BOOK REVIEW

Is China Socialist?

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Boer, Roland (2021), *Socialism with Chinese Characteristics: A Guide for Foreigners*, Springer, Singapore, pp. 323.

Setting the Context

The book under review challenges the opinion held by sections of scholars and China-watchers that, under Xi Jinping, and more generally after Mao Zedong, China has abandoned Marxism and its economy and society have moved further in the direction of capitalism. The author, Roland Boer, is a professor at the School of Philosophy, Renmin University of China. His research area is comparative Marxist philosophy. In this book, Boer makes a strong case for the practice of "Socialism with Chinese Characteristics," first expounded in a speech by Xi Jinping on the occasion of the 200th birth anniversary of Karl Marx in 2018. Boer argues that Xi Jinping's views are based on Marxism-Leninism, and are a continuation of Mao Zedong's political vision. For scholars and activists interested in understanding the theoretical underpinnings of the gigantic and progressive social experiment that is modern China, this is a book well worth reading.

Boer has subtitled his book "A Guide for Foreigners" and admits that he was one among those from the small number of countries that make up the "West" (which contains about 14 per cent of the world's population) which had misplaced notions about China. He claims that he rid himself of "the frameworks and assumptions" with which he had been brought up and educated. He quotes Mao Zedong here.

> Some foreigners say that our ideological reform is brainwashing. As I see it, they are correct in what they say. It is washing brains, that's what it is! This brain of mine was

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> washed to become what it is. After joining the revolution, it was slowly washed, washed for several decades. What I received before was all bourgeois education, and even some feudal education. (p. vii)

Boer spells out the purpose of his study clearly: "I offer a careful presentation of socialism with Chinese characteristics in light of the research undertaken by Chinese Marxist scholars . . . [and] overwhelmingly published in the Chinese language." (p. 1) Included in his references is a list of study sessions of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of China (CPC) devoted to theoretical and practical aspects of Marxism between 2013 and 2020 (p. 3).

Deng Xiaoping's Contributions

Besides the Preface, the book has eleven substantive chapters. Boer starts with an analysis of the contributions of the Chinese leader and political theorist Deng Xiaoping (1904–97) to the idea of building "socialism with Chinese characteristics." For Deng Xiaoping, this goal entailed four tasks. These were: 1) the liberation of thought from its enslavement, 2) the healthy exercise of democratic centralism, 3) seeking truth from facts as an inescapable dimension of liberating thought, and 4) generating new ideas that will provide the impetus to innovation to liberate the forces of production (p. 27). Deng Xiaoping, who was the architect of the phase of Reform and Opening Up, was not, Boer argues, trying to open a path to a capitalist system, but rather to socialism and communism (p. 108).

Analysing Contradictions

Boer uses the term "contradiction analysis" to describe the application of dialectics to the study of society and social change. The chapter entitled "Contradiction Analysis: History, Meaning, and Application," has a useful review of some of Lenin's important writings on dialectics, including his engagement with Hegel and the work entitled *On the Question of Dialectics*. It goes on to discuss Stalin's contributions to dialectics and contradiction analysis and the work in the USSR in the 1930s on dialectical materialism, before moving on to Mao's important contributions in his essays *On Contradiction* and *On Practice*.

Boer makes the point that to understand China's Marxist project is to understand the central role that dialectical materialism plays in shaping the CPC's worldview and methodology. In the years since the establishment of the People's Republic of China, the Chinese leadership has identified three principal contradictions. The principal contradiction reflects the understanding of the particular phase in China's economic and social development and the tasks that flow from that understanding. At the Eighth National Congress of CPC in 1956, the principal contradiction facing Chinese society was identified as being "between the need for building a modern industrial country and the reality of the backward agricultural economy," and flowing from this, the contradiction between "the needs of the people for rapid economic and

cultural development and the failure of current economic and cultural supplies to meet their needs" (p. 76). This was supplanted, 25 years later, by a new principal contradiction that was announced at the Sixth Plenary Session of the Eleventh Central Committee meeting in 1981, after the period of Cultural Revolution, a period Boer characterises as one of "chaos and loss." This contradiction, according to the CPC, was between "backward social production and the ever-growing material and cultural needs of the masses" (p. 76). A full 36 years later, in 2017, this formulation was replaced by a new principal contradiction, which was announced by Xi Jinping at the Nineteenth Congress of the CPC. This contradiction was between "unbalanced and inadequate development and the people's ever-growing needs for a better life . . ." (p. 76).

Boer pays some attention to the process of Reform and Opening Up in Chapter 4, a policy that was formulated in 1978 under Deng Xiaoping but which continued into what he calls the "wild 90s," when the question of opening up to developed capitalist economies while maintaining self-reliance and sovereignty assumed ever greater importance for China (p. 86). He sees the policy of Reform and Opening Up as a socialist project, one that involves the relationship between rural and urban; collective and individual (as reflected in the Household Responsibility System (HRS), and encapsulated by the term "eating from one big pot"); and equality and inequality under socialism (p. 86). The HRS, he argues, is a policy to enable socialist democracy; it does not lead to income differentiation but to socio-economic well-being for all (pp. 87–8). As he notes, in China

> . . . villages today continue to own their land collectively. Decisions concerning how the land is used by households are up to the village itself. For example, Xiaogang village flourished during the 1980s, but found it had to shift to leasing land in the 1990s when young people began going to the cities to work.[1] By the 2000s, with the deployment of a new generation of technologies, the village once again began pooling resources to make the most of the new situation. (p. 87)

In this context, Boer flags a significant document called "Decision of the CPC Central Committee on Several Issues Concerning the Comprehensive Deepening of Reform," produced by the Third Plenary Session of the CPC Central Committee in November 2013, a year after Xi Jinping had become the general secretary of the CPC (p. 90). The document emphasises that "public ownership is the key, side-by-side with other diverse forms of ownership." The document is clear that markets and planning "are components (*tizhi*) of the overall socialist system" (p. 90).

[1] Xiaogang is a village in Fengyang County in Anhui Province of China. In November, 1978, representatives from the 18 families of this village entered an agreement to subdivide their collective land, with individual families working their allocated plots to meet government quotas, and then sell any surplus for their own benefit. In the following year, the farmers of Xiaogang village produced six times the amount of grain compared to the previous year, and the per capita income of the farmers increased dramatically. This led to the implementation of the household responsibility system and of the rural reform that drove the first period of the Reform and Opening Up.

Boer makes the important point that socialism does not emerge ready-made once rural and urban workers take control through a Communist Party, especially if the country is relatively underdeveloped. The work of reform and construction can only be done after the Communist Party gains power through a revolution (p. 92). One needs to add that this task is made many times more difficult by imperialist encirclement and the relentless militarisation that is a key feature of contemporary capitalism.

Of course, reforms are part of the agenda both before the socialist revolution and afterwards, in the transition to socialism and communism. But it must also be noted that the agenda of reforms for a revolutionary transformation has to be at all times one that advances the revolutionary cause, a point on which Boer seems to be inconsistent. When he approvingly cites two Chinese authors to the effect that

> Chinese material distinguishes between two dialectically related stages: the period from 1949 to 1978, with its fully planned economy, becomes the stage of revolution, while the period from 1978 to the present is the stage of reform . . .

he must also keep in mind that the CPC document under discussion itself speaks of the Reform and Opening Up being a "great new revolution . . . led by the Party under the new conditions of the new era" (p. 92).

Elsewhere in the book, Boer himself argues, quoting Lenin, for the view that the reforms in the transition to socialism must be those that advance the socialist cause. In any event, the centrality of planning in the period from 1949 to 1978, and the far greater use of market mechanisms in the period after 1978 can hardly be the criteria to distinguish between "revolution" and "reform." Here, Boer quotes Xi Jinping approvingly:

> The period before 1978 laid the necessary groundwork for socialist construction, while the period after 1978 enabled a far greater development so that China has not fallen into the disaster that befell the Soviet Union . . . (p. 92)

While this statement contains a partial truth, the role of hostile imperialism, especially in the 1980s with the emergence to dominance of finance capital and neoliberal globalisation, should not be missed in understanding the Soviet denouement.

Socialist Market Economy

In the chapter "China's Socialist Market Economy and Planned Economy," Boer highlights the confusions and misunderstandings around the idea of "socialist market economy," a concept to which the CPC leadership has been committed for some time now. He argues that a planned economy and a market economy are both part of the overall socialist system (p. 127) and marshals evidence for this from the writings of Marxist theoreticians, including the writings and speeches of Mao Zedong, Deng Xiaoping, and subsequent leaders of the CPC, through to Xi Jinping.

Although he does not say so in so many words, he argues that while a centrally planned economy enabled China to achieve rapid economic development initially, contradictions between the growth of the productive forces and centralised planning emerged, presumably because of the more complex and diversified economy created by rapid growth under planning. There are two points that Boer seeks to emphasise in this context. One is that planning *per se* does not define a socialist economy, as planning can also be (and has been) a feature of capitalist economies. Similarly, the use of market mechanisms is not exclusive to capitalism and can be of relevance to socialist construction as well. Boer traces the several stages through which policies concerning the appropriate use of both planning and market mechanisms evolved in China. The acceptance of markets as instruments of economic policy came slowly in socialist China. He identifies three stages in the evolution of policy with regard to the use of markets: the breakthrough, when there was policy acceptance that socialism can engage in a market economy (1979–82); the transition, when planning and the market were combined (1982–89); and, finally, the establishment of a socialist market economy (1989–93) (p. 129). At the Third Plenary Session of the Fourteenth Central Committee of the CPC in November 1993, the following formulation was accepted:

> The socialist market economic institutional form is integrated with the basic socialist system. The establishment of a socialist market economic institutional form is to make the market play a fundamental role in the allocation of resources under the state's macro-control. (p. 118)

The important point is that we are discussing the use of markets *within a socialist economy*. Deng Xiaoping argued that planning happens under capitalism too and that both planning and markets should be seen as economic means to serve a larger (presumably socialist) system. He also argued that the essence of socialism is the "liberation and development of the productive forces, elimination of exploitation and polarisation, and the ultimate achievement of prosperity for all" (p. 118). Boer argues that " . . . the common institutional form of a market economy is not necessarily capitalist, but is shaped by the larger socio-economic system of which it is a component," and that it is therefore appropriate to identify both strengths and weaknesses even while using them (p. 127).

Socialist Modernisation

In the chapter titled "Seeking a *Xiaokang* Society, or, Socialist Modernisation," Boer lays stress on the goals of the four modernisations. The concept of four modernisations has a long history in socialist China, beginning with Zhou Enlai who said in early 1963: "If we want to build a powerful socialist country, we must modernise agriculture, industry, national defence, and science and technology." Mao Zedong stressed this idea, as did Deng Xiaoping, who took the four modernisations to a new level, according to Boer. In 1979, Deng articulated the content of four modernisations in the following terms:

> The so-called four modernisations are aimed at changing the poor and backward situation in China, gradually raising the living standards of the Chinese people, restoring China to a position in international affairs commensurate with its status, and making more contributions to humankind. The four modernisations we are going to achieve are those with a Chinese style . . . (p. 139)

After Deng, the CPC leadership under Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao continued to follow the four modernisations. Xi Jinping defined the goal as reaching the stage of a "well-off society in an all-round way" (p. 156).

Human Rights, Democracy

On the stand by the CPC on the two important issues of sovereignty and human rights, Boer distinguishes between

> . . . the Western liberal tradition, which is based on individual mastery over private property, [which] leads to a core concern with civil and political rights, and has an end-run in identity politics [and] . . . the Chinese Marxist approach, which has its prerequisite in anti-hegemonic (or anti-colonial) sovereignty, entailing non-interference by other countries. (p. 165)

There is a core right of socio-economic well-being, Boer argues, "from which flow civil, political, cultural, and environmental rights" (p. 165). He points out that the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights implies that sovereignty itself is a human right, for it is equated again and again with the "inalienable right" to freedom.

On the issue of democracy, Boer recalls the observations that Deng made in 1979: "The democracy that the Chinese people need today can only be socialist democracy or people's democracy, not bourgeois individualistic democracy" (p. 191). Boer then discusses the electoral and consultative aspects of democracy in China. There are five levels at which electoral democracy functions in China – from elections to the people's congresses in villages, minority nationality townships and towns at the bottom rung to the supreme legislative body of the National People's Congress at the top (p. 193). There is the consultative and consensus-building aspect of democracy at work in China as well. Boer quotes from a 2006 CPC document that states that, in addition to elections and voting, people must "engage in full consultation before making major decisions and reach as much consensus as possible on issues of common interest" (p. 194). Indeed, Boer's discussion on socialist democracy covers much ground, dealing with the issue as theorised by socialist thinkers over time.

Boer devotes a separate chapter to the contributions of Xi Jinping, in which he cites from several statements made by Xi to support the contention that the path that socialist China has elected to pursue today is based on a Marxist-Leninist framework. Boer is of the view that the increased cultural confidence that the Chinese nation and its leaders demonstrate in dealing with the rest of the world and contemporary challenges arises substantially from the practice of "socialism with Chinese characteristics."