

CELEBRATING THE BICENTENARY OF MARX'S BIRTH IN CHINA: AN ANALYSIS OF XI JINPING'S SPEECH AND ITS OFFICIAL MEDIA COVERAGE

ADRIAN KRAWCZYK

Introduction

The year 2018 marked the bicentennial of Karl Marx's birth. The multitude of commemoration activities, speeches, academic conferences, exhibitions, publications, and media reports in Western countries refute the widespread claim that "Marx is dead" and point to the ongoing relevance and controversial legacy of the German social critic and his theories in the era of global capitalism.

In China, the world's largest self-identified socialist country, a huge propaganda campaign accompanied official celebrations that centered on President Xi Jinping's speech at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing on May 4th, 2018, the day before the bicentenary. In that speech Xi stressed that it is totally correct for the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to unceasingly promote the Sinicization and modernization of Marxism and that "we are commemorating Marx to pay our respects to the greatest thinker in human history, and to proclaim our firm belief in the scientific truth of Marxism." He also instructed CCP members to read Marxist classics and understand Marxist principles as a "way of life and a spiritual pursuit." The party shall not forget its socialist roots as it works to attain the "rejuvenation of the Chinese nation."¹

Witnessing the rapid development of a consumerist society and the huge gap between rich and poor since the 1990s, most observers of contemporary Chinese politics and economy have noticed a contradiction between the socialist party rhetoric and socio-economic reality. This led to a widely shared consensus that the CCP leadership has long replaced adhering to a supposedly anachronistic state doctrine with focusing on practical and economical concerns,² while the use of socialist jargon only serves the legitimization of the regime.³

1 Xi 2018.

2 In my view, this interpretation can be viewed as the master narrative of contemporary China's political development in the assessments of China-related political scientists. See, for example, Holbig 2013.

3 For nuanced assessments of the development of Chinese socialism in the reform era, see Brugger and Kelly 1990; Dirlík 2016; Meisner 1999; Misra 1998.

By and large, this also holds true for the assessment of Xi Jinping's recent embracing of Marx and Marxism. Nonetheless, Jude Blanchette,⁴ a liberal commentator on current Chinese politics, does not intend to let his own "post-communist conventional wisdom" be hampered by accepting "the notion that Xi Jinping actually believes in Marx and Marxism" and regards the CCP's emphasis on Marx as "a means to contrast itself with the 'failing' alternative political-economic model of the United States."⁵ Meanwhile, Australian Broadcasting Corporation's (ABC) China correspondent Bill Birtles interprets Xi's tightening of ideological control and partial reassertion of the CCP's guidance of the economy as a sign that Xi believes more in the principles of Marxism-Leninism than his three immediate predecessors.⁶

However, in Western journalism there seems to be a broad agreement that the main purpose of Xi's Marxism is to secure the rule of the CCP. Willy Lam, a Hong Kong-based long-term observer of Chinese politics, rejoices in an interview with ABC News that "most ordinary Chinese have zero interest in Marxism or Leninism," but stresses the usefulness of Marx and Lenin in particular for the "closet Maoist" Xi Jinping "because their teachings justify [...] concentrating all powers in the Communist Party and [...] in the top leader himself."⁷ In a similar vein, the noted China correspondent Richard McGregor points out that "China is about the ideology of power, it is not particularly left-wing" and that it "embodies the Communist Party-centric structure of Leninism more than Marx's theories." To him, the CCP's constant focus on Marxism serves to secure ideological control more than that it represents actual adherence to the core beliefs, which are symbolized by "key terms such as proletariat, class, and bourgeoisie."⁸ In his view, "Socialism with Chinese Characteristics" (*Zhongguo tese shehuizhuyi* 中国特色社会主义) is an attempt by the CCP to make China's market economy look compatible with socialism.⁹

Shifting the focus from Western journalism to the field of academic inquiry, the renowned China historians Timothy Cheek and David Ownby's co-authored essay "Make China Marxist Again" stands out as a nuanced analysis of the CCP's current narrative of Marxism.¹⁰ In their essay they call Xi Jinping's Marxism "a top-down attempt to unify the

4 For a highly readable, liberal account of Leftism in China in the reform era, see Blanchette's monograph "China's New Red Guards: The Return of Radicalism and the Rebirth of Mao Zedong". Blanchette, 2019.

5 Quoted in Shepherd 2018.

6 Birtles 2018.

7 Quoted in *ibid*, no page.

8 Quoted in *ibid*, no page.

9 Quoted in *ibid*, no page.

10 Cheek and Ownby 2018.

population behind a nationalist ideology, not to inspire class struggle.” To them, Xi’s basic interpretations of Marx – “that Marxism changes with the times, that it must be integrated with local culture in order to be effective, and that it needs a strong Party and a strong leader in order to succeed” – cannot stem from a serious reading of Marx and Engels’s *Communist Manifesto* the centrality of which Xi constantly highlights. Instead, Xi’s evocation of Marx aims at a “revival of governing by ideology” and at enabling “the Leninist state to survive and [...] determine the content and direction of China’s rejuvenation to the status of a world power abroad and a prosperous, civilized society at home.”¹¹

Furthermore, Cheek and Ownby point out that Xi’s declarations can hardly be misinterpreted as a call to revolution or inspire “theoretical debates in world conferences on Marxist thought,”¹² for “class struggle has been replaced by the managed efficiency of the ‘China model’.”¹³ Social criticism rather comes from establishment intellectuals, such as Wang Hui, Qin Hui, Xu Jilin, or Jiang Qing, who try to influence state and public opinion without challenging CCP leadership.¹⁴ In this respect, the authors highlight the role of Chinese liberals, New Leftists, and New Confucians who together form a landscape of intellectual pluralism that “makes it harder to sell Xi’s version of the China Dream.”¹⁵

In my view, the reviewed statements rightly identify the core features and function of Xi Jinping’s Marxism as displayed in his speech. Mixing a deterministic understanding of historical materialism and an eclectic draw on Maoist methods and symbols with a revival of Confucianism that is justified by a supposedly dialectical approach to cultural traditions, and taking into account the absence of class as a category of the analysis of social relations, Xi’s Marxism constitutes a nationalist ideology that aims at closing the ranks in view of China’s overall agenda of global expansion and of developing a prosperous capitalist society at home that is led by a strong leader of a Leninist party.¹⁶

That being said, while Cheek and Ownby’s article shares some problematic assumptions with the commentaries of journalists and “China experts” in the Western media, it is the latter who showcase – to differing degrees – a simplified and unambiguous understanding of Marxism, explicitly or implicitly suggesting that it can be discarded in its entirety as a

11 Ibid, no page.

12 The first and second World Congresses on Marxism were held at Beijing University in 2015 and 2018.

13 Cheek and Ownby 2018, no page.

14 For analyses of the theories of these intellectuals and their debates see, among others, Callahan 2013; Davies 2007; Wang 2003.

15 Ibid., no page.

16 For another important text by Xi Jinping in which he explains his policies and his reference to Marxism, see his report to the 19th National Congress of the CCP; Xi 2017.

critical theory of capitalism and as a source of inspiration for emancipatory praxis. The reductionist stance is often expressed through a dichotomy between the supposed “economic pragmatism” of the reform era on the one hand, and the outgrowths of class struggle and ideological excesses of the Mao era on the other. To be sure, standing alone, the basic assumptions about both time periods are not entirely implausible, notwithstanding recent efforts of Western scholars to contribute to a more realistic picture of contemporary Chinese history by also taking into account the continuities between both historical phases.¹⁷

The problem rather lies in the conceptual narrowness that stems from the suggested equation of Marx’s theories, Marxism, and Maoism through the supposed shared key elements of “class” and “class struggle” in the respective texts. Just to address one of several issues, the implicit identification of Marx and Mao regarding their class analysis is highly problematic. To Marx, class affiliation was strictly determined by one’s position in the process of capitalist production.¹⁸ Leaving aside the early Mao’s creation of subcategories of certain classes that seemed necessary to understand the specific class composition of Chinese society, class affiliation would later become a matter of political definition; that is, a person’s supposed personal and political integrity. This moralization of “class affiliation” played a crucial role in the brutal excesses of the Cultural Revolution.¹⁹

Passing over the need to distinguish between different “Marxes” and “Marxisms” in some cases might be owed to a stalwart anti-Communist stance, in others it might be understandable for it reflects the power constellation in Chinese politics since the era of Deng Xiaoping, in which the confrontation within the CCP between market-oriented reformers and the “Old Left” (*lao zuopai* 老左派) time and again plays a prominent role and overshadows other theoretical and practical approaches.²⁰ In any case, it does not come as a surprise that Cheek and Ownby’s overview of the intellectual field does not supplement positions of party apologetics, the New Left, the liberals, and the New Confucians, with Marxist contributions of various kinds. Just to mention one of several critical Marxist commentaries, Nie Jinfang’s²¹ lecture entitled “Our Understanding of Marx is

17 See, for instance, Meisner 1999.

18 See Heinrich 2004, 193.

19 For analyses of the Cultural Revolution and the factor of class in particular, see Meisner 1999; Walder 2015; Wu 2014.

20 “Old Left” is a pejorative term ascribed to supporters within the Party and without of a limited or complete return to the revolutionary politics of the Mao era. For a recent account of the development of the “Old Left” from a liberal perspective, see Brown and van Neuenhuizen 2016.

21 Nie Jinfang is a professor at the institute of philosophy at Beijing University. His research focuses on textological studies of Karl Marx’s works and the development of Marx’s writings. See, for example, Nie Jinfang 2018a.

Far From Enough"²² can be read as a clear rejection of the CCP's narrative of Marx and Marxism. To him, Chinese Marxist philosophy simplifies and falsely linearizes Marx's works, overlooks the epistemological significance of *Capital*, misuses Marxian concepts as a political tool, and omits Marx's striving for the freedom of the individual.²³

In what follows, I analyze Xi Jinping's lengthy speech (Section 1). Focusing on the way Xi establishes a coherent narrative of Marx's life and theories that fits the CCP's purposes, this article offers facets that have not been included in previous discussions of Xi's speech and his overall framework of reference to Karl Marx and to Marxism. The inclusion, emphasis, or omission of certain aspects of Marx's life and oeuvre and of the historical development of Marxism and socialism in China and elsewhere deserve critical scrutiny because they can be used as a foil that helps to distinguish different positions toward Marx and Marxism in China. Furthermore, I review the official media coverage of Marx's anniversary in China through an analysis of exemplary articles from the *People's Daily* and the *Guangming Daily* (Section 2).

1 Xi Jinping's Speech at the Ceremony Commemorating the Bicentenary of the Birth of Marx

Despite the long-standing references in Western assessments to the CCP's eclectic use of Marx's statements to meet its own ends,²⁴ the question of how Xi Jinping's narrative of Marx and Marxism, and its mediation into state ideology, actually works has yet to be addressed. In this section I will thus critically analyze Xi's speech on the occasion of the bicentenary of Marx's birth. Special attention will be given to Xi's narrative of Marx's life course, character, and the evolution of his theories. I will examine Xi's elaboration of the key principles of Marxism for contradictions and omissions and relate selected aspects of Xi's declarations on the basis of quotes from the *Communist Manifesto* about the contemporary significance of studying and practicing Marxism to the context of Marx's original work.

Xi Jinping's short portrayal of Karl Marx's life stages, thought, and works starts with the assertion that Marx had *one* mission in life – to work for the liberation of humanity – that had been determined as early as in his early adolescence.²⁵ In Xi's chronological ac-

22 Nie Jinfang 2018b.

23 Ibid. For an overview of the Marxist intellectual field in China, see Hu Daping 2010. For a study on one of the most influential critical Marxist scholars in China, see Krawczyk 2019.

24 See, for example, Kalpana Misra's excellent study of official Marxist theory in the reform era; Misra 1998.

25 Quotations from Xi Jinping's speech are taken from the official English translation issued by Xinhua News Agency (see Xi 2018) and have been cross-checked by the author with the Chinese original. The Chinese and English versions do not show noticeable differences in meaning.

count of Marx's historical achievements, after having written subversive articles for the *Rheinische Zeitung* newspaper, Marx became a materialist through revolutionary practice in the workers' movement of Paris, explained the basic principles of historical materialism in *The German Ideology* before he wrote the *Manifesto of the Communist Party* "which, once published, immediately shook the world." After the failure of the revolution in 1848, he engaged in "a systematic politico-economic analysis, thus revealing the nature and patterns governing capitalism." This led him to writing *Capital*, "his most profound and fecund work, and which has been honored as the 'Bible of the working class.'"

Xi's narrative contains hagiographic elements that have been commonly employed both in traditional Chinese biographical writings and in biographies of "great men" in state socialism. It follows the eulogistic logic of a step-by-step increase in the significance of Marx's writings and activities. This becomes obvious as Xi struggles to uphold the narrative for Marx's later years, of which he states nebulously:

Marx continued to closely watch new trends in global development and new events in the workers' movement, making great efforts at reflecting on issues concerning human development *from an even greater viewpoint*. (emphasis added)

In a later part of the speech Xi sums up fittingly that "in founding his scientific theoretical system, Marx endured hardships unimaginable to most ordinary people until *ultimately arriving at the luminous summit*" (emphasis added). In the continual development to a higher plateau in Marx's "life of greatness," bound together by the dedication "to the lofty ideal of the emancipation of humankind," only one notable change occurred; that is, Marx's transformation during his years in Paris from the "idealist" and "revolutionary democrat" he was when he attacked "the autocratic rule of the Prussian government and defended [...] the rights of the people" in the *Rheinische Zeitung*, to "materialist" and "communist." Although Xi is anxious not to suggest that Marx's development constituted a clear break between a young and a mature Marx, an argument that has increasingly come under attack from Marxologists in recent years,²⁶ it still helps to slightly and subtly downplay Marx's earlier views, which seems necessary for the CCP given that one of Marx's major concerns in his defense of the "rights of the people" was the critique of the Prussian governments' restrictions on freedom of speech.²⁷

The very few specifications that Xi attributes to Marx's works are either empty signifiers or do not focus on their content but on their impact and reception. Passing over Marx's important concept of ideology, Xi describes *The German Ideology* as "the first

26 See Heinrich 2018, 30–31.

27 See Marx's "Bemerkungen über die neueste preußische Zensurinstruktion," in Marx and Engels, *Werke*, vol. I.

relatively systematic elaboration of the basic principles of historical materialism,” thus continuing a central tenet of the orthodox Stalinist tradition. Although it was known that Marx and Engels never published *The German Ideology* and that the manuscripts were incomplete, it was edited and published as a founding text of historical materialism and served as a cornerstone of Stalinist ideology.²⁸ More significantly, a new text-critical edition of *The German Ideology* has revealed that Marx and Engels neither planned to publish a book entitled *The German Ideology* nor intended to write a systematic philosophy of historical materialism, as if the latter had already existed in their heads.²⁹

Leaving aside that the speech ignores these insights, it is telling that only in the case of *The German Ideology* does Xi hint at the theoretical significance of Marx's cited works through the buzzword of historical materialism. Thus, instead of commenting on class struggle or explicating his assertion that Marx performed a “systematic politico-economic analysis” of the failed 1848 revolution, we learn only that the publication of the *Manifesto* caused a worldwide immediate shock and that *Capital* has been honored as the Bible of the working class. Both works are invoked here only as milestones in the success story of Marx and the global worker's movement, while the reproduction of August Bebel's cliché of “the Bible of the working class,” which transformed *Capital* into a scientifically justified prophecy, in particular brings an element of nostalgia into the celebration of the historical achievements of the working class. Xi's comments on the *Manifesto* and *Capital* are also problematic from the perspective of the historical spread of these two works. Neither did the *Manifesto* immediately take the world by storm; in fact, it did not even play a role in the revolution of 1848, and it was only until much later that it became an important source of inspiration for workers' movements in Europe. Nor has *Capital* always been a standard read in workers' households, and more often than not it was consulted only very selectively – in that regard, perhaps, resembling the Bible.³⁰

The speech offers a hint to why Xi bypasses Marx's major works without elaborating on their contents. Referencing Engels's *Speech at the Graveside of Karl Marx*, he emphasizes that Marx was first and foremost a “ceaseless fighter” and “the revolutionary leader of the proletariat.” Listing Marx's involvement and supposed leadership positions in the Communist League and other organizations, Xi declares that “Marx threw himself *without hesitation* into the dynamic worker's movement, always standing at the vanguard of the revolutionary fight” (emphasis added). It needs to be pointed out that Marx by no means had a generally positive attitude toward “the workers' movement,” a harmonizing

28 The edition of *The German Ideology* consulted for this paper is published in *Marx and Engels Collected Works* (hereafter *MECW*), vol. V, 19–584.

29 Demirović 2018.

30 Koenen 2017, 456, 466.

expression that masks the fragmented state of proletarian organizations, which stemmed partly from incompatible views on the forms and aims of practical action. Thus, it was Marx's lifelong concern to theoretically refute the assumptions of real existing socialist practices that also made him retreat, time and again, from immersing himself in the intensive activities of socialist organizations.³¹ As Michael Heinrich, one of the leading Marx scholars in Germany, explains, Marx's enormous political impact did not stem from his role in barricade fights, but mainly from his writings, and throughout his whole life he was primarily an author.³²

The historical misrepresentation of Marx as the unquestioned spearhead of a monolithic workers' movement corresponds to the glorification of his personality and private life. According to Xi, Marx "selflessly dedicated himself to his work, regularly working sixteen hours a day," "encountered hardships [...] and suffered poverty and illness, yet he [...] never swayed from his original aspiration." Although "Marx was a great man of indomitable spirit," Xi reminds us, "he was also a man of flesh and blood." But in what follows, Xi does not remove the halo from around Marx's head, instead explaining Marx's humanness, Xi claims that "he loved life, and was sincere, honest, sentimental, and fair-minded." With his wife Jenny, he endured all hardships together, "composing a providential symphony of ideals and love." It is not surprising that Xi avoids mentioning Marx's occasionally excessive alcohol usage, his participation in barroom brawls, or moments of infidelity.³³

Xi's depiction of Marx's character and personal life embodies the problematic characteristics of traditional biographical writing and communist hagiography: a glorification and claim of consistency in personality and motives that are timeless constituents of a person. Marx was simply good and devoted himself to an ascetic lifestyle. Marx himself would have surely ridiculed this view given his criticism in the *Manifesto* of certain kinds of socialism that have a "reactionary character" that stems from the inculcation of a "universal asceticism and social leveling in its crudest form."³⁴ Xi's portrayal of Marx provides no room for a discussion of the incommensurable aspects of the biographical subject or for reflections on the mutual process of the constitution of the individual and the historical world. Consequently, Xi's account of Marx's personal qualities contains the same paradoxes as those displayed in biographies of the "founding fathers" that have generally featured in all socialist states. On the one hand, under the label of historical materialism, a very strong structural determinism leaves little room for individual action beyond the

31 Koenen 2017, 303–349, 422–479.

32 Heinrich, 2018, 376.

33 This is not, however, to imply that a serious treatment of Marx's life and theories must mention these anecdotes.

34 *Manifesto, MECW*, vol. VI, 509.

collective subjects of “class” and party; on the other hand, the individual genius of Marx, Engels, and Lenin apparently transcended all such social determinations.³⁵

Xi's Marx is a moral role model with a coherent personality and teleological life course. Accordingly, his thoughts and huge oeuvre – which are not discussed by Xi – are from the outset governed by his pursuit of the liberation of humankind, follow a straight path to excellence, and thus neither entail any contradictory elements nor give rise to controversial discussions. Hence, to Xi, Marxism, “*the theory*” that Marx “left for us” – disregarding that Marx had at several points expressed his annoyance at the characterization of his theories into an “ism,” and suggesting that Marx's oeuvre is a completed work – “is just like a magnificent sunrise,” thus not taking into account the very real epistemological breaks and fragmentation in Marx's writings and in the Marxist tradition. The evocation of Marxism as an ever-developing, open theory stands in sharp contrast to the static account of Marx's life and thought governed by a special variant of the teleological representation of the life of an individual – to look for early reasons of later developments.

For Xi, Marxism as a theory has four essential characteristics. It is first a scientific theory that consists of historical materialism and the theory of surplus value, which “brought to light the general patterns underlying the development of human society, and revealed the particular laws governing capitalist operations.” Again, as in his “elaboration” of *Capital*, Xi does not explain what these “particular laws” might be, and key terms in serious discussions of Marx's analysis of capitalism such as commodity, value, wage labor, exploitation, and so forth, are not even mentioned.

However, it is striking that Xi's explanation of the “scientific theory” is an exact translation of a part of Engels's *Speech at the Graveside of Karl Marx*. Engels is very often attributed with being the creator of the first contours of an easier to understand “Marxism” or “scientific socialism” through the condensation of Marx's complicated and fragmentary writings in several relatively easy-to-read texts such as *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific* and *Anti-Dühring*.³⁶ These writings had a key role in the intellectual formation of the main proponents of European socialism who in turn had a major impact on the creation of Marxism-Leninism – the *weltanschauung* set forth by Stalin and his ideologues from which generations of Chinese Marxists obtained their understanding of Marxism.³⁷ Thus, Xi's reference to Engels's speech also clearly indicates that the CCP still upholds elements of dialectical materialism that had been highlighted in the Stalinist tradition.³⁸

35 Heinrich 2018, 366–367.

36 Koenen 2017, 463–465.

37 For the history of Marxist philosophy in China, see Knight 2005.

38 The basic text of this tradition was Josef Stalin's *Dialectical and Historical Materialism*, which was highly influential in China. See Stalin 1940 [1938]. However, the argument often averred

Two aspects of Marx's thought – optimism regarding progress and a teleological understanding of history – had been highlighted in this intellectual lineage. Although these highly problematic notions have been excessively overemphasized in the ideology of socialist states and have been debunked often enough, they nevertheless play an important role in Xi's speech. Despite the catastrophe of the rise of fascism in Europe after the failure of socialist revolutions in the 1920s, and despite the demise of the majority of socialist states after 1989 and the observable shift to right-wing or neoliberal politics in many Western states in recent years, Xi still maintains that "Marx revealed through his research the inexorable trend that human society would ultimately move toward Communism." Accordingly, he is convinced, that "even though international socialism has encountered complications in its development, the overall trend in human development has not changed, nor will it change." Xi even declares that Marx and Engels "through scientific determination foresaw the emergence of 'Chinese socialism'," thus projecting the common practice in socialist states of deriving future developments from the alleged "full understanding" of the "laws of development" into Marx's *hypothesis* in a comment on the Taiping uprising about the prospects of the role of China in enhancing world revolution.³⁹

Xi's appreciation of Marx's "scientific prediction" of globalization is a different case given that it is indisputable and widely acknowledged that Marx anticipated a globalized world governed by the expansion of capital, and analyzed its patterns at a time when it was only rudimentarily visible. The problem rather lies in the conclusions Xi draws from Marx's discoveries for his foreign policy agenda. His advocacy of a "path of peaceful development," a "mutual beneficially strategy of opening up", the expansion of "cooperation with all other countries," and of China taking "an active part in the global governance system" is supported by the following philosophical-sounding description of the state of world politics:

We live in a united world; whoever rejects this world will also be rejected by it. Living things that are nourished will not injure one another; roads that run parallel will not interfere with one another.

Here, the process of globalization that Marx spoke of in the *Manifesto* – the worldwide implementation of capitalism on the basis of the expansionist tendencies of capital as a necessary but highly violent process – is completely deprived of its economic and social character and replaced with a positively connotated "united world" that consists of peaceful "living things." Thus, an analysis of the global development and functioning of a *man-made*

in critical Marxist historiographies of Marxism-Leninism, which tend to draw a direct line from Engels to Stalin, has recently become the object of critical scrutiny. See, for instance, Füllberth 2018.

39 Marx's comments were made in his "Revolution in China and in Europe," published in the *New York Daily Tribune* on 14 June 1853; see Torr 1951.

mode of production is transformed into a theory of the harmonic interaction of all creatures of nature. The metaphor of non-interfering parallel roads for the claimed progressive development of each nation under the condition of extensive global interdependence runs counter to Marx's and Lenin's observations regarding the competition between imperialist nations on the world market and the disastrous effects these caused in newly exploited world regions.⁴⁰ In any case, Xi's pursuit of a peaceful global development rid of any contradictions that echoes his concept of a "community of human destiny" (*renlei mingyun gongtongti* 人类命运共同体) is also hardly compatible with dialectical materialism or with historical materialism, the worldviews and methodologies which, he believes, "we need to uphold and apply." Lastly, one of the final passages of the *Manifesto* sharply contrasts with Xi's call to cooperate with all other countries, regardless of their political orientation:

In short, the Communists everywhere support every revolutionary movement against the existing social and political order of things. In all these movements, they bring to the front, as the leading question in each, the property question, no matter what its degree of development at the time. Finally, they labour everywhere for the union and agreement of the democratic parties of all countries.⁴¹

In order to highlight the second essential characteristic of Marxism – the openness and continual development of Marxist theory – Xi calls on Marx to act as a principal witness who "admonished people over and over that Marxism is not dogma, but a guide to action that must be developed with changes in practice." This reference to Marx is unwittingly ironic given that Marx famously stated that he was not a Marxist.⁴² What he worried about was not that Marxism could become a dogma, but that his own "so-called theory"⁴³ could be transformed into a dogma that could be recited in the manner of schoolboys and that would be used fractionally, thereby standing in the service of interests alien and external to science.⁴⁴ Thus it is unlikely that Marx "would be comforted" if he heard Xi declare solemnly that "we are loyal believers in and staunch practitioners of Marxism."

40 See Lenin's classical and highly influential account; Lenin 1948.

41 *Manifesto*, *MECW*, vol. VI, 511.

42 Accusing Jules Guesde and Paul Lafargue – the founders of the Parti ouvrier, the first French Marxist party – of "revolutionary phrase-mongering" and of denying the value of reformist struggles, Marx famously remarked that, if their politics represented Marxism, "*ce qu'il y a de certain c'est que moi, je ne suis pas Marxiste*" (what is certain is that I myself am not a Marxist). Quoted by Engels in a letter to Eduard Bernstein; see Marx and Engels, *Werke*, vol. XXXV, 388.

43 Marx, *Entwürfe einer Antwort auf den Brief von V.I. Sassulitsch. Dritter Entwurf*, quoted in Koenen 2017, 466.

44 *Ibid.*

Xi's self-proclaimed adherence to the principle of the continual development of Marxist theory and its adjustment to the present which aims to prevent dogmatism pushes aside important categories of Marx's critique of political economy and many aspects of traditional Marxism. But he seems not to apply this principle to the role of the Communist Party. He lists the requirements that the CCP has to meet in order to become a "vibrant Marxist governing party," such as the need to "coordinate our great struggle, great project, great cause, and great dream," and to "uphold the authority of the Central Committee and its centralized, unified leadership." He prepends this list by quoting Marx in the *Manifesto* that "in the various stages of development which the struggle of the working class against the bourgeoisie has to pass through, they [Marx is referring to developing a Communist political party; Xi applies this to the CCP] always and everywhere represent the interests of the movement as a whole," "have no interests separate and apart from those of the proletariat as a whole," but instead "work in the interest of the immense majority."⁴⁵ This interspersion of the *Manifesto* published in 1848 in Xi's speech delivered in 2018 is highly problematic. As intellectual historian Quentin Skinner has pointed out, historical political texts have to be distinguished as bearers of semantic, timeless meanings and as speech acts, as interventions into certain conflicts and situations.⁴⁶ While it would overstep the mark to conclude from this that all historical texts are only significant in the situation they are written in, Skinner's characterization of texts as maneuvers under specific circumstances obviously applies particularly to manifestos since they are public declarations of intentions and motives. The opening paragraphs of the *Manifesto* itself clearly testify to this:

- I. Communism is already acknowledged by all European powers to be itself a power.
- II. It is high time that Communists should openly, in the face of the whole world, publish their views, their aims, their tendencies, and meet this nursery tale of the Specter of Communism with a manifesto of the party itself.⁴⁷

How different the context of this statement – the wake of the February revolution in France and the March revolution in the German Confederation in 1848 – and the Communists' aims were from those of China in 2018 becomes clear from a brief look at passages from the *Manifesto* that stand – unmentioned by Xi – immediately before or after the passages quoted in the speech. It says that "the immediate aim of the Communists is [...] the formation of the proletariat into a class, overthrow of the bourgeois supremacy, conquest of political power by the proletariat." Interestingly, the following sentences even illustrate that the *Manifesto* was meant strictly as a political intervention of

45 The words Xi quotes can be found in *Manifesto, MECW*, vol. VI, 497, 499.

46 Skinner 1969.

47 *Ibid.*, 491.

its time: “The theoretical conclusions of the Communists [...] merely express, in general, actual relations springing from an existing class struggle, from a historical movement going on under our very eyes.”⁴⁸ Put into its immediate context, the references Xi’s speech makes to the *Manifesto* and its linking to present-day China and its policies seems highly questionable, all the more when we look at a statement made by Marx and Engels only one page earlier: “The theory of the Communists may be summed up in the single sentence: Abolition of private property.”⁴⁹

Consequently, the lesson Xi draws from the *Manifesto* is merely that “a Marxist political party always stands with the people and fights for their interests.” Thus, a further “key component of Marxism,” Xi argues, is that it is a “theory of the people” or a “people-oriented theory” – as he puts it himself more adequately in a later passage. Although Xi stresses that Marxism “was the first system of thought to be founded so that people may achieve self-emancipation” and that “we need to [...] give full play to the people’s enthusiasm, initiative, and creativity,” Xi offers no room for misinterpreting self-emancipation as an individual’s intellectual and practical activity. He clearly relegates it to the field of duty of the vanguard party – for “an *affinity with* the people is Marxism’s most distinctive character” and “we need to [...] unite the people and lead them in moving history forward” (emphasis added). It is here – the context of Xi’s clarification of the CCP position – where the maintenance of a teleological understanding of history discussed earlier becomes comprehensible. Accordingly, leading the people “in moving history forward [...] is the inevitable choice which respects the patterns of history.” Xi tautologically argues that “Marxism [...] demonstrates that the right path for humankind is the path on which the people drive forward the advance of history.” Lastly, and fittingly, Marxism is to Xi a practical theory which “was founded so as to change the people’s lot in history.”

Given the analysis up until this point, it is not surprising that at closer scrutiny the speech does not at any point encourage the recipient to *read* Marx’s original works. Instead, CCP members shall *study* Marx (*xuexi Makesi* 学习马克思). It seems plausible that the English translation of “study” for *xuexi* is not adequate in this context, since it implies or at least can imply an individual engagement with a given topic that can lead to individual assessments. The linguistic proximity to slogans of political campaigns in the history of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) such as “Learn from the Soviet Union” (*xuexi Sulian* 学习苏联) or “Learn from Lei Feng” (*xuexi Lei Feng* 学习雷锋) suggest that it is rather a matter of political indoctrination or *learning* with the close oversight of the CCP. Thus, in the main part of the speech, Xi prefaces every point in a long list of pressing issues that must be “studied” with reference to Marx – such as “people’s democracy,” “cultural advance-

48 Ibid., 499.

49 Ibid.

ment,” and “social advancement”⁵⁰ – with the phrase “Studying Marx requires the study and practice of *Marxist thought* on” He then explains his own, “correct” understanding of Marxist principles for each respective study topic. Elsewhere in the speech, Xi demands his audience to “remain confident in the path, theory, system, and culture of Chinese socialism” – known as the “Four Matters of Confidence” (*sigezixin* 四个自信)⁵¹ – the latest development of which is “Xi Jinping Thought.” It is hard to imagine how *confidence* – understood here as unconditional loyalty to a biased view – can contribute to upholding the self-imposed standard of the openness of Marxist theory and not pave the way for the creation of a new dogma under the guise of anti-dogmatism. To be sure, Xi’s encouragement to be confident in the character of Chinese socialism is an attempt to avoid the possibility of critical engagement with it by making the affirmation of it a matter of national pride in the face of a supposedly hostile international community that unjustly has discursive hegemony and ridicules Chinese socialism for its inconsistencies.

The cumbersome wording regarding the content of “studying Marx” reflects the cumbersome references to Marx in Xi’s commemoration speech as a whole. It suggests that the speech is not about the historical Marx, his theories and activities. Rather, it is about Marx from the perspective of Marxism-Leninism, which highlights the teleological life course of a hero and the conciseness of a theory that complies with the teleological advancement of history under the leadership of the CCP. The vanguard Leninist party has the “historic mission” to further develop socialism through the continual “unleashing [...] of the national forces of production.” This shall be accompanied by the development of an undogmatic theory, despite Xi’s proclamation that “Chinese Communists are *loyal believers* and *staunch* practitioners of Marxism” (emphasis added). In Xi Jinping’s speech, Marx’s theories and Marxism constitute a unity that shows no contradictions and leaves no open questions. Historical materialism explains the complete history of mankind, while “the laws governing human emancipation and the full and free development of every individual” lead the way to the future.

In Xi’s journey through Karl Marx’s life and the historical and contemporary significance of Marxism, Marx’s “major work” *Capital* and its critical analysis of the capitalist mode of production is rarely mentioned. Likewise, the worries expressed here and there that Xi’s rhetorical promotion of the “mass line” could indicate an upcoming return to

50 The other areas of required study are the laws of history, upholding the position of the people, the forces and relations of production, the relationship between people and nature, world history, and developing a Marxist political party.

51 Confidence in the path (*daolu* 道路), theory (*lilun* 理论), system (*zhidu* 制度), and culture (*wenhua* 文化) of Chinese socialism.

the class struggle policies of the Mao era,⁵² do not seem to be well-grounded, even when we disregard the recent crackdown by the Chinese government on Maoist-inspired Marxist study groups at leading universities who had participated in workers' strikes.⁵³ In the speech Xi quotes Mao just once:

In 1938, Mao noted that, "Our Party's fighting capacity will be much greater if there are one or two hundred comrades with a grasp of Marxism-Leninism which is systematic and not fragmentary, genuine and not hollow."

Despite Xi's occasional reliance on Maoist slogans, here Mao only serves as a booster of the recurring request that CCP members read Marxist works, hardly a launchpad for a revival of Maoist class struggle.

2 Official Media Coverage: An Exemplary Reading of the *People's Daily*

Western observers and Chinese dissidents⁵⁴ rightly point out that the bulk of Chinese media's reports on the bicentenary closely resemble one another in content, in particular in praising Xi's speech as a soon to be must-read in Marxist theory. In this section I review three examples⁵⁵: (1) an editorial (*shelun* 社论) published in the online edition of the *People's Daily* (*renminribao* 人民日报) on the day of the bicentenary⁵⁶; (2) an article published the same day by the same newspaper but in its overseas edition⁵⁷; (3) an article in the *Guangming Daily* (*Guangming ribao* 光明日报) by Chen Xianda 陈先达, a leading cadre in Chinese academia.⁵⁸ In doing so, I intend to give a representative overview of the Chinese media coverage of the bicentenary which supplements certain aspects of the narrative that Xi Jinping established in his speech.

52 However, recent media reports on the renewed policy of sending young CCP cadres to the countryside indicate a revival of practices not seen since the end of the Mao era. See AFP 2019.

53 For the conflict between Marxist study groups at Chinese universities and the authorities that peaked in 2018, see, for instance, Baptista 2019.

54 For the views of Chinese dissidents on the celebrations of Marx's birthday in China, see for instance a round-table discussion with Hu Ping 胡平 and Zhang Lifan 章立凡 held in the Washington D.C. on May 6, 2018. <https://www.chinesepen.org/blog/archives/103831>.

55 The articles are published online in Chinese. All quotations of them in this section are my own translation.

56 *People's Daily* [editorial] 2018.

57 Liu Shaohua 2018.

58 Chen Xianda 2018.

The *People's Daily* editorial – which given that the newspaper is an official organ of the Central Committee of the CPC we might consider representative of the official state narrative – is, in essence, a summary of Xi Jinping's speech. Its title translates into English as "A Homage to the World's Greatest Thinker." Adopting the structure and, in some places, the exact wording of Xi's speech, it declares that commemorating Marx means paying respect to his great character and to his illuminating thought. Despite all adversities, we are told, Marx fought his whole life for the cause of human emancipation, while the theory he left us – Marxism – is scientific, people-oriented, practical, and open. Marxism changed China profoundly and is "our Party's and our country's guiding thought [*zhidao sixiang* 指导思想] [...] and strong intellectual weapon to remodel the world." China's fast development from "standing up, to becoming wealthy and becoming strong" confirms the validity of the key characteristics of Marxism.⁵⁹ The editorial further stresses that the CCP is a loyal believer and practitioner of Marxism and lists without explanation the nine aspects put forth in Xi's speech regarding the way Marx and Marxism should be "studied." The article ends with a passage that is worth quoting in its entirety since it summarizes in a nutshell the current CCP leadership's framework of Marx, Marxism, socialism and communism, and its political message on the occasion of Marx's bicentenary:

Today we commemorate Marx in order to pay tribute to the greatest thinker in the history of mankind and to declare our strong belief in the scientific truth of Marxism. If we gather closely around the Central Committee that centers around comrade Xi Jinping, if we continue raising the great flag of Marxism and keep up striving for the persistence and development of Marxism, and if we strengthen the "Four Matters of Consciousness"⁶⁰ and the "Four Matters of Confidence"⁶¹ we surely can continuously breathe life into Marx and Engels's wonderful prospects for humanity on Chinese soil.⁶²

59 The key characteristics are listed in the article and are identical with those put forth in Xi's speech: Marxism is supposed to be scientific, truth-oriented, people-oriented, practical, open, and develops with the times.

60 The "Four Matters of Consciousness" (*si ge yishi* 四个意识) are consciousness of the need to maintain political integrity (*zhengzhi yishi* 政治意识), think in big-picture terms (*daju yishi* 大局意识), uphold the leadership core (*hexin yishi* 核心意识), and keep in alignment (*kanji yishi* 看齐意识). The English translations of the terms are those of the CCP's Central Compilation and Translation Bureau (CCTB, Zhonggong zhongyang bianyiju 中共中央编译局) and reveal interesting aberrations of the Chinese wording. The website of the CCTB is not accessible any more.

61 See footnote 47.

62 The original reads: 今天,我们纪念马克思,是为了向人类历史上最伟大的思想家致敬,也是为了宣示我们对马克思主义科学真理的坚定信念。紧密团结在以习近平同志为核心的党中央周围,继续高扬马克思主义伟大旗帜,执着努力坚持和发展马克思主

In sum, then, the *People's Daily* editorial consists only of sterile repetitions of Xi's argument. This points to the rigid ideological control that the CCP leadership has asserted since the beginning of Xi Jinping's presidency in 2012.

Our second article appears in the overseas edition of the same state organ with a title that translates as "The 200th Birthday of Marx: Once He Started Thinking, Humanity had the Solution." Written by *People's Daily* reporter Liu Shaohua with contributions from other staff members, it also follows the official line on the commemoration. Yet, it deserves closer scrutiny for it supplements Xi Jinping's speech and his narrative by describing the commemoration activities in China and the West and through integrating stories of selected Chinese individuals and their experiences with Marx. The article's title echoes Xi's description of Marxism as "a great sunrise." Although the piece begins with the observation that "the analysis and critique of capitalism is among the most commonly known concerns in Marx's life," it drops this line of argument abruptly to bring up the recent CCP reading sessions of the *Communist Manifesto* that Xi Jinping presided over personally. In China, the reader is told, Marxism is a belief, a principle, a spirit, but most of all, a "weapon in beginning a new chapter."

The overall tone of the article mixes euphoria with nostalgia and thus fits the primary message: closely following Marx, Marxism opened a new chapter in the history of mankind and still writes a success story on the global scale. In order to realize that Marx's famous specter from the *Communist Manifesto* that had once haunted Europe is still very influential in China, the article continues, we only need look at the important academic conferences devoted to the topic that have been held in China in recent years such as the World Marxist Conference (shijie Makesizhuyi dahui 世界马克思主义大会). The sheer number of related exhibitions, newly published books, and cultural goods also testifies to the unbroken worldwide impact of the specter. To the *People's Daily*, the commemoration activities of Marx's birthday in his German hometown of Trier in particular, the erection of a statue of Marx sponsored by the Chinese government, the issuance by the city government of Trier of a commemorative zero Euro banknote with Marx's portrait, and the provision of all kinds of Marx souvenirs all bear witness to what Hegel once said about "great men" of history: "Great spirits – the bodies of the heroes in the history of philosophy, their life in time, surely will go and never come back, but their opus (thought and principles) will not pass away."

The *People's Daily* account of the ongoing influence of Marxism in China and globally and its reference to the *Communist Manifesto* is as problematic as Xi Jinping's own recourse to Marx's classic work. Communism had been referred to in the *Manifesto* as a

义, 增强“四个意识”、坚定“四个自信”, 我们就一定能让马克思、恩格斯设想的人类社会美好前景不断在中国大地上生动展现出来。

“haunting specter” by Marx and Engels partly because it posed – at the time – a seemingly mysterious and uncontrollable threat to the bourgeois state through its radical critique of capitalism and its determination to unite the proletariat in order to fight for the overthrow of bourgeois rule. In this light, it is difficult to see quite how Chinese government-sponsored conferences on *the topic of* Marxism equate to the subversive character of a haunting specter.

Additionally, only a conscious disregard of the highly emotional and controversial debate surrounding the commemoration of Marx in the West (especially in Germany) can lead to the conclusion that “Communism” has had and continues to have a considerable impact in Western societies. The numerous activities that took place in Trier – especially the installation of the Marx sculpture – led to heated discussions and protests. While stalwart anti-communists hold Marx responsible for Stalinist mass murder and view the erection of the Chinese government-sponsored Marx sculpture as a bow to a totalitarian dictatorship,⁶³ some scholars and political journalists argued that Marx’s economic analyses are still useful to understanding contemporary global capitalism.⁶⁴ Meanwhile, the majority of media reports in the West value Marx as a “German philosopher” and declare that his theories, while mostly wrong, are nevertheless a worthy reminder of the pitfalls of a “rampant market economy.”⁶⁵ Furthermore, anti-capitalist movements, such as Occupy Wall Street, that emerged in the aftermath of the financial crisis in 2008 and that are often characterized in the West as an incarnation of the return of Marx’s specter are not mentioned in the *People’s Daily* article. One may conclude from this that, unlike the CCP during the Mao era, the current Chinese leadership neither supports such global leftist movements nor considers them notable Marxist practices.⁶⁶

It is somewhat astonishing that the *People’s Daily* article fails to acknowledge the irony that lies in the commercialization of Karl Marx. Instead it sees it as testimony to his ongoing importance today. Moreover, the article attempts to achieve its main purpose (and indeed the main purpose of Xi’s commemoration speech) – to show that Marx’s critique of political economy in fact underpins the state ideology of “Socialism with Chinese Characteristics” – by invoking Hegel’s theory of the eternal life of “great spirits”; that

63 For this and similar views, see Bovard 2018; Byas 2018; Hannan 2018.

64 See Barker 2018; El-Gingihy 2018; Jeffries 2018.

65 For this view, which is particularly widespread in Germany, see, for instance, the speech of the German president Frank Walter Steinmeier; Steinmeier 2018.

66 These movements have also come under intense criticism from within the left in Western countries. They are accused of advocating an inadequate critique of capitalism that, in its focus on the activities and influence of financial elites, opens the door to, or in some cases already represents, a right-leaning anti-capitalism with links to antisemitic conspiracy theories. On this see Rubin 2011. However, the CCP’s indifference to these movements is not the result of such assessments but of its skepticism toward all spontaneous protests.

is, the ideas of great philosophers such as Karl Marx. Over the course of just a few short paragraphs, the word “specter” (*youling* 幽灵) in the discussion of the ongoing relevance of Marxism is silently replaced with the celebration of Marx’s eternal “spirit” (*linghun* 灵魂), which fits the general tendency in Chinese Marxism to use language creatively to downplay critical aspects of Marx’s oeuvre.

The article further accentuates the firm anchoring of an enthusiastic attitude toward Marx across all generations. The after-1990s generation in China is said to be highly active in the creation of materials on Marx and Marxism that take into account the specific needs of young people. Songs that praise Marx and the publication of books that tell “stories” about the philosopher in a youth-oriented style, all written by or with the help of university students, as well as the increasing use of Marx-related emoticons among young people on instant messaging services, are taken as living examples of age-appropriate, creative expressions of Marxist beliefs. “Let young people play in their way, that way it is more lively,” Liu Shaohua’s article exclaims in a gesture of paternal tolerance, notwithstanding the likelihood of rising doubts concerning the relation of earnestness and spectacle of a claimed adherence to Marx considering an official praise of “playing” with the philosopher.

Additionally, the article tells the story of Han Yuhai 韩毓海, a professor of Chinese literature at Beijing University, who is supposed to represent the generation that came of age at the beginning of the reform period at the end of the 1970s. According to Han’s own account, he had already taught Chinese literature for many years when in 2003 he accidentally came across a dusty copy of the *Collected Works of Marx and Engels* in a hidden second-hand bookstore in Beijing and was lucky enough to purchase the set for a ridiculously cheap price. Thus, only after having already reached the age of forty did Han come to realize that “without Marx’s perspective, without Marx’s theory as a basis, in my research field – China’s reform and revolution from a long historical perspective – I would never make a worthy contribution.” From that time on, Liu continues sentimentally, Han has written several books on Marx and teaches courses on the subject to packed lecture halls.

Wary of overinterpretation, Han Yuhai’s story fits well into the officially welcomed narrative that Marx was discovered or acknowledged late in the lives of members of the first generation of post-Cultural-Revolution intellectuals, many of whom had sympathized with the West-inspired democracy movements of the 1980s, increasingly discarded Marxism in the 1990s, and – in Han’s field, the humanities – probed the applicability of contemporary post-Marxist and non-Marxist theories to the Chinese context. Given the return to prominence of the “Old Left” in political discourse since the beginning of the 2000s, the story of the rediscovery of Marx’s works certainly reflects an observable intellectual trend of that time.⁶⁷

67 For analyses of the intellectual field in contemporary China, see Cheek 2016; Xu 2000.

Completing the picture of agreement on the significance of Marx and Marxism among all generations in China, Chen Xianda 陈先达, an eighty-eight-year-old leading cadre in academia and professor of Marxism in the philosophy department of the Renmin University of China,⁶⁸ passes on the message that when it comes to the leading role of Marxism in China, as Xi Jinping said, “we may not wave a bit.” Chinese Marxists, he goes on to explain in a related article published in the *Guangming Daily* on May 3, 2018, with a title that translates as “Why We Should Solemnly Commemorate the Bicentenary of Marx’s Birth”⁶⁹ – have “thousands of reasons to thank Marx and Marxism.” First, Marx left us “innumerable classics,” the “quintessence” of which brought forth an “ism” (*zhuyi* 主义). Marxism “has millions of believers worldwide, an army of practitioners, and it formed a Party.” Again, the use of language illustrates and even reinforces a dogmatic, elitist understanding of Marxism that is also characteristic of Xi’s speech. “Believers” (*xinyangzhe* 信仰者) are generally known to follow certain unquestionable doctrines in the service of an imagined higher authority, while soldiers of “an army” (*dajun* 大军) are expected to obey orders and not to call into question the rules of the military.

Regarding its historical significance in China, Chen explains, Marxism had been “a theoretical guide for progressive intellectuals on the way out of an existential national crisis towards the fulfillment of national rejuvenation.” To him, the preservation and Sinicization of Marxism are a “theoretical magic formula” (*lilun fabao* 理论法宝) that has enabled the CCP for ninety-five years to fulfill a tough mission, a mission that – in Xi Jinping’s view – all kind of political forces have been unable to fulfill.⁷⁰ Despite the striking contradiction between the declared and celebrated openness of Marxist theory on the one hand, and its description as a magic formula – which is marked by the unchangeable mixture of components – on the other, this passage demonstrates the current CCP definition of Marxism as the successful means to the end of a national renaissance. When other political forces are said to have failed in this mission, it is furthermore obvious that the CCP sees itself as the winner in the competition with conservatives, liberals, fascists, and so forth, to reach a shared goal – to make China great again. Thus, this argumentation surely is grist to the mill of the long-standing view of a number of Western China experts and Marxists that Chinese Marxism has never been anything but a program of national reinvigoration.

68 Chen Xianda holds the influential office of director of the academic committee of Renmin University of China (Zhongguo renmin daxue xueshu weiyuanhui zhuren 中国人民大学学术委员会主任).

69 Chen Xianda 2018. The article is a shortened version of Chen’s speech at the International High End Forum to Commemorate Marx’s 200th Birthday (jinian Makesi danchen 200 zhounian guoji gaoduan luntan 纪念马克思诞辰 200 周年国际高端论坛) at Renmin University of China on April 23, 2018.

70 Xi 2018.

Unexpectedly, in his conclusion, Chen not only advocates the continuing study of Marxism and its Sinicization, but he also encourages the study of foreign Marxism (*guowai Makesizhuyi* 国外马克思主义), a term that in China is largely used interchangeably with Western Marxism. Western Marxism plays no role at all in the official celebrations and the accompanied further creation of a Marxist intellectual tradition, for despite significant inner differentiations, Western Marxism is generally critical of Leninist party organization and teleological understandings of history and instead attributes more significance to the individual. Thus, most proponents of Western Marxism of one kind or another do not at all consider Marx's birthday to be an occasion to celebrate the supposed global success of his theories. In this regard, the last sentence of Chen's article could be taken as a cautious advocacy of the preservation of academic freedom and theoretical openness.

To return to the *People's Daily* bicentenary article by Liu Shaohua, the history of China's adoption of Marxism is seen as this openness at work. Strictly following Marx, who had explained that questions are open and constitute the "fearless voices of an era," the Sinicization of Marxism has passed through several successive eras that posed specific questions. Thus, "in the practice of the Chinese revolution, construction, and reform, Marxism constantly poses and answers questions." The prime example of this practice is the implementation of the policy of reform and opening that "was triggered by the question in the people's great debates." After the publication of Deng Xiaoping's highly influential article "Practice Is the Sole Criterion For Testing Truth" in 1978, "the whole nation from the leadership to the masses began the 'debate on the criterion of truth.'" In the last forty years, the "Marxist spirit that was manifested [in the debate's] thought of liberation and [principle of] seeking truth from the facts constantly influenced reform era China." Paraphrasing Xi Jinping, the *People's Daily* article states that "Socialism with Chinese Characteristics" has now entered a new era in which the Chinese nation has surpassed the historical missions of standing up and getting rich and must become powerful. Liu sums up this point by citing Xi Jinping's catchy slogan: "The era poses the questions, we [the CCP] answer the questions, and the people correct the mistakes."⁷¹

This passage exemplifies several characteristics, novelties, and theoretical problems with Xi Jinping's "Socialism with Chinese Characteristics in the New Era." First, it follows Xi in the conscious underexposure or even omission of the Mao era and the Cultural Revolution in the official narrative of China's contemporary history. Up until the beginning of Xi's presidency in 2012 the official assessment of the history of the PRC as stated in the *Resolution on Certain Questions in the History of our Party since the Founding of the People's*

71 In Chinese Xi Jinping's slogan reads: 时代是出卷人,我们是答卷人,人民是阅卷人.

*Republic of China*⁷² distinguished between a heroic early Mao who led the Chinese people to revolution and the construction of a socialist society, and the misguided Mao of the era of the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution who overestimated the role of ideology, exaggerated class struggle, and hence thrust the national economy into a deep abyss. The criticism of the Cultural Revolution, which came to represent a historical aberration, has since then – the official validity of the *Resolution* notwithstanding – been silently replaced by its integration into a narrative of the history of Chinese Marxism that asked and answered successfully the guiding questions of all respective eras.

Second, there seems to be a confusion concerning the interplay of “driving forces of historical development,” given that at one point it is Chinese Marxism which asks the questions of an era, while it is “the era” which poses the question at another point. More importantly, this passage illuminates the way the CCP theoretically justifies the “entrance in the New Era” under Xi Jinping. The *People’s Daily* article quotes from “The Question of Centralization,” an unfinished essay written by Marx in 1842 that deals with the question of whether the centralization of state power at the expense of provincial administration in Germany and France was a welcome process, a question which at the time had been discussed amid controversy. The clause from Marx’s essay cited in the *People’s Daily* article reads:

the questions, on the other hand, are the frank, uncompromising voices of the time embracing all individuals; they are its mottoes, they are the supremely practical utterances proclaiming the state of its soul.⁷³

In order to assess the credibility of the citation of Marx’s text in the official explanations of the nature of the “New Era,” it is necessary to look at the passage in Marx’s essay that leads directly to the half-sentence quoted in the *People’s Daily*:

The fate which a question of the time has in common with every question justified by its content, and therefore rational, is that the question and not the answer constitutes the main difficulty. *True criticism*, therefore, analyses the questions and not the answers. [...] every question is answered as soon as it has become a real question. World history itself has no other method than that of answering and disposing of old questions by putting new ones. The fiddles of each period are therefore easy to discover. They are questions of the time, and although the intention and insight of a single individual may play an important role in the answers, and a practiced eye is needed to separate what belongs to the individual from what belongs to the time, [...] ⁷⁴

72 The resolution had been adopted by the Sixth Plenary Session of the Eleventh Central Committee of the Communist Party of China on June 27, 1981.

73 Marx, “The Question of Centralization [...]” in *MECW*, vol. 2, 182. Original emphasis.

74 Ibid. Emphasis added.

Further on, Marx criticizes the question at hand stating that “whether a single point should rule or whether each province, etc., should administer itself [...] – the question of centralization cannot be formulated in this way.”⁷⁵ Although we do not know how Marx would have formulated the question because the manuscript remained unfinished, it seems that he answered the question in the *Manifesto*:

The bourgeoisie keeps more and more doing away with the scattered state of the population, of the means of production, and of property. It has agglomerated population, centralized the means of production, and has concentrated property in a few hands. The necessary consequence of this was political centralization. Independent, or loosely connected provinces, with separate interests, laws, governments, and systems of taxation, became lumped together into one nation, with one government, one code of laws, one national class-interest, one frontier, and one customs-tariff.⁷⁶

These passages – overlooked by the official narrative – clarify that Marx intended to write a *metacritique* of the respective “question of the time.” Hence, he did not – as can be concluded from the passage cited by the *People's Daily* – view the respective questions of a time as progressive per se or even as manuals for powerholders, but stressed that it is a matter of “true criticism” to analyze these questions. Thus, assuming that the new era in Chinese history that supposedly started in 1978 was guided by the question “What is the criterion for testing truth?”, regardless of the persuasiveness to raise the question in the context of the disastrous consequences of the Cultural Revolution, which were partly caused by ideological fervor, to Marx the question would nonetheless primarily be an indicator of the “state of the soul” of an era and an object of critique. Therefore, the references in the new official ideology to Marx’s short elaborations on eras and its questions disregards Marx’s original critical spirit in order to facilitate its service as a theoretical foundation for Xi’s “theory of eras.” The latter proclaims a simple distribution of tasks between three agents of historical development – the era, the CCP, and the people, a conceptualization that hardly relates to Marx’s metacritique.

The *People's Daily* article ends with the assertion that the CCP’s method to study Marx is correct. On the whole, the article reflects the official position that deemphasizes Marx’s role as a radical critic of capitalism in favor of depicting him as the founding father of Marxism, a tradition that now shall mainly serve as a “spirit” and is celebrated for being and having been the only successful means to save and to make possible again China’s importance as a nation. Furthermore, the article exaggerates the global vitality of communism – the specter – by overlooking the discursive constellations of the commemora-

75 Ibid.

76 *Manifesto, MECW*, vol. VI, 17.

tional activities surrounding Marx's birthday in Western countries such as Germany. Lastly, one of its main purposes seems to be to offer evidence of the closing of ranks of all generations in China with respect to the high estimation of Karl Marx. The image, then, is of a country united, across all demographics, in its belief in Marx.

Concluding Remarks

The analysis of Xi Jinping's speech clearly demonstrated that Karl Marx does not appear in it as a historical person but as a hagiographic figure with a teleological life course at the end of which he eventually achieved his aim – handing down to posterity his ready-made theory for emancipating all humanity. This narrative is at odds with reliable research results on the development of Marx's writings and the genesis of Marxism. While Marx's thoughts and concepts concerning his critique of political economy are widely ignored in Xi's speech, the *Communist Manifesto* is quoted time and again in order to highlight the vanguard position of the CCP. Confronted with the immediate textual context of the quotes, Xi's draw on the *Manifesto* proves to be highly eclectic and frequently blurs Marx's original intentions, for example by disregarding the centrality of class struggle. In the CCP interpretation of the *Manifesto*, it stands for a theory of world history and the starting point for the propagated Confucian harmonious world that is incompatible with Marxian analyses of the politics and economy of global capitalism. The bicentenary article in the *People's Daily* further illustrates how Marxism is praised in the official ideology as the most successful means to reach a goal shared by all political competitors; that is, the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation. Disregarding the context of discussions surrounding Marx in the West, commemoration activities in Germany and other Western countries are taken as a proof of the global success of Marxism, while in China all generations are described to be firm believers of Marxism.

At the same time, my analysis shows that equations of Marx and Lenin, Marx and Mao, Marx and Marxism, and so forth, are expressions of reductionist thinking and must not only be refuted on the basis of a serious reading of Marx's works, but are indeed rejected by some Chinese scholars themselves such as the aforementioned Nie Jinfang. There is no such thing as Willy Lam's "teachings" of Marx, and his writings do not help justify the "concentration of all power to the top leader himself."⁷⁷ It is the CCP that reduces Marx's works into "teachings" and considers its members "staunch believers," thus itself using a language that fits the purpose of a number of observers of Chinese politics to discard Marxism per se. Thus, in my view, the question that more or less explicitly guides recent discussions among Western commentators about Xi Jinping's ideology, "Does Xi Jinping

77 Quoted in Birtles 2018.

actually believe in Marx and Marxism?” – a question China commentator Jude Blanchette affirms – is biased. It presupposes the equivalence of Marx’s theories and Marxism, reduces Marxism to the rigid ideologies of real existing socialist states, the demise of which allegedly prove that any affirmative reference to Marx can only be a matter of misguided “belief.” Therefore, the question itself is a typical expression of Blanchette’s “post-Communist conventional wisdom,” the neoliberal ideology that has dominated Western media and scholarship since the demise of the Soviet Union. Rather, this article has aimed to offer an answer to a different question: how does Xi Jinping refer to Marx and Marxism in his attempt to update China’s state ideology?

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