

On the Experimental Nature of Socialism and the Complexity of China's Reform and Opening Up

I.

To understand the complexity of socialism, it is best to take a broad historical perspective on the actual development of socialist movements.¹ Particular attention should be paid to an often-overlooked aspect of this development – the continuous experiments that have accompanied the history of the socialist movement. Some of these experiments have succeeded, while others have failed. In retrospect, it is clear that these ongoing experiments were an integral part of socialist practice.

From the very early stages of the socialist movement, the period of utopian socialism, such experiments already existed. For example, in 1824, Robert Owen travelled to the United States and purchased 1,214 hectares of land along the Wabash River in southern Indiana. There, he launched the New Harmony commune experiment, which caused a global sensation. Although this dream of an idyllic utopia only lasted four years before failing, it was the first attempt to construct an ideal society amid the capitalist world system. As such, this experiment should be regarded as a remarkable opening of a new historical era.

Half a century later, the Paris Commune carried out an even greater experiment. The victory of the Paris Commune on 18 March 1871 lasted only 72 days. During this brief period, the Parisian proletariat not only established the first workers' government but also introduced a series of political, economic, and cultural reforms.² These included the abolition of the standing army and state bureaucracy, the elimination of high salaries for officials, the abolition of parliamentary governance, and the implementation of democratic universal suffrage for electing public servants at all levels. Such measures were unprecedented in the historical development rooted in private ownership. From the perspective of human social practice, all revolutionary initiatives of the Paris Commune were inherently experimental in nature.

Although this experiment was short-lived and drowned in blood due to brutal repression, Marx argued that it was '...the dawn of the great social revolution which will forever free the human race from class rule'.³ Illuminated by this dawn, subsequent socialist movements aiming to overthrow the capitalist system, though fraught with twists and turns, carried on the revolutionary experiments initiated by the Paris Commune. These experiments have never ceased, and this continuity is one of the most valuable legacies left by the Paris Commune to the socialist revolution.

II.

The famous *Rotes Wien* (Red Vienna) urban development proposals serve as another example of a

revolutionary experiment. Between 1918 and 1934, the Social Democratic Workers' Party of Austria (SDAP) governed the Austrian capital city of Vienna in a period known as *Rotes Wien*.⁴ During this time, the SDAP seized the opportunity to conduct a democratic socialist experiment through the implementation of a series of reforms. Among these reforms, the most remarkable was the construction of public housing to address the poor living conditions of Vienna's working class. By 1934, nearly 65,000 public housing units had been built in Vienna, forming 348 new residential complexes imbued with strong socialist ideals. One of the most famous of these complexes is the Karl-Marx-Hof, completed in 1924. This massive public housing unit not only provided 1,400 apartments housing over 5,000 residents but also included numerous public facilities such as large laundries, public baths, a dental clinic, an obstetrics hospital, a public library, and a pharmacy. Designed with careful consideration of the balance between public and private spaces, the workers living in these apartments enjoyed both excellent living conditions and comprehensive public services.

However, like the Paris Commune before it, this experiment too came to an end. In this case, it was because the SDAP was a party committed to parliamentary politics and reformism. The socialist experiment, which was largely confined to urban development, came to an abrupt halt in 1934 when the Nazi Party rose to power and banned the SDAP.

III.

Looking back at the reformist social experiment of *Rotes Wien*, it serves as a reference point that allows us to re-examine Vladimir Lenin's 'strategic retreat' in the spring of 1921, when he abandoned war communism in favour of the New Economic Policy (NEP). This shift not only fundamentally altered traditional Marxist understandings of socialism but also provided the socialist movement with a new direction.

There were major shifts in Lenin's thinking towards the latter part of his life, when he declared, 'We have to admit that there has been a radical modification in our whole outlook on socialism'.⁵ For many reasons, Lenin seemingly abandoned the immediate transition to socialism in favour of a more circuitous route – retreating to a position of state capitalism and transitioning from a tactic of assault to siege. What is worth noting today is that while these historical experiences offer a wealth of insights and interpretations, they often overlook one key issue: for a Soviet government that had existed for barely three years and was still struggling to find its footing, implementing such a dramatic shift in revolutionary strategy was highly experimental in practice. Lenin's series of retreats aimed at achieving a circuitous transition to socialism can, to a significant extent, be seen as a series of experiments.

Taking a broader view, the October Revolution of 1917 was itself a revolutionary experiment. Carrying out a proletarian revolution in a backwards agrarian country that was unindustrialised and still rooted in serfdom was considered impossible from the perspective of classical Marxist theory. This experiment deviated entirely from the revolutionary experiences of the European proletariat since the 19th century. This theoretical divergence explains why the theorists of the Second International dismissed Lenin's theory that the revolution should begin at the weakest link in the global capitalist system. These theorists always held a negative attitude toward Lenin and the Bolsheviks. Even among Marxists who broadly supported Lenin's strategy, many adopted a critical stance due to uncertainties about his specific practices. The ideological and theoretical debates sparked by these issues have persisted for over a century. In China, similar debates have flourished, especially since the beginning of the reform and opening up era, when discussions about the history of the October Revolution became a vibrant field of study. Yet even in the discussions in China, the experimental

nature inherent in Lenin's leadership of the Russian Revolution has received limited attention. This oversight has limited our understanding of Lenin's tactical shift in 1921. As a result, the difficulties and dangers of this tactical retreat and the profound theoretical and practical challenges it posed are often underestimated or overlooked.

IV.

Lenin provided clear expositions about these challenges in key works written during his later years (1921–1923). In these writings, Lenin reviewed the history of the implementation of the NEP with serious introspection and self-criticism, drawing lessons from past failures. He also repeatedly warned that the Soviet government would face even greater difficulties and challenges in the construction of socialism.

In *The Tax in Kind*, a particularly critical document regarding the NEP, Lenin explicitly stated that nobody ...ever expected to bring about “complete” socialism smoothly, gently, easily and simply’.⁶ Moreover, he sharply criticised the argument that Russia's economic and political conditions lacked the historical prerequisites for a socialist revolution, and that therefore the Bolsheviks should not have seized power. To this, Lenin retorted that, ‘...it always exists in the development of nature as well as in the development of society that only by a series of attempts – each of which, taken by itself, will be one sided and will suffer from certain inconsistencies – will complete socialism be created by the revolutionary cooperation of the proletarians of all countries’.

Lenin's insights, when combined with his other writings on the overarching theme of achieving a circuitous transition to socialism, form a rich and complex body of thought. On a practical level, one key point stands out: the construction of socialism must abandon the dream of immediately realising a ‘complete socialism’. This notion of avoiding dogmatic attempts at a direct realisation of a ‘complete socialism’ represented a significant leap in Lenin's approach to socialist revolution and construction.

A systematic review of Lenin's series of retreats in the 1920s reveals a tactical variety – ranging from the implementation of a tax in kind for farmers, restoration of small-scale industries and smallholder peasant businesses, reintroduction of commodity exchange and monetary circulation, and encouragement of market economies and free trade. However, these tactical retreats can be understood as part of a broader strategic compromise. They accommodated the spontaneous forces of smallholder peasant economies and elements of commercial capitalism, both private and state capitalism. Collectively, these retreats were concrete steps in implementing the overarching strategy of avoiding the idealistic and premature realisation of ‘complete socialism’.

These retreats had serious political consequences, eliciting criticism and opposition from all sides, including the Second International and its affiliates, the Mensheviks, and the Socialist Revolutionaries. SDAP leader Otto Bauer charged that the Bolsheviks were ‘retreating to capitalism’, and that the October Revolution ‘was a bourgeois revolution’.⁷ The journal *Smena Vekh* accused the Bolsheviks of ‘sinking into the usual bourgeois mire’.⁸ Even within the Bolshevik Party, there was a lack of unity, as many members resisted these retreats. Some veteran members protested directly to Lenin: ‘Why talk about state commerce? No one ever taught us business in prison!’ In the Central Committee, there were fierce debates over theory and strategy between Lenin, Trotsky, Bukharin, and Zinoviev. These internal conflicts created significant challenges for implementing the NEP.

Compounding these internal challenges was Russia's dire state, which, after the Civil War, was 'like a person beaten half to death'. Domestic crises abounded, including industrial stagnation, decline in agricultural output, severe famine, and growing peasant unrest triggered by opposition to the *Prodravverstka* system, which in some regions even escalated into uprisings.⁹ Meanwhile, the proletarian revolutions in Europe that Lenin and many Marxists had pinned their hopes on had failed, leaving the Russian Revolution isolated. Amid these severe circumstances, Lenin and the Bolsheviks made the bold decision to implement a series of major economic reforms that were unprecedented in traditional Marxist theory and socialist movements. This posed significant theoretical challenges and practical risks.

The experimental nature of this circuitous approach to forging a new path to socialism, marked by its extraordinary risks and difficulties, should not be overlooked. Lenin was fully aware of the immense risks involved and even foresaw the possibility of failure but was able to unite the party to address these challenges and navigate the crises of practically implementing policies.

V.

On 21 April 1921, Lenin wrote in *The Tax in Kind* that 'It was not without reason that the teachers of socialism spoke of a whole period of transition from capitalism to socialism and emphasised the "prolonged birth pangs" of the new society. And this new society is again an abstraction which can come into being only by passing through a series of varied, imperfect, and concrete attempts to create this or that socialist state'.

On 14 October 1921, in his speech on the *Fourth Anniversary of the October Revolution*, Lenin outlined the link between the bourgeois-democratic and proletarian-socialist revolutions, explaining that 'The first develops into the second. The second, in passing, solves the problems of the first. The second consolidates the work of the first. Struggle, and struggle alone, decides how far the second succeeds in outgrowing the first'.¹⁰

Two weeks later, on 3 and 4 November 1921, in his *Report on the New Economic Policy at the Seventh Moscow Gubernia Conference of the Russian Communist Party*, Lenin further emphasised the non-linear path to victory in war:

This applies to ordinary wars, but what about wars which decide the fate of a whole class, which decide the issue of socialism or capitalism? Are there reasonable grounds for assuming that a nation which is attempting to solve this problem for the first time can immediately find the only correct and infallible method? What grounds are there for assuming that? None whatever! Experience teaches the very opposite. Of the problems we tackled, not one was solved at the first attempt; every one of them had to be taken up a second time. After suffering defeat, we tried again, we did everything all over again.¹¹

A year later, on 27 March 1922, at the Eleventh Congress of the Russian Communist Party (Bolshevik), Lenin reiterated:

On the question of state capitalism, I think that generally our press and our Party make the

mistake of dropping into intellectualism, into liberalism; we philosophise about how state capitalism is to be interpreted and look into old books. But in those old books, you will not find what we are discussing; they deal with the state capitalism that exists under capitalism. Not a single book has been written about state capitalism under communism. It did not occur even to Marx to write a word on this subject; and he died without leaving a single precise statement or definite instruction on it. That is why we must overcome the difficulty entirely by ourselves.

In January 1923, as Lenin's health deteriorated, he dictated *On Cooperation*, a significant text discussing the need for institutional innovation. Here, he stressed, 'Our opponents told us repeatedly that we were rash in undertaking to implant socialism in an insufficiently cultured country. But they were misled by our having started from the opposite end to that prescribed by theory (the theory of pedants of all kinds), because in our country the political and social revolution preceded the cultural revolution, that very cultural revolution which nevertheless now confronts us'.

Revisiting Lenin's argumentation today, we cannot help but link it to the history of the socialist movement after his death. We must re-examine the specific practices of that historical period and consider how many of the twists, turns, and failures in that history are tied to Lenin's repeated assertion that a direct transition to 'complete socialism' is unfeasible. If the construction of socialism embraces detours and retreats, avoids chasing the 'only correct and infallible method', and refrains from, 'looking into old books', to determine the path and direction, but instead undertakes, 'a series of varied, imperfect, and concrete attempts', then in practice, many of these 'concrete attempts' are inevitably experimental in nature. This means that uninterrupted social experimentation is an inseparable component of socialist construction.

VI.

In the socialist history of New China after 1949, the connections and relationships between Mao Zedong's and Lenin's theories and practices have been an important area for Marxist research. While considerable literature already exists on this topic, there is room for more detailed explorations of issues such as the transition to socialism. Specifically, a deeper investigation is needed to study how Mao creatively expanded and developed Lenin's idea that 'complete socialism' cannot be simply and directly realised.

For example, suppose the direct realisation of a 'complete socialism' is not pursued; this inevitably raises a core issue of ownership under socialism – how should Lenin's concept of 'state capitalism under communism' be understood? How should it be implemented in concrete practice? What should its institutional form look like? While Lenin discussed these questions in works such as *The Tax in Kind*, he did not have the opportunity to implement, test, or resolve them in practice before his death in 1924. Subsequently, Stalinism completely deviated from Lenin's ideas and approach. Stalin crafted an entirely different script, ultimately directing the tragedy of the Soviet Union's complete failure, while also leaving behind monumental challenges for the socialist movement.

To understand the Chinese Revolution, it is necessary to analyse how Mao, as Lenin's most steadfast successor, addressed and resolved the challenge of socialist construction. A close reading of Mao's writings – especially *On the Ten Major Relationships* (April 1956), *On the Correct Handling of Contradictions Among the People* (February 1957), and *Talks on Reading the Soviet Political Economy Textbook* (December 1959 – February 1960) – along with documents written under his leadership, such as *On the Historical Experience of*

the Dictatorship of the Proletariat (1956) and *More on the Historical Experience of the Dictatorship of the Proletariat* (1956), and other historical accounts like Bo Yibo's *Reflections on Several Major Decisions and Events* (1991), provide significant insights.

However, while Mao's theories and practices clearly inherited Lenin's own strategy from the NEP, the two revolutions were vastly different. Socialist construction in New China faced broader difficulties and challenges, engaged in more complex practical activities, and accumulated both the most successes and failures. The Chinese Revolution was not only more creative in the history of the socialist movement but also emphasised the dynamism and flexibility that characterise such a movement. More importantly, it preserved greater possibilities for the future of socialism. This perspective is essential when examining the continuity between the two revolutions. Therefore, understanding how to solve the challenges Lenin left behind naturally becomes a vital aspect of comprehending both the Chinese Revolution and China's reform and opening up.

VII.

In March 1949, at the Second Plenary Session of the Seventh Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, Mao proposed a structure of ownership comprising five components: state-owned economy, cooperative economy, individual economy, private capitalist economy, and state-capitalist economy.¹² He said, 'The state-owned economy is socialist in character and the cooperative economy is semi-socialist; these plus private capitalism, plus the individual economy, plus the state-capitalist economy in which the state and private capitalists work jointly, will be the chief sectors of the economy of the people's republic and will constitute the new-democratic economic structure'.

This was the first time that Mao comprehensively articulated the idea that multiple forms of ownership could coexist and operate in a socialist system – a concept that has often been referred to in recent years, in the context of reform and opening up, as 'mixed ownership' by economists. However, this term lacks the theoretical rigour and precision of Lenin's terminology, 'state-capitalism under communism'. Mao's clear articulation of a social ownership system with five coexisting economic components at the very founding of New China was a significant event. Even within the broader history of the socialist movement, this was a momentous development with far-reaching implications. However, this idea did not emerge out of thin air – its seeds can be traced back to experimental practices by the Communist Party of China (CPC) during the period of the Chinese Soviet Republic (1931–1937). One particularly notable source is Zhang Wentian's long-standing research on this issue.¹³

In 1922, while studying in the United States through a work-study programme, Zhang came across an article titled *The Development of Soviet Russian Policy* in an English publication. The article, personally approved by Lenin, carefully explained the background and theory behind the implementation of the NEP. Recognising its significance, Zhang immediately translated the article into Chinese and sent it back to China, where it was published in *The Republican Daily News* in Shanghai. This was possibly the earliest introduction of Lenin's NEP to China, even as the policy itself was just beginning to take shape in the Soviet Union. Zhang continued to study Lenin's NEP throughout China's protracted Land Reform Movement and the Liberation War (1945–1949) and even after stepping down as the CPC's General Secretary. He conducted numerous investigations and wrote essays such as *On the Development of New-Style Capitalism* (1942). He repeatedly proposed to the CPC Central Committee the idea of vigorously developing rural capitalism under a

revolutionary regime. In Bo Yibo's book *Reflections on Several Major Decisions and Events*, the section titled *The Blueprint for New China's Construction Drafted at the Second Plenary Session of the Seventh CPC Central Committee* highlighted that Zhang, then a member of the Political Bureau of the CPC Central Committee and a standing member of the Northeast Bureau of the CPC Central Committee, submitted a document to the CPC Central Committee before the plenary session. Titled, *Outline of Northeast China's Economic Composition and Basic Economic Policies*, it was subsequently revised by Liu Shaoqi and further refined by Mao, who clearly stated, 'In terms of overall economic policy, private capital should be restricted, but it should also be guided onto the track of serving the "national economy and the people's livelihood"'.¹⁴

In 1956, Chen Yun presented a report at the Eighth CPC National Congress titled *New Problems That Have Arisen Following Basic Completion of Socialist Transformation*, where he introduced the concept of 'three main components, three supplements'.¹⁵ He argued that under the framework of public ownership and a planned economy, the development of self-employment and free markets could supplement the socialist economic system. After the Second Five-Year Plan was finalised, Zhou Enlai also proposed establishing free markets within the broader framework of state leadership in certain regions. These discussions underscored the fact that the concept of 'mixed ownership' within a socialist system underwent prolonged incubation, deliberation, and debate within the CPC. This was formally affirmed at the Second Plenary Session of the Seventh CPC Central Committee and later revisited at the Eighth CPC National Congress. However, the realisation of this idea in practice encountered numerous twists and turns.

Looking back today, the agricultural 'cooperativisation' of the early 1950s, the effort to unite with the national bourgeoisie during the Three-anti Campaign (1951) and Five-anti Campaign (1952), the peaceful transformation of industry and commerce through public-private partnerships around 1956, and the subsequent transformation of national handicrafts all followed the principle of mixed ownership. These policies achieved considerable success and addressed significant challenges in socialist construction. In contrast, such challenges were poorly resolved in Soviet socialist practice, sowing the seeds for the Soviet Union's tragic collapse. Yet, by the late 1950s, Chinese socialism faced severe setbacks. After the second session of the Eighth CPC Congress in May 1958, the Party adopted the general line of 'going all out, aiming high, and striving for greater, faster, better, and more economical results in building socialism'.¹⁶ This set the stage for the nationwide campaign of the Great Leap Forward and the setting up of people's communes. These sweeping campaigns, accompanied by mass movements, momentarily convinced the CPC and the people that Communism was imminent. However, in a little over a year, these efforts failed one after another. During the Cultural Revolution, Mao attempted another experiment by establishing Revolutionary Committees modelled after the Paris Commune, such as the Shanghai Commune and Beijing Commune. However, this final effort also ended in failure.

VIII.

Understanding the intertwined successes and failures of this historical period, exploring their causes, and analysing their long-term impact on the socialist movement have become major points of debate in the history of the Chinese Revolution and the global socialist movement. Research on this subject spans numerous theoretical and academic fields across both left-wing and right-wing perspectives. Among these debates, the failures of the Great Leap Forward and the people's commune movement have attracted the most discussion and sharpest criticism. However, these interventions often overlook the fact that the earliest critiques and

reflections on these failures originated from within the CPC itself. At the renowned Zhengzhou Conference in 1959 – barely a year after the launch of the Great Leap Forward – Mao condemned the ‘communist wind’ that had emerged after the establishment of communes in the autumn of 1958.¹⁷ Subsequently, from early 1959 to early 1962, Mao conducted around ten rounds of self-reflection and self-criticism at various levels and in different contexts within the CPC. Particularly noteworthy is that during this period, Mao carefully studied Stalin’s *Economic Problems of Socialism in the USSR* and the Soviet publication *Political Economy: A Textbook* to re-examine earlier practices in socialist construction. He then proposed an original theoretical framework: ‘It is possible to divide the transition from capitalism to communism into two stages: one from capitalism to socialism, which could be called underdeveloped socialism; and one from socialism to communism, that is, from comparatively underdeveloped socialism to comparatively developed socialism, namely, communism’.¹⁸ This formulation went beyond a mere reflection on the Great Leap Forward and signified a deeper theoretical reconsideration of the trajectory of socialist development.

Similar to Lenin’s immediate strategic retreat and swift implementation of the NEP following the setbacks of War Communism in 1921, the retreat after the failure of the Great Leap Forward began as early as 1960. By 1962, the *Draft Regulations Concerning the Rural People’s Communes* explicitly stipulated that, ‘the production team is the basic accounting unit of the people’s commune... this system would remain unchanged for at least thirty years’.¹⁹

When reflecting on Mao’s thoughts and practices during the mid-1950s, particularly the much-criticised leftist errors, a more historicised perspective is required. During that period, Mao himself did not fully adhere to the approach of developing the economy through the coexistence of the five forms of ownership proposed at the Second Plenary Session of the Seventh CPC Central Committee. Instead, he sought to bypass detours by experimenting with the people’s commune system as an alternative path to socialism. Can this solely be explained as a leftist error, or does it need to be sufficiently distinguished from other leftist errors in the history of the Chinese revolution? Since the time of the Peasant Movement Training Institute in Guangzhou in 1924, Mao had been deeply engaged in exploring the unique characteristics of the Chinese Revolution.²⁰ These prolonged reflections and explorations inevitably extended into the post-1949 period, influencing his understanding of socialism and, in particular, the path that socialism should take in China. A closer examination of the rash advance of the Great Leap Forward and the people’s commune movement, as well as the theoretical considerations and complex deliberations reflected in their implementation, requires connecting them to Mao’s intensified emphasis on ideological class struggle from the 1960s onward. His repeated reflections on how to prevent capitalism from undermining and subverting socialism from within are deeply tied to his emphasis on the semi-colonial and semi-feudal nature of Chinese society: his assertion that, ‘the peasant question is the fundamental question of the Chinese revolution’, and that, ‘the essence of the Chinese revolution is a peasant revolution’.²¹ Furthermore, these ideas were undoubtedly related to the ideological divergence between the communist parties of China and the Soviet Union, that began in the 1950s and culminated in open Sino-Soviet debates in the 1960s. All these historical factors converged to create the historical environment in which the Three Red Banners and the Great Leap Forward emerged.

When we connect history and reality in this way, we cannot simply focus on specific leftist errors but must also consider their inherent relationship with Mao’s unique socialist thought and theory. Furthermore, we should place these issues in the broader context of the history of the world socialist movement, examining how they relate to the ongoing development of socialist theory and practice. For example, when we look at

the practice of the people's commune today, it is clearly connected to Lenin's idea that, 'this new society is again an abstraction which can come into being only by passing through a series of varied, imperfect, and concrete attempts to create this or that socialist state'. Could the people's communes be seen as an 'imperfect and concrete attempt', or was it an attempt to directly transition to 'complete socialism'? Conversely, did the failure of the people's commune prove that directly transitioning to 'complete socialism' was not feasible?

These are questions worth deep reflection because it is not only the successes in the history of the socialist movement that we must cherish; the failures are also valuable experiences and milestones for future practice, carrying significant meaning that can be unravelled through thorough review and self-criticism.

When Lenin said that 'Not a single book has been written about state capitalism under communism', he wasn't just pointing out that socialism had no pre-designed blueprint. He was also warning those who came after the October Revolution that socialists must start from scratch, with no ready-made answers. Practice has proven that neither Russia nor China could directly transition to 'complete socialism' in an underdeveloped industrial environment but had to go through '...a series of varied, imperfect, and concrete attempts to create this or that socialist state'. Therefore, socialism is an inherently experimental movement, and it could be argued that China's reform and opening up in the 1980s is an expression of this spirit of experimentation.

IX.

In 1985, Deng Xiaoping told visiting delegations from Algeria and Japan that China's entire open-door policy was a great experiment that could not be found in books – whether the path taken was correct could only be determined over time.²² Henry Kissinger once told Deng Xiaoping, 'No one has ever attempted a reform on the scale of China's. No other country has tried to combine planned and market economies... If you succeed, you will raise philosophical questions for both planned and market economies'.²³ In retrospect, it is now clear that the reform process that began in the 1980s – an unprecedented experiment in human history – was not a sudden explosion of Chinese wisdom or a simple forced search for a way out of crisis. Rather, it was a logical development of the socialist movement. This is particularly evident in the fact that after a series of explorations and experiments, China established a basic economic system with public ownership as the mainstay and the coexistence of multiple forms of ownership. This system has been repeatedly proven successful in the decades-long economic miracle, thus marking the beginning of a new phase in the history of the socialist movement.

Throughout the 20th century, many socialist countries undertook reforms. From the mid-1950s onward, Poland, Hungary, the German Democratic Republic, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, Romania, Albania, Yugoslavia, and others all implemented various reforms. Though the immediate goals of these reforms were to break free from the Soviet model and enter the industrialisation process already undertaken by Western capitalist countries, they all inevitably had to experiment with new political and economic ownership systems. Most of these core reforms ultimately failed, leading to the collapse of socialism in these countries and an unprecedented low point for the world socialist movement.

The question that then arises is why only China's reform was successful. More importantly, how did China enter global capitalist production relations in the 1990s without fundamentally changing the major characteristics of its ideological, political, and economic system? Instead, China continued as a new form of socialism, experimenting with practices never seen before in the history of the socialist movement, amid a

broader historical era of division, turmoil, and restructuring.

X.

Connecting the reform process that began in the 1980s to the experimental nature of the socialist movement, replete with successes and failures, provides a more complex perspective for analysis. For example, regarding the relationship between the reforms initiated in the 1980s and Lenin's NEP, China is clearly the inheritor of Lenin's thought. However, upon closer comparison, China's reforms differ significantly from Lenin's approach. In practical terms, how retreat was implemented, how detours were taken, and how reforms and experiments were carried out to correct past mistakes naturally led to differences. These distinctions have profound historical causes. The revolutions led by Lenin and Mao differed significantly in terms of paths, policies, methods, and strategies. These differences historically contributed to the complexity of the Chinese Revolution and are also integral to the complexity of contemporary China's reforms. Therefore, understanding this complexity must be connected to the historical development of Mao's thoughts and theories.

A detailed study is needed of the differences between Mao and Lenin's thoughts and strategies regarding socialist transition, as well as how each integrated Marxism with their national revolution to create their unique contributions. For example, many have studied Mao's *On the Ten Major Relationships*, but the creative ideas expressed in this work are rarely analysed in the context of the differences between the path of the October Revolution and the revolutionary path that gradually developed in China. This difference had already begun to emerge after the establishment of the first revolutionary rural base in Jinggangshan in 1927. This difference was not just one of revolutionary strategies and methods; it already implied differing understandings of socialism. It could be argued that today's reforms are either subtly or directly connected to the ideas in *On the Ten Major Relationships*. However, this clarity is not simply a relationship of inheritance but involves both acceptance and rejection, with a dialectical complexity of affirmation and negation.

XI.

When examining socialism today, many intellectuals tend to overlook the complexity of the Chinese Revolution and the subsequent reform and opening-up process. Providing a direct and comprehensive study on this complexity is beyond the scope of this intervention. However, in light of China's current reality, especially the fact that the reform (including its various experiments) has not stopped and is still developing, it is worth discussing certain issues that are more prone to error or misunderstanding.

One issue is that many people fail to recognise a key factor of China's reform, which was inherited from Lenin's reform: the idea of not striving to achieve 'complete socialism' through a direct transition. Not only is this concept often overlooked, but due to long-established biases, many still view the socialist blueprint as a 'complete socialism' – an ideal socialism that can be realised through reform, meeting standards in every aspect. As a result, the reforms are seen as trimming an unruly, imperfect tree – difficult, but achievable if the correct methods are followed, eventually restoring the vitality of the socialist tree. Even though at the Seventh Plenary Session of the CPC's Seventh Central Committee, Mao explicitly proposed the coexistence of multiple economic sectors, many still fail to connect these ideas with the current reform process. They do not realise that today's reform is essentially a return to the coexistence and development of five economic sectors within a socialist system. They also fail to recognise that this indirect transition to socialism involves detours, likely large ones, which will inevitably require many experiments. It can be said that many have not prepared

for this path of reform or have not prepared at all.

As a result, in the face of various problems in society today that do not align with the spirit and principles of socialism – such as the increasing class stratification, income inequality (China's Gini coefficient once surpassed that of the US), uneven distribution of opportunities and resources, severe societal involution, and the continuous expectation of realising 'complete socialism' – doubts arise.²⁴ People begin to question whether the direction of reform is correct, or even if China is still a socialist country.

However, we cannot simply attribute these doubts to a misunderstanding. In *The Communist Manifesto*, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels said, 'The bourgeoisie, during its rule of scarcely one hundred years, has created more massive and more colossal productive forces than have all preceding generations together'.²⁵ This acknowledges the creative energy unleashed by such a transformation. Therefore, when those who still seek to immediately achieve 'complete socialism' see this release of creative energy in China but also notice the serious contradictions between these new developments and the ideals and values that socialism strives for, their confusion cannot simply be regarded as an error. They are witnessing objective facts and the actual changes occurring in Chinese society. On the other hand, for some intellectuals who are familiar with Friedrich Hayek's works or similar critiques of socialism, and who identify with their neoliberal theories and ideas of spontaneous order and individual freedom, the situation becomes even more complicated. The ideological inclinations of these intellectuals determine what they see or don't see; for them, facts are irrelevant.

XII.

Without delving too deep into economic theory, it is worth asking some more common-sense and practical questions about China's reform process. Namely, what has Chinese socialism after reform accomplished that capitalism today could not or would not be able to? A common saying in China is, 'To get rich, build roads first'. In the practice of reform, the meaning of this phrase has continuously evolved to encompass the implementation of various large-scale infrastructure projects. Therefore, the implementation and maintenance of large-scale infrastructure is a good benchmark to compare the differences between Chinese socialism and free market capitalism.

The United States currently operates a railway network of 293,564.2 kilometres, nearly twice the length of China's rail network.²⁶ However, China has built approximately 36,100 kilometres of high-speed rail, whereas the US has zero kilometres of high-speed rail.²⁷ On the surface it seems like there are strengths and weaknesses on both sides, but there is one significant difference: US railways are predominantly privately owned, and one obvious result of this is frequent accidents. According to data from the US Bureau of Transportation Statistics, there was an average of 1,704 train derailments annually between 1990 and 2021, meaning there is an average of 4.7 derailments every day.²⁸ The fact that US railways are so underdeveloped is due to specific national conditions – vast land and a sparse population, which have made air travel the preferred mode of transportation. This partially explains why the US had 19,627 airports, including 5,099 public ones, in 2018.²⁹ In comparison, China had only 814 airports in 2018. Upon closer analysis, private airports make up the majority of US airports, and only a few hundred airports have facilities for online ticket purchasing. Moreover, most of these airports are outdated and in dire need of renovation. The same applies to the equipment and infrastructure supporting the airlines, much of which is also old and in need of renewal.

More troublesome is that since the COVID-19 pandemic, the US aviation industry has been in crisis, with frequent accidents that have made news headlines. These have become so commonplace that they are now seen as the norm. But as with the railroad situation mentioned earlier, these urgent issues are long overdue for resolution, yet they cannot be solved quickly, and there is no clear path to resolving them. The situation is so bad because most of the entities involved in the aviation industry are private enterprises. Faced with pressures for profits, cost reductions, competition, and other market forces, they don't have a comprehensive solution to these problems and are often powerless to address them. As a country built around automobiles, the US road system cannot escape criticism. Just one statistic is revealing: there are 617,000 bridges in the US, 42% of which were built more than 50 years ago – and most infrastructure has a lifespan of about 50 years. In addition to bridges, the entire US infrastructure system needs repair or reconstruction because much of the equipment is outdated. According to the American Society of Civil Engineers (ASCE), the infrastructure funding gap in the US will exceed \$2 trillion by 2025.³⁰ An understanding of the US's recent fiscal situation should raise concerns over where this \$2 trillion will come from.

This account of recent issues in the US transportation system provides a comparative and contextual backdrop when discussing China's 'to get rich, build roads first' strategy. In this comparison, a key issue becomes clear: the inability of so-called 'advanced countries' and wealthy superpowers like the United States to build and maintain large-scale infrastructure. By comparing China's ambitious infrastructure projects, it becomes easier to understand why the US cannot achieve these goals.

The first example worth discussing is the construction of China's high-speed railway network. Not only does this require an enormous investment – the cost of building the railways alone was between 120 million and 150 million yuan per kilometre – but the operating costs are also high. Moreover, many of the routes pass through economically underdeveloped regions, making it impossible to expect quick and substantial returns. From the perspective of pure market economics, the high-speed railway network appears irrational and contradicts market principles. However, China has resisted such criticisms and continued to invest in expanding the network despite limited prospects for profit-making.

The second example, and one that could possibly be considered even more irrational, is the construction of bridges in Guizhou. Over the past few years, Guizhou has built 28,023 road bridges, connecting 210,000 kilometres of highways. Half of the top 100 tallest bridges in the world, and four of the top ten, are in Guizhou. This region has long been known as one of the poorest and most underdeveloped areas in China, with the saying 'no flat land for three *li*, no clear skies for three days' reflecting its harsh conditions.³¹ Perhaps there could be a geopolitical justification for these bridges, given Guizhou's strategic proximity to Southeast Asia. However, this alone is not persuasive enough given the size and scale of investment involved and the risk of no payoff.

The third example is the construction of the west-to-east power transmission programme. This initiative involves three power corridors, which are thousands of kilometres long, using ultra-high-voltage transmission technology to cross mountains, deserts, and rivers, from the north to the south and west to the east. This project required an investment of 4.4 trillion yuan over a period of more than 30 years. A remarkable outcome of this project is that it has enabled China's vast rural areas, where hundreds of millions of farmers live, to have access to electricity, water, and the internet. This is not only a great accomplishment in modern history but also a testimony that utopia is not entirely an ideal, and that 'common prosperity' can be achieved.

The above examples present a profound contradiction: while developing the market economy is the basic policy of China's reform and a national economic strategy, much of the practical work of development has not aligned with the principles of a purely profit-driven market economy. At different levels and in various spaces, these experiments have involved new combinations of economic, production, and resource factors. The objective effects of these experiments have already spread far beyond the boundaries of these projects, reaching metropolitan areas, industrial ecosystems, and even residential neighbourhoods. Given that China plays a significant role in global economic development, especially through the Belt and Road Initiative, these experiments acquire new meaning: they provide a grand vision for the restructuring and reorganisation of the world economy on a larger scale, in accordance with socialist principles.

XIII.

In the analysis of China's reform and opening up process, especially prior to the 'New Era' marked by the 19th National Congress of the CPC in 2017, state-led construction of large-scale infrastructure often did not receive the same level of attention as private sector accomplishments such as Jack Ma's Taobao and Ant Financial (now Ant Group), or Pony Ma's Tencent Goldings.³² This led to serious consequences: to many Chinese people, it was not clear what reform meant. It may be associated with the full development of the market economy, or allowing some people to become well-off first, or simply a method to modernise China. These are purely economistic views of reform which have become quite popular in China in recent years. The more successful the reform process, the more popular this economistic view becomes. China's reform marks the beginning of a new historical phase for the socialist movement. Integrating the market economy into the socialist economy and then restructuring them into a new economic system is not a purely economistic act. In practice, the reform process is rife with ideological contradictions. Competing ideological tendencies struggle to realise themselves through the reform process.

To criticise the economistic view of reform and recognise the ideological struggle embedded in the reform process, the work of Louis Althusser can serve as a valuable theoretical resource. Despite the work of scholars such as Chen Yue and Wu Zifeng in translating and researching the works of Althusser, his theories have still received insufficient attention in Chinese academia and even within left-leaning intellectual circles. From the perspective of the development of contemporary Marxism, Althusser's thought is distinctive: while sharply criticising high-minded traditional philosophy that detaches itself from the masses and political practice, he has also consistently emphasised the need to link theory with practice. This sets his theories apart from Western Marxist research that emerged in the 1950s and especially from the left-wing theories that developed out of postmodernism. This makes Althusser's thought relevant for gaining a critical perspective on the history of the socialist movement while also focusing on the concrete practice of contemporary socialism.

In the map of contemporary Marxism, Althusser's *On the Reproduction of Capitalism* holds an extremely important position.³³ This work reconstructs Marxist theory on the state, fully presenting the theory of ideological state apparatuses and their inseparable link from the reproduction of production relations. Compared to Marx and Lenin's writings on the state, Althusser introduces the key concept of ideology. After analysing, criticising, and reinterpreting various traditional concepts of ideology, including the classical Marxist concept, he presents an entirely new understanding – ideology is not purely a spiritual activity or an existence of ideas, but a material existence. Ideology always exists within institutions, particularly within the state or state apparatus, and becomes an indispensable structural component that enables the operation of the

state apparatus.

XIV.

In Althusser's theoretical framework, the relationship between ideology and economic production is not a dualistic division. On the contrary, it is argued that economic production and ideology are not completely detached from each other. This differs from various historical interpretations of ideology. Althusser not only denies the spirituality of ideology but also challenges the view that ideology is part of the superstructure. Ideologies are embedded in all the activities of the state. He provides a famous metaphor for this: If we consider the state and society as an edifice, ideology is the cement that holds them together. No corner, layer, or space in this edifice can exist without cement. Similarly, ideology permeates every part of the state's edifice, including the practical activities of the people within it. It even penetrates the relationship between economic practice and political practice.

Althusser can help us view the reform from a fresher perspective than the classical Marxist dichotomy of superstructure and economic base. Returning to the question of large-scale infrastructure, the question remains as to why the state, and not private capital, undertook these investments. The immediate answer is that private capital is only interested in investment in return for a profit. However, hidden behind this practical response is the notion of *homo economicus* (man as an economic and rational being). This, in turn, rests on an entire system of knowledge, including classical economics, sociology, and modern philosophy – a system that is unambiguously ideological.

When Mao proposed the economic framework of New Democracy, he advocated for the coexistence and development of five types of ownership systems. These ownership systems represent distinct relations of production. In other words, China's reform is taking place within a network formed by five different relations of production. This complexity has been understudied because, in the history of socialist construction, it is rare for different production relations to be so intertwined for such a long time. However, if we adopt Althusser's perspective and apply his theory of the reproduction of production relations, we can find a way to explain and think through this complexity.

According to Althusser's theory of the state, socialist China, having established a revolutionary government with control over the state ideological apparatuses, naturally uses these to ensure the reproduction of socialist relations of production. However, since China's economic policies allow for the coexistence of different forms of ownership, it is only natural that these forms will also engage in the reproduction of certain production relations. At the same time, these respective reproductions of production relations will inevitably compete with each other. This competition serves two functions: first, it stimulates the economy, creating new opportunities for development, dynamism, and structural transformation; second, it also makes use of various state mechanisms, excluding the political apparatus (which is firmly controlled by the socialist state), to achieve its reproduction. We can raise the following question: Is this multi-layered, multi-spatial, and multi-directional reproduction an essential reason for the complexity of economic development in the reform process? And is it also an important reason for the existence of various opposing and conflicting ideological and knowledge systems within the current reform process?

The difficulty in understanding contemporary Chinese socialism often stems from an insufficient understanding of the complexity of the current reforms and the experimental nature of the socialist movement. However, China's reform proves that confronting these complexities and recognising them within

the historical development of Marxist theory is needed to navigate the complex realities of the ‘great changes unseen in a century’, thereby opening new possibilities for achieving socialism.³⁴ China’s reform is certainly not a purely economic reform, but an unprecedented series of experiments in the history of the socialist movement.

Notes

¹ This article is based on a speech by the author at an academic seminar titled ‘The “Two Movements” of the 1980s and the Socialist Issues in Contemporary China’, hosted by *Beijing Cultural Review* (*Wenhua Zongheng*) on 16 March 2024.

² For more on the Paris Commune, read: Karl Marx, V.I. Lenin, Bertolt Brecht, Tings Chak and Vijay Prashad, *Paris Commune 150* (LeftWord Books, 2021).

³ Karl Marx, ‘Resolutions of the Meeting Held to Celebrate the Anniversary of the Paris Commune’, in *MECW Vol. 23* (1872).

⁴ Otto Bauer, *The Austrian Revolution* (Haymarket Books, 2021).

⁵ V.I. Lenin, ‘On Cooperation’, in *Collected Works Vol. 33* (Progress Publishers, 1965).

⁶ V.I. Lenin, ‘The Tax in Kind’, in *Collected Works Vol. 32* (Progress Publishers, 1965).

⁷ V.I. Lenin, ‘Eleventh Congress of the Russian Communist Party (Bolshevik)’, in *Collected Works Vol. 33* (Progress Publishers, 1965).

⁸ *Smena Vekh* was a journal published by Russian émigrés who were formerly loyal to the conservative White movement in the Russian Civil War. Led by N.V. Ustrialov, this tendency later viewed the Bolsheviks as an expression of Russian national will. See: Yu Pushchaev, ‘The Smenovekhovtsy Movement as the First Historical Attempt to Reconcile the Reds and the Whites: Achievements and Failures’, *Orthodoxia* (2023): 246–265.

⁹ *Prodraverstka* refers to the policy of requisitioning grain from the peasantry at a fixed price, which the Bolsheviks adopted as a measure of war communism. See: Silvana Malle, *The Economic Organization of War Communism 1918–1921* (Cambridge University Press, 1985).

¹⁰ V.I. Lenin, ‘Fourth Anniversary of the October Revolution’, in *Collected Works Vol. 33* (Progress Publishers, 1965).

¹¹ V.I. Lenin, ‘Seventh Moscow Gubernia Conference of the Russian Communist Party’, in *Collected Works Vol. 33* (Progress Publishers, 1965).

¹² Mao Zedong, 'Report to the Second Plenary Session of the Seventh Central Committee of the Communist Party of China', in *Selected Works of Mao Tse-tung Vol. IV* (Foreign Language Press, 1961).

¹³ Zhang Wentian (1900–1976) was a CPC leader and theorist born in Nanhui (now part of Shanghai). He was a veteran of the Long March and served in various leadership roles including as general secretary of the CPC, China's vice minister of foreign affairs, and principal of the Academy of Marxism and Leninism. For more of his work, read: Zhang Wentian, *Selected Works of Zhang Wentian* [张闻天选集] (People's Publishing House, 1985).

¹⁴ Liu Shaoqi (1898–1969) was a leading CPC theorist and statesman born in Ningxiang, Hunan Province. He played a leading role in the Jiangxi Soviet and the Long March and later served as the President of the People's Republic of China and Chairman of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress.

¹⁵ Chen Yun (1905–1995) was a CPC leader who played a key role in shaping China's economic policies under the leadership of both Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping. Born in Qingpu (now part of Shanghai), he served as head of China's Central Financial and Economic Commission. For more of his work, read: Chen Yun, *Selected Works of Chen Yun Volume III (1956–1994)* (Foreign Language Press, 1999), 13–26.

¹⁶ The Institute of Party History and Literature of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, *Chronicle of the People's Republic of China (October 1949–September 2019)* (Cengage Learning Asia, 2020), 42–244.

¹⁷ Mao Zedong, 'Speech at Cheng-chow', Marxist Internet Archive, 2004, https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-8/mswv8_27.htm.

¹⁸ Mao Zedong, *A Critique of Soviet Economics* (Monthly Review Press, 1977).

¹⁹ 'Chapter 4 Article 20', in *Draft Regulations Concerning the Rural People's Communes* (1962) <http://www.reformdata.org/1962/0927/6032.shtml>.

²⁰ Gerald W. Berkley, 'The Canton Peasant Movement Training Institute', *Modern China* 1, no. 2 (1975): 161–179 <https://doi.org/10.1177/009770047500100203>.

²¹ Mao Zedong, 'Preface to the Peasant Issue Series', in *Long Live Mao Zedong Thought* (1968); Mao Zedong, 'On New Democracy', in *Selected Works of Mao Tse-tung: Vol. II* (Foreign Language Press).

²² Deng Xiaoping, *Selected Works of Deng Xiaoping Vol. 3* (People's Publishing House, 1993), 130–133.

²³ Party Literature Research Centre of the CPC Central Committee ed., *A Chronology of Deng Xiaoping (1975–1997) (Volume II)* (Central Party Literature Press, 2004), 1094.

²⁴ In the Chinese context, the term involution refers to fierce internal competition brought about by the

market economy.

²⁵ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* (Penguin Classics, 2002).

²⁶ The World Factbook 2024 (Central Intelligence Agency, 2024).

²⁷ This may have been true when the author wrote this article. However, as of 2024, China has 45,000 kilometres of HSR while the US has 735 kilometres.

²⁸ Joe Sommerland, *How Many Train Derailments Have There Been in the US in 2023?*, Independent, 6 March 2023, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/train-derailments-per-year-usa-b2294966.html>.

²⁹ National Plan of Integrated Airport Systems (NPIAS), US Department of Transportation Federal Aviation Administration, 2018, https://www.faa.gov/sites/faa.gov/files/airports/planning_capacity/npas/current/NPIAS-Report-2019-2023-Narrative.pdf.

³⁰ American Society of Civil Engineers, *Bridging the Gap*, May 2024, <https://bridgingthegap.infrastructurereportcard.org/>.

³¹ *Li* (里) is a traditional unit of measuring distance in China. One *li* is roughly five hundred metres.

³² At the 19th Congress of the CPC in 2017, 'Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era' was adopted as a guiding ideology and written into the CPC constitution. This slogan reaffirmed the goal of achieving socialist modernisation and national rejuvenation.

³³ Louis Althusser, *On the Reproduction of Capitalism: Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses* (Verso, 2014).

³⁴ The phrase 'great changes unseen in a century' is frequently used by President Xi Jinping and the CPC to refer to shifts in the centre of gravity of global economic and political power.



Li Tuo

Li Tuo (李陀) is a writer and literary critic. He has written screenplays and authored numerous essays on Chinese literature, cinema, and art. His works have won major awards, including the first National Short Story Award (1978) for 'I Hope You Hear This Song' 愿你听到这支歌 and the Ministry of Culture Best Film Awards for *Li Siguang* 李四光 (1979) and *Sha Ou* 沙鸥 (1981), which he co-wrote. Li has also edited several major Chinese literature anthologies, including *Beijing Literature* in the 1980s, and *Shijie* (Horizons) in the 1990s-2000s. He is currently the editor of *Jintian* (Today).