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Giorgio Strafella

“Marxism” as Tradition in CCP Discourse

Abstract: This study discusses how the Chinese Communist Party has fashioned “Marxism” as a tradition during the last three decades. I argue that its leaders have invented the tradition of Sinicised Marxism by means of a ritualised repetition that emphasises a largely factitious continuity with the purpose of legitimising the Party, justifying policy changes and winning factional struggles. The point is corroborated by an analysis of the invocation of “Marxism” during key political phases in the reform era when the pretence of continuity became crucial for the CCP, including 1978–1985, 1992–1995 and the Eighteenth Party Congress of 2012. The article shows how, in the debates on “the criterion of truth” and “Marxist humanism”, the reformists endorsed a re-definition of Marxism that aimed at saving communism from radical Maoism and legitimising the new policies. Next, I examine texts from the beginning of the second reform period, when official propaganda strove to justify the roll-out of a market economy by portraying “pragmatism” as the essence of Marxism. Finally, I analyse how Party-state leaders have invoked Marxism around the time of the last leadership transition. The article suggests that such a use of “Marxism” in contemporary official discourse originates from Mao Zedong Thought as well as in a gradual hollowing out of the concept. As a result it sheds light on the ideological undertows of China’s contemporary socio-political history and on the chances of future political change.

Keywords: Chinese Communist Party, Marxism, tradition, ideology, China

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1 Introduction

Since the Chinese Communist Party’s adoption of reform and opening up policies in 1978, scholars have described communism in the country as in decline,¹

¹ Ding Xueliang 1994.

on life support and showing a feeble pulse,² and virtually defunct.³ This mainly stems from the fact that while the CCP continues to legitimise its policies by means of references to Marxism, thirty-seven years of reforms have made the link between its policies and Marxist ideals less and less obvious.⁴ Even when one refrains from describing the People's Republic as a capitalist country, the argument that justifies the economic reforms with "the theory of the beginning stage of socialism"⁵ remains make-believe.⁶ One could even argue with Rancière that "the domination of capitalism globally depends today on the existence of a Chinese Communist party that gives de-localised capitalist enterprises cheap labour to lower prices and deprive workers of the rights of self-organisation".⁷

Reflecting on parallels between post-Mao China and post-Khrushchev USSR, Carl Linden in 1990 observed that "from an energising force Marxism-Leninism has petrified into a dogma that props up power structures that have lost their reason for being".⁸ In 2008 David Shambaugh described references to Marxism in CCP discourse as "lip service", arguing that the Party only needs to "feign compliance" with the ideological canon in order to preserve its *raison d'être* as a communist organisation while taking decisions on "non-ideological" grounds.⁹

Nevertheless, "Marxism" still features prominently in the official discourse of a Party that remains highly concerned with "thought work".¹⁰ The 2012 Party Constitution affirms that the CCP "takes Marxism-Leninism, Mao Zedong Thought, Deng Xiaoping Theory, the important thought of Three Represents and the Scientific Outlook on Development as its guide to action".¹¹ "Marxism-Leninism" occupies a higher level vis-à-vis the other items in this list. As the Party Constitution specifies, Mao Zedong Thought "is Marxism-Leninism applied and developed in China"; Deng Xiaoping Theory "represents a new stage of development of Marxism in China, it is the Marxism of contemporary China"; the

2 Brugger/Kelly 1990: 1.

3 Zhou He 2009: 45.

4 E.g. Domes 1990: 195.

5 E.g. Gong Yuzhi 2010: 335.

6 Arif Dirlik wrote in 1989: "Chinese socialism justifies itself in terms of a historical vision that has no apparent relevance to the present ... The counterinsistence that China is a socialist society headed for communism covers up under theoretical conventions a social situation that distorts socialism out of recognisable form" (Dirlik 1989: 362).

7 In Jeffries 2012.

8 Linden 1990: 7.

9 Shambaugh 2008: 104–105.

10 See for instance "Document 9", a communiqué circulated within the CCP by its General Office in April 2013 (Mingjing yuekan 2013).

11 People.cn 2012a.

Three Represents “is a continuation and development of Marxism-Leninism”, and so on.¹²

When the Party enshrines a new formulation¹³ in its Constitution it stresses its adherence to Marxism and claims that it represents the best application of Marxism to China’s circumstances. This shows that Franz Schurmann’s observation that the CCP identifies Marxism as its universal theory and “pure ideology” still holds true today. The other thoughts, theories and formulations belong instead to the domain of “practical ideology”, i.e. they embody sets of ideas derived from pure ideology and designed to provide “instruments for action”.¹⁴ Two main factors define the relation that the Party establishes between Marxism and its practical ideology, namely “Sinisation” – i.e. adaptation to the “unique” characteristics of China – and a Leninist insistence on the importance to analyse and respond to concrete situations.

Why does Marxism play such a central and yet immaterial role in post-reform official discourse? How has this role evolved? This article draws on Hobsbawm’s concept of “invented tradition”¹⁵ in order to answer these questions. Eric Hobsbawm defined “invented tradition” as “a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity” with “a suitable historic past”.¹⁶ The peculiarity of *invented* traditions is that the continuity they attempt to establish is “largely fictitious”. They actually constitute “responses to novel situations which take the form of reference to old situations” and represent the attempt to structure parts of social life as “unchanging and invariant” in contrast to on-going change and innovation.¹⁷ This is why Hobsbawm expected invented traditions to appear more frequently when a society undergoes a rapid transformation that weakens or destroys existing social patterns,¹⁸ as in

¹² People.cn 2012a. The Party Constitution also states that the “basic tenets” of Marxism-Leninism “are correct and have tremendous vitality”.

¹³ Michael Schoenhals (1992) has highlighted the importance of ideological formulations (*tifa* 体法) in CCP discourse and noted how the Party “repeatedly stated that appropriate ones contribute to the attainment of specific goals” (Schoenhals 1992: 8).

¹⁴ Schurmann 1968: 22. On the distinction between pure and practical ideology, and between “theory” (*lilun* 理论) and “thought” (*sixiang* 思想), see esp. Schurmann 1968: 18–33. Despite the use of the term “theory” for Deng Xiaoping’s contribution, this is also subordinate to “Marxism”, as shown above.

¹⁵ See Hobsbawm/Ranger 1983 and in particular Hobsbawm 1983.

¹⁶ Hobsbawm 1983: 1.

¹⁷ Hobsbawm 1983: 2.

¹⁸ Hobsbawm 1983: 4.

post-Mao China. Furthermore, as Barbara Misztal has noted, this occurs where “dominant sectors of society” manipulate public notions of history “through public commemorations, education systems, mass media and official records” in order to suit their present interests and to legitimise their authority or new institutions.¹⁹ This concept is therefore apt to investigate the above-mentioned discrepancy between the policies and professed ideology of the CCP in the age of reforms.

The present study argues that the leaders and ideological establishment of the Party have fashioned “Marxism” as a tradition by means of a ritualised repetition that emphasises a largely factitious continuity. By analysing texts from three crucial phases of China’s recent history, this study shows how the CCP has used the tradition of “Marxism” in order to legitimise its rule, justify policy changes and wage factional struggles. It does not discuss the academic discourse on Marxism in China,²⁰ which is controlled by the Party, nor does it look at the state of communism as a movement in the country.²¹

This study describes “Marxism” in CCP discourse as an invented tradition based on the following considerations: (1) The value attributed to “Marxism” rests on historical continuity more than on the intellectual content and political aims of Marxism as a thought and an ideology; (2) This value is established and emphasised by means of repetition, ritualised language and symbols; (3) The continuity is largely factitious, as the Party employs “Marxism” with ever increasing flexibility; (4) When CCP discourse invokes “Marxism” it obfuscates the origins, evolution and differentiation of this concept.²² In this context, when referring to “Marxism” one may hence distinguish three dimensions of the word: (1) Marxism as thought, i.e. in its historical contexts and including a plurality of

¹⁹ Misztal 2003: 56–57. On the selective rendering of modern history and the politics of memory under the CCP see e.g. Denton 2000 and Lee/Yang 2007. One can see Zhou Yang’s speech on the hundredth anniversary of Karl Marx’s death in 1982 and Hu Jintao’s speech on the 110th birthday of Mao Zedong as two instances of the relationship between historical commemoration and “Marxism” as invented tradition in CCP discourse (see respectively People.cn 2011c and Hu Jintao 2003).

²⁰ See e.g. Kotz 2007.

²¹ For example, how communism may influence labour movements and organisations outside the Party-state system. See: Conclusion.

²² For instance, during the reform era CCP leaders have repeatedly condemned the infiltration of so-called western ideas, values and theories in China. One may point out that the CCP itself was founded by intellectuals influenced by ideas from “the west” like Marxism, but official discourse avoids codifying “Marxism” as western. Neither does it identify “Marxism” as Chinese, otherwise its tenets would not need to be “Sinicised” (*zhongguohua* 中国化) by the Party. This contributes to turning “Marxism” into an ahistorical fetish. On the contradiction between Chinese exceptionalism and the “universality” of Marxism see Chongyi Feng 2012.

contributions and interpretations; (2) Marxism as ideology, i.e. as “a thought that is no longer thought”,²³ as a worldview, a default reading of reality and a dogma; and finally (3) “Marxism” as tradition. In the last sense “Marxism” represents a thought that no longer *can* be thought, because it has lost its content and its function consists in providing legitimacy by dint of continuity, not in shaping a worldview or directing action.

By adducing Marxism to justify pro-market and pro-capitalist policies as well as to legitimise deviations from the established Party line, CCP official discourse has gradually hollowed out this concept and so effected a shift from Marxism as ideology to “Marxism” as tradition. In addition, references to Marxism as thought have gradually vanished from such discourse. Party leaders and ideologues have invoked “Marxism” especially when political rows, ideological re-positioning or leadership change made the pretence of continuity important for the resilience of the regime. The next sections examine the emergence of “Marxism” as tradition in three such phases, namely the early years of the reform era (1978–1985), the beginning of the second reform period (1992–1995) and the leadership transition of 2012.

2 Rescuing Marxism, 1978–1985

After the death of Mao Zedong in 1976 Marxism as the legitimising ideology of CCP rule faced significant challenges. To begin with, Mao’s CCP had employed Marxism to justify socio-economic policies that especially after 1958 had brought about disastrous effects. After the Hundred Flowers movement (1956–1957) and especially during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) Marxism became a bludgeon to beat dissenters and fight rival factions.²⁴ Furthermore, the CCP had turned Marxism-Leninism-Mao Zedong Thought into a solid block of truth that could not be reassessed without undermining its integrity and therefore the legitimacy of the regime. The Maoists had this sacred but fragile golem on their side in the factional struggle that followed the arrest of the Gang of Four in October 1976.²⁵

23 Sartori 2009.

24 E.g. Feng Zhi et al. 1957. At the onset of the Cultural Revolution, on 5 June 1966, the *People’s Daily* cited a new directive from Mao that provided the legitimising slogan of the movement: “All the doctrines of Marxism, with its many theories and postulates, can be summed up in one sentence: To rebel is justified” (see Lu, Xing 2004: 57).

25 At the Eleventh Congress of 1977 even Hua Guofeng attempted to distance himself from Mao’s most radical ideas – with the pretext of eliminating the influence of the Gang of Four – when he argued in favour of implementing the “four modernisations” within the framework of the “continuous revolution” (Sullivan 1985: 76).

The ideological orthodoxy established and discredited by the Party under Mao constituted a formidable obstacle for the reformists. They would not and could not discard Marxism as official ideology. In order to preserve Marxism and with it a continuity with the revolutionary foundation of the Party's claim to power,²⁶ however, Marxism had to be rescued from the Maoist era. In Marxism-Leninism Mao particularly valued the ideas of "class struggle" and "dictatorship of the proletariat".²⁷ Now a minority within the Party, led by Deng Xiaoping and Hu Yaobang, aimed at redefining Marxism as the ideology of "pragmatism" – i.e. reform policies that prioritised economic growth and technological development²⁸ – and greater political freedom.

The "controversy on the criterion of truth" of 1978–1980 was the first step in this direction.²⁹ The controversy began in May 1978 when Hu Yaobang and a group of scholars at the Central Party School, which Hu headed, published an editorial titled "Practice Is the Only Criterion to Ascertain Truth".³⁰ The authors, writing anonymously, cited from Marx's *Theses on Feuerbach* (1845), Mao and Lenin to argue that there can be no Marxism-Leninism, Mao Zedong Thought or revolutionary theory if their application is not grounded in "practice". The editorial suggested that only empirical success can prove the validity of a theory, including Marxism. Deng appeared to throw his weight behind Hu's group when on 2 June 1978 he gave a speech emphasising the importance of "seeking truth from facts"³¹ – an ancient expression already adopted by Mao.³²

A number of articles in support of "the practice criterion" followed, turning the "controversy" into a campaign. On 24 June 1978 an editorial titled "A Most Fundamental Principle of Marxism" appeared on the front page of *Liberation*

²⁶ As A. James Gregor observes, Deng regularly insisted that his reform initiatives were "Marxist". "Such affirmations", Gregor writes, "recommended themselves to a political leader who sought to protect the integrity and continuity of the revolution to which he had devoted himself and on whose orthodoxy he based his right to rule" (Gregor 2014: 212). Nonetheless, since the first introduction of the reforms, "his socialism was seen by many as having only a nominal historical affinity with the nineteenth century Marxism of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels" as well as "no more than a selective", "uncertain" connection with those of Lenin and Mao Zedong (Gregor 2014: 219).

²⁷ Wen-shun Chi 1986: 272–273.

²⁸ Policy slogans emphasised the aim of improving people's living conditions, as in Deng Xiaoping's "three-step" development strategy and the appropriation of the ancient concept of *xiaokang* 小康 (e.g. Wong 1998: 211).

²⁹ E.g. Schoenhals 1991 and Kluver 1996: 43–44. See also the texts in Kelly 1985.

³⁰ Guangming ribao ("specially-appointed commentators of this paper") 1978: 1.

³¹ *Shi shi qiu shi* 实事求是. Schoenhals 1991: 263–264.

³² Mao Zedong 1991[1938]. In this speech Mao exhorts Party members to "set an example in seeking truth from facts" in the context of the anti-Japanese united front.

Army Daily.³³ The article confirmed that “Marxism-Leninism-Mao Zedong Thought is irreversibly correct and must always be adhered to without the least disobedience.” However, the authors also contended that mutated historical conditions required its principles to be “developed forward” and adapted, because their correctness “must be proved through practice”. In other words, the ideological banners and therefore the legitimacy of the CCP remained unquestionable, but the Party – which alone had the power to interpret them – could adjust their content when politically advantageous.

By signalling that Marxism could be re-appropriated to suit reformist intents, the “controversy on the criterion of truth” prepared the ground for the debate on “Marxist humanism³⁴” and alienation under socialism.³⁵ The debate originated from the heart of the ideological establishment. Advocates of a “humanist” interpretation of Marxism included Wang Ruoshui, deputy editor of the *People's Daily*; Zhou Yang, a most powerful figure in the Propaganda Department, the Chinese Writers Association and the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS); and Ru Xin, deputy head of the Philosophy Research Institute at CASS and after 1982 vice-president of the Academy. Wang Ruoshui had supported the “criterion of practice” campaign, stating in 1980 that Marxism takes practice as “the foundation of knowledge”.³⁶

The pro-humanist position expressed support for the reforms while conforming to the “four cardinal principles” established by Deng in 1979.³⁷ It suggested that political persecution, irrational economic policies and the personality cult of Mao brought about alienation in a socialist country, while the reforms could heal this *vulnus* if inspired by Marxist humanism.³⁸ Crucially, this position stressed that only Marxism could inspire the solution for China’s ills while dissociating it from thirty years of CCP rule. Even CASS president and former secretary of Mao Zedong Hu Qiaomu, as he lashed out at this position, attempted to redefine the ideology of the Party as a kind of humanism. Hu, while criticising Wang Ruoshui’s standpoint as an attempt to poison Marxism with bourgeois humanism, wrote of a “socialist humanism” compatible with Marxism and embodied by the CCP.³⁹

³³ *Jiefangjun bao* 1978: 1.

³⁴ *Rendao zhuyi* 人道主义.

³⁵ See e.g. *Beijing Daxue Zhixue* 1984; Kelly 1985, 1987; Brugger/Kelly 1990: 139–170; Sleeboom-Faulkner 2007: 73–75.

³⁶ Wang Ruoshui 1985a: 92.

³⁷ I.e. upholding the socialist path, upholding the people’s democratic dictatorship, upholding the leadership of the CCP and upholding Marxism-Leninism-Mao Zedong Thought.

³⁸ E.g. Zhou Yang 1983 and Wang Ruoshui 1985b.

³⁹ Hu Qiaomu 1984.

The debates on the “criterion of truth” and humanism re-defined the legitimising ideology of the CCP as compatible with a Party-state that downplayed class struggle and emphasised a concern with the well-being of the people. In search for a suitable definition of Marxism, the CCP intellectual and propaganda establishment recovered dimensions of Marxism it previously denied.⁴⁰ The advocates of humanism and the “criterion of practice”, however, went beyond re-legitimising Marxism and associating it with the reformists’ “pragmatism”. They mentioned the taboo subject of labour conditions under CCP rule and argued that Marxism calls for shattering ideological dogma. They even suggested that non-Marxists might have valid points. Hence it does not surprise that the debate ended with a campaign against “spiritual pollution” and the dismissal of Wang Ruoshui from the *People’s Daily*. As the next section will show, however, Wang’s above-mentioned views about practice, knowledge and Marxism resonated during another key phase in the evolution of the CCP.

3 Marxism and pragmatism, 1992–1995

If Hu Qiaomu had a chance to define the CCP as the party of socialist humanism, that chance died in Beijing on 4 June 1989. After the crackdown on the student and labour movements and two years of economic retrenchment,⁴¹ Deng Xiaoping, who no longer held any official position, returned at the centre of Chinese politics in 1992 to sponsor a second phase of economic reforms. If the reforms of the 1980s lacked a well-defined blueprint and compromised between market and plan, the “deep reforms” heralded by Deng’s Southern Tour set the establishment of a “socialist market economy” as the goal.⁴² In November 1993 the CCP adopted policy guidelines that outlined the reform of state-owned enterprises (SOEs), price reform and China’s further integration into the global economy,⁴³ which eventually culminated in the country’s accession to the World Trade Organisation in 2001. The effects of the new reforms included the lay-off of more than twenty-eight million SOE workers between 1993 and 2003.⁴⁴ In his widely publicised Southern Tour speech, Deng proclaimed:

40 For instance, in 1963 Zhou Yang made a famous speech at the Chinese Academy of Sciences in which he denounced those who linked Marxism with humanism as reactionary (see Brugger et al. 1990: 148).

41 Lam 1995; Baum 1994: 313–340.

42 Liu/Dittmer 2006.

43 Zhonggong Zhongyang 1993.

44 Naughton 2007: 186.

— In studying Marxism-Leninism we must grasp the essence and learn what we need to know. Weighty tomes are for a small number of specialists; how can the masses read them? ... [Marxism cannot be defeated] because it is the irrefutable truth. The essence of Marxism is seeking truth from facts. That is what we should advocate, not book worship.⁴⁵

While the debates of the 1980s still cited the works of Marx, Engels and Lenin, Deng here divorces “Marxism” from Marxism. By dissuading from “book worship” Deng is asking to avoid enquiring into whether justification for the reforms can be found in the Marxist canon. The masses should instead purchase, sight unseen, both “Marxism” and the ideological legitimacy of CCP rule. Further in this speech Deng adds that Marxism “is a very plain thing, a very plain truth” without explaining what this truth might be. He then reassures his audience: “Do not panic. Do not think that Marxism had disappeared, that it is not useful anymore and that it has been defeated. Nothing of the sort!”⁴⁶ Deng also stressed that the achievements of reform and opening up – which he cited to justify the 1989 crackdown – came from relying on “practice”, not on “books”. As he launched a new wave of reforms Deng Xiaoping thus emptied Marxism of its content and reduced it to the banner of “Marxism”.

Between 1992 and 1995 an intensive media campaign promoted the message of Deng’s 1992 speech. In July 1992 an article appeared on the first page of the *Guangming Daily* titled “Seeking Truth from Facts Is the Essence of Marxism”. The long editorial repeated Deng’s favourite sound bites: practice is the only criterion of truth; the achievements of reform and opening up are based on practice not books; Marxism originates from practice; and so on. The article explains Deng’s ideological formulation “Socialism with Chinese Characteristics” as meaning “to uphold Marxism under new historical conditions” and “developing” Marxism. It describes Marxism as “always contemporary” and “always developing”. The article also claims that the way in which the Party upheld and developed Marxism proves that Marxism “essentially means seeking truth from facts”. Particular emphasis is placed on the identity between Marxism and the ideology of the CCP, and between the history of the Party – especially after the Third Plenum of 1978 and under Deng’s leadership – and the history of Marxism. The author provides “Marxism” with little content besides that it is said to change with the times and to originate from practice.⁴⁷ This article and its rhetorical use of

⁴⁵ Deng Xiaoping 1992. One wonders whether, while pronouncing these words, Deng thought of the Central Committee Circular No. 4 of 1976, where Mao accused him of not reading books, being “ignorant about Marxism-Leninism” and being unable “to distinguish between Marxism and imperialism” (see Schoenhals 1991: 249–250).

⁴⁶ Deng Xiaoping 1992.

⁴⁷ Li Hongfeng 1992: 1–2.

“Marxism” is representative of the political campaign that accompanied the roll-out of the market reforms.⁴⁸

A 1993 speech at the Central Party School by Ding Guangen, head of the Central Propaganda Department, helps to clarify the strategy. In the published summary of the speech Ding declares that Party propaganda and thought work “under the new circumstances” must aim at establishing “Socialism with Chinese Characteristics”. This formulation, he explained, constitutes the second important application of Marxism-Leninism to the Chinese context after Mao Zedong Thought. Mao taught us to “preserve and develop” Marxism with new ideas towards the victory of socialism, he reasoned; now that the Party is armed with both Mao Zedong Thought and “socialism with Chinese characteristics” this victory is closer. Party propaganda must therefore advance the study of how Deng Xiaoping has examined China’s new situation and solved its most recent problems by employing a Marxist worldview and method.⁴⁹

At the onset of the far-reaching economic reforms of 1990s, the CCP especially stressed the “continuity and development” of Marxism under Deng Xiaoping’s leadership. Compared with the campaigns of the 1980s, the link between Marxism and the use of “Marxism” to claim ideological consistency despite policy changes was greatly reduced, thus hollowing out the meaning of the word. Deng himself, as shown above, suggested to refrain from seeking a rationale for the new policies in the actual content of Marxism as a thought, and trust the value of “Marxism” instead. In addition, the fear induced by the events of 1989 arguably persuaded Chinese intellectuals – i.e. the “small number of specialists” to which Deng referred – to refrain from such a pursuit. Consequently Marxism was no longer re-defined for the sake of continuity, as in the debates of the 1980s, but continuity in the use of the banner of “Marxism” became valued *per se*. The Party employed this pretence of continuity to legitimise the post-1992 combination of economic liberalisation and political repression that it preserves to this day.

4 The 2012 leadership transition

In 1985 Deng Xiaoping famously said that some should be allowed to “get rich first” so they would then “spur and help” others “gradually achieve common prosperity”.⁵⁰ Twenty years after the Southern Tour, as the Eighteenth Party

⁴⁸ See e.g. *Guangming ribao* 1992, 1993; *Liu Ji* 1993.

⁴⁹ Ding Guangen 1993: 3.

⁵⁰ *People.cn* 2006.

Congress elected a new Politburo led by the son of Deng’s ally Xi Zhongxun, some had indeed got richer. The China Household Finance Survey⁵¹ (CHFS) found that in 2011 the top five per cent households in total income controlled 44 per cent of the national income and owned 61.6 per cent of the country’s household savings. Economists have estimated that nearly USD 4 trillion in assets flowed from China to tax havens between 2000 and 2011.⁵² Moreover, investigative reports have revealed that family members of the Party’s highest echelons have accumulated sizeable riches and, with the help of western banks, made use of offshore companies to hide them.⁵³ High socio-economic inequality and the illicit use of official positions undermine the legitimacy of CCP rule and the Party leadership is aware of this.

In the run-up to the Eighteenth Congress, Guangdong Party Secretary Wang Yang was seen as a champion of free-market economic policies and political reforms.⁵⁴ In a speech pronounced two months before the Congress, Wang stressed the importance to “unwaveringly uphold [the principle of] seeking truth from facts.”⁵⁵ The speech cites pronouncements from Deng Xiaoping, Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao in which the former CCP leaders describe Marxism as a theory that “evolves with time” and “develops and expands with practice”. Stressing the continuity between his view and those of Deng, Jiang and Hu, Wang Yang deduces from these quotations that one should not think of Marxism as “a stiff and empty dogma”, but rather as a living theory that stems and evolves with “practice”.⁵⁶ Wang Yang’s references to “Marxism” – like Jiang Zemin’s and Hu Jintao’s – have little to do with Marxism as thought and ideology, aiming instead at portraying the pursuit of further reforms as consistent with the Party’s history. The development of “Marxism” to which Wang Yang refers means the development of the party line,⁵⁷ but referring to “Marxism” instead of “party line” conveys the moot but important message that the CCP’s de facto neglect of Marxist ideals is not a break with the Party’s tradition. The legitimacy of the reforms is again grounded not on their conformity with the avowed ideology of the Party, but on factitious historical continuity.

In November 2012 Hu Jintao and Xi Jinping stressed the necessity to uphold Marxism and “sinicise” it. At the Congress Hu described his own contribution to

⁵¹ This survey was conducted by the Southwestern University of Finance and Economics (China) and Texas A&M University (US) (Li Gan 2013).

⁵² Kar, Dev/Freitas, and Sarah 2012.

⁵³ E.g. Barboza 2012; Bloomberg News 2012; Ball 2013.

⁵⁴ Jacobs 2012; Cheng Li 2012.

⁵⁵ Wang Yang 2012.

⁵⁶ Wang Yang 2012.

⁵⁷ See Tonglin Lu 1993: 192 on “Marxism” as a metaphor of the party line.

the ideological pillars of the Party, the Scientific Outlook on Development, as “created by integrating Marxism with the reality of contemporary China and with the underlying features of our times” and “fully embodying the Marxist world-view and method with regards to development”.⁵⁸ In other words, there would be no Scientific Outlook without Marxism and the Outlook itself would lack legitimacy if Marxism were not accepted as the sole correct ideology.

During his first Party study session as paramount leader, Xi Jinping said:

The theoretical system of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics is the most recent among the achievements in the Sinisation of Marxism, which also include Deng Xiaoping Theory, the important thought of the “Three Represents” and the Scientific Outlook on Development. [These achievements] have a relation of upholding/developing and continuing/innovating with Marxism-Leninism and Mao Zedong Thought. We definitely should not lose Marxism-Leninism and Mao Zedong Thought, because by losing them we would lose our roots.⁵⁹

This extract shows that Xi considers upholding Marxism-Leninism as necessary for the Party in order to preserve a continuity with its past and justifies post-Mao formulations as the result of the Sinisation of Marxism carried out by the CCP.

With regards to Marxism, Hu and Xi stress continuity and “Chineseness” while somehow downplaying the themes of “further developing”⁶⁰ and “seeking truth from facts”. Another element shared by their speeches is the reference to Marxism as a faith. Hu Jintao at the Eighteenth Congress stated:

First of all, we must strengthen ideals and beliefs and hold fast to the spiritual aspirations of a communist. The faith in Marxism and belief in socialism and communism are the political soul of a communist, they are the spiritual mainstay that a communist relies on through every ordeal.⁶¹

Nine days later Xi Jinping repeated the last sentence verbatim in his speech.⁶² While they are not the first leaders of the CCP to ask Party members to believe in Marxism, words from the semantic field of spirituality like “faith” and “soul” in

⁵⁸ Hu Jintao 2012.

⁵⁹ Xi Jinping 2012. In Chinese, *sangshi genben* 丧失根本. Although the first meaning of “genben” is “roots” (both literally and metaphorically), one could also translate the phrase as “lose the fundamentals”.

⁶⁰ Xi Jinping for instance spoke of “preserving (*baochi* 保持) and developing” Marxism, which is more conservative than the common phrasing, “upholding (*jianchi* 坚持) and developing”. He also appears to interpret “developing Marxism” mainly as “furthering the Sinicisation of Marxism” (see e.g. People.cn, 2010, 2011a).

⁶¹ Hu Jintao 2012.

⁶² Xi Jinping 2012. It should be noted that Xi Jinping did not adopt the association Marxism-faith from Hu Jintao’s speech, having already written extensively on Chinese Marxism from the viewpoint of faith in 2011. See e.g. People.cn 2011b.

this context suggest a disposition antithetical to the study of Marxism as a thought (see above) and a further fetishisation of “Marxism”. Based on a comparison between Wang Yang’s words and Xi’s one may speculate that references to “developing” Marxism signal a pro-reform standpoint, while references to “faith” in Marxism a more “leftist” (i.e. conservative) one. The stress on sticking to political orthodoxy “through every ordeal” also suggests the leaders’ determination in preserving unity within Party ranks.

CCP leaders also contradict their own exhortations to “uphold Marxism” when they avoid discussing national and global socio-economic issues in terms of class relations and means of production, rhapsodising instead about “modernisation” and the nationalistic “Chinese Dream”. This shows how Marxism as an ideology has largely deserted the actual worldview of the CCP as a ruling party.⁶³ To conclude, as the distance between the ideals of Marxism and policy-making grows, references to “Marxism” by CCP leaders have become more empty and formulaic, and the value of “Marxism” as tradition has grown as opposed to the role of Marxism as thought and ideology.

5 Conclusion

This study has shown how Marxism in post-Mao CCP discourse has shifted from the role of ideology to the role of “invented” tradition, in that its value rests on a factitious continuity between the Party’s past and present, rather than its contents. Through a series of political campaigns aimed at buttressing its legitimacy to rule, the CCP has gradually hollowed out “Marxism” at the very same time as it claimed to “uphold” it. Deprived of its historical and intellectual complexity, “Marxism” continues to feature prominently in Party discourse through ritualised and formulaic language, a symbol of political orthodoxy and ideological infallibility more than anything else.

While this use of “Marxism” has mainly stemmed from the need to justify changes in the Party line, it may also be rooted in a peculiar aspect of Mao Zedong’s thought. For Mao, as Nick Knight observes, Marxism constituted a universal theory representing a scientific reflection of objective reality. At the same time Mao believed that one must derive the laws that govern reality by moving from the particular to the general. Therefore, while all real knowledge

⁶³ As far as economic policies are concerned, it is worth remembering that “in the last decade major debates among economic and financial policy makers have no longer been about whether the economy should be primarily a socialist or a market one, but about what would be most effective policy to secure sustained and sustainable rapid growth” (Tsang 2009).

derives from practical experience, only Marxism can correctly interpret the reality that is the object of such an experience.⁶⁴ What Knight views as an “unresolved contradiction” in Mao’s methodological approach may have opened the door to the highly flexible use of “Marxism” by post-1978 CCP leaders and to the way the Party justifies this use with “pragmatism”.

This study has also pointed at potential areas of further research, such as the relation between the use of “Marxism” by Party leaders and the academic study of Marxism in the People’s Republic. Another question worth exploring is the relation between “Marxism” as a political tradition and China’s traditions as endorsed and politicised by the CCP. This is probably a relation of subordination, as evidenced by the following quote from a recent *People’s Daily* editorial on “Establishing a System to Preserve and Propagate Outstanding Traditional Culture”: “The Party and the government must fully play their role in guiding accurate work on traditional culture, using Marxism as the guiding principle.”⁶⁵

Finally, one wonders: Can Marxism inspire a new communist labour movement in China? The findings of Ngai and Chan’s and Solinger’s studies on class consciousness among Chinese workers suggest that such a movement, although not impossible, will not happen soon.⁶⁶ However, the *China Labour Bulletin* recorded a total of 1,312 strikes and other labour protests in China between November 2013 and November 2014.⁶⁷ If enabled and organised, the Chinese labour force would represent a more formidable threat to CCP rule than foreign armies and dissent among intellectuals. The “instructions” for this to take place are not found in banned books, censored websites or western media, but in the canon of the very ideology the CCP claims to embody and worship. Hence the Chinese Communist Party may be deriving an additional benefit from retaining the monopoly in the interpretation of Marxism while hollowing out the meaning of this word.

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⁶⁴ See Knight 2007: 203–205.

⁶⁵ People.cn 2012b; see also Renmin ribao 2009.

⁶⁶ Ngai/Chan and Chris King–Chi 2008 and Solinger 2012.

⁶⁷ See <http://www.numble.com/PHP/mysql/clbmape.html> (last consulted on 4 December 2014). The count does not include incidents in Hong Kong, Macao or Taiwan. Recorded incidents between November 2012 and November 2013 were 658.

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