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Chinese Dreams of Socialism—Visions of a Better Future

Gerda Wielander

Introduction

In the autumn of 2013, following the third plenum of the 18th Party Congress, China's new premier Xi Jinping issued a 5000 character-long communiqué in which he outlined the aims of the new leadership and its ideological foundations. Xi had made his mark a year earlier by first mentioning the 'Chinese dream', thus presenting journalists, China watchers and academics with the gift of a metaphor that has become a staple in their headlines and analyses. In the party communiqué, Xi once again mentions the China dream; specifically speaking of the 'Chinese dream of reinvigorating the Chinese nation', which will be realised by building a 'strong, wealthy, democratic, civilized, harmonious country [achieved by the means of] socialist modernization' (Xi, 2013; translation by the author).

In the context of such political rhetoric, this chapter analyses socialism as a category of 'Otherness' in China's political development. It is argued that 'Otherness' persists in two distinct areas: on the one hand socialism emerged from an 'Other', essentially Western, intellectual tradition. Yet its visionary nature also held the promise of creating an 'other' China; one distinct from the weak and beleaguered remnant of a once powerful empire and one that might be able to leave its social problems behind. The concept of socialism quickly gained wide legitimacy in China, as an instrument for the interpretation of Chinese society and a tool for policy implementation. Most importantly, it held the promise of empowerment as a nation built in a mould different from Western societies. Socialism promised China the chance for establishing a 'politics of the Other', not as an act of self-exoticisation, but as a way to be equal(ly strong), yet culturally and morally different from its Western counterparts.

This chapter is divided into three parts. The first part examines the meanings of socialism in the first decades of the twentieth century, which ranged from vague notions of social harmony to calls for social revolution and upheaval. This section shows that moderate concepts of social equality achieved through policy and governance, which closely resembled European socialist thinking of the time, were forced to give way to the concept of social revolution and continuous class struggle as a means to empower the Chinese nation and to liberate itself from Western economic and intellectual imperialism. Section two presents Mao's re-interpretation

of Marxism, which promised a radical change of society in order to put into practice the vision of a modern, socialist China which would overtake the West in terms of industrial production and scientific development. This socialism was culturally inflected and distinct from Western or Soviet versions. It promised a vision of plenty, which stood in sharp contrast to the realities of the day, but which has in many ways been exceeded in China today. Finally, the third part of the chapter contends that Deng Xiaoping's 'Socialism with Chinese Characteristics' was a conscious reinterpretation rather than a rejection of Maoism, and constituted a tool to prepare China's integration into the world economy. It is further argued that Deng's socialism –like Mao's– also served as a marker of difference. Built on this legacy, socialism remains a key signifier of Chinese official identity, whose meaning continues to be debated, reconfigured and described in culturally sensitive terms, be it the Confucian-inflected 'relatively prosperous', 'harmonious' society or Xi's Chinese 'dreams'. The chapter concludes that socialism as China's core ideology continues to be presented as a political category that holds promise of a distinctly Chinese vision of the future; socialism is a key feature of Chinese national and political identity today and a key characteristic of the 'China model', which serves as a new and powerful 'Other' in global politics.

Chinese thinkers first started to contemplate socialism in the context of modernization. From the start in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, modernization was not merely a rational striving for prosperity, peace, or freedom. Along with those aims there was always a great preoccupation about how the Chinese culture should or should not be altered in pursuit of these goals (Metzger, 1996: 9). While the capitalist model practised by the West offered answers to China's economic development issues, its problems were also evident to Chinese reformers. Socialism's appeal to modernisers did not lie in providing a solution to current problems. Its attraction lay in the fact that it was a Western, but hitherto unrealised vision of a more fair society; it thus provided an alternative pathway to capitalism and the modernization model of the West. Starting the modernization process relatively late compared to the big nation states against which Chinese intellectuals, political activists and leaders measured the progress of their own nation also provided the opportunity to do things differently, and possibly better. Pursuing socialism offered the promise and held the potential of avoiding the mistakes of the West by building a modern, yet uniquely Chinese society. As Xi Jinping's 2013 communiqué shows, the search for a definition of what exactly socialism should mean and how it was to be achieved is what has continued to shape China's social and political developments for the last one hundred years.

Social Harmony vs. Social Revolution: Different Positions in the First Half of the Twentieth Century

Depending on where one marks its starting point, the history of Chinese socialism is about 120 years old. While it may seem obvious to associate its beginnings with the founding of the Chinese Communist Party in 1921, the earliest instance of ideas of socialism being discussed was in fact Chinese missionary publications of the 1870s. European and Christian ideas of socialism fed into a famous utopia called *Datong Shu* (Book of Great Unity) by Kang Youwei¹, and continued to influence Kang's younger colleague Liang Qichao (1873-1929), arguably the most influential intellectual of his time. The *Book of Great Unity* was only published in 1935, but various chapters of it were available in the burgeoning Chinese printing press of the early twentieth century, and its ideas were widely known among the reformers of the time. It provides a comprehensive view of an ideal world and society including a step-by-step programme to be followed in order to achieve this ideal state of being. Key to Kang's vision of the 'Great Unity' was the removal of nine barriers in the world. These barriers, which refer to nations, class, race, gender, family, profession, inconsistency (referring to laws), species, and suffering (Bauer, 1971: 418) need to be removed in order to attain the ideal of a worldwide egalitarian society that knows no national boundaries, speaks in one world language, believes in one (new) religion and is entirely vegetarian (as all species are equal, animals cannot be killed for consumption). Kang's vision included the eradication of all racial and gender differences in appearance (rather than equal value of their difference), the abolition of marriage in favour of time-limited love contracts, the dissolution of the family, and the establishment of comprehensive social service organisations. In this world of Great Unity only four things were forbidden: laziness, personal cult, competition, and abortion (see Bauer, 1971; also compare Callahan, 2013: 109-114). Radical and visionary in its conception, Kang's utopia was hugely influential on the next generation.

From the very early days of reforms in the nineteenth century, which were characterized by the intent to learn useful methods and tools from the West while retaining a Chinese cultural essence, Chinese thinkers concerned with the optimal pathway for the future hoped to find a way for the country which considered not only the West's successes, but also its failures. In this context, the effect of the First World War on Western societies and economies as witnessed by many of China's reformers was of crucial importance. It led to a profound disillusionment with the Western system; at the same time, reports from Bolshevik Russia

provided a new source of inspiration. Socialism offered a great paradox by being both Western and anti-Western inasmuch as it derived from the Western intellectual tradition, but also provided a tool to critique the socio-economic order of the Western world and its impact on Asia. Furthermore, socialism was linked to the idea of a strong state, an important concern of Chinese reformers. As Edmund Fung puts it “to be socialist was to be modern, international, and as advanced as possible” (Fung, 2010: 194).

Culturally speaking, socialism chimed with Confucian notions of the rejection of material profit, as well as core cultural values like universal love and social harmony as expressed in one of China’s classics, The ‘Book of Rites’ (*Liji*).² Concepts used to this day in socialist rhetoric, like *datong* (great harmony), *xiaokang* (being relatively prosperous) and *he* (harmony) are all derived from this classical source and evoke an ideal past to help identify with modern socialism. Thus adopting socialism as a modern vision for China allowed reformers to strategically tap into pre-modern Chinese thought.³

Against this philosophical background, it was The Revolutionary Alliance Programme of 1905 which first called for ‘social revolution’ to ward off the negative consequences of capitalism as observed in the West. Thus it was the founding fathers of the CCP’s main rival, Sun Yatsen’s Guomindang (GMD), who first incorporated socialist ideals into their manifesto⁴. *Minsheng*, most commonly translated as ‘people’s livelihood’, was one of the three pillars of Sun Yatsen’s ideology. He first used the term in 1905 and returned to it in 1919, revising and reflecting upon it until his death in 1925. Sun likened it at various times to ‘socialism’ as well as ‘communism’, although Sun’s ‘communism’ needs to be understood not in Marxist terms, but as an interpretation of the traditional Chinese philosophical term *datong* by Kang Youwei. It is an ideal, a utopia, whose appeal was wide enough to form a basis upon which to unite the various factions within the GMD at the time (Bergere, 1998: 352-387 and Myers, 1989: 240).

For Sun, the mainspring of social evolution was harmony, and the principle force in human evolution was cooperation, not conflict, which he abhorred. By trying to understand the origins of the various social conflicts Sun thought it would be possible to draw up policies to ensure economic development for all social groups, and hence to preserve the environment and to restore social harmony, and crucially, avoid revolution. *Minsheng* was synonymous with subsistence and became the driving force of social change in Sun’s ideology.

Associating socialism exclusively with the CCP thus ignores the fact that non-communist intellectuals with a socialist impulse formed a crucial part of the reformist alternative, which

was an important feature of modern Chinese political thought. These reformist socialists during the Republican period had no Marxist inheritance; instead they were statist liberals and social democrats (Fung, 2010: 3). For Zhang Dongsun (1886-1973), one of China's foremost reformist socialists in the Republican period, socialism, rather than a social or economic system, was a view of life as well as a worldview, which held the promise of spiritualist and materialistic transformation for all parts of society, individual or collective. It presented a 'new morality', which promised to address the unsatisfactory status quo (Zhang as quoted in Fung, 2010: 197). Instead of linking socialism to China's cultural values, Zhang Dongsun drew parallels between socialism and Christianity, both important forms of Western life and culture, which to him contained shared values. He also considered all forms of socialism as quasi-religious (Zhang as quoted in Fung, 2010: 236). In this sense there is a link between the socialist reformers of the Republic and many liberals in today's China (some of them Christians), who emphasise the importance of the spiritual and the transcendental in their promotion of an alternative social and political system for the People's Republic of China.⁵ What Zhang Dongsun shared with Liang Qichao and Sun Yatsen was the promotion of social harmony over social struggle; to him and to many of China's reformist socialists, socialism was about promoting the interest of the whole society, not just that of one class: the 'greatest happiness for the greatest number' as Zhang put it using Jeremy Bentham's term (Zhang as quoted in Fung, 2010: 248).

However, these gentle ideals of a new society and social harmony achieved through social policy and governing structures based on a new morality stood in stark contrast to the actual ground realities. As Liang Qichao observed, workers of the West were concerned with whether they were paid sufficiently to own property—a reality rather far removed from the economic situation of Chinese workers and peasants in early twentieth century China. After seeing the realities of the Chinese hinterland outside the economic and intellectual centres, Zhang Dongsun, too, realised that quick industrialisation to create wealth was the only solution to China's social problems. Tackling poverty was considered a far more urgent issue than dreaming up lofty visions of a new society based on social harmony. For reformist socialists, the rise of the capitalist class was therefore seen as a necessary step on the way to socialism. It was also one key issue on which they differed from their revolutionary counterparts in the CCP. For reformist socialists, socialism was not about levelling down the rich—a thought later echoed by Deng Xiaoping, who declared that socialism did not mean equal poverty—but levelling up the poor, which could only be achieved through economic development. To reformist socialists, socialism was not about poverty or redistribution, but

about creating more wealth for all. This meant that wealth creation through industrialisation and capitalist methods had to take precedence over issues of social inequality.

According to historian Arif Dirlik, in its origins, socialism in China was an instrument of national and political development, which, in the priority it assigned to national interest, allowed for the possibility of capitalist methods within socialist development as long as they furthered the national interest. As Dirlik argues, China rendered capitalism a dynamic source of national development, and regarded socialism as the guarantee of national unity against the socially divisive consequences of capitalism (Dirlik, 2005: 19). From the 1920s until today, the discussions and disagreements among socialists, and discord within the party after 1949 centred on exactly what role capitalist methods were allowed to play and whether national needs, in terms of economic growth, for example, could be dissociated from the socialist ideology. Eventually, because of the strong nationalist character of the Chinese socialist project, capitalism was identified with Western imperialism—China's 'Other'—while socialism has been appropriated as a Chinese characteristic.

Reformers of the Republican period (1912-1949) believed in a moderate, evolutionary socialism, which served as a tool to tame or humanise capitalism. From this emerged a belief in social democracy, which was the mainstream of socialist thought during this era. Social democracy offered a vision of modernity that in one form or another was shared across the political spectrum. Evolving out of a group which Liang Qichao headed until his death in 1929, the State Socialist Party was formed in 1934. It embraced Sun Yatsen's ideals, but differed from the Guomindang in its rejection of one party rule and its advocacy of constitutionalism and individual liberty. The party represented a liberal socialism, which recognised the importance of capitalism, while hoping to regulate it through involvement of the state in the form of central planning. To them, the interests of the Chinese nation came before the interests of class⁶, which was regarded as an international or global concept.⁷ Other than Zhang Dongsun, the main proponents of this path were Zhang Junmai (1886-1929), and Luo Longji (1898-1965). Zhang Junmai (also known as Carsun Chang) was a social democratic politician, Luo Longji an intellectual and human rights theorist. During the war years, they formed part of the Chinese Democratic League, a loose association of smaller political parties, with a political agenda that was distinct from the Guomindang on the one hand and the Communists on the other. They were referred to as the so-called 'Third Force', which was politically liberal and promoted 'fair distribution', a minimum wage, an eight-hour day for workers, and absolute equality for women. They firmly believed in property rights and

rejected the concept of class struggle (Fung, 2010: 224-238). As such, their platform resembled the welfare socialism of Europe, rather than a distinctly Chinese vision for the future.

Only Socialism can Save China: Mao's Socialist Utopia

The reformist socialist thought represented by Liang Qichao, Zhang Junmai and Zhang Dongsun, which emphasised wealth creation before redistribution required peace and democratic processes—conditions not prevailing in China in the 1940s. Despite having some political currency, the reformists did not belong to the mainstream; these were middle-class intellectuals who had no experience of social activism or any involvement with the grassroots, and ultimately were not able to influence the social and political development of the following decades. This fell to Mao Zedong's Communist Party, which emerged victoriously from the civil war against the Guomindang, and which established the People's Republic of China in 1949.

Wang Hui, one of China's foremost left-wing intellectuals, argues that from the start, modernization in China constituted a teleological historical perspective and worldview. Socialist modernization in China not only pointed to the difference between the socialist and the capitalist system, but it also implied an entire set of its own values. Modernization in the Chinese discourse includes inherent tendencies to socialist ideological content and values (Wang and Karl, 1998: 13), thereby resulting in the continuing dichotomy of Western capitalist modernity and Chinese socialist modernity. There is no question that Mao's interpretation of socialism and the way he tried to implement it from the 1950s until his death were central in turning socialism into a marker of a Chinese official identity, with lasting effects till date.

Mao's thinking on Chinese socialism evolved gradually. During the 1940s it was still based on a strategy of development that allowed for the continued existence of capitalism in the transition to socialism in order to develop the economy, although there were recurring debates over the role of capitalism on the road to socialism.⁸ During the decades that are now commonly referred to as the 'Mao years' (1958-1978), capitalism and socialism came to be distinguished much more sharply, even though questions of the relative importance of class interest and national interest remained even then, as socialist development was linked to national development (Dirlik, 2005: 41). While reform socialists, including Sun Yatsen, saw

social organization as secondary to nation-building and liberation from foreign imperialism, Mao's Communists did not consider these two processes to be sequential. To them, national development and social revolution were considered integral to one another – one could not be achieved without the other. The dominant thought pattern was that only socialism could save China.

It is not the intention here to list the failings of Mao's policies in the name of socialism, or to discuss their disastrous consequences. Instead, this section attempts to highlight the continuities in socialist thinking before and after the Mao years, which hinge upon the concept of 'otherness', and which were brought into starker relief through Mao's interpretation of Marxism-Leninism and the radical policies, which followed from it. Mao's main shift with regard to Lenin and Stalin concerned the relationship between the working class and the peasantry; Mao considered Lenin's and Stalin's mistrust of the peasantry misguided, and, in lieu of a sizable urban proletariat, placing the peasantry (rather than the working class) at the heart of his theoretical thinking was an inevitable response to Chinese social realities. It resulted in a fundamental shift whereby the original theory was reinvented in a new context. As Slavoj Žižek puts it,

the violent transplantation of a theory into a foreign context radically affects the original theory itself, so that, when this theory 'returns to itself in its otherness' (reinvents itself in the foreign context), its very substance changes - and yet this shift is not just the reaction to an external shock, it remains an inherent transformation of the same theory of the overcoming of capitalism (Mao and Žižek, 2007: 4).

From the very start, Chinese socialism, by virtue of providing a vision of a future society which, given the social realities at the time, required a much larger leap of faith than European socialist visions of the same period, had a strong utopian streak. This utopia of the socialist paradise of abundance became the official narrative of the Chinese state project during the Mao years. Communism, the ultimately desired endpoint in this teleological vision of history, was declared to be within reach and described by officials in the following terms:

After all, what does communism mean? ... First taking good food and not merely eating one's fill. At each meal one enjoys a meat diet, eating chicken, pork, fish or eggs....delicacies like monkey brains, swallows' nests, white fungi are served to each according to his needs...Second, clothing. Everything required is available. Clothing of various designs, styles, not a mass of black garments or a mass of blue outfits. After working hours, people will wear silk, satin and woollen suits....Foxes will multiply. When all people's communes raise foxes, there will be overcoats lined with fox furs...Third, housing. Housing is brought up to the standard of modern cities. What should be modernised? People's communes. Central heating is provided in the north and air-conditioning in the south. All will live in high buildings.

Needless to say, there are electric lights, telephones, piped water, receiving sets and TV...Fourth, communication. Except for those who take part in races, all travellers and commuters will use transport. Air services are opened in all directions and every county has an airport...The time is not remote when each will have an aeroplane. Fifth, higher education is for everyone and education is popularised. Communism means this: food, clothing, housing, transportation, cultural entertainment, science institutes, and physical culture. The sum total of these means Communism (quoted from a Red Guard magazine in MacFarquhar, 1983: 84.)

Utopian in the 1950s, in today's China much of it has been realised or even exceeded. Mao's own utopian thinking rested on a more theoretical and ideological plain – quite possibly enabled by the relative comfort in which he lived throughout his life as a leader. In the area of industrial development, Mao's main aim was to break down the barrier between the more developed urban and the less developed rural areas, the main theoretical argument behind the follies and disasters of the Great Leap Forward⁹ (1958-61). Continuous revolution was considered a necessary process to change cultural values and beliefs, and to prevent a reverting to capitalism; the fate of individuals was of no concern to Mao's visions of a socialist society. As Rana Mitter (2004) has argued, Mao's Cultural Revolution must be seen as an exaggerated and extreme manifestation of the iconoclastic spirit of the May Fourth Movement,¹⁰ which was the first to vehemently question China's cultural traditions. But there are also those who insist on a positive legacy from the Cultural Revolution, in particular once the violence of the first two years had been controlled. Academics like Mobeo Gao point to massive infrastructure programmes, radical educational reforms, innovative experimentation in literature and the arts, an expansion of healthcare and education in rural areas and rapid development of rural enterprises, some of which have laid the foundations for the successes of the reform era (Gao, 2008: 5).

Nonetheless, the rosy image of the Chinese socialist paradise was primarily confined to fiction and art, including the propaganda posters of the period, which despite our knowledge about the reality of living conditions of the time continue to exude a strange fascination. Gone further than any other socialist revolution, China's Cultural Revolution for a while, and seen from afar, provided great inspiration to Europe's left-wing elite. Although a product of the Western intellectual tradition, socialism had turned into something 'other'—a different way of life and politics—onto which dreams of alternative social realities could be projected.

From Socialism with Chinese Characteristics to Socialism as a Chinese Characteristic

It is Deng Xiaoping (1904-1997), who is credited to be the father of China's economic reforms encapsulated in 'The Four Modernizations', the central policy that emerged from the third plenum of the 11th party congress in 1978. It referred to four main areas of modernization, which were agriculture, industry, science and technology, and national defence. One key element of the reforms was 'opening up', a literal reference to the opening of borders and restrictions on communications and international exchange, but also a more metaphorical reference to liberalisation. Deng is famously associated with a pragmatic approach to economic policy and considered responsible for China's embrace of capitalist methods, or as Wang Hui has put it, for China's "complete conformism to the dictates of capital and the activities of the market" (Wang and Karl, 1998: 9). However, the emphasis on the results of Deng's reforms and the rapid change they brought to China risks overlooking the ideological links between Mao and Deng on the one hand, and the continuity between early reform socialist thinking during the Republican period and Chinese socialism today. Crucially, Deng, while clearly influenced by the economic realities of the Mao years, referred to pre-1949 socialist thinking (particularly Zhang Dongsun) when he declared that socialism did not mean equal poverty. His 'socialism with Chinese characteristics' was defined as eliminating exploitation and attaining common wealth; as a political program to develop market tools while rejecting capitalist vices, thus still echoing the search for an alternative modernity. He wanted to develop a market economy, which, as Deng argued, would result in an all inclusive '*xiaokang*' (moderately prosperous) society (Lin, 2006: 5), thus resorting to early Chinese cultural terminology to describe a certain stage of development on the road to socialism.

Instead of repudiating 'Mao Zedong Thought'¹¹

in its entirety, Deng chose to reinterpret the very definition of Mao Zedong Thought, which under him was expanded and considered to include thought by Liu Shaoqi (1898-1969), Zhou Enlai (1989-1976) and Deng Xiaoping himself. Furthermore, the selective use of Mao Zedong Thought and its evaluation in the early 1980s as being '70 percent good, 30 percent bad' has led to the paradoxical situation that not all of Mao Zedong's thought is now in fact considered to be part of Mao Zedong Thought (Mackerrass, Taneeja, and Young, 1998: 102). In that way, Deng achieved a 'reform and opening up' of China's ideological foundation, allowing it to grow and expand, and laying the foundation for the future inclusion of new ideological projects, including Deng's own *gaige kaifang* (reform and opening up). Xi Jinping's 2013

communiqué lists Marxism-Leninism, Mao Zedong Thought, Deng Xiaoping Theory, ‘The Three Represents’¹² (Jiang Zemin’s legacy) and ‘scientific development’ (a nod to Hu Jintao) as the core ideological underpinnings of the Chinese state today.

Although China is now commonly referred to as a ‘post-socialist’¹³ society, in ideological terms there are no signs that China’s party-state has left socialism behind. On the contrary, socialism remains a key ingredient of the ‘China model’, and an important characteristic in Chinese national identity construction. What has shifted, together with the re-evaluation of Mao Zedong, is the primacy of the economy in the project of building socialism, and the accepted theory that China is still in the ‘initial stages of socialism’. Simply put, the CCP today is as committed to the project of building socialism as Mao was; what has changed is the timeframe within which this is seen to be achievable, and the role capitalist methods are allowed to play in this project.

One sign that beliefs and values of socialism have not been entirely dismissed is the question of landownership. Proposals for inheritable landownership rights to be bestowed on small farmers were defeated in 1992. Although there have been reforms since, land reforms, i.e. far-reaching reforms regarding the ownership and right to sell land, continue to be anticipated in China, but have so far failed to materialise. At the same time, Xi Jinping’s afore-mentioned communiqué stresses the importance of state-owned industry and the dominant role of the public-ownership system, despite the emphasis on the market as a decisive factor in the economy. The document sounds reminiscent of Mao when it points to the dual structure of town and country as the main obstacle restraining the integration of urban and rural development, and sees the answer in new types of industry-agriculture and urban-rural relationships where industry stimulates agriculture (Xi, 2013).

Far from being irrelevant, political theory remains important in today’s China. In the absence of a democratic process, ownership of theory forms an important source of legitimacy, although there are few signs that the theory is received in the population at large. However, the fact that the CCP has not officially renounced socialist values also means that they can be invoked in grassroots protests. In fact, as Gao Mobo argues, the concept of class struggle, while rejected by the party and the intelligentsia, is one legacy from the Mao era that has made the farmer and other ordinary Chinese aware of their rights and of the idea of equality (Gao, 2008: 192). Equally, many of the generation that has worked in the rural areas during the Cultural Revolution are willing to speak for the rural poor, or are the party’s most scathing

critics. In them, the combination of socialist ideals, including class struggle, is enacted as non-referential criticism of the incumbent leadership. It is thus ironic that it is the generation that allegedly suffered most during the Cultural Revolution, that is often most critical of the current regime's abandonment of socialist principles in practice.

Intellectuals in China and abroad today also try to salvage positive lessons from the calamities of the Mao years and their write-off in official historiography and international publications as 'ten lost years'. An interesting, but often overlooked fact is that those criticizing the Chinese government from the extreme left are subject to similar forms of repression to those advocating political reform in the liberal sense. The internet is often presented as a forum of liberal democratic dissent, but it is important to note that ultra-left and Maoist voices also use the same technology and medium to debate salient political points, or to criticize the current leadership's take on the Mao years.¹⁴

In Mobo Gao's words,

negative lessons can be drawn from the Mao era, so that violence should be avoided as much as possible and measures should be taken before violence erupts. Positive lessons—such as popular democracy; grassroots participation in management and production; and cheap and locally adopted and traditionally proved healthcare and education—can also be drawn from the Mao era. The ideas and practices of Chinese socialist democracy should be made use of. It is along these lines that we should imagine an alternative model of development in China. Modernity does not have to be totally Western either in terms of governance or in terms of production organization and technology' (Gao, 2008: 201).

This alternative modernity—or 'China Dream', as it is now commonly referred to—continues to be characterized by the insistence on Chinese exceptionalism, which according to Kang Xiaoguang's definition includes a notion of racial superiority, a unique China model, an elitist government, a paternalistic dictatorship, and radical cultural difference.¹⁵

Chinese liberals, on the other hand, have very little time for either positive considerations of the Mao years, or notions of a 'benign Confucian dictatorship'. Liberalism has become the most important political orientation of reform-minded intellectuals in China since the 1990s, although by far not all who consider themselves liberals agree with the desirability of a multi-party democracy in China. Similar to the afore-mentioned Chinese Democratic League of the 1940s, Chinese liberals today not only strive for individual freedoms and seek to replace the Leninist party-state, but also address the issue of social inequality. In their view, the unfair distribution of resources in China today is the direct result of continuing power structures

which dominate the allocation and control of those resources through political power and privileges established in the decades prior to the reform era (Wielander, 2013: 132; see also Garnaut, 2012).

Arguably, China is already socialist in so far as it has a socialist economic system, a socialist ideology, and a socialist political system (Mackerrass et al., 1998: 104 ff.), all of which have been confirmed and declared in need of strengthening through reform (Xi, 2013). The country has a socialist political system by virtue of being ruled by the Communist Party, whose prerogative it is to define the term socialism and all associated terms, and who claims to be the leading force in social transformation. In the party's view, some parts of China are still 'poor and backward', therefore 'socialist modernization'—as mentioned again by Xi Jinping—through industrialization and economic development has priority over other aspects. In this way, anything seen as economically productive can be interpreted as being in the interest of socialism, even though it may result in stark social inequality and environmental degradation. While the plentiful vision of a future communist society as expressed by Tan Chenlin in 1958 (quoted above) has been more or less realised in today's China, the following vision of the same time remains a utopia.

Can we cover more and more of the mountains in the whole district with green trees, and make the streams clearer each year? Can we make the soil more fertile and make the faces of the people in every village glow with health? (Qin Chaoyang, *Village Sketches*, as quoted in Becker, 1996: 60).

If there is one cause in present-day China that galvanizes solidarity and serves as a common denominator across social class and interest groups, it is the state of the environment and the impact it has on the individual's health and wellbeing. In Zizek's words, "China as the emerging superpower of the twenty-first century thus seems to embody a new kind of capitalism: disregard for ecological consequences, repression of workers' rights, everything subordinated to the ruthless drive to develop" (Mao and Zizek, 2007: 18). Although the Chinese government is now working hard to address these problems (and the environment is a firm policy priority), many of those who can afford it are seeking an alternative modernity—by moving to the West.

Conclusion: Chinese Socialism—An Alternative Pathway to a Common Dream

When socialism started to be debated in China, there was no Western proto-type to refer to. While capitalism was there to be observed, to be critiqued and to be experienced, socialism provided an unknown alternative. Instead of taking the path the West had travelled down, China, further behind on the road to modernity, consciously chose a different route. Socialism offered the possibility of modernization without Westernization; it vaguely chimed with Chinese cultural values and yet provided a framework and ideological justification for a radical overhaul of Chinese society. From the start, socialism held the promise of a better future, a better China. It promised something modern, yet not Western, something radical and attractive as so alluringly and deceptively projected by the images of the Mao period. Socialism represented an ‘otherness’ that had not yet found a realisation in the West and thus offered the chance of shaping and defining it in Chinese terms.

In this process of shaping, socialism has become a defining element of official Chinese identity; although referred to as ‘socialism with Chinese characteristics’ it is apt to say that socialism has officially become a Chinese characteristic. It is a conscious placing of China as an ‘Other’ to the West’s democratic, capitalist societies. The emphasis on this ‘otherness’ has guided China’s engagement with socialism and is encapsulated in Xi’s phrase of the ‘Chinese dream’. It is likely to find a different expression again come the next leadership. For now, China’s dream of socialism is associated with vague notions of a happy future that is proudly Chinese; prosperous yet egalitarian; industrialised yet environment-friendly; an attractive utopia on which the party wishes to build as a stable basis for political consensus.

In Zhang Lijia’s memoir *Socialism is Great* (2007) the author recounts how in the 1980s her mother chided her for dreaming of being a journalist, when she was supposed to be happy for the opportunity to be a worker and the security that came with this position. Her boss in the factory also derided a fellow worker for dreaming in bright daylight. During China’s ‘socialist period’ all ambition and aspiration was relegated to the world of dreams and fantasy it seems. Now these dreams have found a place in the party’s most recent political manifesto in the hope to tie people’s dreams to the party, and with the underlying expectation that by holding on to the party, China will be able to realise its dreams. But at an individual level these dreams—regardless of any claims to Chinese exceptionalism—are far from being distinct or ‘other’; they bear a strong resemblance to the dreams of ordinary people anywhere in the world—dreams of living a moderately prosperous life in a healthy and safe environment.

Endnotes

¹ Kang Youwei (1858-1927) was a prominent scholar and reformer of the late Qing dynasty. He was one of the main proponents of a constitutional monarchy and the author of the utopia *Datong Shu*, or Book of Great Unity.

² The 'Book of Rites' is one of the 'Five Classics' in the Confucian canon. It is a collection of articles with a focus on etiquette and music, but spanning a wide range of other topics including morality, politics, law, and philosophy of the pre-Qin period (before 220 BC).

³ This approach was, however, not confined to reformist socialists: in their discussion groups at Beijing University, two of China's earliest Marxists, Qu Qiubai (1899-1935) and Li Dazhao (1888-1927), also cast Marxism in classical terms, referring to Confucian and Daoist principles. According to Mahoney (2008: 110) *datong* was described in terms of egalitarian fraternalism and public over private ownership while *xiaokang* was described as a period in which the pursuit of great harmony is sacrificed in order to confront the fragmented and contradictory social conditions of the day. These terms and concepts, which were subsequently more closely defined by Mao, have been in use to this day and continue to be included in Xi Jinping's communiqué following the third plenum of the 18th party congress.

⁴ For details, see Brian Tsui, this volume.

⁵ For a detailed discussion see Wielander (2013), chapter 7.

⁶ According to Marxism, all societies are divided into classes, most notably the bourgeoisie and the proletariat; in order to achieve social change, the proletariat must overcome the bourgeoisie through class struggle, a concept considered universally applicable.

⁷ For a further discussion on the aspect of 'class' in the Chinese context, see Tsui, this volume.

⁸ The key document outlining Mao's thinking of this time is 'On New Democracy'; for the complete text see http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-2/mswv2_26.htm (last access: 18 November 2014).

⁹ The 'Great Leap Forward' was a campaign launched in 1958, which intensified the pace of collectivization in agriculture while aiming at a higher industrial output, primarily in steel production.

¹⁰ The May Fourth Movement takes its name from student protests against the outcome of the Versailles Treaty, which took place on 4 May 1919. The movement itself is generally understood to have lasted for several years around this date and included political and cultural aspects. It is sometimes referred to as China's 'Enlightenment'.

¹¹ 'Mao Zedong Thought', or *Mao Zedong sixiang* in Chinese, is the official term for the body of Mao's theoretical thinking.

¹² The 'Three-Represents' is a guiding socio-political theory credited to Jiang Zemin, the then General Secretary of the Communist Party, which was ratified by the Communist Party of China at the Sixteenth Party Congress in 2002. The official statement of the ideology stipulates that the Communist Party of China should be representative to advanced social productive forces, advanced culture, and the interests of the overwhelming majority.

¹³ 'Post-socialist' is a term used to denote a phase of development in countries following previous communist regimes and a centrally planned economy.

¹⁴ For a more detailed discussion on the role of the internet and soft power in China see Mareike Ohlberg, this volume.

¹⁵ Kang is a prominent scholar famous for his call for Confucianism to become China's state religion¹⁵. (Callahan, 2013: 156).