

Contemporary "Socialism" and the Chinese Communist Party

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In the context of political changes in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, the durability of socialism in China is in some ways surprising. By the late 1980s it might have appeared that socialism was under greater threat in China than in Europe. Economic reforms had provided grounds for scepticism concerning the commitment to socialism among the Chinese leadership, with the remarkable encouragement of practices which would have been unimaginable a very few years before. There was also ample evidence of considerable popular cynicism, and even official sources had admitted to a "crisis of faith", which was reflected in dissenting political behaviour and occasional direct challenges to the regime. Whether by revolution or peaceful evolution, by mid-1989 the demise of socialism in China seemed likely.

There are, of course, many possible explanations of why that apparent likelihood has not (yet) been realized - the regime's indigenous rather than imposed origins, willingness to resort to coercion, cultural resistance to political disorder, and so on. My focus in this paper, however, is not on those explanations but on an underlying issue confronting discussions of the demise of socialism. That is the interpretation of socialism itself, and specifically the implications of the official Chinese interpretation. Here again an immediate comparison with other experiences suggests itself. European comrades had grounds for being more confident in their appeals to socialism, since they had generally been much more consistent in interpretation and assertion of the values of socialism. In the Soviet Union, for example, "developed socialism" was presented as a new concept in the late 1960s,¹ but did not suggest a radical break in the understanding of the basic character of the Soviet system. There may then have followed different emphases in

invocation of "developed socialism", corresponding to the changes in the claimed benefits of the system.² Nevertheless, there was a generally-accepted orthodoxy concerning the character of socialism, derived from the notion of a socialist system articulated by Stalin in 1936,³ which persisted over a long period, with changes appearing as adaptations according to a gradually developing environment.

Such consistency has not applied in the Chinese case. While the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has, to a large extent, adopted an approach similar to that of the European parties, it has also flirted with significant departures in its interpretation of socialism, especially under Mao Zedong's interventions. The official formulations of recent years have to be seen against that background of mutability.

Socialism under Mao

Until the mid-1950s the CCP accepted the straightforward conception of socialism which it inherited directly from the Soviet Union. The process of "socialist transformation" involved emulation of the socialist system, as already established in the Soviet Union, and, following Stalin, defined primarily according to replacement of private ownership of the means of production by collective and state ownership. Other characteristics of the socialist system were also to be adopted - including, most importantly, "Party leadership", which underlay the CCP's penetration of other organizations and its centrality to all political processes. There were disagreements within the Party over the policies appropriate for socialist transformation, but these were within the general framework of agreed understanding of socialism as a clearly-defined model. That agreed understanding was, however, to be eroded in two stages. First, during the second half of the 1950s some parts of the Party began to assert greater flexibility in interpretation of "socialist system". And then, by the 1960s there emerged views which challenged the very notion of a socialist system.⁴

New formulations during the second half of the 1950s did not imply a fundamental rejection of the former understanding of

socialism, as the conception of a "socialist system" remained. But that system was now to be understood as a more generalized, looser model, in contrast to the specific and restrictive model which had applied when looking to the Soviet Union. Hence, socialism could still be identified in terms of general characteristics, such as the forms of ownership, but the concept could be severed from particular practices in other countries recognized as "socialist". Accordingly, CCP sources began to suggest means of socialist transformation which departed from Soviet precedent. The most important area of novelty was in the notion of progress and development, as Soviet-style reliance on centralized planning and incremental change was challenged by arguments emphasizing the fluidity of social forces, so that socialism would advance dramatically by "leaps" and the creativity generated through "contradictions among the people". This approach could strike powerful chords in the CCP, evoking themes of heroic mass endeavour and sacrifice for common benefit which were well-entrenched Party myths (whether or not they were valid understandings of the anti-Japanese and Liberation struggles). The looser notion of socialism also corresponded to pressures within the CCP for more innovative policies, better suited to Chinese circumstances and overcoming some of the perceived deficiencies of a foreign model. Although not so labelled, this process might be seen as the "Sinification of socialism" comparable to the "Sinification of Marxism" of the early 1940s. It was thus a precursor of the notion of "socialism with Chinese characteristics" to emerge some three decades later.

A far bleaker vision of socialist prospects prevailed in the 1960s, eventually to be termed the "theory of continuous revolution". The key themes became the persistence of "class struggle" throughout the process of socialist transition and the dangers of revolutionary retrogression or "restoration of capitalism". This "theory" was certainly not presented coherently. It was never clear whether "class struggle" was a vestige of pre-1949 society, or a product of privilege and power in the new society, or constantly generated from a material basis in the persistence of capitalist relations of production within "socialism". The conception of socialism was a major casualty of such confusion. Although Cultural Revolution discussions still usually assumed positive identification of China as socialist, there

was also a persistent underlying theme which cast doubt on the notion of a socialist system. This went beyond the expressed fears that socialism was endangered because of the machination of class enemies. There were also suggestions that a system such as China's could not be identified as "socialist" in a straightforward manner, because it contained contradictory elements which formed a basis for retrogression. To take the most important example, the understanding of socialism in terms of forms of ownership usually persisted. But there were also claims that, within state or collective ownership, relations characteristic of the capitalist mode of production continued. The simple identification of a socialist system was thus implicitly undermined, even if still explicitly affirmed. A similar contradiction applied to another principal characteristic of a socialist system, the operation of "Party leadership". The various different analyses all pointed to the Communist Party itself as the main arena of class struggle and, hence, as posing the main danger of revolutionary reversal. This suggested that "Party leadership" could no longer be understood simply as a necessary and unchallengeable characteristic of the "socialist system". And so the Cultural Revolution confused the understanding of socialism. While socialism was still usually understood as a model positively identified with the Chinese system, as it had been in earlier periods, there were also contradictory tendencies which implicitly denied that identification.

Post-Mao Socialism

Within a few years after 1976 the post-Mao leadership moved to counter the ideological confusion associated with the "theory of continuous revolution". In 1978 the Central Committee rejected the supposed pervasiveness and centrality of class struggle in socialist society, and by 1981 the "theory" itself was directly repudiated. That cleared the ground for a replacement formulation of the official conception of socialism. The phrase "socialism with Chinese characteristics" was selected as an affirmation that China does have a socialist system, without any of the ambiguities raised during the

Cultural Revolution. The reference to "Chinese" is, of course, partly a nationalist appeal, but also provides for flexibility in the interpretation of socialism. As in the latter half of the 1950s, the socialist system is presented as a rather loose model, including some general characteristics and allowing wide scope for adaptations which are justified as meeting particular Chinese circumstances. Official sources recognize this parallel, pointing to the efforts to move away from Soviet-style socialism after 1956. But while Mao and other Party leaders became aware of the need to adapt to Chinese conditions, they failed to develop the type of systematic understanding of socialism that they had achieved in the earlier stage of "democratic revolution". Deng Xiaoping is said to have been able to build upon the earlier experiences of innovation in socialist construction while transcending their limitations of understanding. Hence, "socialism with Chinese characteristics" is presented as continuous with earlier Party efforts but also as a new scientific concept which is Deng's personal creation.⁵

There have been two main trends in the progressive development of this formulation since the late 1970s. The first is that socialism has been interpreted in economic terms. Reference to "Chinese characteristics" has been used largely in support of programmes of economic reform, to the extent that "socialism" has been subsumed within standards of economic development understood as growth of production. That has contributed greatly to the other trend, which has been that even the looser understanding of defining characteristics of the socialist system has been challenged by recent practices sanctioned or encouraged by the CCP. But a key exception has been that aspects of present political arrangements are asserted as necessary parts of the "socialist political system". Hence, while these two trends are mutually reinforcing, and together have reduced the substantial content of "socialism" in China, they are also in some ways contradictory - with the contradiction focussed on implications for the political role of the CCP.

The trend towards the economic interpretation of socialism has been evident throughout the reform period. In early 1979, immediately after the Third Plenum and the "shift in focus" to modernization, there was a decided tendency to reduce all aspects of social policy to economic productivity. This was later qualified,

by greater emphasis on "*socialist* modernisation", the need for "socialist spiritual civilisation", and so on. Nevertheless, the economic reduction of socialism persisted, and was again reinforced at the CCP 13th National Congress in 1987 by the so-called "theory of the initial stage of socialism" presented by Zhao Ziyang.⁶

The "theory" proceeded from the assertion that China has a socialist system. But that system is in an "initial stage", which is "the specific stage China must necessarily go through in building socialism under conditions of backward productive forces and an undeveloped commodity economy." While some limited class struggle remains, the "principal contradiction" becomes that "between the people's daily increasing material and cultural needs and backward social production." Resolution of that contradiction requires expansion of the commodity economy, higher labour productivity, modernization, and reforming "parts of the relations of production and of the superstructure which are unsuitable for development of the productive forces."⁷ The "initial stage" will end when present backwardness is overcome. Hence, the whole character of "socialism" in China is understood in terms of levels of economic development.

The main use of this "theory" is obviously justification or rationalization of economic policies and practices which are seen as desirable for increasing productivity. Whatever facilitates growth of the "productive forces" can be presented as consistent with resolution of the current principal contradiction. Perhaps the best example is justification of growing inequalities, on the grounds of stimulation of growth. The Party's new orthodoxy effectively denies the application of standards derived from what have usually been seen as "socialist" goals or values. Not only can these be dismissed as not bearing upon the "principal contradiction", but contrary practices can be regarded as valuable or legitimate because they are consistent with the requirements of the "initial stage". The most general statement of such flexibility is that "relations of production and the superstructure" must be changed in order to become consistent with economic growth. That bears some similarity to the notion of "cultural lag" of Cultural Revolution vintage, which saw the need to eradicate the "bourgeois superstructure" continuing to impede

and threaten the "socialist economic base". The main difference now, though, is that the impediments are often what formerly would have been regarded as "socialist" standards, while the "economic base" is seen narrowly in terms of economic results.

In other words, the formulation of the characteristics of the "initial stage" tends to render vacuous parts of the assertion that China has already established a socialist system. That system is defined officially in terms of an economic structure based on public ownership of the means of production, a political structure of "people's democratic dictatorship", and the affirmation of Marxist-Leninist ideological guidance. But the "initial stage" conception of socialism suggests that the economic structure dimension of the system should be adaptable according to requirements of economic growth. And that process has been evident throughout the reform period. There may be those within the CCP who continue to insist on principles such as the priority of "public ownership" and a prominent role for planning. But they have rather little basis for that position according to the Party's own interpretation of socialism.

The ideological dimension of the system is also very fragile. That is most evident in much intellectual discourse, in which Marxism-Leninism is treated as irrelevant and has been displaced by a range of competing ideological orientations. More broadly, the former dominance of official ideological positions has greatly declined since the late 1970s. Although the CCP has waged periodical ideological campaigns and attempted to reinforce mechanisms of indoctrination, those efforts have confronted the proliferation of sources of information available to most of the Chinese people, the availability of competing views, and the widespread cynicism generated by the gap between official pronouncements and practice. Such tendencies are again reinforced by the CCP's interpretation of socialism. The priority accorded to economic growth overwhelms assertions of the desirability of "socialist spiritual civilisation". An insistence on superstructural changes compatible with the growth of productive forces justifies modifying or abandoning inconvenient aspects of Marxist-Leninist "guidance". The result has been inconsistency in the official position, especially when people are encouraged to maintain values contrary to actions expected in economic life, which inevitably fosters further cynicism.

Much the same sort of analysis could also apply to the political dimensions of the alleged "socialist system", which might also be thought to require modification to remove incompatibility with development of productive forces. Certainly, arguments for political reform routinely emphasize the need for facilitating economic reform. But here the logic of the "initial stage" formulation has not been followed. Much more striking has been the Party's unwillingness to countenance some forms of change in political structures. In contrast to the treatment of other supposed defining characteristics, therefore, the general pressure for subordination to economic growth has been resisted. In particular, the dominance of the CCP itself has been strongly affirmed, so that "Party leadership" has come to be seen as the key to identification of a socialist system. The best illustration of that position was, of course, the political suppression of 1989. The Central authorities demonstrated clearly a refusal to countenance any form of political activity asserting autonomy from CCP control. The suppression was explained as defence of socialism, which should be understood as protecting the role of the CCP as the single most important identified characteristic of the socialist system.

Such assertion of the need for "Party leadership" is, however, a response to the weakness of the Party's political position rather than a sign of confidence. The weakness results from both the economic interpretation of socialism and the lack of other substantial content in the understanding of "socialist system". Emphasis on economic growth as the overarching objective according to which all else must be measured implicitly challenges the Party's political dominance. This can be seen as a matter of areas of competence. The principal justification of "Party leadership" has always been its claimed ability to guide processes of social transformation consistent with socialist objectives. That claim now appears empty. There are organizations other than the Party, and people other than Party members and cadres, more directly concerned with and competent in realizing the objectives of economic growth which are presented as central to "socialism". Hence, alternative grounds for leadership are suggested by the Party's own interpretations.

Insistence that the dominant role of the Party is essential to the socialist system has the comforting aura of familiarity, as it is

consistent with the understanding of a socialist system which has long prevailed in other countries and, with the limited exception of the Cultural Revolution, in China itself. But in former times the notion of socialist system has always had much more substantial content. There were many characteristics which could be positively identified as components of the system. Under the CCP's current economic interpretation most such characteristics have been, at the very least, considerably attenuated. The Party's political dominance, therefore, does not now appear as justified in terms of facilitating or protecting or supporting other parts of the system. On the contrary, as the only clearly identifiable characteristic of the system, claims for Party leadership now appear as nothing more than self-serving assertion, as the Party seeking to protect its position for its own sake and without more general justification.

Conclusion

Hence, the main trends in the interpretation of socialism, while generally mutually reinforcing, are also contradictory, with the assertion of CCP dominance at the same time as the basis for that dominance is undermined. One motivation in the post-Mao reformulation of "socialism" was to overcome the ideological confusion which impinged directly upon the justification of the Party's role. The "continuous revolution" approach had undermined the former confident assertions of "Party leadership", and had supported the mass attacks upon, and consequent weakening of, the Party during the Cultural Revolution. The denial of class struggle and the stress on economic growth had been partially intended to overcome such difficulties. But the ironical result has been that the weakening of the Party has now been extended.

One response to that has been a more "technocratic" orientation of the Party in order to assert its credentials for fostering modernisation. This has been reflected in the treatment of personnel issues, with emphasis on recruitment or cooptation of people with higher levels of expertise, especially in responsible positions within Party organizations. There have also emerged new general ar-

guments which might be adapted as justification of Party dominance within the present system - such as the theories of "new conservatism" and "neoauthoritarianism".⁸ Such arguments are interesting because they are outside the framework of Marxism-Leninism. In particular, arguments for "neo-authoritarianism" drew on the experiences of non-socialist systems (such as the "Four Small Dragons"), cited non-Marxist-Leninist sources (including American and Western European academics) and often were framed in terms of the need to remove the constraints of what used to be regarded as "socialist" economic principles. They therefore demonstrate how far the significance of "socialism" has diminished, at least in these intellectual circles (who often have links to major CCP figures), to the extent that it has become irrelevant except as an obstacle to be overcome. The implications for the CCP are thus two-edged. Arguments for the need to maintain authoritarian controls may be thought useful to bolster the present system of Party dominance, but they provide no intrinsic justification of the Party specifically performing this role. Indeed, to the extent that the CCP maintains any residual commitment to "socialism", other sources of "neo-authoritarianism" may be regarded as more effective.

Official responses to events of mid-1989 also reveal sensitivity to effects of the treatment of "socialism" over the preceding decade. Zhao Ziyang was accused of saying that no-one can state clearly what the socialist road is, and that of the four cardinal principles it was necessary to pay attention only to the principle of Party leadership.⁹ As an example of the common tactic of blaming a disgraced individual for collective faults, such criticism seems to be part of a general recognition of the need to give greater substance to the notion of socialism. Official sources have re-emphasized old themes, such as the necessary victory of socialism as a supposed law of social development (according to which the recent events in Europe are only a temporary setback). And that is reinforced by the claim that the past century of Chinese history proves that only socialism could have and, therefore, can "save" China, seeking to appeal to nationalist sentiment by presenting socialism and patriotism as essentially equivalent. Similarly, the official treatment of human rights issues asserts that socialism has provided the necessary basis for the realization of genuine human rights in China.

Another theme is that only socialism can "develop" China - which, again, has been hailed as a "new thesis" advanced by Deng Xiaoping.¹⁰ It is claimed that socialism has been necessary to avoid Chinese dependence on world capitalism, and also to prevent drawbacks of internal growth such as class polarization. This type of argument does suggest a content for socialism apart from reduction to economic growth. That was also evident in the "twelve principles for building socialism with Chinese characteristics" formulated by the 7th Plenum of the 13th Central Committee at the end of 1990. As Jiang Zemin explained in discussing these principles, the economic, political and cultural dimensions of socialism with Chinese characteristics were "an organically unified, inseparable whole".¹¹

Nevertheless, Jiang quickly added that economic construction had to remain the centre, to which all else was subordinated. The attempts to spell out objectives of social transformation, if only in very generalized and rhetorical terms, still necessarily confront the entrenched emphasis on economic growth almost irrespective of social consequences. That confrontation has produced further tensions in the Party leadership, especially in the wake of events in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. One response has been to revive warnings about the dangers to socialism in China. In the terms of the "initial stage" formulation, there has been a tendency to put greater emphasis on the necessary defining characteristics of a "socialist system". That has reinforced the insistence on the Party's political dominance, the decline in which has been seen as the chief cause for the downfall of socialist regimes. But there have also been more general warnings about the dangers of "peaceful evolution", and questions as to whether Chinese reforms have "practised socialism or capitalism". This suggests a challenge to the economic interpretation of socialism - a challenge which has been met recently by condemnation of a resurgence of "leftism" and a reaffirmation of "one centre (economic construction)". While all CCP authorities may support the generalized affirmations of the historical necessity and progressive character of socialism, there are many grounds for conflict over the more precise contents of "socialism with Chinese characteristics."

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NOTES

- 1 Alfred B. Evans, Jr., "Developed Socialism in Soviet Ideology," *Soviet Studies*, Vol. XXIX, No. 3 (July 1977), pp. 409-28.
- 2 Alfred B. Evans, Jr., "The Decline of Developed Socialism? Some Trends in Recent Soviet Ideology," *Soviet Studies*, Vol. XXXVIII, No. 1 (January 1986), pp. 1-23.
- 3 J. Stalin, "On the Draft Constitution of the U.S.S.R.," in *Problems of Leninism* (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1945).
- 4 The following is derived partly from G. Young and D. Woodward, "From Contradictions Among the People to Class Struggle: The Theories of Uninterrupted Revolution and Continuous Revolution," *Asian Survey*, Vol. XVIII, No. 9 (September 1978), pp. 912-933; and G. Young, "Mao Zedong and the Class Struggle in Socialist Society," *The Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs*, No. 16 (July 1986), pp. 41-80.
- 5 Li Junru, "Deng Xiaoping's 'Theory of Socialism With Chinese Characteristics'," *Jiefang Ribao*, June 5, 1991, in *Summary of World Broadcast (SWB)*, Part III, The Far East, 1098/ B2/1-4.
- 6 Zhao Ziyang, "Advance Along the Road of Socialism With Chinese Characteristics," *Hongqi*, No. 21, 1987 (translated in *Beijing Review*, No. 45, 1987). Although it is inevitably asserted that Deng Xiaoping was responsible for overseeing the development of this "theory", many have noted its indebtedness to other Chinese sources, most notably Su Shaozhi. For an analysis of Su, which puts this particular aspect in the general context of development of his ideas, see Søren Clausen, "Modernization of Marxism' in China - the Case of Su Shaozhi" (a paper presented at the "Symposium on Modernization and Cultural Change in China", Finland, June 1989).
- 7 *Hongqi*, No. 21, 1987, pp. 6-7.
- 8 Gu Xin and Davis Kelly, "New Conservatism: Ideological Program of the 'New Elite'," (a paper presented at the Conference: Towards the Year 2000: Socio-Economic Trends & Consequences in China, Perth, Western Australia, January 1992); Barry Sautman, "Sirens of the Strongman: Neo-Authoritarianism in Recent Chinese Political Thought," *The China Quarterly*, No. 129 (March 1992), pp. 72-102.
- 9 Xu Zhengfan, "Who Says Socialism Cannot be Clearly Explained?," *Renmin Ribao*, 30 July 1990 in SWB, Part III, The Far East, 836/B2/1.
- 10 *Renmin Ribao* Editorial, 22 July 1989 in SWB, Part III, The Far East, 518/B2/1.
- 11 Jiang Zemin, "Speech at Meeting Celebrating the 70th Anniversary of the Founding of the Chinese Communist Party," *Renmin Ribao*, 2 July 1991, p. 2.