

B.4 The Chinese Heartland and its Imaginaries: Essays

Brief Thoughts on the Semiotics of 陈朋 加强理论与实践融合共进 [Chen Peng, Strengthen the Integrity of Theory and Practice] and New Era Chinese Leninism

Coalition for Peace & Ethics

Prepared by

Larry Catá Backer¹

It is useful from time to time to consider the way in which quasi-official elements of the intelligentsia approach a public discourse of vanguard working style. It is particularly important in Marxist Leninist states where the issue of the engagement with theory, and its connection with its operationalization both in terms of vanguard working style and specific programs (the manifestations of responding to contemporary fundamental contradiction).² This is particularly important since the collapse of the Soviet European Marxist imperial model which, like its liberal democratic challengers, took as a fundamental ordering premise

¹ Member, Coalition for Peace & Ethics, also holds an appointment as the W. Richard and Mary Eshelman Faculty Scholar, Professor of Law and International Affairs at Pennsylvania State University (B.A. Brandeis University; M.P.P. Harvard University Kennedy School of Government; J.D. Columbia University) where he teaches classes in constitutional, corporate, and transnational law and policy. Professor Backer is a member of the American Law Institute and the European Corporate Governance Institute. For further information see his website, Backerinlaw, available [<https://backerinlaw.com>].

² Mao Zedong, "On Contradiction (August 1937), Originally delivered as lectures at the Anti-Japanese Military and Political College in Yanan and then revised; available [https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-1/mswv1_17.htm].

Strengthen the Integrity of Theory and Practice

the Biblical nature of classical Marxist works.³ But they also gave rise to cults of personality that, in their own way, also paralleled the rise of pivotal religious figures and their iconographies.⁴ Against these core expressions and cults, glosses were permitted (and during the Stalin era strategically abused),⁵ but revision might be understood both as heresy and treason.⁶

It is with that in mind that it may be useful to consider 陈朋 加强理论与实践融合共进 [Chen Peng, *Strengthen the Integrity of Theory and Practice*].⁷ The article provides a valuable window on the academic elaboration of Chinese Leninism in the New Era and for that reason alone is of great value. More importantly, perhaps, it suggests an academic working style that appears to suggest the contours of an evolutionary element in the development of Chinese Marxist-Leninism. It is one that, at its base, reflects the need to move theory forward to fit the conditions under which Marxist-Leninism must operate as it encounters different fundamental contradictions that must be overcome in the long march from rudimentary socialism to the establishment of a communist society in China. That, in turn, suggests the borders of conceptualization within

³ See, e.g., Gerold Tanquary Robinson, "Stalin's Vision of Utopia: The Future Communist Society," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 99(1): 11-21 Ideology and Reality in the Soviet System (Jan. 27, 1955). That notion of progress toward an ultimate goal is written into the constitution of the Chinese Communist Party as well. See Communist Party of China, Constitution; available [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/download/Constitution_of_the_Communist_Party_of_China.pdf] ("The Party's highest ideal and ultimate goal is the realization of communism. . . China is currently in the primary stage of socialism and will remain so for a long time to come. This is a stage of history that cannot be bypassed as China, which used to be economically and culturally lagging, makes progress in socialist modernization; it will take over a century. Ibid., General Program)

⁴ See, e.g., Robert C. Tucker, "The Rise of Stalin's Personality Cult," *The American Historical Review* 84(2):347-366 (1979).

⁵ Stephen F. Cohen *Bolshevism and Stalinism* (Routledge, 1999) (esp. Chapter 2).

⁶ For an example, see, for example, Joseph V. Stalin, *Foundations of Leninism* (Moscow, Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1953). For the Cuban Marxist Leninist version of this old European approach, see, Larry Catá Backer, *Cuba's Caribbean Marxism: Essays on Ideology, Government, Society, and Economy in the Post Fidel Castro Era* (Little Sir Press, 2018).

⁷ 陈朋 加强理论与实践融合共进 [Chen Peng, *Strengthen the Integrity of Theory and Practice*] sponsored by the Chinese Social Science Net and made available 20 May 2021. 本文系中央马克思主义理论研究和建设工程重大项目“习近平新时代中国特色社会主义思想对马克思主义中国化的历史贡献研究”(2020MZD016)阶段性成果【(作者系江苏省社会科学院中国特色社会主义理论体系研究中心研究员) [This article is a major project of the Central Marxist Theory Research and Construction Project "Research on the Historical Contribution of Xi Jinping's New Era of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics to the Historical Contribution of Marxism in China" (2020MZD016) Phased Achievement] (The author is a researcher at the Research Center of Theoretical System of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics, Jiangsu Academy of Social Sciences)]

Strengthen the Integrity of Theory and Practice

which the world around them is received, processed, judges and from out of which legitimate responses may be developed.

A few more specific points are also worth addressing briefly sketched in the numbered paragraphs that follow.

1. The article elaborates a fidelity to the core concept of 实事求是 [seek truth from facts] which has had a quite flexible history to suit the era in which it was deployed. It is remarkable, though in the context contemporary of Chinese Marxist Leninism quite fortuitous, that 实事求是 can bridge *revolutionary* party focus on class struggle and victory over adversaries, to the *institutionalized leadership* party focus on socialist modernization. That bridging was critical as the vanguard sought to rationalize an increasingly complex apparatus through which it is to guide the nation toward the ultimate goal justifying its exercise of leadership and power.⁸

It is that combination of theoretical Chinese Marxism at the core of the role of the vanguard as a revolutionary party, with the pragmatic element of Leninism at the time that the vanguard decisively embraced its new era as the incarnation of political authority expressed through the apparatus of government that gives the expression its power. That is, as well, a thrust that requires projection into the Party as well as the masses, something that has concerned the core of Party leadership from its time as a revolutionary rather than as a ruling, party.⁹ Of course, the nature of truth seeking might change with the historical period in which it is deployed.¹⁰

⁸ See, Yonglong Lu, Yueqing Zhang, Xianghui Cao, Chenchen Wang, Yichao Wang, Meng Zhang, Robert C. Ferrier, Alan Jenkins, Jingjing Yuan, Mark J. Bailey, Deliang Chen, Hanqin Tian, Hong Li, Ernst Ulrich von Weizsäcker, and Zhongxiang Zhang, "Forty years of reform and opening up: China's progress toward a sustainable path," *Science Advances* 5(8):1-10 (2019).

⁹ See, Jian Li, Zhang Yongzhi, Xue Eryong, and Nan Zhou, "Faculty Ethics in China: From a Historical Perspective," *Education, Philosophy and Theory* 52(2):126-136 (2020). They note:

Moreover, during this period, the core idea of faculty ethics tends to be in consistent with the points of Marxist-Leninist ideology. Mao Zedong advocated the establishment of Marx communist higher education institutions for strengthening the Marxist-Leninist ideological education of Party members and cadres, communist spiritual education. Faculty members were required to teach ideological knowledge in regard to 'seeking truth from facts and linking theory with practice'. In addition, during period of 1937 and 1944, Mao Zedong completed three books, entitled Practice Theory (实践论), Contradiction Theory (矛盾论) and Two Road theory (两条路) to examine the rationality of implementing Marxist-Leninist ideological education in modern higher education system. Ibid., p. 131

¹⁰ Ibid. pp. 132-(" 'The Reform and Opening up Policy' plays an inevitable role to shape the faculty ethics since 1978. Along with the opening up policy, there existed a fierce discussion on 'Practice is the Sole Criterion for Testing Truth'

Strengthen the Integrity of Theory and Practice

2. In this case it serves as the foundation on which the essay is built. The specific context itself is worth quoting, and it was thought important enough to circulate in foreign languages from early in the time of the establishment of the revolutionary government.

To take such an attitude is to seek truth from facts. "Facts" are all the things that exist objectively, "truth" means their internal relations, that is, the laws governing them, and "to seek" means to study. We should proceed from the actual conditions inside and outside the country, the province, county or district, and derive from them, as our guide to action, laws which are inherent in them and not imaginary, that is, we should find the internal relations of the events occurring around us. And in order to do that we must rely not on subjective imagination, not on momentary enthusiasm, not on lifeless books, but on facts that exist objectively; we must appropriate the material in detail and, guided by the general principles of Marxism-Leninism, draw correct conclusions from it."¹¹

It is this insight that is well elaborated beyond the reference to the well known 解放思想，实事求是，团结一致向前看¹² within which seeking truth from facts is embedded. The notion is essentially semiotic though one in which the normative outlook of the interpretive community is taken not just as a given, but as the basis for a dialogue between fact and truth mediated by the meaning structures of Marxist Leninism. That dialogue itself then changes the aggregate of such meaning structures and so on until through this dialectical process one (eventually) arrives as a truth no longer in need of dialectical engagement.¹³ This is the "New Era" transformation of the Maoist notion of making revolution for suitable for the contemporary historical stage of development.¹⁴

(‘实践是检验真理的唯一标准’), which influence the construction of faculty ethics at China's contemporary universities and colleges." Ibid., 132).

¹¹ Mao Zedong, "Reform Our Study" (May 1941), Selected Works, Vol. III, pp. 22-23 reprinted in English in *Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-Tung* (1966); available [http://www.marxists.info/ebooks/mao/Quotations_from_Chairman_Mao_Tse-tung.pdf].

¹² "Emancipate the mind, using one's brain, seeking truth from fact, and uniting to look forward." Jianlin Song and James Paul Gee, "Slogans with Chinese Characteristics: The Political Functions of a Discourse Form," *Discourse and Society* 3(2):201-217 (2019), at ¶ 22.

¹³ Mao Zedong, "Examples Of Dialectics" (Abstracted Compilation) (1959); available in Marxist.com website [https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-8/mswv8_48.htm].

¹⁴ Mao Zedong, "Win the Masses in their Millions for the Anti-Japanese National United Front" (May 7, 1937), Concluding speech at the National Conference of the Communist Party of China, held in May 1937; available [[https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-](https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-8/mswv8_48.htm)

Strengthen the Integrity of Theory and Practice

3. The essay starts with the now familiar idea, often repeated by the core of leadership on China that one must start with a study of Marxist classics. But that this study is not meant to be in the model of biblical exegesis--rather it is meant to trigger the dialectics that propel the vanguard authority forward toward the realization of its principal normative objectives. Chen Peng notes: 然而，一个客观事实是，“我们的理论是发展着的理论，而不是必须背得滚瓜烂熟并机械地加以重复的教条”。[However, an objective fact is that "our theory is a developing theory, not a dogma that must be memorized and repeated mechanically."].¹⁵ Of course the objectivity of facts is necessarily understood to be contingent--on the historical era, on the stage of development, and so on. It is to the objectivity of the performance, of the dynamic process of understanding fact in time that makes the approach more relevant, and more in line with theoretical Leninism (though again the gap between theoretical approaches and the efforts to implement may be quite large).

And of course this brings us back to "truth from facts." Or rather it brings one back to an engagement with truth from the moving lens of the historical era in which truth finding (and meaning making) is to be undertaken. But this is basic semiotics¹⁶--as well as the methodology of

1/mswv1_15.htm] ["We are exponents of the theory of the transition of the revolution, and not of the Trotskyite theory of "permanent revolution". We are for the attainment of socialism by going through all the necessary stages of the democratic republic. We are opposed to tailism, but we are also opposed to adventurism and impetuosity."]. Mao defined tailism in the following terms: "Tailism in any type of work is also wrong, because in falling below the level of political consciousness of the masses and violating the principle of leading the masses forward it reflects the disease of dilatoriness. Our comrades must not assume that the masses have no understanding of what they do not yet understand. It often happens that the masses outstrip us and are eager to advance a step and that nevertheless our comrades fail to act as leaders of the masses and tail behind certain backward elements, reflecting their views and, moreover, mistaking them for those of the broad masses." Mao Zedong, "On Coalition Government" (April 24, 1945), Selected Works, Vol. III, p. 316; available [https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/works/red-book/ch11.htm]. For the reference to Trotsky's permanent revolution, see, Stalin, "The Foundations of Leninism", supra, Part m, "The October Revolution and the Tactics of the Russian Communists", Part II; "Concerning Questions of Leninism", Part III.

¹⁵ 陈朋 加强理论与实践融合共进, supra.

¹⁶ Sébastien Pesce, "From Peirce's Speculative Rhetoric to Educational Rhetoric," *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 45(7):755-780 (2013). As he notes:

Knowledge can be defined as the result of semiotic processes: i.e. processes by which interpretants are produced. These interpretants may be thoughts, feelings, actions, laws or 'habits', and in this way, a semiotic perspective offers a broader conception of cognition. This conception is particularly fruitful when linked to Peirce's pragmatics. Learning is a process by which 'beliefs' are construed, handled as

Strengthen the Integrity of Theory and Practice

Chinese Leninist interpretation (though again the gulf between interpretation and operationalization can be quite large).

这就意味着，学懂弄通马克思主义基本理论必须与时俱进地学习党的创新理论。如果说理论武装是任何一个政党在推进国家治理过程中必须完成的基础性工作，那么理论创新则是使理论武装更加有效的现实需要。[This means that to understand and realize the basic theories of Marxism, we must keep up with the times and study the party's innovative theories. If theoretical arming is the basic work that any political party must complete in the process of advancing national governance, then theoretical innovation is the practical need to make theoretical arming more effective.]¹⁷

This is not a great leap from Roberta Kevelson's notion of a semiotics of meaning making as "a mode of analysis which would be capable of accounting for, that is, of describing, the actual processes that do occur in the discovery of new truths or facts in the experiential world which lead to a reinterpretation of former judgments, and to the development of a new idea."¹⁸

The consequence is important and a core element of conceptual Leninism in the Chinese context--the material cannot be given meaning in the absence of a meaning making structure. That meaning-making structure must itself be based on ideological premises that were themselves the product of a long process of meaning making by a revolutionary vanguard with reference to a baseline conception of the world taken as true because it must inherently be so. This faith in truth is then scientifically elaborated through the dialectics of meaning making--of the signification of facts that both shape and are shaped by the normative premises through which it is possible to provide a coherent system of meaning to facts.

All of this appears esoteric, and certainly abstract. Yet it is no more so than the more obtuse approaches to signification deeply ingrained in other systems of providing a structure of meaning or the world around us¹⁹--and then to use that meaning making strategically both to enhance authority and to add legitimacy to the pragmatic

objects, commented upon and challenged. A new metaphor of cognition thus comes to light. (Ibid., . 766, also 766-768).

¹⁷ 陈朋 加强理论与实践融合共进, *supra*.

¹⁸ Roberta Kevelson, "C.S. Peirce's Speculative Rhetoric, Philosophy & Rhetoric 17(1):16-29 (1984).

¹⁹ See, e.g., Stuart Hall, "Signification, representation, ideology: Althusser and the post-structuralist debates," *Critical Studies in Mass Communications* 2(2):91-114 (1985).

Strengthen the Integrity of Theory and Practice

expressions of political power.²⁰ In the absence of a knowledge of the approach to understanding the world and its possibilities it is only possible to impose a gloss of personal signification on the signification that one encounters as facts, but which to the other is an expression of truth.

The failure to grasp this continues to impede both Chinese and U.S. policymakers, each so deeply involved in the signification of "facts" (the actions and positions off the other party) that they miss its inherent and quite contextual truth (of the signification that is the product of a system foreign to those receiving it as fact). In this context even communication becomes difficult--though the same words (the objects of language) are used, their meanings do not align (the signification of the word-object, its meaning embedded in the premises form which such meaning is understood in its ordinary sense).



²⁰ See, e.g., Dennis K. Mumby, "Ideology & the social construction of meaning: A communication perspective," *Communication Quarterly* 37(4):291-304 (1989).

Emancipating the Mind (2021)16(1)
Larry Catá Backer for CPE

Strengthen the Integrity of Theory and Practice