

Starting from the "Preface to <A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy>" to Further Comprehensively Deepen Reforms

Fenglin Tian

The Communist Party of China Zhongxian County Committee Party School in Chongqing, Chongqing, China

Abstract

Over the more than four decades of reform and opening up, China has achieved an economic miracle. However, as reforms have continuously advanced, the nation has encountered unprecedented challenges amid its rapid development. A high degree of openness has allowed China to leverage the global capital system for its own growth, but it has also provided Western countries with the opportunity to exploit their discursive advantages to vilify China's reforms. The Third Plenary Session of the 20th Central Committee of the Communist Party of China made the decision to further comprehensively deepen reforms. In the face of various contemporary distractions, this paper draws on the "Preface to A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy" to understand the need for further comprehensive deepening of reforms, clarify the underlying logic of reform, and thereby eliminate interference and move forward with courage and determination.

Keywords

Third Plenary Session of the 20th Central Committee; Comprehensive Deepening of Reforms; Historical Materialism; Ideology.

1. Introduction

Historically, China was once a country with a flourishing civilization. However, after missing the wave of the Industrial Revolution in the 18th century, it rapidly declined into a backward nation, becoming "a nation at the mercy of others, vulnerable to oppression and exploitation." It was not until the reform and opening-up in 1978 that the fate of China's economy underwent a fundamental transformation. From the reform and opening-up initiated at the Third Plenary Session of the 11th Central Committee of the Communist Party of China to the proposal of comprehensively deepening reforms at the Third Plenary Session of the 18th Central Committee, and further to the current call for continued comprehensive deepening of reforms at the Third Plenary Session of the 20th Central Committee, China has achieved a remarkable journey through reform-from being "expelled from the world stage" to "catching up with the times in big strides" and now to "leading the times." Nevertheless, some Western countries, with ulterior motives, have been defaming China's reforms on various platforms, spreading narratives such as "China's reform has peaked" and "China's reform is collapsing." At present, as China advances the great cause of building a strong nation and achieving national rejuvenation through Chinese modernization, it is imperative to strengthen ideological consensus and unite forces for action.

2. Organization of the Text

2.1. Understanding the "Source": A Profound Analysis of the Essence of Reform from the Perspective of the "Preamble"

What is the fundamental driving force behind the progression of human society from a primitive state of consuming raw meat and blood to the present era of moon landings and space exploration? Before the emergence of the materialist conception of history, the idealist conception of history dominated, asserting that social consciousness determines social existence and that spiritual forces are the impetus for historical development. Hegel, for instance, believed that the development of human society to its current state was determined by the "Absolute Spirit." This perspective, which attributes historical progress to spiritual forces, essentially serves to justify the ruling class, as in all past eras, only a minority engaged in politics monopolized education and thus dominated the ideological realm. It was not until Marx delivered a decisive blow to this idealist view in his "Preface," stating: "It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness." [1] Therefore, to eliminate outdated social consciousness, it is necessary to transform reality through economic struggle. And to engage in economic struggle, one must grasp the contradictory movement between the productive forces and the relations of production: "Just as we cannot judge an individual by what he thinks about himself, so we cannot judge such a transformative era by its consciousness. On the contrary, this consciousness must be explained from the contradictions of material life, from the existing conflict between the social productive forces and the relations of production." The contradictory movement between the productive forces and the relations of production is the fundamental driving force behind the continuous advancement of human society. The interaction between the productive forces and the relations of production functions like wheels, propelling human society forward under the dual drive of these two forces. This is the objective law of human societal development revealed in the "Preface" and the underlying logic of reform. The materialist conception of history is the correct key—the only "key" capable of unlocking the "cryptic box of history," transforming the development of human society into a transparent structure that can be observed, analyzed, and even predicted in its operational laws. Since its inception, the materialist conception of history has withstood skepticism and criticism from multiple fronts. Although bourgeois scholars have attempted to suppress it a hundred, a thousand times, they continue their efforts to this day, for the hundred-and-first, the thousand-and-first time. Yet the materialist conception of history remains a scientific theory that its opponents have never been able to refute. As the renowned Nobel laureate economist John Hicks noted, "Most of those who want to trace the general course of history use the Marxist method of historical materialism, or some modified version of it—for there is no other that stands up to examination."

2.2. Charting the "Path": Advancing Chinese Modernization Through Further Comprehensive Deepening of Reforms

2.2.1. Why Reforms Are Feasible: "Three Better Alignments"

The reason why China's reform has been able to progress to this day is that we have always adhered to the Marxist principle of "two better adaptations" as our compass. Today, on the new journey of further comprehensively deepening reform, the Third Plenary Session of the 20th Central Committee of the Communist Party of China has made comprehensive and innovatively proposed the "three better adaptations": "promoting better adaptation between the relations of production and the productive forces, between the superstructure and the economic base, and between national governance and social development." [2] This evolution from the "two

adaptations" to the "three better adaptations" provides powerful momentum for Chinese modernization.

1) Resolutely promote the better adaptation of production relations to productive forces

"Among the 'Three Better Adaptations,' promoting the better adaptation of production relations to productive forces is the foundation, the fundamental aspect, and the core. The 'Preface' points out: 'At a certain stage of development, the material productive forces of society come into conflict with the existing relations of production or-this merely expresses the same thing in legal terms-with the property relations within the framework of which they have operated hitherto. From forms of development of the productive forces these relations turn into their fetters. Then begins an era of social revolution.' The General Secretary has profoundly grasped this fundamental principle in advancing comprehensive deepening reforms: 'Production relations must adapt to the development of productive forces. To develop new quality productive forces, we must further comprehensively deepen reforms and form a new type of production relations that adapts to them.' [3] In the face of the ongoing fourth technological revolution, represented by computing power, seizing this historic opportunity requires leveraging the role of new production relations in promoting new quality productive forces, thereby liberating and developing them."

2) Promoting the Better Adaptation of the Superstructure to the Economic Base

In the new era, China's economic development has shifted from high-speed growth to high-quality development, reflecting the evolving nature of China's economic base. As noted in the "Preface": "With the change of the economic foundation, the entire immense superstructure is more or less rapidly transformed." Therefore, addressing the prominent issues in the process of achieving high-quality development requires leveraging the advantages of the socialist system with Chinese characteristics, as the national system represents the concentrated expression of the superstructure. Only by harnessing the strengths of the socialist system with Chinese characteristics can the superstructure effectively promote the economic base. The Decision of the Third Plenary Session of the 20th Central Committee mentioned the term "system" 187 times, "structure" 81 times, and "mechanism" 242 times. The Central Committee has focused on these three aspects—structure, mechanism, and system—to address bottlenecks and challenges in high-quality development, strengthen institutional supply, and thereby ensure that the superstructure of the socialist system with Chinese characteristics better adapts to the economic base of modernization, safeguarding China's high-quality economic development.

3) Promoting Better Adaptation of National Governance to Social Development

A sound institutional system must be complemented by strong execution capabilities. As the General Secretary emphasized: "To truly achieve social harmony, stability, and long-term peace, we must rely on institutions and our exceptional capacity for national governance." [4]

Social progress has generated diverse demands, and the principal contradiction in Chinese society has evolved-shifting from the people's need for material and cultural well-being to their aspiration for a better life. This new principal contradiction imposes higher requirements on national governance and social development. Focusing on the new expectations of the people, the state continuously improves social governance methods, driving transformative changes through digitalization. By leveraging big data analytics and intelligent technologies, it provides robust support for urban governance, environmental management, and other areas, enhancing the people's sense of happiness, gain, and creativity.

"The 'Three Better Adaptations' represent a principled innovation within the Marxist historical materialist framework. The first two adaptations form the philosophical foundation for the third, while the third reflects the contemporary consciousness of the first two. Since the launch of reform and opening-up, we have adhered to the Marxist 'Two Adaptations' as our compass

for reform, achieving fruitful outcomes. Now, as we embark on the new journey of further comprehensively deepening reform, we are advancing from the 'Two Adaptations' to the 'Three Better Adaptations,' providing powerful impetus for Chinese modernization."

2.2.2. Who to Rely on for Reform: Adhering to the Principle of People-Centeredness

The idealist conception of history views the will of a minority engaged in politics as the motive force of historical development, treating the masses as a vulnerable group needing help. Only the materialist conception of history recognizes the immense power inherent in the masses themselves—the true force propelling human society forward and the decisive force in social change. Marx stated: "The most powerful productive force is the revolutionary class itself." [5] The experience of over forty years of reform and opening up has repeatedly proven that only when bottom-up demands receive top-down promotion can systems be implemented more smoothly. If driven solely by the government, often through administrative orders, it fails to mobilize the enthusiasm of the people and rarely achieves the intended effect, often ending in failure. As the wheel of history rolls forward, in the new journey of further comprehensive deepening of reforms and advancing Chinese modernization, over 300 reform measures covering politics, economy, culture, society, ecology, and other fields require the efforts of countless unsung individuals to push the wave of reform forward. In this process, the CPC and the Chinese people, as the subjects of history, are key, with the initiative and agency of the people being crucial to success, ensuring that "reforms are for the people, reforms rely on the people, and the fruits of reforms are shared by the people."

In developing new quality productive forces, we must also emphasize the cultivation of knowledge-based, skilled, and innovative workers who are aligned with these forces. This involves nurturing and empowering strategic scientists, outstanding engineers, master craftsmen, highly skilled personnel, and building a first-class industrial technical workforce. These individuals are key determinants of national industrial competitiveness and must be granted both a voice and autonomy.

Over the past decades, we relied on demographic dividends. For further comprehensively deepening reforms, what we need is no longer a quantitative demographic dividend, but a qualitative one. We have shifted from "strength in numbers" to a track of "strength in per capita capabilities."

3. Conclusion

The General Secretary emphasized: "Reform is China's second revolution." This revolution entails two dimensions: dismantling old institutions and old orders, and building new institutions and a new society. Therefore, to further comprehensively deepen reforms, it is essential to break deep-seated institutional barriers and structural contradictions, fully unleash the vitality of entrepreneurship, innovation, and creativity across society, and inject powerful momentum into the advancement of Chinese modernization. This will enable Chinese modernization to overcome all obstacles and march forward with unwavering determination.

"We must further comprehensively deepen reforms, focus on dismantling deep-seated institutional barriers and structural contradictions, fully galvanize the entrepreneurial, innovative, and creative dynamism across society, inject powerful impetus into advancing Chinese modernization, and enable the pursuit of Chinese modernization to overcome all obstacles and advance with unwavering determination."

References

- [1] Marx, K., & Engels, F. (2014). *Selected Works of Marx and Engels (Vol. 4)*. Beijing: People's Publishing House.

- [2] Central Committee of the Communist Party of China. (2024). Decision on Further Comprehensively Deepening Reforms and Advancing Chinese Modernization. Beijing: People's Publishing House.
- [3] Xi, J. P(2014). On Adhering to Comprehensive Deepening Reforms. Beijing: People's Publishing House.
- [4] Xi, J. P(2024, May 24). Advancing Comprehensive Deepening of Reforms in Tandem with the Theme of Chinese Modernization. People's Daily.
- [5] Robinson, J. (2019). On Marxist Economics. Beijing: The Commercial Press.