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Sinification of Marxism – The CPC’s Most Urgent Ideological Challenge

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At its 100th anniversary, the Communist Party of China (CPC) faced a serious ideological challenge. One hundred years ago, it was established by a group of intellectuals searching for a viable way to pursue a modernised China. Marxism was more of a tool adopted to mobilise revolutionary forces and aim for its ideal society, rather than a theory to understand society.

The political movements during the CPC’s first 30 years of rule were instrumental in China’s modernisation process, notwithstanding their Marxist outlook. From 1978, the CPC turned back to China’s traditional values, particularly pragmatism and meritocracy, to guide its reform process and ultimately, state governance.

It is no exaggeration to say that China’s economic success has been a result of the CPC’s sinification. Yet the CPC’s political legitimacy still rests on its theoretical allegiance to Marxism, creating a great tension between what it says and what it does. Realising this tension, the CPC has put the sinification of Marxism at the top of its priorities for theoretical innovation.

Thus far, however, only limited success has been achieved, mainly because China’s Marxist theorists have not taken traditional Chinese thought, particularly Confucianism, seriously in their quest for the sinification of Marxism. For them, Marxism is the basket, and Chinese thought is something that basket can contain. The right approach should be reversed: Chinese thought should be the basket that selectively picks up pieces from Marxism to carry.

This article first reviews the CPC’s role in China’s modernisation process, ending with an emphasis on the CPC’s return to Chinese traditional values in the reform era. Then it turns to the contradictions of Marxism and what the CPC

has done right in the reform era. Lastly, the article suggests several areas in which Marxism can be made congruent with Confucianism.

Modernisation: The CPC's First Hundred Years

The CPC was founded as a Marxist-Leninist party in 1921. At that time, China was in a period of change that had not occurred for more than two thousand years. The empire had fallen apart, and China had entered a period of warfare among warlords. The belief was widespread, and reinforced by leading intellectuals like Liang Qichao and Yan Fu, that China's problems could not be solved without bringing China together again.

As in every period of drastic change in any country, radical ideas were more likely to prevail, because they could bring quick and major regime change. The success of the Bolshevik victory in Russia inspired a group of intellectuals to establish the CPC. From the very start, the CPC was therefore a product of China's learning from the "West". In this sense, the CPC was also a product of China's modernisation process because China's modernisation was imposed by the West.

In its first 30 years of rule after 1949, the CPC followed the Soviet model and the Soviet version of Marxism to build a socialist China. After the initial land reform that gave land to tillers, the CPC quickly moved to collectivisation of agricultural production. One of the strong reasons for this move was to facilitate rapid industrialisation. With the commune system, the state could control food production and procurement to accelerate capital accumulation.

Although visible successes were limited, industrialisation laid a foundation for China's economic take off in the reform era by accumulating a considerable amount of physical and human capital. In addition, the CPC also raised the country's average educational level, built a public health system and lifted women's status. Thus, by 1978, China was socially ready for the fast economic take off. Notwithstanding its big mistakes (the Great Leap Forward and subsequent Great Famine, the Cultural Revolution), the CPC consciously paved the way for China's modernisation. The process was painful, but later generations benefitted. By 1978 when the country began to open up, China was more ready than other large developing countries (such as India) for economic take off. The CPC in its first 30 years of power, therefore, was instrumental in China's quest for modernisation. Marxism at that time was instrumental for its policy.

Under the pragmatic leadership of Deng Xiaoping, the CPC changed its course in the reform era. Although Marxism was still written in its charter as the guiding ideology, in practice the CPC irrevocably turned back to Chinese

traditional thought. At the philosophical level, pragmatism guided the Party on the ground. Absolute truth pursued by Marxism gave way to the idea that truth should be tested by practice. Deng's "cat theory"—goals are more important than means—prevailed.

As a result, China's reform has taken a gradual approach. At the organisational level, the CPC embraced China's traditional political meritocracy. Officials were selected more on their merits than on their allegiance to Marxist orthodoxy. The Party set up various programmes to discover and train young talents; the party school system provides systematic training for officials at all levels. Promotions gave officials strong incentive to grow the economy amidst corruption.

The CPC also brought tradition back to Chinese society. A market economy, often believed to be coeval with capitalism, had existed also in China for a long time before 1949, at least since the Northern Song dynasty a thousand years ago. Hard work and talent should be rewarded. This meritocratic belief runs deep in the Chinese blood. The CPC's reestablishment of the market released the inner energy of ordinary Chinese. On top of that, the CPC also brought back traditional culture to Chinese society. Traditional festivals were restored, traditional ethical values were promoted, Chinese arts and poems became popular again and the government spent large amounts of money to support the study and restoration of Confucian archives.

Legacy and Reality

In effect, the CPC has sinified itself. Its goal is no longer to build a communist society, but to create a fully modernised China. Modernisation has replaced Marxism as the Party's *de facto* ideology. However, this has created a great tension between the CPC's theory and its practice. Its theory is still Marxism, but its practice is guided by Chinese values. This tension in turn created deep anxiety in the Party about its political legitimacy. The economic success since 1978 has allowed the CPC to win great support from the Chinese people. However, economic success is not enough to prove that a political system is right. To do that, the system must be based on a political philosophy that embraces values which are widely held by citizens.

Marxism in its current form does not fulfil that function. To find a way out of this conundrum, the CPC must find an alternative theory. However, it is not ready to completely give up Marxism because such an act would run the risk of negating the Party's past. Sinification rather than rejection of Marxism has therefore become the Party's major theoretical pursuit.

However, the current efforts to sinify Marxism have not obtained meaningful results. The most popular approach, often adopted by orthodox Marxist scholars, is to apply Marxism to explain what the CPC has done in the reform era. Because of the reasons laid out in the opening section, it is very hard for orthodox Marxist scholars to explain the CPC's success. Instead, their views are often critical. This is not surprising, because Marxism was a critical theory in the first place.

Another approach, taken by Marxist scholars who are more sympathetic towards Chinese traditions, is to compare what Marx and Confucians wrote to try find commonalities. However, this approach does not pay attention to the systematic and fundamental differences between Marxism and Confucianism, so their comparison is mechanical and selective because of the many conflicts between Marxism and Confucianism. Below, I will show that this does not mean that there are no commonalities between these two political theories, but just that such an effort should be based on a more fundamental understanding of what unites and separates them.

Marxism was created as a theory to guide the proletarian revolution, putting exploitation at centre stage. After 1978, the CPC no longer concerned itself with exploitation and in practice gave up Marx's political economy. Indeed, the Party had to give up Marx's whole theory of revolution and its auxiliary proposal of proletarian dictatorship (or "people's democratic dictatorship", in the CPC's jargon after 1978).

Communism is a utopia by definition because it is based on the premise that all of the people's needs have been met—a kind of "end of history" in which man's desires are sated. The role of communism is at best to inspire a society to increase the supply of goods and services so that it moves asymptotically close to that premise. Dictatorship of the proletariat is merely a transitory phase between capitalism and communism.

Nevertheless, the "people's democratic dictatorship" often becomes a Sword of Damocles to private business owners when the mood turns to the left in China. They fear that their wealth will be taken by the state. In response, they often move their wealth to other countries. To the extent that the private economy is one of the pillars of China's sustainable growth, "people's democratic dictatorship" is detrimental to the rejuvenation of China. The CPC has to find a new political philosophy that is accepted by ordinary Chinese.

Marxism meets Confucianism

The CPC's new political philosophy must borrow from Confucianism because Confucianism is firmly grounded in Chinese values and has been the model of state

governance for most of the last two millennia. Both Marxism and Confucianism should be sources for the CPC to build its new political philosophy. To do that, the CPC needs to find commonalities and complementarities between the two strands of thought. Although the Marxist theory of political economy is flawed, Marxist philosophy is more likely to offer opportunities. Here are a few of them.

First, Marx and Engels put individual achievements before collective achievements. If they lived in today's world, both thinkers would be progressive liberals. Contrary to conventional wisdom, classical Confucianism does not reject liberal ideas. Both Confucius and Mencius put personal efforts at the centre of their theories of personal perfection. *Sbi* (scholars) are self-regulated agents, not subjects who merely follow the king's orders.

Second, historical materialism offers viable methods for us to understand human beings and human history. Man is not just defined, as by Hobbes, Smith and Locke, by self-interest. The starting point of the construction of human society is not some normative claim, but an empirical observation of what human beings really are. Confucius held such a view. For him, human nature had many forms; it was fluid and could be moulded by personal effort.

Third, dialectics has been a long-time part of Daoism. Confucianism is not as dialectic as Daoism, but quite agrees with dialectics when it comes to practice. One of the central ideas held by Confucianism is Keeping the Mean (*zhongyong*), the middle way. Engels expressed similar ideas when he discussed dialectics: "Differences are harmonized in the middle stage; all the contradictions are transformed by each other through intermediating steps (...) Dialectic reasoning does not recognize rigid and fixed boundaries. Nor does it recognize universal 'not this, but that' (...) Dialectics recognizes 'this and that' when it appears appropriate".¹ *Zhongyong* has guided China's reform process since 1978. The CPC adopted a gradual approach to reform, creating many transitory institutions that were not perfect but solved the most urgent problems of the time. *Zhongyong* is also reflected in the CPC's governance model. For outsiders, many of China's laws only reflect the Party's arbitrary will. But in reality, most of China's legislation is deliberated and even contested during many rounds of consultation before going up for voting. In the end, Chinese laws are the result of compromise among many interests at stake.

Fourth, Marx's ideas about democracy can be combined with the Confucian theory of human nature to create a new form of state governance. For Marx, democracy created by Locke was a false form of democracy because it ignored the existence of classes in society. Real democracy can only be established when people become self-regulating agents. However, agency is an ideal rather than reality. We have to accept Confucius' view that man is constantly engaged in a

process of perfection. As imperfect agents, not all people are qualified to make all political decisions.

Thus emerges a political meritocracy, a society ruled by a political hierarchy in which commensurate quality is required of officials at each level. However, decisions by these officials are not without any constraint. The last say belongs to the people: through their representatives, they approve or disapprove the decisions of officials. Unlike in the current form of democracy where people's sovereignty is positively defined—people, through their representatives, are entitled to make the law—people's sovereignty is passive in the Confucian state: i.e., people, also through their representatives, are only entitled to approve or disapprove the law recommended by officials.

Concluding Remarks

Sinification of Marxism is itself an example of *zhongyong*. It is neither a continuation of orthodox Marxist teachings nor a wholesale acceptance of China's traditional values, but something in between. Confucianism experienced similar transformations in historical times. The introduction of Buddhism was the first cultural shock China had had in recorded history. It challenged the Confucian order and the Confucian belief that virtues were given by Heaven. As a response, Neo-Confucian scholars in the Song dynasty absorbed Buddhist ideas and introduced self-reflection into Confucianism.

The introduction of western ideas was the second cultural shock in China's history. The country is still in the process of that shock. On the material front, China has done a good job in absorbing the knowledge created by the West. On the spiritual front, China has not yet decided how to absorb the values and ideas created by the West. Marxism is by far the most consequential western idea in China, but other western ideas, such as liberalism, have also impacted Chinese society. The period of introducing western values and ideas is probably approaching an end; China is now at a point where it will go back to its own traditional values. The task of the CPC is to lead the process to create a new Chinese culture. In that culture, Chinese values should be the basket that carries universal values and western ideas that are congruent with Chinese values.

Note

¹ Translated from *Makesi Engesi xuanji* 马克思恩格斯选集 [Collected Works of Marx and Engels], Vol. 9: 471. Beijing: Renmin chubanshe 人民出版社 [People's Press], 2009.