



Correctly Interpreting the Relationship between Two Historical Periods before and after the Reform and Opening Up in China

Yun Gong

To cite this article: Yun Gong (2022) Correctly Interpreting the Relationship between Two Historical Periods before and after the Reform and Opening Up in China, *International Critical Thought*, 12:2, 271-286, DOI: [10.1080/21598282.2022.2053930](https://doi.org/10.1080/21598282.2022.2053930)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/21598282.2022.2053930>



Published online: 14 Apr 2022.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 110



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



Correctly Interpreting the Relationship between Two Historical Periods before and after the Reform and Opening Up in China

Yun Gong

Academy of Marxism, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, Beijing, China

ABSTRACT

The 70-year history of the People's Republic of China can be divided into two historical periods, before the reform and opening up and after it, with the line of demarcation coinciding with the third plenary session of the Eleventh Central Committee of the CPC in 1978. These two periods are interrelated, but are also different from one another. In essence, they both embody the CPC's practice in leading the people in socialist construction, and the Party's exploration of methods for improving that practice. Correctly interpreting the relationship between socialist practice and exploration during the periods before the reform and opening up and after it is not only a historical issue, but also a political one. We therefore need to make a correct evaluation of the historical period before the reform and opening up. We should not use the period following the reform and opening up to negate the period before it, and vice versa.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 7 November 2021
Revised 23 February 2022
Accepted 13 March 2022

KEYWORDS

The history of PRC; socialist practice; planned economy; socialist market economy; socialism with Chinese characteristics

The 70 years since the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC) make up a period when the Communist Party of China (CPC) has united and led the people of all ethnic groups throughout the country in overcoming difficulties, in continuing to struggle, and in carrying out magnificent feats of socialist construction. Under the leadership of the CPC, the Chinese people have created a moving epic of struggle and have performed one of the great miracles in the history of human development. The Chinese nation has carried out a great leap; it has first stood up, then grown rich and become strong, and is now striding forward in a new era of great rejuvenation.

The 70-year history of the PRC can be divided into two historical periods, before the reform and opening up and after it, with the line of demarcation coinciding with the third plenary session of the Eleventh Central Committee of the CPC in 1978. As President Xi Jinping has pointed out,

They are two interrelated periods with significant differences, but in essence they both feature the practice and explorations of the Party as it has led the people in socialist construction. . . . The historical period before the reform and opening up must be correctly evaluated. The historical period after the reform and opening up cannot be used to negate the historical period before the reform and opening up, and vice versa. (Xi 2019)

These two historical periods make up 70 successive years of continuous development, and they represent a coherent and dialectically unified whole.

1. Correctly Interpreting the Relationship between the Two Periods Is a Major Political Issue

As President Xi Jinping has pointed out, “correctly handling the relationship between socialist practice and exploration before and after the reform and opening up is not just a historical issue, but more importantly a political issue” (Party Literature Research Office of the CPC Central Committee 2014a, 113–114).

The ancients said, “To destroy a country, its history must be destroyed first.” Hostile forces against China spare no effort to attack, vilify, and slander the history of the Chinese revolution and of the PRC. Their fundamental purpose is to confuse the people. Why did the Soviet Union disintegrate? Why did the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) collapse? An important reason is that the ideological struggle in the Soviet Union was very fierce. The history of the Soviet Union and the history of the CPSU were completely negated, and Lenin and Stalin were denied. People were confused, and many were afflicted by historical nihilism. Almost all the Party organizations at all levels lost their effectiveness; the army was no longer under the leadership of the Party. Finally, the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, a large party, fell apart, and the Soviet Union, a great socialist country, disintegrated. That is a real lesson! If China had totally rejected Mao Zedong at that time, would the Communist Party of China still exist? Would China’s socialist system still exist? Neither of them could have survived, and the result would be great chaos.

Analyzing and evaluating the 70-year history of the PRC is inseparable from the keyword “exploration,” and the 70-year development of the PRC has been full of the hardships of exploration. Many things cannot be understood correctly without a proper understanding of this word. The revolution, construction and reform were all new subjects to China, a large Eastern country with a vast population, and there were no ready answers in books or in other countries’ experiences. To take a suitable new path, China could only rely on the Chinese people to explore bravely in practice, and to constantly examine their experiences and lessons. There were no shortcuts. Since it was an exploration, it was impossible to experience only success and no failure, or only correctness and no error. There had been no such exploration in the history of human development. The dialectics of history are that it is through comparisons between success and failure, right and wrong, and often through repeated comparisons, that people can achieve subjective understanding in conformity with objective truths and find the right way forward. This is the essence and value of exploration. It was on the basis of their successful experience, setbacks and lessons during the period before the reform and opening up that the Chinese Communists made a great and far-reaching turn in 1978. Since then, they have successfully pioneered the road of socialism with Chinese characteristics, and have created a Chinese miracle in human history. We should view the “first 30 years” of the PRC with a respect for history. It is reckless to seek blindly to discredit the “first 30 years,” and it is unwise to “go along the old road.” Forgetting the past means betrayal. Without yesterday, there would be no today and no tomorrow.

The conquests of China's new democratic revolution must not be given up, the achievements of China's socialist revolution and construction must not be denied, and the direction of China's reform and opening up and socialist modernization must not be changed. These are the basic conditions for the CPC and the Chinese people to gather their strength and move forward in today's world.

2. The Two Historical Periods Are Essentially the Same

The two periods in the 70-year history of the PRC make up an inseparable and in no sense antagonistic whole. In essence, they amount to the practice and explorations of the CPC as it has led the Chinese people in carrying out socialist construction, and as is demonstrated above all in the following aspects:

The social nature of the two periods is the same. During the decades leading up to the reform and opening up and in the years since, the nature of Chinese society has been socialist. After the founding of the PRC, China began its transition to socialism. On the basis of the national economic recovery, China's socialist transformation was initiated in 1953 and was basically completed in 1956, marking the country's entry into a socialist society and the beginning of the primary stage of socialism. After implementing reform and opening up, China is still in the primary stage of socialism, but through reform and opening up the socialist system has been continuously improved. In 1987, the Thirteenth CPC National Congress pointed out that "our society is already a socialist society," but noted: "China's socialist society is still in a primary stage of socialism. We must start from this reality, and should not go beyond this stage" (Party Literature Research Office of the CPC Central Committee 1991, 12). In 1997, the Fifteenth CPC National Congress observed that China's central reality was that, while a socialist country, it would remain "in the primary stage of socialism for a long time" (Party Literature Research Office of the CPC Central Committee 2011b, 12). Since the Eighteenth CPC National Congress, under the leadership of the CPC Central Committee with Xi Jinping at its core, socialism with Chinese characteristics has entered a new era, one that features a new historical orientation for China's development and which "means that scientific socialism is full of vitality in twenty-first century, and that the banner of socialism with Chinese characteristics is now flying high and proud for all to see" (Xi 2017). Although the principal contradiction in China has been transformed in the new era, and is now the contradiction between the people's ever-growing needs for a better life and the unbalanced and inadequate development, "[t]he basic dimension of the Chinese context—that [China] is still and will long remain in the primary stage of socialism—has not changed. China's international status as the world's largest developing country has not changed" (Xi 2017).

The social systems of the two periods are consistent. Since its founding, the Communist Party of China has taken the realization of socialism as its central goal and the core of its political program. Mao Zedong made it clear that "the future of China is to build socialism" and that "only socialism can save China" (Mao 1999b, 124, 214). After the founding of the PRC, a socialist state system and a socialist political system were established in China on the basis of the victory of the new democratic revolution. The new social order was founded on a state system of people's democratic dictatorship led by the working class (through the Communist Party) and based on the alliance of workers

and farmers, a political system resting on democratic centralism and the people's congresses. Its national structure was that of a unitary country possessing a regional ethnic autonomy system within a unified multi-ethnic state, and its party system featured multi-party cooperation and political consultation under the leadership of the Communist Party of China. After the country completed the socialist transformation of private ownership of the means of production in 1956, a basic socialist economic system founded on public ownership was established. This system certainly needed to be continuously developed and improved through the process of exploration. As pointed out in the "Resolution of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China on Certain Questions in the History of Our Party since the Founding of the People's Republic of China" that were adopted by the sixth plenary session of the Eleventh Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, the country's socialist system was "still in the primary stage," and would "inevitably go through a long process to be more perfect" (Party Literature Research Office of the CPC Central Committee 2011a, 166–167). China then began to build socialism in an all-round way so as to allow the system to be consolidated. During the "Cultural Revolution," it was reported that "the foundation of China's socialist system still exists; socialist economic construction is still in progress; China remains unified, and it exerts important influence in the international arena" (Party Literature Research Office of the CPC Central Committee 2011a, 147). Since the carrying out of reform and opening up, the reforms China has promoted consist of the self-improvement and development of the socialist system, and in these reforms the country has always adhered to the direction of socialism. As Deng Xiaoping repeatedly emphasized, "It is a very important issue to adhere to the direction of socialism in reforms" (Party Literature Research Office of the CPC Central Committee 2014b, 27). After the Eighteenth CPC National Congress, President Xi Jinping pointed out:

The world is developing and society is making progress. Without reform and opening up, there would be a dead end. It would also be a dead end to engage in reform and opening up while negating the socialist direction. We must be very clear-headed when it comes to direction. Our direction is to continue to promote self-improvement and development of the socialist system, rather than to change the socialist system. We must adhere to the four cardinal principles, the foundation of the nation. Not only should we uphold the four cardinal principles so as to ensure the correct direction of reform and opening up, but through reform and opening up we should also endow the Four Cardinal Principles with new connotations suited to the times. We should eliminate all kinds of interference, and unswervingly follow the path of socialism with Chinese characteristics. (Party Literature Research Office of the CPC Central Committee 2014b, 14–15)

Xi Jinping proposed that the overall goals of China's comprehensively deepening reform should be to improve and develop the socialist system with Chinese characteristics, to promote the modernization of the national governance system and governance capabilities, and by 2020, to make the system of socialism with Chinese characteristics more definite in form, mature, and effective.

The CPC's leadership is consistent. The leadership exercised by the Communist Party of China represents the country's most important national condition, and upholding the Party's leadership has been the key to the success of China's revolution, construction, and reform over the past 70 years. Throughout these decades, it has been precisely under the strong leadership of the Communist Party of China that the Chinese nation has made a

great leap from standing up to growing rich, and then to becoming strong. The leadership of the Party has ushered in a bright prospect for realizing the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation. China has persisted in upholding the Party's leadership for 70 years; Mao Zedong repeatedly emphasized that "In industry, agriculture, commerce, education, military affairs, government and Party, in all these seven domains the Party leads in all things" (Mao 1999c, 305). Deng Xiaoping pointed out that the key to implementing the four cardinal principles is to uphold the Party's leadership and the socialist system (Deng 1994a, 391–392). Xi Jinping has clearly pointed out that the leadership provided by the Communist Party of China represents the most essential feature of socialism with Chinese characteristics, the greatest advantage of socialism with Chinese characteristics, and the country's highest political power. It is necessary to uphold and strengthen the Party's overall leadership (Xi 2020).

The original aspiration and mission of the CPC are consistent; they consist of seeking happiness for the Chinese people and pursuing the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation. This original aspiration and mission constitutes the fundamental driving force for the Party's continuous advancement. In the 70 years since the founding of the PRC, whether in adversity or in prosperity, the Communist Party of China has unwaveringly maintained its original aspiration, has kept in mind its mission, has always maintained close ties with the people, has taken the people's yearning for a better life as its goal of struggle, and has strived for the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.

The goals of the CPC in the two periods are the same. Building a modern and powerful socialist country is the consistent goal of the PRC. Mao Zedong repeatedly emphasized that one of the burdensome historical tasks shouldered by the Party was to build the poor and backward China into a powerful modern socialist country: "We can assuredly build a socialist state with modern industry, modern agriculture, and modern science and culture" (Mao 1999b, 268). Subsequently, the Party put forward the goal and strategic concept of realizing the "four modernizations." After the reform and opening up, the Party continued to take the realization of socialist modernization as its goal. Deng Xiaoping emphasized repeatedly that only by building China into a modern, powerful socialist state can it more effectively consolidate its socialist system (Deng 1994a, 86). Over the past 40 years of reform and opening up, every CPC National Congress has focused on the theme of upholding and developing socialism with Chinese characteristics, and step by step, a grand blueprint has been drawn up for China to realize socialist modernization. As a Marxist political party, the Communist Party of China always takes as its unwavering goal the realization of common prosperity for all the people. After the founding of the PRC, Mao Zedong carried out arduous and continuous explorations for the common prosperity of the Chinese people, stating at one point:

Since we are now implementing such a system and such a plan, we will become richer and stronger year by year, and we will see that we are growing richer and stronger year by year. The wealth is wealth in common, and the strength is common strength, of which we all have a share. (Mao 1999a, 495)

After the beginning of reform and opening up, Deng Xiaoping summed up past experiences and lessons, defined common prosperity as the essence and basic principle of socialism, and proposed a specific path to achieve common prosperity: those who became

rich first should bring along with them those who were not yet rich. The CPC Central Committee Xi Jinping at its core has unwaveringly followed the path of common prosperity, stressing repeatedly:

The development we seek is development that benefits the people, and the prosperity we pursue is the common prosperity of all the people. The final criterion for the success of reform and development is whether the people have enjoyed the success together. (*People's Daily* 2015)

The Nineteenth National Congress of the Communist Party of China has drawn up a clear schedule for achieving the common prosperity of the Chinese people. A moderately prosperous society will be built by 2020; all the people will make solid progress towards common prosperity by 2035; and common prosperity for all the people will basically be achieved by the middle of the twenty-first century (Xi 2017).

3. The Development of China in the Two Historical Periods Is Consecutive Development

As President Xi Jinping has pointed out,

The great practice of revolution, construction, and reform led by the Communist Party of China is a historical process of continuous struggle. It is a complete cause of saving, rejuvenating, and strengthening China, and of realizing the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation. (Xi 2021, 58)

The two historical periods of China are characterized by the unity of the stages of development with the continuity of development, and their relationship is that between continuity and development.

The historical period before the reform and opening up provided the political premise, institutional foundation, material and technological foundation, and ideological and theoretical preparation for the period that followed, along with valuable experience and a favorable international environment.

- (1) Political premise and institutional foundation. The founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949 marked an unprecedented social change in the history of the Chinese nation. It ended China's semi-colonial and semi-feudal history completely, put an end to the country's fragmented condition, revoked all the imperial privileges enjoyed in China by the great powers, abolished the unequal treaties these powers had imposed, and enabled China to make a great leap from thousands of years of feudal autocracy to people's democracy. After the founding of the PRC the first generation of the CPC's central leadership, with Mao Zedong at its center, quickly healed the wounds from the war and restored national economic development. The Party led the people in putting forward the general line for the transition period, seizing the opportunity and creatively completing the transition from the new democratic revolution to the socialist revolution. China, a vast Eastern country with a quarter of the world's population, thus entered socialism, successfully carrying through the greatest and most profound social transformation in Chinese history. As President Xi Jinping pointed out: "The victory of the new democratic revolution and the establishing of the basic socialist system shaped the political future in

fundamental terms, and laid the institutional foundation for all the development and progress in contemporary China” (Xi 2021, 53).

- (2) **Material and technical basis.** After the founding of the PRC, and despite a relatively poor material foundation, the Communist Party of China led the Chinese people in establishing an independent and relatively complete national industrial complex and economic system, in a much shorter time than in many Western countries. In this way, the basic material and technological foundation was laid for the development of the new era of reform and opening up. Between 1949 and 1978 China’s average annual GDP growth rate was 8.43%, with an overall increase in GDP from 46.6 billion to 362.41 billion yuan, or 6.8 times. The total value of the country’s industrial output grew from 14 billion to 423 billion yuan, an increase of 29.2 times, while the total value of agricultural output increased from 32.6 billion to 139.7 billion yuan, an increase of 3.3 times. Grain output increased from 113.18 million tons to 304.7 million tons, an increase of 1.7 times; cotton output from 0.44 million to 2.167 million tons, an increase of 3.9 times; steel output from 0.16 million to 31.78 million tons, an increase of 197.6 times; coal production from 32 million to 618 million tons, an increase of 18.3 times; and electric power generation from 4.3 billion kWh to 256.6 billion kWh, an increase of 58.7 times (Jin 2009, 32). At the same time, the number of college graduates across the country was more than 14 times the total number during the 36 years before 1949, and the number of professional and technical personnel was more than 13 times the total in the early days of the PRC (Jin 2013, 11). In 1981, the “Resolution of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China on Certain Questions in the History of Our Party since the Founding of the People’s Republic of China” pointed out:

A large part of the material and technological foundation we rely on for modernization was built during this period. Most of the backbone of national economic and cultural construction was created in this period, and the necessary work experience was also accumulated during this time. This is the dominant aspect of the Party’s work during this period. (Party Literature Research Office of the CPC Central Committee 2011a, 138)

- (3) **Ideological and theoretical preparation.** Following the establishment of the basic socialist system, the Communist Party of China was faced with the brand-new challenge of how to build socialism in China. With Mao Zedong at its core, the first generation of the CPC leadership conducted a strenuous search for a road to building socialism suitable for China’s conditions. It put forward theories and ideas on how to build socialism, including the theory of the “second combination” of the basic principles of Marxism-Leninism with China’s reality; the theory of socialist social contradictions; the theory of dividing socialism into two stages, underdeveloped socialism and more developed socialism; the theory of the socialist commodity economy, and so forth. Through this process, the CPC leadership prepared itself ideologically and theoretically for socialist construction after the reform and opening up.
- (4) **Positive and negative experiences.** Before the reform and opening up the people of all of China’s ethnic groups, under the leadership of the Communist Party of China, devoted themselves to the booming socialist construction that had never before been seen in Chinese history. Within a short time, China “became a major power

with important influence in the world, and accumulated important experience of socialist construction in a large Eastern country with very backward social productivity” (Xi 2021, 54). In the process of building socialism in an all-round way, the Chinese people reached a broad objective understanding of their national conditions, and accumulated a series of positive experiences still valuable for the reform and opening up. At the same time, China also made many mistakes and learned painful lessons. But although positive experience is wealth, negative lessons are also wealth; as Deng Xiaoping pointed out,

When we review our history, we should not focus on the achievements and mistakes of particular individuals but seek to chart a course for the future. Our successes have provided us with valuable experience, and so have our mistakes. Although we thoroughly condemn the “cultural revolution,” we recognize that it was useful to the extent that it taught us a lesson. Without that lesson, we would have been unable to formulate the policies and the ideological, political and organizational lines that we have worked out since the Third Plenary Session of the Eleventh CPC Central Committee. At that session it was decided that the focus of our work should be shifted from class struggle to developing the productive forces and modernizing the country. That policy decision won universal support from Party members and the people. Why? Because we had before us the alternative example of the “cultural revolution.” So the “cultural revolution” has turned out to be valuable. (Deng 1994b, 272)

- (5) Favorable international environment. From its founding, the People’s Republic of China actively supported the national liberation and independence movements in Asia, Africa and Latin America, established a reputable image in the world, and developed deep friendships with a large number of developing countries, especially African countries. In the early 1970s Mao Zedong put forward the theory of the Three Worlds, achieved Sino-US reconciliation, improved China’s relations with Japan and many countries in Western Europe, and restored its legal seat in the United Nations. All this greatly improved China’s international status and bought time for its peaceful construction. As Deng Xiaoping commented, “Comrade Mao Zedong’s strategic idea of differentiating the three worlds opened up a road for us” (Deng 1994a, 127).

Throughout the historical period since the beginning of reform and opening up China has adhered to, and further reformed and developed, its socialist practice and exploration as seen in the previous historical period. The path of socialism with Chinese characteristics was opened up on the basis that the PRC had established a basic socialist system through more than 20 years of construction. The great cause of reform and opening up was embraced and carried forward on the basis of the achievements of the first generation of the CPC’s central leadership with Mao Zedong at its core, creating Mao Zedong Thought, leading the whole Party and the people of all ethnic groups in the country to found the People’s Republic of China, accomplishing great feats in the areas of socialist revolution and construction, and gaining valuable experience through their arduous investigation of the laws of socialist construction. Socialism with Chinese characteristics did not fall from the heavens. It is a fundamental achievement of the CPC and the Chinese people, won through untold hardships and costs. The socialist exploration and practice that occurred before the reform and opening up represented the starting point for the CPC and the Chinese people to grasp the fresh reality and create the

future in the new historical period. Without the positive and negative historical experiences the earlier period provided, and without the ideological, material, and institutional achievements it recorded, China would have found it impossible to carry out reform and opening up smoothly. Although the two historical periods are very different in their ideological guidance, principles and policies, and in the practical work of socialist construction involved, they are by no means separate from each other, let alone being fundamentally opposed. Before China's reform and opening up, the CPC put forward many propositions concerning the practice of socialist construction, and even if these were not actually implemented at that time, they have been carried out since the reform and opening up, and will be adhered to and developed in the future. Deng Xiaoping pointed out:

In many respects, we are doing things Comrade Mao suggested but failed to do himself, setting right his erroneous opposition to certain things and accomplishing some things that he did not. All this we shall continue to do for a fairly long time. Of course, we have developed Mao Zedong Thought and will go on developing it. (Deng 1994a, 300)

The reform and opening up has represented a great revolution in the history of the development of the Chinese nation, and it has allowed the cause of socialism with Chinese characteristics to make a great leap. As Xi Jinping has pointed out, "Reform and opening up is a great awakening of the Communist Party of China, and it is this great awakening that has given birth to the CPC's great creations in theory and practice" (Xi 2021, 214).

What does the Communist Party of China rely on to inspire the people, unify ideas, and gather strength? What does the Party rely on to stimulate the creative spirit and creative vitality of the entire people? What does the Party rely on to achieve rapid economic and social development in China and to win comparative advantages in the competition with capitalism? It is reform and opening up. (Party Literature Research Office of the CPC Central Committee 2014a, 508)

The CPC's historic decision to implement reform and opening up was based on a firm grasp of the future destiny of the Party and the country, on a profound grasp of the socialist revolution and of the practice of construction, on a deep insight into the trend of the times, and on a thorough understanding of the expectations and needs of the people. On the basis of summing up the experiences of the two historical periods before and after the reform and opening up, and aided by a deepened understanding of the nature of socialism, of how to build socialism and other major issues, the Party has established the basic line of the primary stage of socialism. It has made the transition from "taking class struggle as the key link" to "centering on economic construction," and the transition from a highly centralized system of planned economy to a system of socialist market economy. In this fashion, the Party has created and developed socialism with Chinese characteristics. In the field of theory, the CPC has made breakthroughs on a number of major issues. It has come up with innovative formulations in the fundamental area of "what is socialism and how can socialism be built," and has put forward theories on the primary stage of socialism, on the essence of socialism, on the socialist market economy, and on socialist reform and opening up. In the area of practice, the CPC has abandoned the mistaken concepts and policies of stage-transcending before the reform and opening up, has put an end to the "ultra-left" error of "taking class struggle as the key link" in a certain period, has transformed the highly centralized system of planned economy, and so forth. Reform

and opening up is an important weapon through which the Party and the people can keep up with the times; it is the only way to uphold and develop socialism with Chinese characteristics, and provides a key to determining the destiny of contemporary China. It is also the key to achieving the “two centenary” goals and carrying through the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation. Reform and opening up is the correct way to make the country strong and enrich the people. If the CPC had not decided resolutely in 1978 to carry out reform and opening up, if it had not unswervingly promoted reform and opening up, and had not persevered firmly in pursuing the correct direction of reform and opening up, socialist China would not have been in such a good situation today. Instead, it would have faced a crisis like the one that resulted in the collapse of the Soviet Union and the socialist countries of Eastern Europe. Reform and opening up has provided people with a great deal of valuable enlightenment; most importantly, it has taught them that if a country or a nation is to rejuvenate itself, it must move forward in line with the logic of history, and must respond to the trend of the times.

The major difference between the two historical periods may be understood in terms of a spiral process. “Nothing develops in a straight line. Everything spirals up, that is, develops in waves” (Mao 1999c, 120). The same is true of the interconnection and distinction between the two historical periods, which is a spiral process in which theory and practice interact and influence one another.

The two historical periods before and after the reform and opening up are closely linked and dialectically unified, but at the same time, there are significant differences between them. The two periods are not only distinct with regard to their ideological guidance, policies and practical work of socialist construction, but are also very different in their internal and external conditions and in the basis of their socialist practice and exploration. Unless we appreciate the major differences between the two periods, we will not be able to perceive the distinctive features of the new period of reform and opening up, to grasp the far-reaching significance of the historical turning point, to understand the “specific character” of the path of socialism with Chinese characteristics, or to gain a full understanding of the significance of the great social revolution involved in reform and opening up. In an important sense, reform and opening up in the new period is just such a great revolution, marked by the correction of concepts, systems and mechanisms that did not meet the needs of the development of the productive forces in the period before the reform and opening up, and also by a “negation” that reveals significant differences. This negation, however, takes the form of “sublation,” which involves adhering to the basic system while at the same time transcending it in a spiral process.

From the perspective of the CPC’s guiding ideology, the years of reform and opening up have seen the correcting of various mistakes made by Mao Zedong in his later years. The incorrect slogan of “taking class struggle as the key link,” a position unsuited to the socialist period, has been refuted, and the Party’s focus has shifted to economic construction. On the basis of adhering to Marxism-Leninism and Mao Zedong Thought, the basic principles of Marxism have been combined with China’s specific reality. Marxism-Leninism and Mao Zedong Thought have been developed, while Deng Xiaoping Theory, the Important Thought of “Three Represents,” the Scientific Outlook on Development, and Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era have been successively formulated. As a result, the guiding ideology of the Party has remained consistent while also advancing with the times. Where the economic system is concerned,

unified public ownership, distribution solely according to labor, and the highly centralized system of planned economy in China have been changed since the reform and opening up began, and a system of socialist market economy has been established. But at the same time, the leading role of public ownership and of distribution according to labor, the dominant position of state ownership in the national economy, and collective ownership of rural land have all been adhered to, even as new forms of rural collective economy have been explored. It has been made clear that the socialist market economy is integrated with the basic socialist system, and that the government's macro-control must be given full play at the same time as the market plays the decisive role in the allocation of resources. In its political system, China has strengthened the building of socialist democracy and the rule of law in an all-round way. Meanwhile, the overall leadership of the CPC, the people's democratic dictatorship, and the unity of the Party leadership have always been adhered to. The people remain the masters of the country, the rule of law continues to apply, and China has wholeheartedly relied on the working class. Culturally, China has abandoned the "ultra-left" practices of past ideological work, and promotes the diversification of the people's spiritual life. But at the same time, China always upholds the guiding position of Marxism in the ideological field. In diplomacy, China has re-examined its past analyses of the international conjuncture and has transformed its previous relatively closed position. Concluding that peace and development are the themes of the age, it has opened up to the outside world in an all-round way, and has advocated building a community with a shared future for humanity. At the same time, China still adheres to its independent, peaceful foreign policy and to the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence established during the early days of the PRC. China strengthens unity and cooperation with developing countries, opposes various forms of hegemonism and power politics, and promotes the development of the international order in a more just and reasonable direction. In the new stage of reform and opening up, the CPC is uniting and leading the Chinese people in ensuring that reform and opening up will emerge as a great new revolution. It vigorously stimulates the creativity of the broad masses of people, liberates and develops the social productive forces on an enormous scale, and greatly enhances the vitality of social development. This is significantly improving the people's living standards, enormously enhancing China's overall national strength, and greatly improving the country's international status. The significance of this great historical contribution is that it has opened up the path of socialism with Chinese characteristics, has created a theoretical system of socialism with Chinese characteristics, and has established a system of socialism with Chinese characteristics. This is enabling China to catch up with the times and the Chinese people to make a giant leap. From first standing up, they are now growing rich, and will become increasingly strong.

4. Correctly Interpreting the Relationship between the Two Historical Periods before and after the Reform and Opening Up Is of Great Significance to Upholding and Developing Socialism with Chinese Characteristics

As early as 2013, President Xi Jinping pointed out: "The reason why I emphasize this issue is because if this major political issue is not handled properly, there will be serious political consequences" (Party Literature Research Office of the CPC Central Committee

2014a, 113). Reviewing the past development of the People's Republic of China and correctly interpreting the relationship between the two historical periods before and after the reform and opening up is of great importance historically, and of far-reaching practical significance if we are to accurately grasp the essence and main themes of the PRC's 70-year history, to enhance our understanding of the laws of governance of communist parties, of the laws of socialist construction, and of the laws of human social development, and for China to promote the development of the country in the new era and achieve its "two centenary" goals.

Correctly interpreting the relationship between the two historical periods can allow us to accurately grasp the essential nature and main thematic current of the past development of the People's Republic of China, so as to understand this 70-year history in a unified way. President Xi Jinping has pointed out: "We must insist on seeking truth from facts in studying and publicizing the Party's history, and must firmly grasp the theme, main line, mainstream, and essence of the Party's historical development" (*People's Daily* 2010). As this indicates, correctly interpreting the relationship between the two historical periods will give us a solid factual basis for understanding the 70-year history of the People's Republic of China, and will help us to firmly grasp the theme, main line, mainstream and essence of the PRC's historical development. The theme and main line that has run through the 70 years of the PRC is the history of the Chinese people in building a new socialist country and society under the leadership of the Communist Party of China. This new undertaking, unprecedented in history, is advancing through a continuous process of exploration. Through the people's struggles and quests, history has created the Communist Party of China, and the Party has led the Chinese people in recording achievements of a new, historic brilliance. Over the past 90 years, the CPC has relied firmly on the Chinese people to complete the new democratic revolution, to achieve national independence and the people's liberation. The CPC has completed the socialist revolution, has established the fundamental system of socialism, and has made great advances in socialist construction. It has carried out a great new revolution in the shape of reform and opening up, and has improved and developed socialism with Chinese characteristics. These three major achievements have fundamentally changed the future destiny of the Chinese people and the Chinese nation. They have put an end forever to the tragic situation of China in earlier decades, a situation of domestic turmoil and foreign invasion, poverty and weakness. They have begun the irreversible, historic march of contemporary China along the socialist path towards modernization and a glorious rejuvenation. If we fail to see the continuity between the new period of reform and opening up and the period that preceded it, we will find it impossible to understand the reasons why socialism with Chinese characteristics is socialism rather than some other doctrine. This will deny us an overall grasp of the 70-year history of PRC, and that history will be cut short.

Grasping the theme, main line, mainstream and essence of historical development does not mean we should ignore the twists, turns and mistakes that are also part of history. As President Xi Jinping has pointed out, when we examine the practice and explorations of socialist construction during the period before the reform and opening up,

We must adhere to the ideological line of seeking truth from facts, distinguish between the mainstream and the tributary, adhere to the truth, correct mistakes, learn from experiences and lessons, and on this basis, continue to promote the cause of the Party and the people.

The Communist Party of China has always taken a solemn attitude towards its faults and mistakes including those made by the Party leaders. First, the Party dares to admit its faults and mistakes; second, the Party is able to analyze the faults and mistakes correctly; third, the Party is able to resolutely correct the faults and mistakes. As a result, the faults and mistakes together with the Party's successful experiences have become valuable historical textbooks. (Xi 2013)

Correctly interpreting the relationship between the two historical periods tends to enhance our understanding of the laws of communist parties' governance, the laws of socialist construction, and the laws of development of human society. Socialist construction has its own laws, that must be strictly followed and that cannot be violated at any time. Simply relying on subjective good wishes and giving full play to people's subjective initiatives cannot result in things being done well. Only if we correctly understand the relationship between the two historical periods before and after the reform and opening up can we come to see how China has historically chosen Marxism and the socialist path through repeated comparisons and summaries in the process of promoting revolution, construction, and reform; how the Chinese communists have integrated the basic principles of Marxism with Chinese reality and the features of the times and independently taken our own path; and how they have gone through untold hardships and paid various costs to create and develop socialism with Chinese characteristics. We are thus able to understand that socialism with Chinese characteristics represents the fundamental achievement of the CPC and the Chinese people over 90 years of struggle, creation, and accumulation. It is the fundamental embodiment of the practice of reform and opening up over more than 40 years; it constitutes the realization of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation, the most fundamental dream of the Chinese nation in modern times; and it incorporates the splendid vision of the future and the unremitting quest of humanity for socialism in the modern epoch.

Correctly interpreting the relationship between the two historical periods will help to promote the new practice of the development of the country in the new era, as China strives to achieve the "two centenary" goals. History is a mirror. Learning from the past will help one to better know the present, and studying history will help one to be wise. Contemporary China is the continuation and development of the historical China. Adhering to and developing socialism with Chinese characteristics in the new era requires systematic study of Chinese history and culture, as well as the laws of the development of human history at a profound level, so as to imbibe wisdom from a deep reflection on history, and in this way, to move towards the future. History is the best teacher. It faithfully records the footsteps of each country and provides inspiration for humanity's future development. History is the best textbook. Reviewing the history of the People's Republic of China over the past 70 years and correctly interpreting the relationship between the two historical periods before and after the reform and opening up will aid in cohering public feeling, strength and wisdom to the greatest possible extent; it will help achieve an ideological consensus, and will lay the ideological foundations for the people of the whole country to unite and struggle together. There is no straightforward cause anywhere in the world. If we look at world history, we find that the development of any country or nation is full of ups and downs, even twists and turns. There were old sayings that,

“With much hardship and suffering, the jade is made”; “Many hardships make a nation, and great worry enlightens the saints”; “Failure is the mother of success.” The future is bright, but the road to the future is tortuous; this is the historical logic behind the development of all just causes. The reason China’s socialist cause is great is that before achieving continuous success, it first experienced hardships rare in the world. Direction determines path, while path determines destiny. History and practice have proved conclusively that only socialism can save China, and that only socialism with Chinese characteristics can develop China. Only by upholding and developing socialism with Chinese characteristics can China achieve its “two centenary” goals. Socialism with Chinese characteristics is a unity of continuity and periodicity. As Xi Jinping has emphasized,

Upholding and developing socialism with Chinese characteristics has been like writing a great article, for which Comrade Deng Xiaoping defined the basic ideas and principles. Both the third generation of the Party’s central leadership with Comrade Jiang Zemin at its core and the Party Central Committee with Comrade Hu Jintao as its general secretary have written wonderful sections of this great article. Now, the task of our generation of communists is to continue composing this mighty text. (Party Literature Research Office of the CPC Central Committee 2014a, 114)

Marx noted that, “Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past” (Marx 2010, 103). Looking back on history, we can clearly see that the birth and development of Marxism and the founding and development of the socialist countries were full of hardships and struggles. The establishing of the Communist Party of China, the founding of the People’s Republic of China, the implementation of China’s reform and opening up, and the promotion of the cause of socialism with Chinese characteristics in the new era were all initiated, developed and strengthened through the process of struggle. To deal properly with the important political issue of the relationship between the two periods under discussion, we must also carry forward the spirit of struggle and enhance our ability to engage in it. Looking forward to the prospects for a great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation, the Chinese people have good reason to feel confident. By the 100th anniversary of the founding of Communist Party of China, the Chinese people have built a moderately prosperous society in an all-round way. When the 100th anniversary of the founding of the People’s Republic of China comes to be celebrated, China will be recognized as a prosperous, democratic, civilized, harmonious and beautiful modern socialist country. The dream of a great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation will surely be realized on schedule.

Acknowledgments

This article is translated from Chinese by Associate Professor Shuqing Li at the Yantai Institute, China Agricultural University.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on Contributor

Gong Yun is a researcher and Vice President of the Academy of Marxism, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS), and Executive Deputy Director of the Research Center of Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era, CASS.

References

- Deng, X. 1994a. *Selected Works of Deng Xiaoping*, vol. 2. [In Chinese.] Beijing: People's Publishing House.
- Deng, X. 1994b. *Selected Works of Deng Xiaoping*, vol. 3. [In Chinese.] Beijing: People's Publishing House.
- Jin, C. 2009. "Talking about 'the First Thirty Years of the People's Republic of China.'" [In Chinese.] *Literature of the Communist Party of China*, no. 5: 29–36, 85.
- Jin, Y. 2013. "A Scientific and Dialectical Understanding of the Two Historical Periods after the Party Came to Power." [In Chinese.] *Observation and Ponderation*, no. 3: 9–13.
- Mao, Z. 1999a. *Collected Works of Mao Zedong*, vol. 6. [In Chinese.] Beijing: People's Publishing House.
- Mao, Z. 1999b. *Collected Works of Mao Zedong*, vol. 7. [In Chinese.] Beijing: People's Publishing House.
- Mao, Z. 1999c. *Collected Works of Mao Zedong*, vol. 8. [In Chinese.] Beijing: People's Publishing House.
- Marx, K. 2010. *Marx and Engels Collected Works*, vol. 11. Electronic edition. London: Lawrence & Wishart.
- Party Literature Research Office of the CPC Central Committee. 1991. *Selections of Important Documents since the 13th National Congress of the Communist Party of China*, vol. 1. [In Chinese.] Beijing: People's Publishing House.
- Party Literature Research Office of the CPC Central Committee. 2011a. *Selections of Important Documents since the 13th Plenary Session of the 11th Central Committee of the Communist Party of China*, vol. 2. [In Chinese.] Beijing: People's Publishing House.
- Party Literature Research Office of the CPC Central Committee. 2011b. *Selections of Important Documents since the 15th National Congress of the Communist Party of China*, vol. 1. [In Chinese.] Beijing: Central Party Literature Press.
- Party Literature Research Office of the CPC Central Committee. 2014a. *Selections of Important Documents since the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China*, vol. 1. [In Chinese.] Beijing: Central Party Literature Press.
- Party Literature Research Office of the CPC Central Committee. 2014b. *Excerpts from Xi Jinping's Expositions on Comprehensively Deepening Reform*. [In Chinese.] Beijing: Central Party Literature Press.
- People's Daily*. 2010. "National Party History Work Conference Held in Beijing." [In Chinese.] *People's Daily*, July 22.
- People's Daily*. 2015. "The CPC Central Committee Held a Symposium of Non-party Personages: Soliciting Opinions on the Proposals of the CPC Central Committee on Formulating the 13th Five-Year Plan for National Economic and Social Development." [In Chinese.] *People's Daily*, October 31.
- Xi, J. 2013. "Speech at the Symposium to Commemorate the 120th Anniversary of Comrade Mao Zedong's Birth." [In Chinese.] *People's Daily*, December 27.
- Xi, J. 2017. "Secure a Decisive Victory in Building a Moderately Prosperous Society in All Respects and Strive for the Great Success of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era—Delivered at the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China (October 18, 2017)." <https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/ce/ceegy/eng/rdwt/20171015/P020171109048753422373.pdf>.
- Xi, J. 2019. "Several Issues on Upholding and Developing Socialism with Chinese Characteristics." [In Chinese.] *Qiushi*, no. 7. http://www.qstheory.cn/dukan/qs/2019-04/01/c_1124307480.htm.

Xi, J. 2020. “Leadership of the Communist Party of China Is the Most Essential Feature of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics.” [In Chinese.] *Qiushi*, no. 14. http://www.qstheory.cn/dukan/qs/2020-07/15/c_1126234524.htm.

Xi, J. 2021. *On the History of the Communist Party of China*. [In Chinese.] Beijing: Central Party Literature Press.