

Discussion on the Origin of Chinese Modernization from the Perspective of Classical Marxist Theory

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Abstract: Chinese modernization is socialist modernization with Chinese characteristics under the leadership of the Communist Party of China, and it is the contemporary form of Chinese socialist modernization under the grand historical vision, which has considerable research value. This paper mainly combines the theoretical vision with the historical vision, studies and discusses the origin of Chinese modernization, from China's "Oriental society," a modern prehistoric social form, to modern China stepping on the socialist road under the basic circumstances of world history, and takes the initiative to master the relevant logic of the historical trend. This paper also presents the research and discussion on why it is possible for modern China to realize Chinese modernization, and to solve the problem of the origin of Chinese modernization in theory and historical logic.

Keywords: Marxist theory; Chinese-style modernization; The problem of origin

Online publication: November 23, 2023

1. Introduction

In the contemporary context of socialism with Chinese characteristics for a new era, "Chinese-style modernization," as a new formulation of "socialism with Chinese characteristics under the leadership of the Communist Party of China," is of considerable research value. However, in the current Marxist theoretical circle, scholars have studied more on the "empirical problems" (background, characteristics, etc.) of "Chinese-style modernization," but less on its "original problems" (historical origin, cause, etc.). Based on the first-hand materials of Marx and Engels' classic literature, this paper focuses on the origin of Chinese-style modernization, from the modern prehistoric social form of "Oriental society" in China to the socialist road of modern China under the basic circumstances of world history, and proactively grasps the relevant logic of historical trend. Then, it studies and discusses how it is possible for modern China to realize Chinese modernization, attempts to interpret the historical process and contemporary value of Chinese modernization as the research object by Marxist classical theory, and discusses the hot topics of current research on Chinese modernization, so as to realize the restoration of the historical value and contemporary value of Chinese modernization.

2. The historical origin of China's "Oriental society"

The Oriental society is one of the key topics of Marx's research in his later years, and it is the focus of constructing Marx's complete theoretical vision of world history. From this theoretical perspective, ancient China is a typical example of research, known as a "living fossil," with "the common characteristics of all Eastern movements" ^[1]. Therefore, China is the inevitable focus of Marx's theory of Eastern society, and the study of this theory is conducive to us looking at the overall situation of history and better sorting out the theoretical and historical logic of China's modernization.

2.1. Social structure of the Eastern society

According to the general academic view, Eastern society mainly has two levels of connotation: the first is geographical connotation, which refers to the pan-Asian region with East Asia as the center; the second is the political and economic connotation, which refers to the backward social form of capitalism in prehistoric times, compared with the developed capitalist nations or countries in the West. In Marx's view, the so-called Eastern society should be defined in terms of political and economic connotation, and the definition of this concept focuses on its special public ownership of land, which is typical of the two Asian countries, China and India. Therefore, "Asiatic society" became the typical name to define the Eastern society.

When studying the related categories of Eastern society, Marx made a detailed analysis and discussion of several ancient countries (including ancient China) in a series of documents from the materialist view of history, and studied and analyzed the historical form of Eastern society from three aspects: land ownership, economic structure, and the form of state power. In further research, according to Marx's point of view, public ownership of land, as a typical social and economic structure of Eastern society, is of fundamental significance for the study of the overall history of ancient China. "The foundation of all phenomena in the East is that there is no private ownership of land, which is even a real key to understanding the Oriental heaven" ^[2]. For this reason, Marx conducted an in-depth study of the social organization in the history of Eastern society. He believed that the rural commune was the basic structure of Eastern society, and its basic characteristics were mainly "independent organization, leading a closed-door life." Manifested in the purpose of self-sufficient production and the economic form of direct combination of agriculture and handicraft industry, this ancient economic form is deeply rooted in the commune, making it impossible for new economic forms to develop and reach the degree of disintegrating the rural commune.

The special land ownership and social organization determined the unique social and political form of the Eastern society, that is, the Eastern autocracy. Marx explored the reasons for the formation of this unique political pattern in Eastern society from multiple theoretical dimensions such as economics, politics, and philosophy. He believed that the unique public ownership of land and village community system in Eastern society were the fundamental reasons for the manifestation of the Eastern authoritarian system in political relations. Firstly, public land ownership is the unique economic foundation of Eastern society. In its unique economic and political logic, Eastern countries externalize the dual identities of land owners and sovereigns. This economic logic is expressed as "the fiscal and taxation system with unified land rent and taxation," and "sovereignty is the centralized land ownership throughout the country" ^[3], which is the economic logic of the special political pattern of Eastern society. Engels also clearly pointed out that "the authoritarian system in the East is based on public ownership" ^[4]. Secondly, the village community system in Eastern society constitutes a unique social structure. "These pastoral rural communes, however peaceful and innocuous they may seem, have always been the solid foundation of Eastern despotism" ^[5]. The rural commune, as the basic unit of Eastern society, is different from the previous blood ties. The common possession of land makes people live together.

At the same time, the special way of land possession, which is isolated and dispersed, determines the people's conservative thoughts and behaviors, and makes the endogenous Eastern social and political factors sprout.

2.2. Stability of the social and economic structure as the basic characteristic of the historical phenomenon of Eastern society

Compared with the developed capitalist societies of the West, Eastern society is historically shown as a relatively backward social form in the pre-capitalist stage, and this relative backwardness has concretely shown that the development of Eastern society is based on the stability of Eastern social and economic structure. In the theoretical circle, this historical phenomenon of Eastern society is called the "theory of structural stability." The study of the "theory of structural stability" has been going on for a long time. Herder first laid the basic theoretical foundation. He focused on the study of the stability of the political structure of Eastern society, and believed that the unique land system of "the land does not belong to people, but people belong to the land" made the social structure solid and stable. From Herder's point of view, Mill believes that the rights and property security of individuals in this social environment are actually non-existent. Hegel, on the other hand, described the stability of this social structure in philosophical terms as "history without history."

On this basis, Marx thought that China was like a "mummy kept in a closed coffin," but compared with their political stability, Marx considered this proposition in terms of the economic dimension of Eastern societies. Stability was the characteristic that Marx focused on. Firstly, the stability of the social and economic structure of the East was determined by the self-sufficient natural economy in which agriculture and handicrafts were firmly integrated. The purpose of agricultural production within Eastern society, with the aim of providing raw materials for handicraft industry and self-sufficiency, has created a closed and circular economic pattern in the whole rural communes, which enables "these self-sufficient communes to reproduce themselves in the same form, and when they are accidentally destroyed, and are re-established in the same place and under the same name, 'resulting in' a structure of the basic economic elements of society that remains untouched by storms in the political sphere" ^[6]. Secondly, the "non-existence of private land ownership" in Eastern society is the foundation of the entire social economy. Due to the special form of land public ownership, the state plundered surplus products in the form of land rent, "surplus products belong to this highest unity," ^[7] and few surplus products entered the circulation link, the development of commodity economy was seriously inhibited, and the village community system was firmly controlled by the feudal rulers, and agricultural producers were firmly bound to the land. Forming a special pattern of "the land does not belong to man, but man is attached to the land." These two aspects together determine that the economic development of Oriental society is severely restricted under the special pattern of the dual construction of economy and politics.

In historical context, China, which Marx referred to as the "Eastern society," also had a historical stage of strong national strength and prosperous culture. However, this history was based on the feudal system of the "Eastern society." The characteristics of the "excessively stable" traditional Chinese economic and political structure seriously hindered economic development. However, as the Western bourgeoisie created the world history, China's closed and stable political and economic pattern was gradually broken, and it passively accepted the historical destiny of "the East belongs to the West."

3. China's progress from passive to active in world history

After the bourgeoisie started the world history, modern China was opened to the world by Western powers, and the closed and stable Eastern society passively became a vassal of the bourgeois world system. However, the Chinese nation went through a series of sufferings and changed the unfavorable historical pattern. From a semi-

colonial and semi-feudal society, it experienced the historical determination to “shed one’s head and shed one’s blood,” crossed the “Caving Gorge,” made socialism a reality in Chinese history, and embarked on the road of modernization. In world history, the Chinese nation has changed from passively accepting the fate of history to actively creating a modern history belonging to the Chinese nation.

3.1. Basic circumstances: The transition from history to world history gradually ended China’s historical destiny as an “Oriental society”

The concept of “world history” originated from the historical process of various peoples and countries, and gradually pointed to “integration.” World history, which is now an empirical fact, began in the modern era, the era of capitalism. In his *German Ideology*, Marx characterized this overall historical trend with the “transition from history to world history”^[8], arguing that “world history has not always existed in the past; history as world history is the result.” This is a category of history that characterizes a certain historical trend.

The history of mankind first obtained its corresponding origin in several ancient nations, which showed that each nation acquired its own mode of production in its own living environment. Due to the restrictions of geographical conditions, there was little communication among various nations, and the circle of human civilization remained closed and isolated from each other for a long time, even though they had certain changes and developments. However, they were all completed on the premise of mutual isolation and mutual non-interference. At this time, people’s communication was not common, and it was in the pre-historical stage of world history. History will turn into world history only when certain historical conditions are met. This historical condition is the state of general intercourse on the basis of relatively advanced development of the productive forces, formed specifically by the establishment of large capitalist industry, represented by the formation of large industry, the socialization of production, and the expansion of demand, which drives the bourgeoisie to run around the world and objectively form a world economic situation. “Modern society is a capitalist society that exists in all civilized countries”^[9]. “The bourgeoisie, by opening up the world market, has made production and consumption worldwide in all countries”^[10]. In this way, capitalist socialized mass production “for the first time created world history, because it made every civilized country and every individual in those countries dependent on the world as a whole for the satisfaction of their needs, and because it abolished the former natural isolation of nations”^[11].

The historical destiny of China is basically the same as what Marx said: due to the transformation of history into world history, the traditional social, economic, and political pattern of the East began to disintegrate, that is, the historical destiny of China as an Eastern society began to end. However, this historical process did not happen overnight. According to contemporary scholar Yang Geng, the reality of China as an Oriental society in world history is represented by the unity of opposites between China’s “vitality” and “disintegration process” under the world history led by the bourgeoisie^[12]. Marx discussed the “vitality” of old China under the world history led by the bourgeoisie and its reasons, that is, “the Chinese social and economic structure that depended on the combination of small agriculture and family industry”^[13]. This disintegration took a long time, “for there was no assistance from direct political power.” The great economy and the saving of time, resulting from the direct union of agriculture and crafts, have made the most stubborn resistance to the products of large industry”^[14]. But at the same time, the British cannon “forced the Chinese Empire into contact with the earthly world,” leaving Chinese society in the midst of “disintegration”^[15].

Complete isolation from the outside world had been the primary condition for the preservation of the old China, and when this isolation was broken by violence through the British, a process of disintegration inevitably followed.

3.2. Historical logic: Moving towards socialism in world history

In modern China's world history, the "Oriental society" disintegrated in the actual situation and historical fate, and there appeared a "strange" historical phenomenon, it is this historical phenomenon that makes China grasp the historical initiative in the world history, from passive to active. That is, the Chinese people historically chose the road of socialism. At that time, China was forcibly dragged into the track of world history by the Western capitalist countries, resulting in the disintegration of the "Eastern society," which was manifested as "passive" in historical development. It was only by moving towards socialism that it became possible to turn from passive to active. According to the overall domestic and international situation of China at that time, the theoretical circle believed that the possibility of this historical phenomenon was constructed under the dual factors of productive forces in modern China and the internal contradictions of globalized capitalism.

The internal factor includes the duality of the productive forces in modern China. Under the basic circumstances of world history, the economic performance of modern China's productive forces is the coexistence of advanced and backward, forming a structural mode of "grinding shoulder to back" which influences and restricts each other. According to the records of relevant economic data at that time, the small-scale peasant economy (individual agricultural and handicraft economic form) accounted for about 90%, which belonged to the backward productive force category "staying in ancient times." Modern industry accounted for about 10%, which was relatively concentrated and controlled the economic lifeline of the country. It was the most advanced productive force in China at that time. It not only laid the material foundation for the development of capitalist production relations in China, but also provided the material premise for the establishment of socialist production relations in China. Therefore, the possibility of China's future development becoming a reality, to a large extent depends on the adjustment of China's relations with the world in the course of world history.

The external factor includes the globalization of the internal contradictions of the capitalist mode of production. In the 1920s and 1930s, capitalist countries in Europe and the United States experienced frequent economic crises and serious intensification of social contradictions. "Countries with more developed industries showed countries with less developed industries only a picture of the future of the latter" ^[16]. At the same time, the October Revolution in Russia made scientific socialism move from theory to reality and profoundly changed the history. The countries to be liberated echoed the signal of the socialist revolution in the course of world history, and various nationalities, states, and other political entities formed a historical whole in different regions, violently impacting the historical capitalist world system, and forming the "era of the world socialist movement." China is in the midst of this historical whole, becoming part of the world socialist movement.

These two factors had a realistic and historical impact on China at that time. Various international and domestic historical conditions were intertwined and converged in the historical inevitability of forming the new democratic revolution and the socialist revolution in China.

4. The reason it is possible for Contemporary China to achieve modernization: The philosophical logic of the superiority of the socialist system

China's embarking on the road of socialism is not the ultimate goal of modernization, but the beginning of traditional China's integration with the modern world at the level of social formation, and there is still a long way to go before comprehensive modernization. The realization of modernization in the full sense lies in China's existing socialist system itself, and the superiority of the socialist system represents a historical trend of positive guidance for China's modernization.

4.1. Historical logic: Social development is a process in which the advanced productive forces continue to replace the backward productive forces

Fundamentally, the reason China's socialist development is at the forefront of the times is that China's social system has followed such a fundamental logical direction: social development is a process in which the advanced productive forces continue to replace the backward productive forces. The development of advanced productive forces is precisely the fundamental requirement of this logical direction in China's socialist practice. On the one hand, the productive forces determine the relations of production, which is the underlying logic for examining the superiority of the social system. The stage of development of a society and the characteristics of its social relations are fundamentally determined by the state of the productive forces. "No social formation can perish until all the productive forces it can contain have been brought into full play, and new and higher relations of production never appear until the material conditions of their existence have matured in the womb of the old society" ^[17]. In this historical logic, socialism, as a new productive force, is based on the historical necessity of the development of capitalist productive forces. This shows that socialism can accommodate the productive forces at a higher level of development than the capitalist productive forces, that the socialist system should logically be superior to the capitalist system, and that it represents the way forward for the more advanced productive forces. On the other hand, productive forces are an important category for considering the all-round development of people and society. All social development manifests multiple goals, such as improving material living standards, social and political justice, and integrity. These goals show the expression of the development degree of productive forces in social relations, represent the new direction of productive forces, and are the proper meaning of "vigorously developing productive forces." If the productive forces do not develop substantially, "there will only be the generalization of poverty, extreme poverty." In the case of extreme poverty, the struggle for necessities must be restarted, and all the old and dirty things will be revived. The practical history of contemporary China has proved that only "focusing on economic construction and vigorously developing productive forces" is the fundamental task ^[18]. Only by completing the building of a moderately prosperous society and a great modern socialist country in an all-round way can social progress in its true sense be realized.

4.2. Practical logic: The scientific dimension of developing the advanced productive forces and the value dimension of developing the interests of the people

The unprecedented historical achievement of the unified socialist system lies in its attention to the interests of the all-round development of the people, which is mainly manifested in the adjustment of the relationship between social development and human activities. The law of social development shows that the development of productive forces fundamentally determines the overall process of social development, while the development of advanced productive forces fundamentally determines the trend of social development. At the same time, the law of social development is formed in people's practical activities, and the people have created history and are the real subjects of history. The principle that productive forces determine the relations of production is the philosophical basis for the high unity of the two scales.

"Everything that people strive for is related to their own interests" ^[19]. In the theoretical vision of scientific socialism, the masses of the people are the actual subject of history-making activity, which is the development of productive forces, that is, the development of productive forces by the masses in accordance with their own material interests. In the context of the socialist system, the productive forces, relations of production, and material interests are united in the great practice of the masses, and people's material life forms the natural basis of material interests. Material interests are the direct material expression of the development of productive forces, and the productive forces are the prerequisite for the existence of material interests. The productive

forces determine the relations of production, and the relations of production are the social expression of the material interests, and at the same time restrict the material interests and object to the social nature of the material interests. Therefore, the development of advanced productive forces and the development of the interests of the people are two different aspects of the same contradiction in the overall institutional framework, and they are unified in opposition to each other, forming the practical requirements of a high degree of unity between the two. Therefore, under the new historical background, the development of productive forces must take the development and realization of the fundamental interests of the people as the starting point and the ultimate goal.

The Communist Party of China (CPC) is the subject of practice with a high degree of unity in the two dimensions. “The reason why our Party has won the support of the people is that in every historical period of revolution, construction, and reform, our Party has always represented the development requirements of China’s advanced productive forces, the direction of China’s advanced culture, and the fundamental interests of the overwhelming majority of the Chinese people”^[20]. From a practical logical point of view, the significance of the CPC’s participation in China’s revolution, construction, and reform is to be targeted as the practical subject of the organic unity of the advanced productive forces and the interests of the people. On the one hand, “advanced productive forces” is the meaning of social production internalized in the Communist Party of China, representing a new class. In the new industrial era, the proletariat, as the new main body of production, is internalized in the historical machine production, a modern social form of production, and realizes the development of productive forces in the form of a modern political party, that is, a proletarian party. The Communist Party of China, as a genuine proletarian party, internalizes the requirements for the development of the new productive forces through scientific party policies and lines. On the other hand, “the interests of the masses of the people” represents the significance of the production relations of the Communist Party of China as a proletarian party. The Communist Party of China historically represents the most advanced relations of production in China. The essence of the meaning lies in the essence of the class interests of the proletariat. According to the logic of Marx’s discourse, since the birth of the proletariat, class interests and the interests of the whole society have formed a meeting point at the “lowest point” in terms of changing the unreasonable social system, that is, the interests of the proletariat and the interests of all mankind are fundamentally consistent. Therefore, the fundamental interests of the Communist Party of China and the broadest masses of the people are historically consistent.

Modernization is an eternal topic in the pursuit of human society. Since human beings subconsciously realized the necessity and possibility of development in the basic circumstances of world historical development and change, modernization began to enter the stage of history as a kind of “conscious existence” in the social and historical development. Chinese-style modernization, as the Chinese wisdom and Chinese plan of modernization, is no exception. An in-depth study of the origins of Chinese-style modernization will help us to understand the past and present life of China’s socialist movement, enhance our confidence in China’s development, and strengthen the common ideal of the Chinese people for socialism with Chinese characteristics and the lofty ideal of communism. The vigorous development of Chinese-style modernization will surely open a new chapter in the future era of China and even mankind.

Disclosure statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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