

Headed west on the A30

International Conference on Contemporary Capitalism Studies,
Changshu, November 2006

The A30 in question runs west of Shanghai Pudong Airport through what can only be described as ‘another Canary Wharf every 5 miles’. The occasion for the road trip was the ‘International Conference on Contemporary Capitalism Studies’, organized by Nanjing University and Changshu Institute of Technology, to which six UK ‘scholars’ had been invited: myself, Bob Jessop, Sean Sayers, Andrew Chitty, Mark Neocleous, and Martin McIvor. We were goggle-eyed throughout the two-hour trip from the airport. This was an up-close view of what it’s like in a country where ‘official’ annual growth rates in the region of 10–15 per cent are regarded as underestimates, and *China Daily* runs articles explaining in unworried and rather thankful tones that export growth will fall from 25 per cent to a mere 15 per cent, ditto the vast trade surplus, and the surplus of foreign currency conservatively valued at US\$1 trillion.

It is difficult to convey the sheer scale of mile after mile of brand-new expressway scenery running through a landscape filled with high-rise, high-tech work and living structures on a scale that dwarfs Dallas. The postmodern touches were the pastiche columns, arches, cupolas, domes, architraves, friezes and the like appliquéd to last month’s facades. The communist touch was the vast red banner (in English) alongside the zooming traffic exhorting the citizenry to promote a harmonious society through urbanization. The conference hotel itself caught our collective eye from quite a distance: in the flat industrializing landscape we could see the campanile of St Mark’s, Venice, spiking the evening skies of Asia-Pacific.

Still reeling from our collective apprehension of this Hollywoodesque, science-fictional brainwashing, and having been asked to make some formal opening remarks, I announced to the conference, ‘China is the best place in the world to study capitalism.’ Instantly realizing that this flat declaration would require some quick rephrasing, I regrouped. After all, this is a communist country in some self-declared sense, although this could hardly be gleaned from a quantitative study – though my observation was admittedly limited to English phrases, logos, icons, symbols, and other Barthesian paraphernalia, all of it commercial. To say that China is the best place in the world to study capitalism because it has so much of it, and is so obviously successful at it, was probably in the realm of the unsayable. It is one thing to know that China has a number of carefully defined ‘enterprise zones’, generally along the coast, well away from the interior, yet what we had seen suggested rather a large elephant in the room. I sensed that throughout the conference, and in particular in informal discussions, we would find intellects eager to enlighten us on the evident fact that the landscape was walking, talking and quacking to us like capitalism, well beyond the occasional KFC or Starbucks outlets that decorate China’s shiny new airports.

Further down the line in the order of welcoming speeches was the municipal representative of Changshu City (pop. 1.3 million), Jiangsu province. His delivery and PowerPoint enthused about the awards that his city and its various enterprise zones had won. He informed us how far up the league table of Chinese municipalities his own had clawed its way: bank deposits, ‘civilian’ bank accounts, private car ownership, urbanization of the countryside, roads, total retail sales, ‘Best Chinese Commercial Cities’, even ‘green issues’, having first set the context of industrial and commercial success. At the end of the conference, another civic representative pressed the glossy Changshu Development Agency prospectus into our hands, urging us to invest.

Given that the Chinese government has recently chosen to fund at least three centres of excellence for the pursuit of Marxism Studies, and in particular for a huge ‘catching up’ exercise on Western Marxism – and that the Communist Party of China itself funds a very large ‘Central Compilation and Translation Bureau’ pursuing much the same things, including a new large-scale version of Marx and Engels in Chinese, not to mention government funding for several state-funded academies of social sciences to which the conference attendees were all connected in one way or another with this vast enterprise – it was just faintly surprising that no one was very interested in the official line relating China to Marxism at the moment. We had to ask. The cheerful answer was that China is officially socialist and is therefore developing its productive resources as rapidly as possible for the benefit of its people, and in order to build socialism in an international context of peaceful nations. Of course, this technocentric line erases and forgets what some might think were obviously central Marxist concepts, such as class and class struggle. No one volunteered even a Rawlsian justification for inequalities of income and wealth, or mentioned exactly what aspects of socialism were being built (with capitalist cash). The closest we got to those lines of thought were references to state management of conflict, otherwise known as building the ‘harmonious’ society. I suggested that this was perhaps an approximation to Western social democracy, where socialism strikes a ‘deal’ in terms of class compromise to be managed by a strong, and sometimes rather one-party-ish, state. This produced some giggles. ‘Democracy’ is not a viable subject here – too close to human rights, free press and other Western ideas (not that ‘the West’ is entirely up to speed on these native issues, of course). My best interlocutor on some of these subjects was forthcoming, so I politely enquired as to the nature of his work. ‘I study social democracy’, he said. He then put the situation more succinctly: ‘We can’t give up Lenin, and we can’t follow Bernstein.’

How, then, do philosophers in China study contemporary capitalism? We shouldn’t be surprised to learn that they do it through a hit parade of familiar names, or at least those invited to this conference took that approach. The faves were the Frankfurt School and Habermas, Gorz and Baudrillard, Poulantzas and a fast-forward to Laclau and Mouffe, and Hardt and Negri, with considerable emphasis on précis and overview. Most of the discussion concerned issues of definition and translation between the Eurospeak of Marx and Marxism (*bürgerliche Gesellschaft*, civil society, etc.) and Chinese. One Chinese delegate volunteered some comments on the differences between Marx and Engels. This was surely one of the higher stages of open unorthodoxy. I asked if anyone in China was actually studying the labour theory of value (either pro or con). The answer was ‘not really’. Moreover, we were also told that economists no longer wanted to study capitalism, since it was no longer bad! Obviously a space has opened up there for other interests, hence the conference.

My overall impression is that Marxism occupies an intellectual and political space in China much like that of liberal-democratic thought in the West – a none-too-coherent array of ideas, texts and icons that can be cited and interpreted selectively to cover most exigencies, supported by various national and ideological investments in university curricula and philosophical research. The barely mentioned Mao was clearly fading into kitsch. In a country that has achieved a ‘socialist market economy’ (we are told), and is ‘building socialism with Chinese characteristics’, the queue of capitalists wanting to invest stretches right round the world.

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