

TOTALITARIAN FUTURE: THE CASE OF RED CHINA

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Abstract. The major point of this paper could be reduced to the following: Chinese totalitarianism merged Oriental despotism with Marxism and provides the framework for China's global predominance. The article will follow a certain outline. First, it shows why Western observers could not understand China. Secondly, it shows how Oriental despotism enjoys a lot of "socialist" features and how Marxism was finally blended with Chinese tradition. Finally, the result of this blending would be elaborated upon.

Keywords: China, USA, Francis Fukuyama, Karl Marx, state, socialism, Nikita Khrushchev, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, Gorbachev, Mao

CHINA AND THE "END OF HISTORY" AS BLACK BOX

China, emerging as the major American rival, is of great interest to Western academia, think tanks and journalism. Virtually, libraries of books and articles have been written on the subject. Still, practically all of them saw China's future in the context of two models. The first implied that China shall follow the road of political and economic liberalism, to be more and more similar to the modern capitalist West. In the context of this approach, China has achieved economic success only because of its political and economic liberalisation following Mao's death. The second approach implies that China does not imitate the West and, recently, has actually

moved in the opposite direction: the state increases its control over the economic and political life of the society. In the context of these models, China shall experience stagnation, “hard landing”, or total collapse. Any signs of the opposite: the development of Chinese science, for example, is attributed to “stealing of intellectual property.” The works which explain Chinese success as a result of the country’s totalitarian tradition are practically absent, at least they are not known to the author of this piece. But why those works have not appeared? One could understand these only if one would elaborate on how socio-economic, political and related intellectual discourse exists in the USA. And here one could see that discourse which contradicts the mainstream could hardly emerge. These notions are hardly a novelty. It simply needs to be refreshed to understand why practically no visible alternative narrative exists.

CONSTRUCTED REALITY AS “PARTY LINE”

Those who are predisposed to the USA, seen as the embodiment of the West and, implicitly, capitalism, since the end of WW2 and especially after the collapse of the USSR, often regarded the USA as “free.”

This freedom manifested itself in a variety of ways. One of them, they claimed, is the existence of what is usually called the “free market of ideas”. It presumably works in the same way as “economic free market” or as “political free market”. Both of the statements implied that the best of products survive, whereas those who could not compete shall perish. The same shall be said about the market of ideas. This is an illusion, or what could be defined as a political myth. A close look could well discover that ideological trends in the USA are often as controlled as in authoritarian and even totalitarian states.

It goes without saying subjects related to race and gender shall be approached only from the prescribed point of view. And if some facts do not fit into the prescribed paradigm, they shall be plainly

“cancelled”. It is not just stuff related to such politically sensitive subjects as race and gender, which could be a cultural/ ideological minefield. Indeed, even elaborations on abstract political subjects are strictly controlled. The example would be sufficient. In 1989, Francis Fukuyama, an American politologist of Japanese descent, published an article on “The End of History.” The article was soon reworked into a book. His major thesis was that the collapsing East European soviet type states and the USSR’s serious troubles demonstrated the obvious: totalitarian socialism did not work, and American Capitalism is the only viable option for humanity.

The article and, of course, his book made Fukuyama famous overnight and launched his spectacular academic career. Still, one might pose the question: why no one saw the problems with Fukuyama’s approach? Why does he dominate the intellectual discourse? Was he a Party leader whose dictions were propped by state censorship and apparatus of repression, which prevented others, those who did not support his view, to challenge him? The answer was no. Everyone could challenge Fukuyama either in writing or public speeches and not be sent to the Gulag. Moreover, the facts which contradict Fukuyama were in abundance. It would be wrong to assume that everybody was blind to American problems, already quite visible in late 1980th, the time when Fukuyama published his essay.

The economic problems were the most obvious. The US economy had reached its peak around early 1960th when the USA became “the workshop of the world” as it was the case with the UK century before. Still, by 1980th/ early 1990th, when Fukuyama penned his essay, the story was quite different. Already by that time, the USA had experienced the freefall of deindustrialisation, and after its next 30th year, after the publication of Fukuyama’s essay, the real American economy would be in really bad shape. The decline here is not an intellectual abstraction but a reality which could be easily visible.

Those who take the train from South Bend (Indiana) to Chicago would pass through the city Gary. In the 1950th/ early 1960th, it

was a flourishing industrial hub with a productive steel mill. While some steel production still remains, most mills have closed, and large parts of the city now appear abandoned. Population shrinks and inhabited houses testify about this city's past glory. Gary is hardly an exception, and it was not surprising that Trump stated in his inaugural address that the plains of America are covered by empty buildings of American factories as "tombstones." One might state here that the USA economy declined not just relatively to global production but in absolute terms. The peak of the USA steel production was around 50 years ago, and car manufacturing around 40 years ago. The decline of overall industrial production was not the only problem. American products were increasingly of poor quality, making them non-competitive with foreign brands. Ford, for example, has been in the process of losing its ground to foreign car companies, mostly those from Europe and Japan. It could not compete well even in the USA, where the locals preferred foreign cars even when they cost more than domestic products. The increasing problems with the USA industry were reinforced by other problems. In the past, America was an epitome of efficiency, and it was not accidental that Stalin called on the Soviets to "combine American business-like behaviour with Russian drive to create something grand." All of these American ways of doing business had already passed by the late 1980th/ 1990th. Not efficiency but bureaucratic red tape and absolute disregard for results and hard work became common. While the economy was declining, the national debt rose. At the same time, the institutionalised economists, often with seemingly formidable credentials, assured the public that the US economy is rising despite all problems. The economy was not the only problem. US society suffered from serious racial tension, and there was no solution in sight.

All of these and many other problems were quite visible not just to foreigners but to native Americans. Why had no visible opposition to Fukuyama's "end of history" emerged? Those who would engage in a detailed study of American intellectual history in the future would probably find works which challenge Fukuyama's

narrative. Still, they all were published by marginal publisher houses and media outlets. And what was absolutely evident is that no authors of these publications would brag about illustrious academic careers or, most likely, any academic career at all. One might state that those who defend his/her own convictions, even when these lead to personal misfortune, shall be lauded by the public. It's a matter of fact that both Giordano Bruno's burn on stake for challenging religious dogma and Husayn Shia Saint, engaged in battle where his defeat and death were predetermined, were praised through the centuries. Still, these models do not work in the USA and increasingly in Europe due to the USA's geopolitical and cultural predominance. The USA Calvinist cum Social-Darwinian cultural framework does not recognize the notion of "noble losers", the men who suffer and sometimes die for their convictions. In the context of American culture, these people became simple "losers" in Donald Trump's fashion, and those who die for one's conviction would be seen as purely insane by the majority.

Consequently, the vast majority of Western and especially American pundits do not want to be "losers", who, with their pretension and challenge of mainstream views, in the eyes of the prosperous mainstream, were absolute idiots and deserved their fate. These imbeciles were not able to adjust their research and findings to "need of market." Not only does he/she need to adjust his/her views to the needs of "market", i.e. academic peers and government officials, but they shall also be attentive to changes in "party line." Indeed, it could change rapidly and without warning. The changes in approach to the USSR/ Russia could be a good example.

For several decades, the "party line" for those who study the USSR—and most of them were either liberals or leftists—the USSR was the embodiment of grassrooted democracy and "affirmative action empire," at least it was the case in the beginning of the regime's history. "Affirmative actions" and, implicitly, "diversity" and "inclusion" were also hallmarks of the early Soviets' progressiveness. After the beginning of the war with Ukraine, the

“party line” changed abruptly, and that has an immediate implication for studying Russia/ the USSR. It was immediately discovered that Russia has been an imperialist predator throughout its history, regardless of the regime’s changes. One, of course, could ask the question why was this not discovered before? Still, no one could raise the question publicly, at least to the author’s knowledge.

Once again, those who would express different views would not be arrested and sent to Gulag. He/she could even publish his views at his/her own expense. Still, no respectable and widely read mass media would publish his article, and publishers would not be anxious to publish his/her manuscript, and his/her chance for academic or government employment would be minimal. Unemployed and marginalised, he would be dismissed as a “loser” whose stubbornness and unwillingness to follow the road of institutionalised Mandarins deserved the punishment. It was not surprising that observations about these or that phenomenon, both in the past and present, are surprisingly uniform. Often, scholarly experts, journalists, etc. repeat each other's major ideas and operate in a uniform cultural framework as if they are directed by strict censorship of the “big brother” of totalitarian regimes. “Deviations” from “party lines” are usually minimal. It is true that sometimes unorthodox writings appear. Still, they usually soon became invisible under the layer of orthodox works and the views of “leading experts”, who would have never been elevated to the level of “leading experts,” if they were in open opposition to prevailing views. One might assume that they might not have been employed at all. The prevailing uniformity of views is not purely an American recent phenomenon.

Alexis de Tocqueville, the author of classic *Democracy in America* and Alexander Hertsen, a Russian who followed Tocqueville, support French views of the USA. Both found that societal control made the USA quite inhospitable for independent thought. Carl Jung, a Swiss who visited the USA centuries later, admitted that the notion of alleged American individualism was flatly wrong, and he admitted that finding an independent mind in the USA was not an

easy task. All of these explain why alternative views on China have no traction in Western discourse.

ORIENTAL TRADITION AND MARXISM AS A ROAD TO SUCCESS

The ease with which Marxism was embraced by China looks strange. Historically, China had been xenophobic and was not fond of Western creeds. The notion is now, of course, vehemently denied by the present-day Chinese elite with their goals for Eurasian and implicitly global predominance. It is true that Chinese eagerly take some foreign material; some were quite praised, such as for example, horses from Central Asia. Still, cultural, political and economic arrangements of the capitalist West were accepted with great difficulty. One might also note that Chinese diasporas are assimilated with great difficulties. But Marxism had spread quickly and seemed to be easily accepted, in its major paradigms, by large numbers of Chinese peasants who joined Mao at the beginning of his quest for power. One might state that they joined Mao for some very simple and universal reasons. They wanted division of landlord's land and did not want to pay rent. One might add here that this is the desire of each peasant in each country and each epoch. Still, it is a rather over-simplified view, and a close look at peasants' demands in different revolutions could be instructive here. Take, for example, what is usually called "classical" European revolutions—the French and Russian Revolutions.

French peasants clamour for land. These lands belong to nobles. Yet, most of this land was in the hands of peasants who worked on it. The revolution did not take land from landlords but released peasants from payment for the land. The fig leaf of formal legality was preserved. Some of leftist historians, such as for example, Georges Lefebvre, believe that peasant revolts during the French Revolution were autonomous from the general revolutionary trend, i.e. France's transition to a bourgeois country. According to Lefebvre, "peasantry was motivated by collectivist instincts" (Jones

1990, 8). In this context, peasants' premodern/precapitalist instincts were, implicitly, a seed of potential socialist transformation. And here, socialism, or at least potentially socialist *fraternité* and *égalité*, was juxtaposed to the cold bourgeois formality of "liberté". This notion was challenged, even by fellow leftists.

Albert Soboul "took pains to emphasise that, in his view, the peasant revolution developed within the framework of the bourgeois revolution and did not surpass it" (Jones 1990, 41). Soboul implied that the French peasants were members of bourgeois strata, at least in their mentality and respect for private property. As a matter of fact, some of the leading historians of the French Revolution question openly the feudal nature of the social arrangements on the eve of the Revolution, and it is not accidental that Alfred Cobban, one of them, "objected that relationship between peasants and landlords could still be termed 'feudal' in the eighteenth century" (Jones 1990, 6). Finally, Lefebvre's own statement is somewhat contradictory, and he noted that peasants "were not hostile to the principle of individual property" (Jones 1990, 18).

It is true that late XVIIth-century French peasants were basically petty bourgeoisie and started with the bourgeois elite basic respect for private property. It was true that they suffered from increasing taxation and other forms of payment by the end of the XVIIIth century (Jones 1990, 15). Still, their complaints would be, in many ways, not much different from that of complains of sharecroppers in bourgeois society. Finally, one could note that the revolutionary government did its best to uphold to peasants pro-capitalist attitudes.

Moreover, a considerable amount of land was confiscated from "the revolution's enemy" and became national property. After these, the land was sold, and peasants were among the new owners. Thus, some semblance of legality and implicit respect for property rights were preserved, albeit of course in twisted form. The bourgeois nature of the revolution was upheld by the fact that the revolutionary regime and implicitly the majority of Frenchmen,

most of them peasants, rejected the idea of equal distribution of the land. One might add that capitalism, with the notion of private property, was deeply entrenched in French society long before the Revolution. One might, of course, note the Socialist doctrines of various times circulated widely among French intellectuals. As a matter of fact, France was the country where major protagonists of socialist thought lived. But its influence on the majority of the lower classes, especially peasants, was quite limited, and French peasants had always been on the side of the French bourgeois government during numerous workers' revolts.

The story was different in Russia. For the entire pre-revolutionary history, peasants were not land proprietors in any form. Land belongs not to the peasant family but to the "peasant commune", the groups of peasants who lived in the same village. One could not sell his plot, and arrangements were periodically changed. One might also note that Russian peasants had been themselves property until 1861; they were serfs. It is true that the money economy was quite developed in pre-revolutionary Russia, and by the beginning of the XXth century, the Russian middle class, quite similar to that of its European counterpart, was thriving in big cities. Still, peasantry dominated Russian society until 1930th and often had an absolutely different view from those of the city's middle class. These outlooks downplay the role of private property and related "human rights", and these views exercised a strong influence over the entire society. Consequently, the presence of premodern/precapitalist arrangements made transition to "socialist" order comparatively smooth. Premodern became here transmodern, postmodern or supermodern, if you wish. While receiving land to work on, Russian peasants did not demonstrate much desire to transform land into private property in the context of capitalist legal culture.

While premodern/precapitalist elements in Russian culture helped Russia move to socialist order, it was even easier for China. China's "hydraulic" civilisation implicates the absolute patrimonial power of the leader - the "son of heaven." He enjoyed the absolute

control over “means of production” in quasi socialist way as Karl Wittfogel noted sometime ago (Wittfogel 1957). Land, as everything else, had belonged to him by definition and by the nature of a peculiar “social contract”, if you wish. Those who controlled the land were not proprietors, in the Western Capitalist sense. They were not in possession of “sacred private property” and related “human rights.” They were renters, and their possessions and ultimately their lives were at the mercy of “son of heaven”. It is true that, following the Confucian template, the imperial “father” should use his ultimate power to benefit “family”. Yet it had no legal restraints on his behaviour, and while officially the emperor was guided by Confucianism, his real northern star was Legalism, which emerged during the reign of the First Emperor of Qin. And while Confucianism insisted on moral authority of power, Legalism emphasised the sheer force.

Then, absolute power made Chinese emperors similar to Oriental totalitarian rulers such as Mao and Stalin. And similar to them, the emperor ruled through the bureaucratic web, and it was quite similar to the party apparatus. Last but not least, the Chinese emperor had been directly involved in the economy, something which capitalist states rarely do, believing in the “invisible hand of market.”

Not only was the emperor engaged in the economy of the state—the building and maintenance of irrigation channels was among his major responsibilities—but planned economic activities far in the future. The Chinese economy and, as a matter of fact, everything else, was often planned ahead for years, centuries or actually even millennia. Indeed, the Great Wall of China was built and rebuilt for more than 2000 years. Imperial China looks extremely “modern”/ “socialist” in its arrangement. Their “socialist” nature is, of course, missed by the Western observers for whom “socialism” is related to democracy and the distribution of various social goodies. Marx also ignores the “hydraulic civilisation” of the East, following the views of his contemporaries like Hegel. He has defined these civilisations as those which embraced the “Asiatic mode of production” and

placed it beneath capitalism, for it was stagnant and, in a way, a reactionary system which needed to be destroyed by advanced capitalism. Indeed, Marx saw no problem in British victories over the Chinese in the Opium Wars and British industry's destruction of Indian craft, which could not stand competition. Capitalism, with all of its ugliness, was needed to develop "productive forces", the modern industry, first of all, to engender the proletariat, the "gravedigger" of capitalism.

Not only that the "Asiatic mode of production" wasn't able to develop "productive forces" leading to industrialisation, but it had the other features which put it behind Western capitalism and, even more, socialist society. The point here was that socialism, in Marx's view, shall lead to a weakening of the state, the weapon in the hands of the oppressive elite. Socialism would lead to the end of the bourgeoisie as an economic minority, which is because of the repressive power of the state. Victorious proletariat, the vast majority of the population would not need such an elaborated repressive state. Consequently, after short periods of "dictatorship of the proletariat", the state shall "wither away." And when socialism would evolve into communism, the states shall disappear completely.

Thus, the "Asiatic mode of production" with its undeveloped "productive forces" and despotic state could hardly be a springboard for the development of socialism. One might state Marx's views on the state were widely supported by his followers through the late XIXth/early XXth centuries. Vladimir Lenin, the founder of the Soviet state, expressed the same view of the state on the eve of the Bolshevik takeover. In his *State and Revolution*, a socialist state shall be quite weak, for then the state would enjoy the support of the majority (Liang 2023, 70).

Thus, according to Marx and his early supporters, the "Asiatic mode of production" was the dead end of history. They were discarding it not just for technological backwardness but also because of its socio-political organisation: despotic government. Still, the reality shows that these were absolutely wrong views.

ORIENTAL TRADITION AND CHINESE SOCIALISM

Both Soviet and Red China states, both under Mao and his successors, have been despotic and surprisingly similar to the state of “Asiatic mode of production.” In both cases, the leader's power is absolute, and he ruled through the web of Mandarins/party officials. Even ideological makeup was surprisingly similar. Following Confucianism, Chinese emperors liked to elaborate on the importance of “toilers,” in this case, farmers. Emperors praised them for providing food for the nation. Even some of Xi Jinping’s campaigns, e.g. drive against corruption and emphasis on the cadres’ morality, are also not new. A similar campaign was, for example, launched during Ming’s era. Indeed, “Ming officials who bribed were heavily punished by law” and there were “records of numerous cases of punishing corrupted officials and clerks” (Liang 2023, 70).

Structural similarities between Oriental despotic states and socialist regimes were noted long ago. In the USSR, the study of “Asiatic mode of production” was stopped in 1930th when collectivization and rapid nationalization made the USSR too much similar not to that of Russia of Ivan the Terrible or Peter the Great, both were praised in 1930th USSR as “progressive” leaders, but to Imperial China or Ancient Egypt. The comparison had reemerged in 1950th/1960th after Nikita Khrushchev’s revelation that Stalin seriously “distorted” socialism. Here, he, of course without acknowledgement, followed Trotsky and the Mensheviks. Khrushchev’s move inspired many works and intellectual trends. One of them, implicitly neo-Marxist, indicated that the elite could dominate without direct control of the “means of production” by its members. These views were spread among Eastern European/Russian dissidents such as Mikhael Voslenski and Milovan Djilas; the last one became a real celebrity. (Djilas was a prolific author. But there was one particular book that made him famous: *New Class*.) These approaches provide an intellectual framework for direct comparison between Oriental despotism and Socialist regime in the

USSR and China. Here, Karl Wittfogel was a prominent example of Western scholar who made direct comparisons between two systems.

The works of Russian dissidents were especially important here in reshaping the image of socialism. In the works of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, the most famous among them, the Soviet regime was a brutal rule of ideologically obsessed fanatics who enslaved the entire society. In both cases, the omnipotent leader is in full control over “means of production” or actually anything else. In all of these cases, the ruler widely used terror. Wittfogelism and related views on Red China and, implicitly, the USSR were rejected by the majority of specialists on China as more politicised caricatures rather than a true picture of what was going on in Maoist China. Indeed, the Oriental despotism implied hierarchical order and Confucian respect for authorities. At the same time, the Cultural Revolution called for “bombardment of headquarters” and a special campaign against the evil of Confucianism was launched.

Not just Chinese students but part of the Western elite, those of course on the left of the political spectrum, was also excited, assuming that “real” grassroots socialism was emerging. Julia Kristeva, Bulgarian expat who, together with Tzvetan Todorov, also expat Bulgarian, became a part of French or, as one could assume, Western intellectual elite, shared these views, Kristeva was apparently inspired by its French intellectual environment and, of course, mood of French students whose riot in 1968 was about to bring a real revolution in France. In their views, the grey bureaucratic regime of Leonid Brezhnev’s USSR was a “perversion” of “real” socialism, which shall be grassroots and dismantle the state. Here, the leftists followed Marx. In the USSR, the rule of bureaucracy controlled the masses, whereas in China the masses finally revolted and brought about a “real” socialism. Kristeva’s efforts to advertise the Cultural Revolution were noted in Beijing, and Kristeva was invited to visit China. One could assume that all expenses were paid by the host. The left was excited

by China during the Cultural Revolution, and people in Beijing resolutely discarded China's old political and cultural tradition. Still, one shall remember that Mao launched the Cultural Revolution not for upholding the power of the masses but to purge bureaucracy from potentially disloyal members. Mao had the same goal as Stalin had before. By the end of his life, Mao achieved his goal and realised the danger of an uncontrolled mob. Consequently, he employed an army to bring “control and punishment”, if one would remember the title of Michel Foucault's book. The Cultural Revolution with its anarchical excess emerged here not much as the leap to another socio-political dimension, but plainly as anarchy, which finally led to reinstatement of the Oriental order and a peculiar new Chinese dynasty. The only difference was that the old and new emperor was the same—Mao. The end of Cultural Revolution led to the re-establishment of a bureaucratic structure and related repression. China had returned to itself, and Mao became implicitly Wittfogellian.

Indeed, he started to praise the First Emperor of Qin by the end of his life. Known for his brutality, he was also the ruler who unified China and made an attempt to forge the sense of unity among the different groups of Chinese plains and who actually had little in common with each other. As a matter of fact, different languages called “dialects” exist in China up to the present. The emperor launched the famous Great Wall to protect China from northern nomadic tribes. Still, he was seen in Chinese tradition as a brutal ruler. Mao was not bothered by this and saw himself, as one could assume, as the modern embodiment of the emperor, whose rule, in many ways, rested on control and punishment.

These principles were transformed by to post-Mao rulers. Those who studied Deng Xiaoping's reforms, and this was especially the case in the beginning of reforms, emphasised Deng's China cardinal differences from the Mao era. They noted that Mao not just downplayed the possessive instincts but even improved living standards. He regarded this as the manifestation of “bourgeois” degeneration, and Mao blasted Nikita Khrushchev,

the Soviet leader, for promising to make the life of the Soviet better. It looks like, at first glance that the Deng and Mao eras were absolutely different. But this was not the case: both Mao and post-Mao China preserve the same elements of socio-economic and political system. Moreover, post-Mao China became, in a way, more Wittfogellian than Mao's China. To understand this, one shall look closely at post-Mao China. To start with, the absolute power of the leader was not shaken. Indeed, after a few intermediary stages of "collective leadership" and periodical replacement of the leader, China returned to its traditional political arrangement when the single leader enjoyed absolute power. Economic changes also heeded scrutiny. And one could see that not much changes happened here as well.

Some Western observers asserted that present-day China represents "state capitalism." At the same time, some of them assured that Scandinavian countries are a good example of "true socialism". The definition is mostly due to the observers' political views and their vision of socialism as alien to reality, as the views of Kristeva and Todorov, who saw the Cultural Revolution as the manifestation of true socialist reform. In the view of these Western observers, "true socialism" implied, first of all, broad social security and a rather relaxed lifestyle and income equality. Neither of these exists in post-Mao China. Therefore, it was defined as "state capitalism". Still, it is not the case. Socialism, in Marx's view, implied first of all state/societal control over "command nights" of the economy, of the means of production. It also implied the state's paramount role in defining the economic process.

All of these were preserved in post-Mao's China. It continued to be socialist and, by default, Orientally despotic. As a matter of fact, post-Mao China became more close to Oriental despotism than Mao China. Indeed, Oriental despotism did not imply that the ruler controlled the entire body of economy completely. People engaged in selling/buying and had a property. But their property and social autonomy were not absolute. They were not absolute proprietors in the context of Western capitalism, rooted in the

Roman Legal tradition. The ultimate proprietor of everything and everybody was the state. It simply “leases” property and life itself to the individual. The individual was related to the state pretty much in the same way as slaves to “dominus” [masters] in Roman tradition. Slaves, in certain cases, could acquire property and create a quasi-family. One could assume that slaves operate as an independent socio-economic entity. Still, his property, family, and he belong to the master who could take the property and kill the slave at any given moment. Property and life in these cases were “leased” to slaves.

The same model explains the relationship between proprietor, Oriental state and post-Maoist China. Property, especially the big property, was implicitly conditional, and post-Mao Chinese leaders often showed as big businessmen, especially those who tried to behave independently, who were really in control. In the Chinese case, the “disciplining” of wayward rich individuals is the way of asserting ultimate dominance of the state and not just a particular ruler, as is the case in Russia. Thus, post-Mao China is closer to Oriental despotism than Maoist China; and both Maoist China and post-Maoist China are basically socialist states. One of course could pose the question: if Oriental despotism and socialism are basically the same, why did Marx not see them as such? Why was Marx utterly contemptuous of Oriental despotism and saw its destruction as essential for economic progress?

There were several reasons for these assumptions which shall be revisited. To start with, Marx believed that the end of private property on the “means of production” would lead to grassrooted democracy. The early Marxists, such as Lenin, believed before the Bolshevik Revolution in his *State and Revolution*. Secondly, Marx saw in Oriental despotism the stagnant society, technologically backwards and unable to develop technologically. And in Marx’s view, each new stage in the history of humanity is marked by a higher level of technological progress. Thus, the praise of technology. Marx believed that Oriental despotism and technological progress could not co-exist. One excludes the other.

This was not the case, and Marxism, with its emphasis on technological progress, was brought to the socio-political body of Oriental despotism, creating the modern Chinese socialism. The question could arise: why didn't this merger happen earlier?

ORIENTAL DESPOTISM AND TECHNOLOGICAL PROGRESS

Why did ancient China fall behind the West, especially since the time of the Renaissance? China's backwardness was really puzzling if one would remember that ancient China was ahead of Europe in invention and scientific discoveries. China, for example, had invented paper money centuries before Europeans. Some Chinese inventions, such as powder, were passed to Europeans. Chinese achievements were well documented by Joseph Needham, the British historian and the author/editor of a multi-volume set on Chinese science and technology. Besides numerous scholarly monographs, Needham was also the author of popular works, e.g. *The Genius of China: 3000 Years of Science, Discovery, and Invention* (Temple 1986).

So, what was the reason why Chinese early inventions led to nowhere, and why inventors were not praised as was the case in the West? To understand this, one shall remember that ignoring scientific discoveries was not just a Chinese phenomenon. It was quite spread in Greek/Roman antiquity. There was clear evidence that Heron, the Hellenistic Roman inventor, actually invented the steam engine or at least designed something quite close to the steam engine. But invention played no role in the ancient world. There is an explanation of this neglect.

Some noted that invention was not introduced in the economic life of society, plainly because both ancient Greece and/or Roman societies enjoyed a lot of slaves. Still, these explanations do not work. Indeed, one powerful steam engine could do what thousands of slaves could not accomplish. The disregard for machines/inventions related to production could be explained by

different reasons. Neither Greeks nor Romans were interested in industrial production. Their focus was either on agriculture or loot related to conquest. The Chinese elite extract value from agriculture and, partially, from trade, mostly silk and porcelain. Industrial production/craft—unless it was related to silk and porcelain production—was a marginal aspect of the economy. In addition, the Chinese totalitarian state, like other similar societies, emphasised the importance of social status but not the accumulation of wealth. Striving for riches was not beckoning true Mandarin who shall live comfortably but not ostentatiously. Brazen life of luxury, notions that pursue wealth, is a peculiar polluter of the human character and especially spirituality is quite old. It was not surprising that in Plato’s designs of an ideal totalitarian state, the “guardians”—the rule philosophers—shall live comfortably but not be able to accumulate wealth. The same was for the Confucian template. The love of riches was an attribute of the lower classes, at least this was according to Confucian philosophy.

According to Confucianism, the love for the filthy rich and the like is an attribute of merchants and any business people who, while not producing any real value, parasite on others. Official Confucianism depicts these folks as base characters and foreigner’s descriptions of Chinese merchants—the only Chinese with whom they usually interact—often confirm these bleak images. In the view of the Westerners, these Chinese merchants were people without any sense of self-respect and excessively greedy. Their image of these Chinese was similar to the image of Jews. Mandarin, with whom foreigners rarely interact, despise these greedy underclasses. The mandarin, the members of the ruling elite, strive not for material well-being but for moving along the bureaucratic hierarchy. Thinking about material improvement unrelated to social promotion was not acceptable. The despise of material goods could also be deduced from the general ethos of totalitarian oriental despotism. It implied shaping of the material by the will of the state, and corollary implied the dominance of the spiritual

over the matter. Consequently, the stress was on what we could call humanities, e.g. languages, philosophy, history, etc. Practical knowledge of technologies was always on the back burner. The imperial system, which tested one's knowledge of language, philosophy, and history, implied a considerable effort. Those who prepare for exams shall memorise literally hundreds of thousands of hieroglyphics in addition to studying ancient text, and they plainly have no energy for anything else.

Later, by the end of imperial periods, the interest in technology related to natural science and industry increased. Still, by that time, China was in the process of being transformed into a semi-colony of Western power and Japan, and neither of them was interested in China's economic development. Moreover, neither of them was actually interested in China's existence as a unified state. The situation had changed after Mar's victory in 1949.

BLENDING TECHNOLOGY WITH ORIENTAL TRADITION AND THE BIRTH OF CHINESE SOCIALISM

There were two major repercussions of these events. First, Mao unified China and started a peculiar new dynasty. During his rule, Mao's socioeconomic experiments led to the deaths of tens of millions. One might add that from the time of the collapse of the last dynasty to Mao's victory, millions also died from starvation, disease, wars and banditry. Yet the loss of life during Mao's experiments was truly horrific. Dozens of million people possibly died during the Great Leap Forward alone. Still, Deng Xiaoping proclaims that Mao was "right" for 70% of his actions. The reason for such an assumption was manifold. But the major reason might be as follows: in Deng's view, Mao recreated a strong state which would protect China from foreign predators and reestablish basic unity of the country. Finally, his "socialist" arrangement was actually a reestablishment of China's traditional imperial socio-economic arrangement, which implied that the "son of heaven" is

the final proprietor and subjects received their property in the form of a peculiar “lease”. However, Mao was not a restorationist. While restoring imperial structure and implicitly comparing himself with the First Emperor of Qin, he engaged in violent campaigns of what he regarded as remnants of old pre-revolutionary China. There was a special campaign against Confucianism. On the surface, the reason was simple: attacking what Mao proclaimed to be a remnant of a discarded past helped him to launch the “Cultural Revolution”. Its quest was simple: to purge bureaucracy, actually, any elite which was not absolutely loyal to Mao. Yet, this attack on old China indicates that imperial China had a lot of negative attributes. Marginalisation of industry and hard science was, implicitly, one of imperial China’s problems. Socialist regime, Marxism as ideology, implicated the development of “productive forces”, technological and industrial capacities of the state. These changes shall be injected into the old body of Oriental despotism. And changes were indicated by the nature of the “Great Leap Forward”. It was a disaster and dozens of millions starved. Still, it indicated Mao’s understanding of the importance of the development of “productive forces”. The production of steel was seen as a paramount goal in this context. It was Marxism that apparently influenced Mao to engage in frantic industrialisation. The socio-political setting of this industrialisation was essential: it was to be conducted not in the context of private property and “free market” but in the context of absolute power of the state over “means of production”. In this reading, Oriental despotism became not backward but progressive for both Marxism and Oriental despotism downplay private property, Western capitalist democracy, etc. Marxism also emphasised the role of “productive forces”, e.g. technology and hard science. And this stress on the development of science and technology clearly demarcated Red China from its old imperial template. The peculiar marriage between Marxism and China's indigenous traditions implied the marriage of technology to a totalitarian state. And the result was stupendous.

RESULTS

How to measure the success of the system? Those who review the program of either major contender for highest offices in the USA or those who explain the reasons for US global expansion usually appeal to democracy, the final and most precious gift to humanity. The problem here is not just that in many cases the Western capitalist democracy in its real implication is actually the rule of economic elite—and this was made clear by Marx sometime ago—but that democracy itself, the political institutions, are not of much value for *hoi polloi* if it is not directly related to economic well-being of the population or, in more general form, the well-being of society in total. The first, and in a way axiomatic, demand is security, safety from both external and internal threats. The totalitarian socialist state ensures safety from the foreign threat. Indeed, even a rudimentary nuclear arsenal protects China from foreign invasion.

The power of the state also establishes a basic order in the country. This, however, was not the only gift. Indeed, it is economic progress that is the most visible sign of the workability of the Chinese model and an economic surge indicated by the rise of real production. It is not a service “bubble” of the West unrelated to real production, but the economy which could be measured by tons, meters, etc. And if one were to measure the Chinese economy by these criteria, it achieved a lot. At present, China produces almost 30% of the global industrial output. In some areas, China dominates completely. It produces, for example, 50% of the global steel production.

The western, mostly American observer assumed that totalitarian China could not catch up with the USA technologically, and new know-how in China is the result of China’s theft of Western, mostly American, intellectual property. It was this fear that led to the extensive search for peculiar intellectual spies in the leading American universities. The notion that China’s technological advancement is due exclusively to “stealing” Western technological products is also false. One shall remember here that not only

imperial China, the country of Oriental despotism, was ahead of the West in many technological/scientific discoveries, but the USSR, the other totalitarian state, had made a great leap forward without any help from the West.

Indeed, as it is known, the USSR was the first in launching Sputnik and later man in Space. The very notion that a totalitarian state could achieve technological progress outside of modern Western arguments could not be accepted by Western, especially American, observers and the stream of publications which predicted China's "hard landing" proliferated. Some of them pointed to what they regarded China's economic problems without attempting to place the phenomenon in the particular socio-economic context. For example, the observers could have noted that China's housing market had lost a lot of "value." As these implied serious or even catastrophic problems. Yet to understand the phenomenon, one shall remember that observers applaud the criteria of the modern Western, mostly American capitalism, to understand China. American observers might have noted that houses in certain areas lost 30%-40% of their "value", and this is a horrible loss. Somebody might assume that these regions had suffered a horrible catastrophe. It might suffer either carpet bombing or a devastating tornado. Still, none of these types of calamities happen. The houses' value was not related to their size, quality and other measurable attributes, but to their market values, it was a bubble value which could easily pop up and explode with the same speed. While in the USA "bubble" economy "value" became increasingly postmodernist construction, the story would be different in China. Here, housing, as anything else, would be mostly measured by the actual production, e.g. building of these houses, and while fluctuation of their values might be a nuisance, it would not have serious economic implications.

And here is another example. The Western observer often noted that entire Chinese cities were absolutely empty. This is, in the view of the observers, a good example of China's totalitarian inefficiency. To start with, empty buildings/apartments can be seen in big American cities. These apartments are empty because there are no

tenants who could pay the huge rent. In China's case, the rationale is different. In the course of these or definitely next generation, most Chinese would move from villages to cities, and sufficient housing shall be built ahead of time.

While some of the Western observers acknowledged China's economic success, they noted that the present-day economic model could well reach a dead end. They noted that this present-day economic model is based on extensive export, and the markets for Chinese goods close up for a variety of reasons. In their view, China's economic and related socio-political structure shall also change. There is a good point in these assumptions. It is quite possible that the Chinese socioeconomic body would change. Those who pointed to those changes implied that only one avenue exists: China shall forsake government control over the economy and move toward "the end of history", i.e. Western liberal capitalism.

While these directions are possible and, as a matter of fact, many options exist, socioeconomic liberalisation is not the most viable option, for it entails a danger of the collapse of the entire social and political system. The most likely scenario is the movement in the opposite direction: further limiting the role of the market and increasing the role of the state with all its repressive functions, in all aspects of society's life. And here China could well follow the Soviet scenario.

Indeed, one could remember that most of those who watched the USSR in 1920th predicted that the country had no other options but to move to full restoration of capitalism, the system shall inevitably lapse to its "Thermidor", a term quite popular among the enemies of the regime at that time. "Thermidor", taken from the French Revolution, marked the end of the rule of radical Jacobins. In the context of Soviet history, it implied the end of Bolshevik rule and a complete restoration of capitalism shall follow. One shall remember that everything seems to be moving in these directions. Private business flourished, the Party was split, and revolutionary ideology was increasingly passé. Still, the opposite process prevailed, and the "revolution from above" in 1929 "orientalised" society

completely, and the wave of terror had produced absolute obedience. The same could have happened with China.

The society of Oriental despotism, even its modernised “socialist” form, could well prevail in the future. Still, it would be wrong to assume that the system is bulletproof. One shall remember that after the victory in WW2 and acquiring of nuclear weapons, the USSR was seen as an impregnable fortress. In 1970th, most Western observers believed in its final global predominance in the conflict with the democratic or, to be precise, oligarchical capitalist West. One might note that some Soviet dissidents believed that the USSR would collapse. This was, for example, the case with Andrei Amalrik. Yet, he was unable to predict the Gorbachev phenomenon and the destruction of the empire from within. For him, Brezhnev’s USSR was similar to the late Roman Empire, and elite comparative liberalism was due to the peculiar ageing and feebleness of the Politburo octogenarians. In Amalrik’s view, Brezhnev’s USSR looks like the Roman Empire in the last decades of its existence, where a decaying elite was not able to stand against vigorous barbarians. In the Soviet case, the threat emerged in Red China, at times in convulsions of the Cultural Revolution. In Amalrik’s view, the Chinese revolutionary elite was full of bellicose elan and would finally smash the USSR. At the same time, he saw no Gorbachev on the horizon. Amalrik, as well as quite a few Western observers, overlook the fact that everything depends on the leader in “totalitarian orientalism”. These attributes made the system both extremely powerful and, at the same time, extremely brittle. The point here is that this system is a system of agents, but not a structure. Consequently, the appearance of Chinese Gorbachev could lead to a speedy collapse of the system and the country and its reassembly might not be possible. Still, the strong tradition of Sinocentrism and a critical and selective approach to the political tradition of the West might be an antidote against the possible Chinese variant of Gorbachevism. The problems with leadership and tradition would be solved, and barring of course “black swans” - e.g. major wars, pandemics, etc. China would reemerge as a leading

power in the 21st century, restoring the prominence of despotic power, which Western politology had discarded in the “dustbin of history” a long time ago.

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