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RESEARCH ARTICLE



The Chinese Path to Modernization and Its Implications for the World: A Historical Perspective

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ABSTRACT

The Chinese path to modernization, explored by the Chinese people under the leadership of the Communist Party of China (CPC), breaks the Western-created mindset that “modernization equals capitalism.” While overcoming the inherent problems brought about by Western modernization, problems that include polarization, ecological destruction and the supremacy of capital, China’s modernization also refutes the myth that “modernization equals Westernization.” It serves as a proof that developing countries can take an independent path to modernization based on their own national conditions and historical traditions. Through its successful practice, China’s modernization has given the lie to the Western-centric concepts of the “end of history” and the “clash of civilizations.” It has brought deep changes to the world landscape, and is exerting a profound influence on the trend of development of world history.

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1. Introduction

A grand view of history is a method and perspective through which social history can be investigated and analyzed. It emphasizes the need to begin with the overall structure and long-term development of social history; to reveal the internal logic of historical development through a broad vision extending over a long period; and to explore the law of historical development and its future direction. Chinese President Xi Jinping has repeatedly emphasized the importance of acquiring such a broad view of history. On February 20, 2021, at a mobilization meeting that focused on the study of Party history and on promoting education in this field, Xi Jinping emphasized the need

to understand the mechanism of social evolution, to explore the law of history, to formulate corresponding strategies and tactics, and to enhance the systematic, far-sighted, and creative characteristics of our work through an analysis of the long course of history, of the tide of events, and of changes in the global situation. (Xi 2021d, 14)

In his “Explanation of the Resolution of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China on the Major Achievements and Historical Experience of the Party over the Past Century,” Xi Jinping emphasizes:

We need to maintain a rational outlook on Party history and see history from a broader perspective so as to develop an accurate understanding of the underlying trends and defining features of the CPC's history of evolution. We need to properly address the mistakes and setbacks that have occurred on the Party's path forward. We should draw experience from our successes and learn lessons from our mistakes so as to score new victories. (Xi 2021a)

The grand view of history is not only a path and method for studying and understanding the century of Party history, but also provides a theoretical guide for understanding and interpreting the Chinese path to modernization.

The process of modernization involves an evolution from traditional agricultural society to modern industrial society, and constitutes an extremely extensive, profound and drastic transformation of humankind, with deep changes in the economic, political, social and cultural spheres of society. The modernization of human society has been occurring for more than two hundred years, since the beginning of the Industrial Revolution in the West in 1760s. During these two centuries Western countries have generally been at the forefront of modernization, regarding themselves as the model and their path as the only one that other countries can take, then imposing this path on other countries. In the course of modernization, the question of whether developing countries can free themselves from dependence on the West and take an independent modernizing path has been much debated. Over more than 70 years since the founding of the People's Republic of China, the Communist Party of China (CPC) has led the Chinese people on a new path to modernization, a path quite different from that of the West and involving arduous exploration under the guidance of Marxism. Summarizing the historical significance of the Party's century-long struggle, the Sixth Plenary Session of the 19th CPC Central Committee pointed out:

The Party has led the people to achieve a successful Chinese path to modernization, create a new form of human civilization, expand the way towards modernization for developing countries, and provide an alternative for those countries and peoples in the world that wish to achieve rapid development while maintaining independence. (*China Daily* 2021)

To correctly understand and accurately grasp the meaning and historical significance of this new path to modernization, it is necessary to analyze and interpret it scientifically in the context of the "long period" of the history of modernization, while also adopting a broad perspective that takes into account the relationship between East and West.

2. The Western Path to Modernization and Its Negative Consequences

From the 18th century, the development of the industrial revolution saw the formation of a new bourgeoisie and the outbreak of bourgeois-democratic revolutions. This process of "dual revolution" led in the West to the transition from traditional society to modern society, while also giving rise to revolutionary changes around the world. Under the impetus of capitalism, human society made rapid advances in technology and productivity. "The bourgeoisie, during its rule of scarce one hundred years, has created more massive and more colossal productive forces than have all preceding generations together" (Marx and Engels 2010, 489). At the same time, the growing bourgeoisie broke the theocratic rule of the Middle Ages in Europe, liberated the human mind and spirit from the bondage of religion, abolished feudal privileges and feudal rule through bourgeois revolutions, and established a bourgeois-democratic system. This

series of changes carried forward by the Western bourgeoisie contributed enormously to the modernization of human society, and saw the achievement of great historical progress. Precisely for this reason, Western capitalist modernization was once regarded as the only path towards modernization, and Western capitalist civilization was regarded as the ultimate form of human civilization. All attempts at modernization that have diverged from this path have been criticized as deviating from the main line of human historical development. Francis Fukuyama, for example, argues:

While there was disagreement among modernization theorists as to how unilinear historical evolution would be, and whether there were alternative paths to modernity, none doubted that history was directional or that the liberal democracy of the advanced industrial nations lay at its end. (Fukuyama 1992, 69)

The fact is, however, that Western modernization has been driven and dominated by capitalist relations of production. While providing impetus for the industrialization and modernization of society, these relations have had many disastrous consequences, and have become a shackle on human development.

In the first place, Western modernization is capital-centered, resulting in the widespread enslavement by capital of the mass of the population. The modern transformation of Western countries is a historical consequence of the development of capitalism. The creation and accumulation of capital is both the driving force of this transformation, and determines its value orientation. Under capitalist relations of production, capital as reified dead labor rules over workers as living labor. “The rule of the capitalist over the worker is therefore the rule of the object over the human, of dead labour over living, of the product over the producer” (Marx 2010, 398). Driven by its inherent greed, capital in its pursuit of the maximum possible surplus value continually exploits and oppresses the working class, which results in a widespread impoverishment of workers and in widening social polarization. After World War II Western countries under the pressure of the workers’ and socialist movements made some concessions and compromises to the working class, with strengthened government intervention, nationalizations and the establishment of welfare systems to ease the class contradictions in society. The nature of capitalist relations of production, however, has not changed, and neither has there been a fundamental change in the oppressed and exploited status of the working class. In the neoliberal wave since the 1980s, many of the rights once enjoyed by the working class have gradually been lost, creating an increasingly serious gap between rich and poor and intensifying class divisions. As President Xi Jinping points out, “Some developed countries began industrializing centuries ago, yet as a result of deficiencies in their social systems, they have not only failed to crack the problem of common prosperity, but are facing increasingly severe disparity between rich and poor” (Xi 2021b, 6–7). In the meantime, the contradiction between socialized mass production and the private ownership of the means of production has led to regular economic crises. These place an insurmountable barrier in the path of Western modernization, as epitomized by the worldwide financial crisis of 2008. This crisis brought a tremendous intensification of class, racial and cultural contradictions in the West, plunging the countries concerned into endlessly increasing turbulence from which they have been unable to pull themselves out.

Second, Western modernization is Western-centric, and this has resulted in dependence of the East on the West. Following the rise of capitalism, pressure from

competition and the need for constantly increased sales led the bourgeoisie to seek expansion on a global scale, creating a universal world history. In the “Manifesto of the Communist Party” Marx and Engels point out, “The bourgeoisie has through its exploitation of the world market given a cosmopolitan character to production and consumption in every country” (Marx and Engels 2010, 488). However, the world history that has unfolded on this path to modernization is not one of peaceful development and shared progress, but has seen worldwide colonialism, expansion through invasion, and the dependence of countries in the East on the West. As Marx and Engels suggest:

It [the bourgeoisie of the West] compels all nations, on pain of extinction, to adopt the bourgeois mode of production. . . . Just as it has made the country dependent on the towns, so it has made barbarian and semi-barbarian countries dependent on the civilised ones, nations of peasants on nations of bourgeois, the East on the West. (Marx and Engels 2010, 488)

Through continuous aggression and expansion, Western countries have incorporated Asian, African and Latin American countries into their colonial system and plundered wealth from them through the export of commodities and capital. Although the traditional Western colonial empires, which were based on territorial occupation, collapsed completely following the end of World War II, the economic colonization and political control of Third World countries by countries of the West has continued. The West has controlled the economic lifelines of these Third World countries and plundered surplus value from them through unequal exchange and other mechanisms.

Third, Western modernization is anthropocentric, and has destructive ecological consequences. The mode of operation of Western modernization, based on capitalist relations of production, is like catching fish through draining the pond. Driven by its intrinsic need to pursue surplus value and by the external pressure of competition, capital through its unlimited expansion has gradually exceeded the carrying capacity of the natural environment, causing serious environmental pollution and ecological damage. The history of Western modernization is a history of the destruction by human beings of the natural environment, causing air pollution, soil pollution, water pollution, global warming and land desertification. Together, these seriously threaten the sustainable development on which human beings depend. Statistics show that in the two hundred years since the Industrial Revolution, the vast bulk of emissions of greenhouse gases and of various environmental pollutants at the global level have come from Western countries (He 2000). Although the natural environment in Western countries has in some respects been improved, this has been achieved to a large extent through the transfer of polluting industries and the export of waste to other countries. The purpose in essence is to allow Western countries to enjoy the fruits of economic development while transferring the consequences of environmental pollution and ecological damage to developing countries.

3. The Meaning of the Chinese Path to Modernization, and Its Transcendence of the Western Path to Modernization

Following the Opium War, the penetration of China by Western colonialism resulted in the country being drawn into the current of world history in a passive role. Over time, the Chinese nation took on the status of a semi-colonial society, and suffered unprecedented

calamities. Countless men and women fought against great difficulties to realize the dream of saving the nation from peril and building China into a modern country. Since being founded in 1921, the Communist Party of China has pursued its original mission of seeking the happiness of the Chinese people and the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation. Making the modernization of China its goal, the Party has struggled for this aim over more than a century.

After its founding, the CPC united the Chinese people and led them in overcoming the three mountains of imperialism, feudalism and bureaucratic capitalism. It achieved the great victory of the New Democratic Revolution, ended China's humiliating history as a semi-colonial and semi-feudal society, and established a new China where the people became masters of their own country. These conquests have represented the fundamental social conditions and political guarantees for China's modernization. Since the founding of the People's Republic of China, the CPC has led the Chinese people in creatively completing the transition from the road of New Democracy to the road of socialism; in carrying out the socialist transformation of agriculture, handicrafts and capitalist industry and commerce; in eliminating private ownership of the means of production and the system of exploitation; in establishing the economic foundations for socialism; and in creating the fundamental political preconditions and institutional foundations for China's modernization. In the new era of reform and opening up and socialist modernization, the leaders of the CPC and the state realized that in order to promote modernization, they needed to derive lessons from both the positive and negative aspects of the first thirty years of the new China, and to take into account the actual and particular conditions of China in order to find their own, new path of modernization. In March 1979, at a meeting of the CPC on theoretical work, Deng Xiaoping first put forward the proposition of "finding a Chinese path to modernization," and pointed out that in order to realize modernization, it was necessary to "take the characteristics of China" as the departure point (Deng 1994, 164). Under the leadership of the Chinese Communists represented by Deng Xiaoping, the CPC established the basic line of the primary stage of socialism and the system of socialist market economy, thus creating the material conditions and institutional guarantees for the Chinese path to modernization. Since the 18th CPC National Congress, the Chinese Communists represented by Xi Jinping have presented a series of important theoretical formulations on modernization, focusing on major theoretical issues such as "what kind of Chinese path to modernization should be built, and how should the Chinese path to modernization be adhered to?" These have become a guide to action for advancing along China's path to modernization in the new era, and have opened up a fresh expanse on the Chinese road. This new path of modernization has surpassed the Western path in a series of respects.

First, in terms of how it is being realized, the Chinese path to modernization is a socialist path, pursued under the leadership of the Communist Party of China. President Xi Jinping has pointed out that "the modernization we promote is socialist modernization under the leadership of the CPC."¹ The leadership of the CPC is the essential feature and crucial advantage of the Chinese path to modernization, and represents the fundamental difference between the modernization processes in China and the West. The leadership provided by the CPC defines the nature and direction of the Chinese path to modernization. The CPC is the vanguard of socialism with Chinese characteristics, and its nature and goal mean that it "has no special interests of its own—it has

never represented any individual interest group, power group, or privileged stratum” (Xi 2021c, 11–12). The leadership of the CPC guarantees that China’s modernization will follow a path of socialist development under the guidance of Marxism. Only under the leadership of the CPC can the socialist direction of China’s modernization be ensured. Meanwhile, it is the leadership of the CPC that provides the impetus for pursuing the Chinese path to modernization. As Xi Jinping states, “The Party exercises overall leadership over all areas of endeavors in every part of the country” (Xi 2020, 21). The CPC is the pioneer, leader and practitioner on the Chinese path to modernization. During the course of the Chinese modernization, the CPC has fully mobilized the enthusiasm and initiative of the masses of the people, has united all the forces that can be united, and has gathered them into an invincible and majestic force through which the Chinese path to modernization can be pursued.

Second, and in terms of its motivating values, the Chinese path to modernization is people-centered. The people are both its historical subject and the focus of its value orientation. In the Chinese modernization led by the CPC, it is always stressed that development is for the people, that it depends on the people, and that its fruits are shared by the people. The common prosperity of all the people is the central goal of the people-centered path of modernization, and it is this that shows the superiority of Chinese modernization compared with modernization in the West. Based on a socialist economy, the Chinese path to modernization avoids the enslavement by the power of capital, the oppression and the polarization brought by the Western model of modernization. The decision to follow this path has ensured that the people are able to share the fruits of modernization, and has aided the achieving of common prosperity. At the very beginning of China’s reform and opening up, Deng Xiaoping emphasized the importance of common prosperity, pointing out that “the aim of socialism is to make all our people prosperous, not to create polarization” (Deng 1985). Since China entered the new era, the main contradiction in its society has been transformed into the contradiction between the people’s growing need for a better life and the unbalanced and insufficient character of development. Promoting the common prosperity of the whole people, and better meeting their need for an improved life have become the challenges that the CPC and the Chinese government are striving to meet. In highlighting the importance of shared prosperity, Xi Jinping stated that this was “the fundamental principle of socialism with Chinese characteristics” and “an important feature of the Chinese path to modernization,” going on to stress that

the gains of reform and development [must] benefit all our people in a fair way. By doing so, we will promote well-rounded human development and achieve shared prosperity for everyone. (Xi 2018)

Under the strong leadership of the CPC, and through the hard work of people of all nationalities, China by the 100th anniversary of the Party’s birth has succeeded in achieving the historic first centenary goals of eliminating absolute poverty, building a moderately prosperous society in all respects, and creating favorable conditions for moving towards the realization of common prosperity.

Third, and in terms of its relationship with the West, China has freed itself from dependence on Western countries and has explored an independent and autonomous path of modernization. As a socialist country, China cannot allow its modernization

path to be based on the suffering of other peoples and countries, and nor can it accept falling into dependence on Western countries in order to achieve rapid industrialization. Therefore, China has chosen an independent and self-reliant path to modernization. During the first years of the People's Republic of China, Mao Zedong put forward the strategic goal of industrializing the country, seeking to establish an independent and complete industrial system, and explored an inward accumulation model based on the difference between industrial and agricultural products. Under this model, the state obtained agricultural products from farmers at a lower price and sold industrial products to farmers at a higher price. The surplus products were transferred from the agricultural sector to the industrial sector, and in this way capital was accumulated for socialist industrialization, with the creation of a complete and independent industrial system. Since the reform and opening up began the process of China's active integration into the global market, the CPC has continued to adhere to the path of independent development. As Xi Jinping has pointed out:

Independence is an inevitable conclusion drawn by our Party from China's reality, after going through the stages of revolution, development and reform by relying on the strength of the Party and the people. We should always rely on ourselves when seeking our national development and defending our national pride and confidence, and resolutely follow our own road now and in the future as we did in the past. (Xi 2014, 31)

Fourth, China's modernization is in line with the principle of harmony between humans and nature. Compared with the capital-dominated modernization seen in the West, the Chinese path to modernization is based on the advantages of the socialist system. It transcends the logic of capital and anthropocentric modes of thinking, and realizes the harmonious coexistence of humans with nature. In the process of developing a socialist market economy, China has of course experienced some detours with regard to the construction of an ecological civilization. Some enterprises and local governments have been less aware of the need for environmental protection, and viewing economic growth as the only goal of development, have shown a blind pursuit of profit maximization at the cost of environmental pollution and ecological damage. Since the 18th CPC National Congress, Xi Jinping has corrected the misconception that economic development and environmental protection are in opposition to each other, emphasizing that short-term economic development must not be pursued at the expense of the natural environment, and calling for a new pattern of modernization in which people and nature develop harmoniously. Guided by this development concept, China has created a win-win situation for economic development and environmental protection, exploring a new path of civilized development that combines bright prospects for the development of production, higher living standards and a healthy ecology.

4. Three Implications of the Chinese Path to Modernization from a Grand View of History

Following its own distinctive path, China in a few decades has undergone a process of modernization that in the West took centuries, and from being a poor and weak country, has developed to the point where it has the world's second-largest economy. This has been the greatest and most successful modernization ever witnessed. Created by the

Communist Party of China as it has united and led the Chinese people in a painstaking process of exploration and experiment, this new path of modernization has not only laid the foundation for the development and prosperity of Chinese society, but has also set an example for other countries. Through living practice, this successful path has refuted such ideas as the “end of history,” “Western-centrism” and the “clash of civilizations.” Not only has it profoundly altered the global landscape, but it has influenced the development trend of world history as well.

First, the key significance of the Chinese path for world socialism is shown by the fact that it has disproved the idea of the “end of history.” The dramatic changes in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe meant that the international communist movement suffered a major setback. The socialist camp ceased to exist, and only 5 of the 15 socialist countries remained. The communist parties in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe lost their ruling positions, and either changed their banners and became social-democratic parties or dissolved themselves. Most of the communist parties in other developed or developing capitalist countries also fell into crisis, and the total number of communists (outside of China) decreased from 44 million to 11 million in 1995 (Huang 2013). At the same time, the social-democratic parties in the West also changed direction, completely abandoning their working-class positions and their political goal of the social transformation of capitalism, and becoming complicit in the hegemony of neoliberalism. It was against this historical background that the “failure of socialism” and the “end of history” became truisms of Western discourse. However, the Chinese Communists resisted this tremendous pressure, held high the great banner of scientific socialism, and drew on the historical experience of world socialism including both its positive and negative aspects. They led the Chinese people in pursuing the road of socialism with Chinese characteristics and in exploring the Chinese path to modernization. The latter is the only non-capitalist path of modernization that has been tested in practice. It embodies the CPC’s understanding and application of the laws of Communist Party rule, of socialist construction and of human social development. The success of the Chinese path to modernization proves with hard facts that capitalism is not the only path to modernization, and that modernization can also be achieved by socialist means. This experience demonstrates the strong vitality of scientific socialism in the 21st century, and shows that the “end of history” has itself come to an end.

Second is the significance of the Chinese path for developing countries. The lessons of the Chinese experience are destroying “Western-centrism.” Although a large number of Third World countries freed themselves from imperialist colonial rule after World War II and achieved national independence and liberation, they still faced a common problem of how to find a path to modernization that suited their own conditions. With strong encouragement from the West, many Third World countries blindly imitated the Western path of modernization and eventually fell into the trap of “dependent development.” It has been proven that the Western path to modernization is “a path of inequality in which the West utilizes the cheap resources of developing countries to support its own development” (Lian 2017, 2); that is, it is a development trap constructed around “Western-centrism.” For developing countries, modernization thus requires getting rid of blind faith in the Western model and finding a path of development that is consistent with their own

national conditions. The main factors behind the success of the new path of Chinese modernization are that it takes into account China's national conditions, history and culture, and that it unswervingly pursues an independent development path that fully manifests the unity of the general features of modernizing development with the particular nature of China's modernization. In this way, it opens a new path for the developing countries that account for three-fourths of the world's total population. As Xi Jinping has pointed out, the Chinese path to modernization has blazed

a new trail for other developing countries to achieve modernization. It offers a new option choice for other countries and nations who want to accelerate their development while preserving their independence; and it offers Chinese wisdom and a Chinese approach to solving the problems facing humanity. (Xi 2020, 12)

Despite the fact that the Chinese path to modernization has attracted worldwide attention, China will not impose its own development path and model on other countries, but will respect and encourage different countries to explore their independent paths of development according to their own national conditions.

Third, the significance of the Chinese path for the international community is that it refutes the idea of the “clash of civilizations.” Western modernization is based on foreign expansion and aggression, and is a development path of colonialism and hegemonism—in short, a zero-sum game. Huntington's “clash of civilizations” is a concentrated expression of the thinking behind this zero-sum confrontation. Unlike the countries of the West, China has been peace-loving since ancient times, lacking the cultural gene for militarism. China's century-long history of humiliation following the Opium War also means that it will not take the path of aggression and expansion. Immediately after the founding of the People's Republic of China, the country put forward the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, and engaged in friendly cooperation with various other countries on a basis of equality and mutual assistance. After the beginning of reform and opening up, China continued adhering to an independent and peaceful foreign policy, emphasizing the need to take the path of peaceful development while rejecting aggression and hegemony, maintaining world peace and promoting common development. Since the 18th CPC National Congress, Xi Jinping has called for the development of a new type of international relations, one marked by mutual respect, fairness, justice, and win-win cooperation, by the building of a community of shared future for humanity, and by the search for a modern path of common and peaceful development. He has stated:

The Chinese nation does not carry aggressive or hegemonic traits in its genes. The [CPC] cares about the future of humanity, and wishes to move forward in tandem with all progressive forces around the world. China has always worked to safeguard world peace, contribute to global development, and preserve international order. (Xi 2021c)

Consequently, the Chinese path to modernization always embodies the principles of equality, mutual benefit and win-win cooperation, and rejects the Western path of modernization that rests on zero-sum thinking and foreign expansion. China's modernization path avoids the “clash of civilizations” trap, promotes communication, dialogue and win-win cooperation among different countries and civilizations, and opens up a new form of human civilization.

5. Conclusion

The Chinese path to modernization is by nature a socialist modernization under the leadership of the Communist Party of China. It is not based on external aggression or on colonization, internal exploitation or oppression. Nor does it blindly copy or imitate the modernization paths of other countries. Rather, it is a new modernization path opened up independently by the CPC through the great practice of revolution, construction and reform, a path based on a scientific understanding of China's history, culture and national conditions and on the objective laws of modernization. Breaking with the Western assumption that "modernization equals capitalism," this new path transcends the persistent problems that are inseparable from the Western path of modernization, problems that include capital supremacy, polarization, ecological destruction, and foreign aggression and expansion. Further, the Chinese path disproves the myth that "modernization equals Westernization" and shows that multiple ways of achieving modernization are possible. As it presses ahead with building a modern socialist country in all respects, China should continue to promote the Chinese path to modernization, rejecting both the old and rigid closed-door policy and any attempt to abandon socialism and take an erroneous path. Gathering together the historical synergies needed to achieve its second century goals, China should continue to build a prosperous, strong, democratic, civilized, harmonious and beautiful modern socialist country.

Note

1. See Xi Jinping's speech at the seminar for leading provincial and ministerial cadres on "Acquiring the Spirit of the Important Speech of General Secretary Xi Jinping in Preparation for the 20th CPC National Congress." [In Chinese.] http://news.youth.cn/sz/202207/t20220731_13884390.htm.

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Notes on Contributor

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