

Let a Hundred Flowers Bloom: My Experience of China Today

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On a number of recent occasions, I have been asked what my impressions are of China after having been away for too long. To set the context: due to the global conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic I was unable to return to China for more than three years. However, the much awaited return finally took place at the beginning of April of 2023. By now, I have settled back into Beijing. I have also been on a research field trip to Xizang (also known as Tibet) and travelled by train to the old Song Dynasty capital of Kaifeng. Above all, I have kept my eyes and ears open, talked with so many people, and discussed the situation in China today. As the well-known saying in China puts it, what you see with your eyes and hear with your ears is the only way to verify what is going on. Hearsay and rumour is certainly not the way to understand anything.

Of all the many things I have experienced, four stand out: the comprehensive consolidation of a socialist rule of law and the associated legal system; the greening of China; a quiet but evident optimism; and the ferment of idea, proposals, and plans. In what follows, I begin each section with some experiences, with what I have seen and heard, and then move to some theoretical reflections.

Socialist Rule of Law

Let us begin with the comprehensive consolidation of the socialist rule of law. Some may find this a somewhat strange development to notice, but I begin with rule of law since it is vitally important for socialist construction. Among the many aspects of rule of law that I have noticed, let me give four examples.

To begin with, in the early days of my return some people complained of what they saw as increasing “bureaucracy.” It may be a new Party secretary for an educational institution, who observes that the old “work style” is no longer adequate and must be changed. It may be all the new forms I had to complete, which were then submitted to new centres for processing such forms. It may be new requirements for outsiders to be admitted to a university campus. The list could go on. As time moved on, I began to realise that people had become used to the old way of completing tasks. Now, they actually needed to learn how to follow correct procedures and processes. Let me put it this way: while I have noticed that there is more “paperwork,” this has actually led to a significant improvement in efficiency. For all his faults, it was Max Weber (1922, 129) who pointed out

that socialism would require a qualitatively more efficient and rational bureaucracy than what may be experienced in a capitalist country.

Further, the former “grey area” between the law and observance has gone. One of the effects of the “wild gos” was this large “grey area.” Moving in this “grey area” became a necessary skill for living, but it also bred significant social mistrust. Fast-forward to the present. Counterfeit products: gone. Fake student IDs for cheaper tickets on trains and so on: gone. Scams on Wanfujing Street in Beijing: gone. Extravagant meals to impress guests for favours in return: gone. Malpractice by large enterprises: gone (due to comprehensive processes of rectification and reform). Again, the list could go on and on and on. The “grey area” has become very small indeed, if not completely gone.

Further, I have noticed a significant return of social trust. The value of social trust comes out of China millennia-long cultural tradition, in the sense that you can trust the person with whom you are dealing. Of course, China’s history has periods when there was a distinct lack of social trust, most recently the “wild gos” and its aftermath in the first decade of the new century. For most people, this loss of social trust was an affront to deep cultural values, so they have welcomed in so many ways the return of this value into daily life. Whether I visit the local dentist, hearing-aid specialist, or optometrist, they have the very refreshing – especially for one too used to Western contexts – approach of knowing what they are talking about, of a comprehensive gathering of scientific information so as to make the correct recommendation, and a concern that I am happy with what they have been recommended.

Finally, I have noticed that everyone is subject to the rule of law, from common people going about their daily lives to the highest levels of leadership in the country. When you have ensured and strengthened the leadership of the Communist Party through rule of law, then it becomes possible for all to be subject to the rule of law.

We have come to the point where some background and theoretical explanation is needed. As for background: although the step-by-step development of rule of law dates back at least to the late 1970s, and arguably further back to the very first days of the New China from 1949, the most significant developments have taken place since the CPC’s Eighteenth Congress in 2012 – now known as the beginning of the New Era (for example, see Xi 2017).

As for theory: we are speaking of a socialist rule of law, which is qualitatively different from a capitalist rule of law and its supposed “separation of powers.” How is a socialist rule of law defined? It ensures *both* the “people-centred” reality in China today, the reality that the “people are masters of the country,” *and* strengthens the leadership of

the Communist Party. For readers accustomed to think in terms of either-or – as in “either the people are the centre or the Communist Party leads” – you will need to put aside such thinking and try to understand this vital point. In other words, the reader will need to exercise some dialectical thinking: a socialist rule of law ensures and strengthens the leadership of the Communist Party precisely through ensuring that the people are masters of the country. But how does this dialectical relation work? The rule of law comprises a core feature of the mechanisms – the technical term is “statutory processes” – through which the will of the people is connected with the will of the Communist Party. Other aspects of these statutory processes include the constitution and China’s robust socialist democratic system, but I have noticed most at a day-to-day level how much the rule of law and the associated legal system have been enhanced and strengthened.

A final note: since we have not seen until today the reality of a socialist rule of law, it could not be instituted immediately. Such a rule of law must be developed, through pilot projects, through trial and error, through crossing the stream by feeling one stone at a time. It also requires learning best practice from every other country in the world, discarding what is unsuitable and adapting the best in light of China’s concrete conditions.

The Greening of China

The second feature that has struck me is the greening of China. Upon returning to Beijing earlier this year, I immediately encountered greenery at every turn and in every corner. To set the context: some years ago, I decided to get to know Beijing somewhat better. So I set out on ever longer hikes covering the length and breadth of the city. It was not uncommon for me to walk 15-20 kilometres or more on each hike. Back then, I could see clearly the greening process underway. Yet, that experience was nothing compared to what I encountered this year. Green belts running through the city, clean waterways, and trees, trees, trees. Every resident is now able to gain access to green space within a short distance from their residence. Simply put, Beijing has become a garden city.

Even more, Beijing’s sky is blue every day, except when it is raining. When I first visited Beijing in 2009 people used to joke that they may have seen the sun during a brief period in the previous year (the 2008 Olympics), but by 2009 the situation was back to “normal”: you could not see a clear sky or the sun. Weather reports included statistics on the level of air pollution: light, moderate, heavy, hazardous or very hazardous. All manner of air purifiers were common in homes, dust masks were common on the streets, and I had to exercise by running up stairs wearing a dust mask. The rare clear day was due to the

wind. Today, not an air-cleaner or dust mask is to be found. To repeat, day after day in Beijing the sky is blue, except when it is raining.

The reader may wonder whether these environmental projects are to be found only in Beijing? I have travelled through the countryside and cities by train to see some old friends in the ancient Song Dynasty capital of Kaifeng. Not only was Kaifeng's development obvious, but so also was the greenery and the clear skies. When I asked people concerning such matters, they confirmed that there had been significant improvement. I have also been on a week-long research field trip to Xizang (also known as Tibet) and found that afforestation projects are to be found all over the region – at least below the tree line. For example, the mountains surrounding Lhasa, which rise to over 4000 metres above sea level, are well on the way to being forested with trees that flourish in such conditions. These mountains have always been bare of trees. Now they are being forested.

To understand how China has been able achieve such a turnaround and become a world leader in environmental protection and development, we need to consider some of the key policies and projects. For example, the phrase “lucid waters and lush mountains are invaluable assets [绿水青山就是金山银山 *lǜshuǐ qīngshān jiù shì jīnshān-yīnshān*]” has come to sum up the whole range of environmental projects across China. One may wonder whether economic development and environmental protection are compatible with one another. This question arises only if you adhere to an either-or approach to contradictions. Instead, the Chinese approach is thoroughly dialectical (and this is a millennia-old approach): it is precisely economic development that enables more effective environmental measures, and vice versa. In this sense, it becomes possible to understand the concept and reality of “green growth.” All of this may be summed up in the term “ecological civilisation [生态文明 *shēngtái wénmíng*],” which is very difficult to translate. While 生态 *shēngtái* concerns the way an organism's mode of life relates to its environment, 文明 *wénmíng* concerns the essence or the best of a cultural tradition. Together, the two words mean that “civilisation” is not simply a human endeavour, but is rather a comprehensive, holistic, and environmental endeavour.

One of the features of China that impresses me the most is that no matter how good a project is, no matter how much has been achieved, it is always in process and much work needs to be done. For example, in the General Secretary's report to the CPC's 20th National Congress in October of 2022, it was noted that significant achievements had been made in the last five years in ensuring “stronger ecological conservation and environmental protection across the board, in all regions, and at all times.” All of this has

led to “historic, transformative, and comprehensive changes in ecological and environmental protection and has brought us bluer skies, greener mountains, and cleaner waters.” However, a much longer section later in the report outlines how much still needs to be done after achieving zero emissions: this is nothing less than a project of environmental restoration in the framework of “ecological civilisation” (Xi 2022).

A Quiet but Evident Optimism

A third feature of China today is a quiet but evident optimism. There is an energy and vitality about everyday life, a distinct optimism that shows itself through all manner of daily interactions. And this optimism rubs off on the many foreigners who are flowing to China as I write. Talking with an English colleague from Peking University: he points out that being back in China has been very good for his view of the world. Meeting an old Australian friend in Beijing (who was quite down for some time): I see his renewed smile, his energy, and the bounce in his step (he is in his 80s). My spirits too have been lifted, to the point of taking up running again and other exercises I thought were no longer suitable for my age.

There are so many reasons for such optimism as the New Era (from 2012) has unfolded. We may put it in negative terms: about 15 years ago the effects of the “wild 90s” were still felt in many areas. Today these effects have either been completely overcome or are well on the way to being resolved: the chaotic situations for workers – whether losing jobs without compensation, delays in pay, and widespread flouting of labour laws – have been resolved; the wide gap between wealthier and poorer regions has been reduced through the success of the anti-poverty campaign and now the growth of a middle-income group to about 500 million; the problems with air, water, and land pollution are well on the way to being resolved (see above); the absence of medical, unemployment, retirement, and disability insurance schemes has been resolved with the largest welfare scheme on the planet now implemented; and the wide gap between the CPC and the common people has definitely been resolved through the most resolute, thorough, and long-lasting anti-corruption campaign of the New China; the lack of knowledge of Marxism by even leading cadres in the CPC has moved to a point – through regular study sessions and much more – where cadres are ever more knowledgeable; and the disjointed nature of the CPC, between central and local bodies, of 15 years ago has turned into a Party more united than it has been since before 1949.

However, the negative approach reveals only so much. I find it better to focus on the positive dimension. Perhaps I can sum it up best as follows: when I return to China I

am stepping into the future; when I visit a Western country I am stepping into the past. It is common in some quarters to focus on a few areas of technological development, where China has taken a major leap forward to lead in almost all areas. But the future I mention is evident everywhere: visit the local dentist and you will see high-end equipment (which I do not find in, for example, Australia or Denmark) that provides accurate assessment in seconds; visit a medical specialist and you are told that the “latest treatment” in a Western country was abandoned five or more years ago since it is not so efficient; travel through the countryside and you will see that the standard trains crisscrossing the whole country are the older “Harmony” high-speed trains which travel at “only” 300 kilometres per hour (the newer “Fuxing” trains of 350 km/h are beginning to replace the older ones). At so many levels, China has not “caught up” but has already taken a dialectical leap forward.

At a social and political level, the country is not falling apart but is moving forward at notable speed that is also stable (dialectics, remember!). My assessment is that China’s socialist democratic system is now more mature and developed than any political system you will find elsewhere. And at a cultural level, there is a creative energy that is increasingly being called the new “liberation of thought” (see more below).

By now some readers may be wondering what China thinks of the few countries of the world that make up the “West.” To be clear, the causes for optimism are primarily internal, to which external factors add another dimension. As for the West, at an everyday level people are neither interested in nor afraid of the West. It rarely comes into discussions, and the news outlets may have an item from time to time but it is well down the main page on the website. In other words, for ordinary people the West has become irrelevant. The real world and the most important developments are elsewhere.

As for experts and policy-makers, the assessment now is not that the West is in decline, but rather that it has hit rock bottom. Fifty years of economic decline, stagnation, and fragmentation have increasingly evident effects on political systems and societies. Stagnation and fragmentation at these levels have now become tears in the social fabric, evident breakdowns of old political certainties, and waves of social unrest. Having ceased to innovate, all that the West can do internationally is attempt a feeble and “outdated Cold War thinking,” without any economic substance and in response to China now setting the agenda. From personal experience, I can attest to these realities. Coming from China to Western Europe, I am struck by how degraded, fearful, and isolated Western countries have become. However, it is important to note that unlike many in the world who would like to see the West collapse entirely, a Chinese approach is to hope that the West can find the resources for social, cultural, and political renewal. It will no doubt take a long time,

and it will require initially a full acknowledgement that the West has hit rock bottom. The next step is to dig deep into Western traditions to find the resources for renewal. I am not speaking of some conservative approach that seeks to reinforce the “either-or” or “zero-sum” approach to the world; I am not speaking of finding renewed justification for war-mongering and seeking to impose hegemony on others; and I am certainly not suggesting a renewed emphasis on the private individual. The resources for renewal need to be quite distinct. The process, from a Chinese perspective, is not to recover old values and reclaim them, but to find other values that can then be transformed in a very different context. However, by the time the West manages to do so, the world will be a very different place.

Finally, I would like to explain a few key phrases that sum up the Chinese approach. Each phrase carries a wealth of connotations that do not need to be repeated, for they sum up the breadth and range of scholarship and assessment on such matters. The first is “qualitative change [质变 *zhibian*],” in the sense that world is now undergoing qualitative and not quantitative transformation. More fully, we are now witnessing “profound changes unseen in a century [百年未有之大变局 *bainian weiyou zhi dabian ju*].” Think back a century or so and we are in the time of the Russian Revolution and its aftermath. Although the times are quite distinct, the depth and breadth of changes underway now are analogous. The third phrase is “a new form of human civilisation [人类文明新形态 *renlei wenming xin xingtai*],” which expresses the clear awareness that a different structure of the world is emerging out of the qualitative changes underway and that this provides unique opportunities to which China is already contributing. The reader may be familiar with other ways of expressing this awareness, such as a “multi-polar” world, and that the US-led West is exhausting itself trying to roll back the clock.

Perhaps the reader can see now why there is a quiet but evident optimism in China, whether we speak of everyday of common people or the assessments and policy decisions being made. In short, the times suit China very well, as indeed they suit so many developing countries.

Let a Hundred Flowers Bloom and a Hundred Schools of Thought Contend

The fourth feature I have noticed is the extraordinary ferment of ideas, proposals, and plans. This truly is a time – to quote an expression from millennia ago – of “letting a hundred flowers bloom and a hundred schools of thought contend [百花齐放百家争鸣 *baihua-qifang, baijia-zhengming*].” There are so many examples, ranging from the inherent innovation of Chinese culture as it is integrated with Marxism, the writing of a whole new chapter of Marxism from the midst of the mainstream, and the energetic development of

existing and new international projects as China engages ever more deeply with so many countries in the world.

Perhaps the best way to indicate this ferment of ideas, proposals, and plans is to mention a couple of the “hot topics” in China today. The first concerns “justice [正义 *zhengyi*],” which initially appeared about a decade ago and continues to be a topic of much discussion and debate. In the framework of “practical materialism” and concrete Marxism, there are two key aspects. The first is to develop further a socialist approach to justice, in the sense that justice is absolutely central to a whole range of questions on the socialist road. The second is a comprehensive and very practical approach to justice. Thus, justice involves: the imperative that no-one should live in poverty, which has been a core dimension of the immense project of lifting 800 million Chinese people out of poverty; the fact that no-one is to be left behind on the path to common prosperity; the core human right as the right to socioeconomic well-being, from which flow civil, political, cultural, and environmental rights; access to quality education from the cities to the remotest high-altitude regional areas; a medical insurance scheme that covers all of China’s 1.4 billion people, with a focus on primary care at local hospitals (such as the very competent one on my campus) to specialised care in major hospitals – so much so that the policy is to ensure that no-one needs to leave their province for a full range of medical care; livable retirement pensions, which come alongside the many other aspects of care for the elderly; and so on.

A second focus of much attention concerns the “two integrations [两个结合 *liangge jiehe*],” in the sense that Marxism needs to be combined or integrated with China’s concrete realities and the best of China’s traditional culture.¹ The first integration may be dated back to the late 1930s, when Mao Zedong spoke of the need for communists to understand the whole history of China, from Confucius to Sun Zhongshan (Sun Yat-sen), of the need for concrete Marxism in light of China’s actual conditions, and the need to develop Marxism in terms of China’s specific characteristics (Mao [1938] 1991, 658-59).

However, it is the second integration that is drawing most attention. While the integration of Marxism with the best of China’s traditional culture has been a feature since the beginning of the CPC, it has only recently been specifically identified as such. Thus far,

¹ The “two integrations” were initially mentioned briefly in the CPC General Secretary’s speech at the centenary celebrations of the CPC on 1 July 2021, elaborated further in the report to the CPC’s 20th National Congress on 16 October 2022, and elaborated even more in a speech at a conference on cultural inheritance and development on 2 June 2023. At the time of writing, more than 400 articles (many brief at this stage) have been published on the “two integrations,” with a focus on the “second integration.” As an aside, I have been invited to write a monograph on this topic, from the perspective of a foreigner who has some knowledge of China’s situation. It will be published in Chinese and English.

we find two main moves: the one seeks to identify the essence of China's traditional culture and the compatibility of this essence with scientific socialism. The other seeks to identify the process by which this is done.² These include: 1) the need for a good fit between two approaches that come from different sources; 2) the organic unity of the two, in which Marxism has become China's Marxism, and China's traditional culture has become modern; 3) while Chinese culture has given Marxism a much longer and broader historical road, it is Marxism that has led to the renewal of Chinese culture, giving us Chinese-style modernisation and thus strengthening China's traditional culture; 4) since China's traditional culture is inherently innovative, Marxism has and continues to provide the impetus for enlightenment, renewal, and innovation of that culture; 5) the integration of the basic principles of Marxism with China's traditional culture has consolidated the distinct identity of China on the world stage today.

Allow me to summarise these dialectical formulations. Marxism is often described as China's "Enlightenment," in the sense that it has enabled China to grasp the laws of historical development and profoundly shift the direction China is taking. Further, the second integration is described as another "liberation of thought" (after Mao Zedong in 1935-1936 and Deng Xiaoping in 1978). As I write, there are the beginnings of a comprehensive assessment of how modernisation and traditional culture relate to one another, how to identify the essence of traditional culture, and how all of this has contributed to Chinese-style modernisation as well as a new form of human civilisation. Finally, not all of traditional culture can and should be carried forward. So how does one identify the dross to be discarded and the essence that is to be creatively developed? The debate has only begun, but I would like to emphasise that the phrase "优秀传统文化 [youxiu chuantong wenhua]" should perhaps not be translated as China's "fine traditional culture" (common today), but as the "best of China's traditional culture." In this way, the dialectical process of discarding the feudal and indeed bourgeois dross and developing the "best of" that culture can be indicated. All of this can be summed up in the observation: "The best inheritance of history is to create a new history; The greatest respect for human civilisation is to create a new form of human civilisation."

Conclusion

To sum up: I have written of four features that have struck me upon returning to live and work in China this year, namely, a socialist rule of law, the greening of China, a

² The following is drawn from a detailed report of the General Secretary's speech at a conference on cultural inheritance and development on 2 June 2023. The report may be found here: https://www.gov.cn/yaowen/liebiao/202306/content_6884316.htm.

quiet but evident optimism, and the ferment of ideas, proposals, and plans. On each topic I could have given many more examples, and provided more theoretical discussion, but the points are clear as they stand.

There is one final feature that I mention here by way of conclusion: the extraordinary flow of people to China, to study (Marxism as well), to work, to live, and simply to visit. Not only is China increasingly open to the world as it has stepped onto the world stage, but people are drawn to the country. Why? As a fellow ex-pat put it, life is better here. My Chinese friends, however, always remind me that there is much work to be done since there is much room for improvement.

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