

## Chinese Experiments in Socialist Modernisation

Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels never left the socialist movement with a blueprint for building a new society out of the contradictions of capitalism. They merely provided a concrete analysis of the movement of capital, that too based on their access to resources outlining the development of capitalism primarily in Europe. In fact, they were adamant that ‘Communism is for us not a state of affairs which is to be established, an ideal to which reality will have to adjust itself’. For them, communism is ‘the real movement which abolishes the present state of things’.

The breaking of the ice in Russia by Lenin and the Bolsheviks challenged many of the assumptions of the orthodox Marxists of the Second International. Through the process of revolution at the weakest links of capitalism, from Russia to China and Vietnam to Cuba, a new way of thinking about socialism arose. Rather than being the culmination of the contradictions of capitalist modernity, socialism itself could provide the darker nations of the Global South with a path to modernity. Such a path could eschew military expansion, preserve the collectivist spirit of the countryside, resist socioeconomic polarisation, and avoid ecological crises. But as the history of the Soviet Union and modern China show, this process is not without profound challenges and contradictions.

It is notable that in many official documents or statements made by Chinese leaders, socialism is not necessarily seen as some transcendental ideal to be achieved for its own sake. Rather, socialism is the path chosen to achieve concrete goals, including the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation and fulfilling the Chinese people’s aspiration for a good life. In various speeches, President Xi Jinping has emphasised two points. First, in a report to the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China in 2022, he emphasised that ‘Chinese modernisation is socialist modernisation’, which ‘contains elements that are common to the modernisation processes of all countries, but it is more characterised by features that are unique to the Chinese context’. Later, in a keynote address to world political parties in March 2023, Xi said, “We must uphold the principle of independence and explore diversified paths towards modernisation”. This is to say that there can be no cookie-cutter approach to the process of modernisation, which must adjust to national realities.

This issue of *Wenhua Zongheng* is about China’s experiments in socialist modernisation. This is not the first time that this journal explored the theme of socialist modernisation. In fact, our second issue was on ‘China’s Path from Extreme Poverty to Socialist Modernisation’. The editorial for that issue described socialism as a historical process linked to industrial modernity. While that issue honed in on China’s lifting 800 million people out of poverty in the process of modernisation, the essays in this issue explore the ‘real movement’ of the experimentation, institution building, and fierce ideological struggle in China’s process of socialist modernisation. This issue represents China’s modernisation as a world-historic process, replete with idealistic leaps, pragmatic retreats, and many contradictions that are yet to be resolved.

This issue begins with an essay by Chinese writer and literary critic Li Tuo, who reminds us of the experimental nature of socialism. Li argues that China's 1978 reform and opening up process is the historical heir of a long series of experiments, from the Paris Commune (1871) to Red Vienna (1918–1934) to the New Economic Policy (1921–1928). Li Tuo points to the profound contradictions at the heart of the reform and opening-up process: the fact that while private property, the market, and the profit incentive have been allowed to thrive, the greatest feats of this era include state-driven experiments such as the construction of high-speed railways and the west-to-east power transmission line. Whether these feats are attributed to the socialist nature or the capitalistic elements of China's modernisation constitutes a significant ideological debate. As Li emphasises, 'Competing ideological tendencies struggle to realise themselves through the reform process'.

Next, Fudan University economists Meng Jie and Zhang Zibin provide a meso-level analysis of the institutional structure of China's modernisation. In Western development economics, the literature on industrial policy has experienced a resurgence since the 2009 financial crisis. This essay draws from both the Western canon on developmental and entrepreneurial states and Marxist literature on markets and state formation to provide an original analysis of Chinese industrial policy. For Meng and Zhang, China's leadership system makes it an ideal 'entrepreneurial state' that is capable of resisting capture by private and foreign interests. As the authors emphasise, 'whenever industrial development faces fundamental strategic choices, the CPC's ideology will guide policies back to the direction of independence'. Most significant is their analysis of the institutions of the Chinese state, which, under the leadership of the CPC, engage in fierce competition to drive forward the development of the productive forces. These mechanisms of local government competition keep the bureaucracy engaged with the fundamental goals of the development process, forcing experimentation at the local level, which in turn generates knowledge and innovation throughout the national economy.

Finally, Wenhua Zongheng co-editor Xiong Jie reviews *Neoliberalism or Neocollective Rural China*, a book by the President of the International Communication Research Institute at East China Normal University, Lu Xinyu. The book delves deep into the agrarian question and the fate of the peasantry in the process of modernisation. The review highlights the intense intellectual debates that have taken place inside China since the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. These debates relate to China's policies in the reform and opening-up process and the extent to which the resulting incursion of neoliberal capitalism might or should be allowed to completely overtake China's political and economic structure. Highlighting the decade-long debate between Lu Xinyu and Chinese liberal Qin Hui, Xiong highlights the extent to which important debates with vast political implications are conducted openly and fiercely in Chinese intellectual circles. The agrarian question and the fate of the peasantry loom large in these debates, as right-wing forces seek to complete the process of capitalist primitive accumulation in China, while the left fights to find ways to ensure continuity of the collective structure of the countryside.

The essays collected in this issue provide an outline of experiments in socialist construction in the context of China. They are a reminder that the socialist path to modernisation is filled with contradictions and class struggles. As China marches towards its second centenary goal to build a modern socialist country by 2049, it is now more than ever finding itself in new territory. Having achieved a level of industrialisation and development that is unprecedented for a country under communist leadership, there are no clear manuals for how to (or how not to) proceed from the present. Experimentation will be the only way forward.

