and market signify respectively justice and efficiency, which are like “the two wheels of a cart and the two wings of a bird” (Yang 2009, 175) and need to function in terms of the unity of contradictions. For Yang, maintaining the non-antagonistic contradiction between justice and efficiency is an ongoing task (see also Zhou Nan 2017, 29). Ultimately, the concern of these studies is to seek a balance or “golden mean” between plan and market.

Of more interest are studies that push the question further. These are predicated on the argument that if one is to deploy a market component, one must deploy its key commonalities (普遍性 *pǔbiàn xìng*), especially the law of value,²⁷ hard budget constraints in term of entry and exit, and supply-demand (Zhang and Zhuang 1994, 5).²⁸ We may describe this process as pushing the contradiction between plan and market all the way so to achieve a transformation of both. In a crucial document from the CPC Central Committee in 2013, this emphasis comes to the fore. Here, a market economic component in the socialist system would no longer play a “basic role [基础性作用 *jīchǔ xìng zuò yòng*]”; it would now play a “decisive role [决定性作用 *jué dìng xìng zuò yòng*]” in allocating re-

socialised ownership and capitalism a market economy with privatised ownership. In their own way, the “projectment” research team also notes this point (Jabbour, Dantas, and Espindola 2023, 526, n. 14).

24 In order to translate 体制 *tǐzhì* or 体系 *tǐxì* as “institutional form” I have drawn from the terminology of “Régulation Theory” (Boyer and Saillard 2002). An institutional form is one among a number of specific building blocks or components of a larger system.

25 Throughout human history there have been a number of qualitatively distinct market economies, such as the ancient Persian military market economy, the Greco-Roman slave market economy, China’s earlier feudal market economy, as well as a capitalist market economy.

26 Heilmann (2018) also recognises that planning was never abandoned in China.

27 At this point, the reader may puzzle over the “projectment” research team’s emphasis on the replacement of exchange value for the sake of the production of use value for society. Here I note that Cheng Enfu and others have sought to rework the basic principle of Marxism concerning the labour theory of value into a “new proposal of the creation of value by living human labour [新的活劳动创造价值假设].” This in turn leads to the need to increase “total social value [社会价值总量]” and thus focus on a “Gross Domestic Welfare Product [国内生产福利总值]” or GDWP. (Cheng, Wang, and Zhu 2005; Cheng 2007; see also Boer 2023c). Drawing together all of the factors from economy, nature, and society gives us a comprehensive “final gross welfare product [最终福利总值]” (Cheng and Cao Licun 2009; Cheng 2020, 101). The question to be asked here is whether this is simply the elevation of use value or the dialectical integration of use and exchange values within the framework of a Marxist theory of labour value in a socialist context.

28 Studies of Eastern European socialist countries’ tentative experiments with “market socialism” noted their unwillingness to embrace these commonalities (Wang 1995; Yu 2011).

sources (CPC Central Committee 2013, paragraph 2). Given that a market is an “institutional form [体制 *tǐzhì*]” in the “basic economic system [基本经济制度 *jīběn jīngjì zhìdù*],” the very same text outlines how planning would move to a qualitatively higher level (CPC Central Committee 2013, paragraphs 9-13). In other words, planning works with and through a market economy, while a market economy transforms planning. As Li Minsheng (2018, 23) observes, the “organic unity” of the two “gives full play to both the advantages of socialism and the advantages of a market economy.”

It is now becomes possible to see how the argument for a dialectical transformation of both plan and market comes to a conclusion. In this respect, I would like to quote from two studies, the first more recent: “China’s practice has proved that the combination of a market economy and socialism is a new form of exploring socialist practice, which overcomes the dual disadvantages of a traditional planned economy and a capitalist market economy, and which realises a twofold transcendence [双重超越 *shuāngchóng chāoyuè*]” (Zhou Zhishan and Wang 2019, 41; see also Li Minsheng 2018, 23). A somewhat earlier quotation makes largely the same point, albeit with one refinement: the “new form of socialist practice” in China comprises the “dual sublation [双重扬弃 *shuāngchóng yángqì*] and transcendence [超越 *chāoyuè*] of a traditional planned economy and a market economy” (Zhang 2009, 139).²⁹ The refinement here is the usage of 扬弃 *yángqì*, which indicates more clearly the distinctly Marxist angle of this proposal since this word is the philosophical translation of the German *Aufhebung*. This is of course a key methodological move that Marx and Engels took over from Hegel and stood on its materialist feet: it entails the thorough transformation of an initial contradiction so as both to negate it and take it to a qualitatively new level.³⁰ I would add that 扬弃 *yángqì* expands the semantic field of *Aufhebung* to include discarding the dross and taking up the essence. It would seem that Chinese studies have indicated for some time now a philosophical framework that may contribute to the proposal of a “new projectment economy.” Conversely, the extensive empirical detail in the latter may also contribute to the philosophical considerations of the material I have presented.

Let me bring this section to a close with two examples that illustrate at a concrete level the dialectical transformation underway. The first concerns the process of rectification and reform (整改 *zhěnggǎi*) of enterprises. In 2020 a particular incident caught widespread attention: in November of that year Ant Financial Services Group stated that it would suspend its massive IPO on the Hong Kong Stock Exchange.³¹ Why? Ant Group was already in the early stages of what would become a thorough process of rectification and reform. Although it was not technically breaking any laws, the assessment was that Ant Group had for some time been pushing the red lines of government regulations and that it was failing in terms of ethical and social responsibility. As the “projectment” team would put it – following Rangel – Ant Group was too focused on “accounting for the firm” and failing in the need for “social accounting.” This was by no means an isolated

29 In the 1990s we find that the *Aufhebung* or 扬弃 *yángqì* in question was restricted to the traditional planned economy (Ding 1996).

30 This may also be put in terms of the third “law” of dialectics: the negation of the negation (Fang 2014, 63).

31 Ant Group had already launched an IPO on the Shanghai stock exchange earlier in the year, but these were halted by November. Many are the studies of the reform implications of the Ant Group incident, but for a description of what happened and why see Cai Jun and Guo Mei (2021).

incident, for Ant Group was one of the more notable enterprises³² – due to its size and reach – that became subject to a process begun earlier in the same year. In March 2020, the Supreme People’s Procurate had begun initial work on overseeing enterprise compliance reform. In early 2021 an overall plan was promulgated concerning pilot work on enterprise compliance reform, with subsequent updates (Chen 2023b; 2023a; Gao 2023). Notably, the process includes detailed inspection, revision of appropriate laws, and training sessions for all interested parties. Further, the oversight team includes China’s leading legal experts, judges, lawyers, and the director of the SASAC. Clearly, this is a comprehensively coordinated and extensive project, working its way through all types of enterprises – state owned and non-public – in order to reform and upgrade practices and indeed to improve public confidence, with a notable emphasis on ethics and social responsibility. At first sight, it may seem as though the Supreme People’s Procurate is simply doing its job and exercising due oversight of enterprises. If we dig deeper, it becomes obvious not only who is setting the agenda, but also that “social accounting” is not merely the task of government planners. Enterprises at one and the same time must ensure both the bottom line and social accounting. Or, to put it in terms used earlier: social accounting needs to be enhanced in and through accounting for the firm and vice versa, in a way that seeks a transformation of both.

The second example concerns the reform of Party structures and work style, especially at the grassroots level (Boer 2023b, 245–70). This comprehensive process has been underway for a decade and concerns all levels, with a particular focus on the ten types of grassroots Party branches, the quality of branch secretaries, raising the ideological level of members, strengthening robust practices of democratic responsibility, and engaging more extensively with mass organisations and non-Party members. Of particular interest here are branches in non-public enterprises (of which there are many types). In the past, the assumption was that the enterprise management would deal with matters relating to the enterprise, while the Party branches would deal with Party matters. The notable shift has been the deeper involvement of the Party branch executive and regional committee members in enterprise policy and decision making. The range of such involvement is increasing extensive, ranging from ensuring adherence to rule of law concerning the workplace, democratic work on the shop floor with all workers and staff, safeguarding workers’ rights, and ensuring the economic health of the enterprise. Of course, this raises new contradictions in the sense that Party members also need to avoid taking on mere managerial roles. However, the question here is what effect the deeper involvement of Party members in non-public enterprises has on the nature of the enterprise. It is increasingly difficult to use the loose term “private” and it is certainly not a winding-back of the clock to earlier forms of public ownership. Instead, what we see emerging is a shift to a new form of ownership that goes beyond the initial opposition of “public” and “non-public.” Perhaps the attitude of enterprise leaders can indicate what is at stake in this new form of ownership. As He Yong (2020) notes: “Practice shows that when Party building is solid, so also are the productive forces and motivating forces, and when it is strong, so also are competitiveness and creativity.”

32 The Evergrande property conglomerate was another early focus for rectification and reform.

To sum up, in this section as a whole I have provided: an outline of contradiction analysis, with an emphasis on features pertinent to the “projectment” research team; an account of the economic history of China since 1949 in light of both contradiction analysis and the emphasis on managing the transitions between disequilibria; and a Chinese Marxist angle on the “new projectment economy” in terms of the dialectical *Aufhebung* (扬弃 *yángqǐ*) of plan and market. The last point included two concrete examples: the rectification and reform of all types of enterprises and developments in Party building that may be seen in terms of a new form of ownership.

4. Conclusion: A Need for Mutual Engagement

By way of conclusion, I will not provide a summary, since the reader may consult the abstract or introduction for this purpose. Instead, a couple of final points are important. To begin with, the “projectment” research team has proposed that the developments in China constitute a “new projectment economy,” which is the most recent development in a new socioeconomic form that initially emerged after 1978 (Jabbour, Dantas, and Espíndola 2023, 504, 509–10; Jabbour et al. 2023, 20; Jabbour and Capovilla 2023b, 21; 2023a, 26). Along with the task of refining the very definition of socialism, this is the core of the project and has led them, in light of an immense amount of empirical research, to seek a new model and a new cognitive grammar. They go so far as to ask: “isn’t China saving Marxism from the pitfalls of a Western social thought that is rapidly decaying?” (Jabbour and Capovilla 2023a, 8).

Further, to my knowledge there has been relatively little active mutual engagement between the “projectment” research team and Chinese scholars and policy-makers. While the research team cites research by Chinese scholars, most of these references are in English, and only a couple of items relating to the “projectment” team have been published in Chinese-language research.³³ In this light, it would be of great benefit for the research team to engage more extensively with Chinese scholarship on these questions and for Chinese scholars and policy-makers to engage with research on the “new projectment economy.” While “new projectment economy” is not currently part of the vocabulary of Chinese scholars, it has the potential to provide a further dimension – in terms of both philosophy and political economy – to the existing ways in which such scholars deal with Chinese-style modernisation and development, and indeed provide some further tools for future research and policy-making. The result would entail both complementarity and difference: common ground in seeking models for new developments in China; distinct angles due to the way such matters are analysed by Chinese scholars and the “projectment” research team. For these reasons, I encourage the “projectment” team and interested Chinese scholars to engage actively and directly with one another.

33 The first a translation of an article from 2017 and the second an interview with Jabbour (Jabbour and Dantas 2019; He 2022).

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