The Discourse of “Chinese Marxism”

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I take up in this discussion a discourse on Marxism in the Chinese Communist movement that was aborted by the Cultural Revolution but has been reborn since the 1980s to claim the mantle of Chinese Marxism. Chinese Marxism as a specific discourse needs to be distinguished from “Marxism in China,” which is broader in compass and more diffuse. It refers to an ongoing effort “to make Marxism Chinese,” or “to integrate the universal truths of Marxism with the concrete circumstances of Chinese society.” The discourse also equates “Chinese Marxism” with Mao Zedong Thought as its foundational moment.

The discourse assumed recognizable form in the idea of New Democracy during the Yan'an period (1935–45), which also corresponded roughly to the years of the war of resistance against Japan (1937–45). It guided

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1 I use the quotation marks here to indicate reference to Chinese usage (Zhongguo Makesi zhuyi), and the description of a discourse. They are dispensed with below unless I use the term to refer to other works. I also prefer in this discussion “making Marxism Chinese” to the more common terms, sinicization or sinification, not only because it is a more literal translation of “Makesi zhuyi Zhongguohua,” but more importantly for interpretive reasons. The terms sinicization or sinification carry the suggestion of cultural assimilation to a “Sinic” space as Latinate equivalents for Hanhua (becoming Han) or tonghua (assimilation). Problematic in their application to imperial China, these usages are meaningless in the 20th century as Chinese society itself was undergoing radical change, raising the question of what the foreign was being assimilated to. “China” in the new national conception was in the process of being invented out of the dialectics of the past and the “West”, which was the source of the very idea of the nation. This dialectic is quite apparent in Communist usage, which sought not just to assimilate Marxism to some preexisting social or cultural entity, but to use Marxism as an instrument of change and an indispensable moment of inventing a new nation. The complexity is evident in the ambivalence toward past legacies of Communist leaders from Mao Zedong (1893–1976) to Hu Jintao (1942–) even as they speak of the glorious cultural legacies of the Chinese nation. It is most eloquently illustrated in the recent appearance and disappearance of the Confucius statue in Tiananmen square.
the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to victory over the Nationalist Party (Kuomintang) in 1949. It was quickly forgotten with the re-radicalization of the new communist regime by the mid-1950s that would culminate in the Cultural Revolution of the 1960s. The repudiation of Cultural Revolution Marxism after 1978 would prepare the grounds for another “great leap” in the unfolding of the discourse. Since then, but especially over the last decade, it has been the subject of intensive theorization in official Marxism, which inevitably colors all discussion of Marxism in the People’s Republic of China.

My discussion below is organized around these two periods of “great leap” in the unfolding of this discourse, the one associated with the name of Mao Zedong, the other with those of Deng Xiaoping and his successors. This is the periodization of Chinese Marxism that is sanctioned in official historiography, but with a critical twist. Official historiography is of obvious significance for comprehending the self-image of the Communist Party under the reform leadership, but it needs to be approached critically. A discourse does not just propose a certain way of thinking and writing; it also suppresses or

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2 This has become standard usage in recently published works on “Chinese Marxism”. For an example, see Guo Dehong, chief editor, Zhongguo Makesi zhuyi fazhan shi (Beijing, 2010).

3 A scholar in the People’s Republic of China (PRC), Hu Daping, has suggested recently that there has been a rejuvenation of interest in Marxism that he describes as “re-Marxization”. According to Hu, “Re-Marxization means that many Chinese Marxist scholars are beginning to reconsider Marx’s critique of modern capitalism in a different way under the conditions of market and globalization. In comparison with dominant ideology, it means: (1) there will be an emphasis on socialism with Chinese characteristics; (2) Marxism will be studied more as the critique of capitalism than as a guide to socialism; (3) if the process by which Marxism became the dominant ideology was the Marxization of old China, then re-Marxization demonstrates theoretically a new phase of Chinese modernization. Hu Daping, “Marxism in China,” Socialism and Democracy 24.3 (15 December 2010), 193–97, p. 193. “Re-Marxization” is visible in efforts to create a Marxist sociology (e.g. Sun Liping, Shen Yuan), in cultural studies deployments of Marxism (Cui Zhiyuan, Wang Hui, Wang Xiaoming), and work that stresses issues of subjectivity in Marxism (e.g. Zhang Yibing and the Center for the Study of Marxist Social Theory in Nanjing University). We might add that important work is produced also by party-affiliated institutions such as the Central Compilation and Translation Bureau and the Marxism Academy of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. While some of the work produced by these scholars and institutions critically engages problems of “socialism with Chinese characteristics”, it is also severely limited by the regime’s jealous guardianship over interpretations of Marxism. From its origins to the present, the discourse on Chinese Marxism has positioned itself in opposition to “left” tendencies. Yet, we need to remember that while they may have different visions of the trajectory of socialism in the PRC, few intellectuals of a Marxist bent would disagree about “making Marxism Chinese.”