

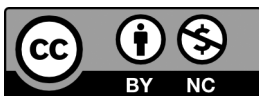
Chinese Modernization: A Theoretical and Practical Leap Over the Capitalist “Caudine Forks”

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Abstract: The issue of modernization in Eastern societies has always been an important aspect of socialist development. Marx and Engels proposed a theoretical conception of the leap over the “Caudine Forks” in Russia’s development path. Under the principle of historical materialism, they delineated the material, institutional, and revolutionary prerequisites for leaping over the “Caudine Forks”. After the October Revolution, China embarked on the socialist path, and the leap over the “Caudine Forks” also became an important issue facing China’s social development. In the new era of socialist construction, Chinese modernization has combined the issue of the leap over the “Caudine Forks” with the construction of modernization paths, achieving new significant breakthroughs in theory and practice, and representing the latest theoretical frontier of scientific socialism. Logically, Chinese modernization relies on the people as the main body and realizes the leap over the capitalist developmental stage while absorbing the achievements of the capitalist mode of production through the contradiction movement of productive forces and production relations; in the practical path, Chinese modernization starts from the three dimensions of productive forces, production relations, and forms of civilization, breaks through the inherent drawbacks of capitalist modernization, and expands the new path of modernization. Chinese modernization provides profound value inspirations at the levels of methodology, values, and civilization outlook for developing countries seeking modernization and the overall evolution of human civilization. Therefore, both from the theoretical logic and the practical path, it has been confirmed that China’s leaping over the “Caudine Forks” and taking a socialist modernization path with Chinese characteristics is highly realistic and feasible.

Keywords: Modernization; Chinese modernization; Caudine Forks



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1 Introduction

During the phase when capitalism opened up world history in the 19th century, Marx and Engels, in light of the developmental trends of world history and against the concrete practical backdrop of Eastern societies, made the judgment that non-Western societies could leap over the “Caudine Forks” of capitalism—that is, under the conditions

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of not being coerced or controlled by capital, they could forge a socialist path that transcends the developmental stage of capitalism. In his speech at the opening ceremony of the study and implementation seminar on the spirit of the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China (CPC), General Secretary Xi Jinping (2023a) clearly pointed out: “Summarizing, putting forward and elaborating in depth the theory of Chinese modernization is a major theoretical innovation of the 20th National Congress of the CPC and the latest major achievement of scientific socialism.” Today, both the theory and practice of Chinese modernization have reached a new height. Chinese modernization is not only China’s contribution of Chinese strength, wisdom and solutions to the progress and development of human civilization as a whole (Huang, 2022), but also a new historical response to Marx’s vision of the leap over the “Caudine Forks”. As the latest major achievement of scientific socialism, Chinese modernization has offered a departure from the traditional paradigms of Western modernization through its unique essential attributes and practical trajectories, scientifically answering the questions of whether and how the “Caudine Forks” can be leaped over, and providing a highly realistic and feasible Chinese answer from the perspectives of theoretical logic and practical pathways.

Furthermore, a brief review of recent research findings on Chinese modernization and the “Caudine Forks” leads to the conclusion that current research on Chinese modernization is characterized by overall diversification in research perspectives, a more comprehensive construction of research systems, and research content that is more closely aligned with practical applications, thus possessing strong guiding significance. However, existing research on Chinese modernization still focuses primarily on theoretical interpretation, content elaboration, and its special significance in the current process of building socialist modernization with Chinese characteristics; research on how Chinese modernization addresses the issue of the leap over the “Caudine Forks” remains extremely scarce. The few existing studies merely use the theory of the leap over the “Caudine Forks” to further illustrate the unique theoretical value and practical significance of Chinese modernization in the contemporary era. Therefore, research on how Chinese modernization answers the question of the leap over the “Caudine Forks” provides a certain innovative space for the development of relevant research and endows this study with greater value.

2 Chinese Modernization: The Theoretical Basis for the Leap Over the “Caudine Forks”

In the second half of the 19th century, Western capitalism entered a relatively stable phase of development, and the periodic waves of revolution gradually subsided. On the contrary, under the constant encroachment of capitalism, various social contradictions in Eastern societies became increasingly acute, and a revolutionary crisis was imminent. Against this backdrop, the question of the developmental path for Eastern societies emerged as a primary concern. In particular, the tenacious vitality demonstrated by the Russian rural communes prompted Marx to rethink his previous theories on Eastern societies. Regarding Russia as an important window to observe Eastern societies, Marx conducted systematic research on the future developmental path of Russia, which was on the eve of social transformation. He ultimately reached a groundbreaking conclusion: Russia could potentially bypass the “Caudine Forks” of capitalism and move directly toward a socialist society.

2.1 The Theoretical Vision of Classical Writers on the Leap Over the “Caudine Forks”

There are two major modes of social-formational transition in human history: “the ‘externally-driven’ mode and the ‘transcendental leap’ mode”. The former refers to the direct impetus exerted by a higher social formation on a lower one through violent or non-violent means. For instance, the primitive social formations in the Americas directly advanced to the capitalist social formation. The latter occurs during a critical historical window. When the higher social formation has shown a tendency of self-sublation, and against the backdrop of extensive interactions with it, the evolutionary process of the lower social formation can be “shortened”. Thus, without going through the full development of the higher formation, the lower one can directly absorb its civilized achievements and transition to a more advanced formation. What Marx referred to as the leap over the “Caudine Forks” corresponds to the second form of transcendence, whose historical prerequisite is that it can only be realized when capitalism has developed sufficiently to a certain stage (Xiao, 2018).

In line with Marx’s original understanding, the question of the leap over the “Caudine Forks” refers to how, under the conditions that the Russian rural communes coexist with the Western capitalist production that dominates the world market, Russia could bypass the “Caudine Forks” of the capitalist system and appropriate the positive achievements of the capitalist system for the communes (Marx, & Engels, 2009a: 57). Based on the formulation of the question concerning what the leap over the “Caudine Forks” entails, Marx and Engels further made general stipulations on the conditions for achieving such a transcendence.

First, the material conditions. In response to the question of how Russia could leap over the “Caudine Forks” of the capitalist system so as to find a development path for their motherland different from the one Western Europe has taken and is still taking (Marx, & Engels, 2009a: 463), Marx argued that in the era of large-scale industry dominated by the capitalist mode of production, the formation of the world market had driven the global expansion of capital. This process shattered the traditional natural economic structures of Eastern societies. By participating in the world market and engaging in economic exchanges with capitalist countries, backward nations were able to directly absorb and adopt advanced productive forces, thus potentially attaining the same level of productive forces as capitalist countries in the same era. In other words, it emphasized absorbing and appropriating all the positive achievements created by the capitalist system, including advanced productive forces, management methods, and technological fruits, to provide material substance for exploring a higher form of social development and the socialist path (Li, & Chen, 2023).

Second, the institutional conditions. Against the backdrop of the world market dominated by the capitalist mode of production, if Eastern societies were to explore an independent development path and preserve their national characteristics in light of their unique historical contexts, they must adopt a mode of production distinct from that of capitalism. The public ownership of the means of production inherent in the Russian rural communes, precisely, provided the internal basis for leaping over the capitalist “Caudine Forks”, enabling them to serve as the “direct starting point” for establishing a realistic socialist economic system.

Third, the revolutionary conditions. In his Afterword to “The Russian Question”, Friedrich Engels noted that Russia needed to carry out a social revolution complementary to the proletarian revolution in Western Europe. “The initiative for such a possible transformation of the Russian commune can only come from the industrial proletariat of the West, not from the commune itself.”(Marx, & Engels, 2009b: 457) This indicates that although the Russian commune possessed certain characteristics of public ownership, its transformation could not rely on itself but on the Western industrial proletariat or the European socialist revolution. In the 1882 Russian Preface to the Communist Manifesto,

Marx and Engels wrote regarding the question of whether such a leap was feasible: “The only possible answer at present is this: If the Russian revolution becomes the signal for a proletarian revolution in the West, so that both complement each other, the present Russian system of common land ownership can serve as the starting point for communist development.”(Marx, & Engels, 2009c: 275) Here, Marx and Engels put forward the hypothetical theory of interactive revolution, which became an indispensable prerequisite for realizing the leap. Conversely, without the conditions for an interactive revolution, Russia would lack the revolutionary prerequisites for leaping over the “Caudine Forks” (Wang, 2023).

However, leaping over the “Caudine Forks” of the capitalist stage of development to build socialism does not mean that human society can bypass the capitalist social formation or the capitalist mode of social production. On the contrary, the key reason why Russia and other Eastern societies could take the socialist path of leaping over the “Caudine Forks” lies in the fact that Western capitalist countries, as an important part of human society, had already fulfilled the historical mission of developing the capitalist mode of social production and achieved the civilized fruits of the development of social productive forces in the capitalist era. Marx held that with the emergence and development of capitalism, world history gradually took shape. Under the conditions where all countries were interconnected and interacting with one another globally, “the production and consumption of all nations have become cosmopolitan”(Marx, & Engels, 2009, Vol. 1: 306). On this basis, the political events of all countries have inevitably assumed a global character; a revolution occurring in one country may take its own economic achievements as material conditions or draw on the material wealth of other countries as its material premise. Therefore, in a certain sense, without the development and intensification of contradictions in Western capitalist production, human society could never have advanced to the point of establishing any socialist or communist mode of social production. Of course, to build socialism by leaping over the “Caudine Forks”, it is essential to fully absorb and learn from the epochal achievements and civilized fruits of capitalism, but this should not take the form of transforming oneself into a capitalist society; instead, it requires upholding the socialist and communist modes of production (Ding, 2022).

2.2 The Theoretical Logic of Chinese Modernization Leaping Over the “Caudine Forks”

Marx’s conception of the leap over the “Caudine Forks” is not a simple negation of the capitalist stage of development or an abstract affirmation of the socialist path. Instead, it is about moving toward socialism by absorbing all the positive achievements created by capitalism while avoiding the institutional traps of capitalism. As a contemporary practical embodiment of this conception, Chinese modernization differs in its theoretical logic from the labor exploitation and alienation centered on capital proliferation under the Western capitalist mode of production. Centered on realizing the free and all-round development of human beings, Chinese modernization, on the premise of transcending the limitations of the Western capitalist modernization path, carries out innovative transformation through adaptive integration, thereby exploring a path of socialist modernization with Chinese characteristics that conforms to China’s specific national conditions.

First, Chinese modernization takes “people” as the practical subject. The construction of socialist relations of production is not centered on capital proliferation, but on realizing the free and all-round development of human beings. The proposition that the development of the economic social formation is a natural-historical process stipulates the historical laws that the development of productive forces cannot transgress, but it does not negate the historical creativity and subjective initiative of “people” as the social subject. Real people carry out practical activities within certain social

relations, and specific social relations constitute the prerequisite conditions for specific practical activities. “Here, man does not reproduce himself in one specific determinacy, but produces his comprehensiveness”(Marx, & Engels, 2009c: 480). This kind of production can only be carried out under the conditions of public ownership. Of course, the practical activities of real people continuously produce social relations, and continuously produce the “comprehensiveness of their real and ideal connections” within specific social relations (Marx, & Engels, 2009c: 541). Chinese modernization unifies the theoretical logic of scientific socialism with the historical logic of China’s social development, takes the people as the subject of modernization practice and social development, focuses the purpose of productive force development on meeting the needs of all the people, and gives full play to the people’s historical initiative in advancing the modernization process. At the same time, the Chinese people, as the practical subject of Chinese modernization, continuously produce a more comprehensive self and more comprehensive social relations in the practical activities of modernization construction, and achieve freer and more all-round development of individuals while greatly enriching their own material and spiritual lives.

Second, Chinese modernization takes the contradictory movement of productive forces and relations of production as the inherent law of the leap. The CPC has always adhered to the path of socialism with Chinese characteristics, persisted in independently developing social productive forces, led the people to successfully embark on the path of Chinese modernization, and transcended the capitalist modernization model centered on capital. Lenin (2012: 8-9) held that: “Only by reducing social relations to relations of production, and relations of production to the level of productive forces, can we have a reliable basis for regarding the development of social formations as a natural-historical process.” Social nature is directly determined by the dominant relations of production in that society. The level of development of productive forces is the criterion for judging the stage of social development. However, the issue of modernization is by no means merely the modernization of the economy and society, but a process of social production driven by the contradictory movement of productive forces and relations of production. China’s socialist modernization is positioned in what Marx called “pre-capitalist” socialism that awaits the absorption of capitalist civilizational achievements. In its development process, it will inevitably address the productive potential and contradictions of capital. The key here is how to properly handle the relations between productive forces and relations of production, and between the basic socialist economic system and the market economy. In the new era, the CPC Central Committee with Comrade Xi Jinping at its core, adhering to the principle of common prosperity, has further proposed to correctly view the material civilization achievements embodied in capital as a factor of production, give play to the positive role of capital as a factor of production, and at the same time inherently stipulate the development direction and purpose of capital from the perspectives of Party leadership, people’s subjectivity, ownership structure, and distribution system, supporting and guiding the standardized and orderly development of capital (Cai, 2022), which has greatly enriched human modernization practice.

Third, Chinese modernization takes the capitalist stage of development as the substantive content of the leap. In a century of exploration, the CPC has led the people to successfully create the Chinese path to modernization through continuous institutional improvement, solid material accumulation and the stimulation of people’s subjectivity. This practice not only effectively responds to the proposition of whether modernization equals Westernization and provides an important perspective for understanding Marx’s theory of the leap over the “Caudine Forks”, but also profoundly confirms that what can be leaped over is not only the capitalist system itself, but also its stage of development as a specific form of modernization. In the historical process of leaping over the “Caudine Forks”, China has not followed

the path of dependent modernization of many late-developing countries, but has embarked on a modernization path that attaches equal importance to institutional construction, material accumulation and human development based on China's national conditions. History and practice have fully proved that Chinese modernization is not only a powerful path to realize the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation, but also demonstrates another possibility of modernization while promoting the development of the economic and social formation.

To sum up, Marx and Engels theoretically put forward the socialist conception of the leap over the "Caudine Forks". They made general provisions on the conditions for leaping over the "Caudine Forks". These general provisions are consistent with the presentation of historical materialism, contain profound methodological principles, and reflect the variability of historical development and the complex characteristics of the replacement of social formations. The leap over the "Caudine Forks" by Chinese modernization is a dialectical unity of inheritance, adherence and leap. On the premise of absorbing all the positive achievements created by capitalism, with the people as the practical subject, it has realized the leap over the capitalist stage of development in the contradictory movement of productive forces and relations of production. It not only breaks the myth that late-developing countries must take the capitalist path for modernization, but also enriches the contemporary connotation of the theory of the leap over the "Caudine Forks", providing a Chinese solution for mankind's exploration of a better social system.

3 Chinese Modernization: A Historical Exploration of the Leap Over the "Caudine Forks"

Since China entered the modern era, countless people with lofty ideals have fought relentlessly, making various explorations for national salvation and the path of early modernization. However, hampered by imperialism and feudal forces in China, the country's early modernization drive was fraught with difficulties and struggled to move forward. The October Revolution fired the opening shot and brought Marxism to China, endowing China's modernization drive with a new directional option—the socialist path. Since then, generations of progressive intellectuals and members of the CPC have proceeded from China's realities, striven to leap over the "Caudine Forks" of the capitalist stage of development, and continuously explored new paths for China's modernization.

3.1 The Exploration of Modernization During the New Democratic Revolution Period

Since its founding, the CPC has set the ultimate goal of "striving for communism and socialism". To achieve national modernization and the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation, it has waged a struggle against imperialist and feudal forces. The purpose of the CPC's leadership in the New Democratic Revolution is to create fundamental social conditions for advancing national modernization and realizing the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation. (Yu, 2023) During this period, although the CPC focused its work on the revolutionary movement against imperialism and feudalism, the exploration of China's modernization by Chinese communists, represented by Mao Zedong, never ceased. Zhu De was among the first to put forward the concept of "modernization" during the War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression. In September 1937, summarizing the experience of the Pingxingguan Campaign, Zhu De (1997: 318-319) pointed out: "To defeat the modernized powerful enemy with inferior weapons, we must be adept at using our troops and weapons flexibly and maneuverably in tactics." In May 1938, Mao Zedong (1991a: 511) proposed that "the

reform of the military system cannot be separated from modernization, and technical conditions must be strengthened". Faced with the huge military gap between China and Japan, the CPC took the lead in proposing modernization in the military field. This was both a profound reflection on the suffering of the Chinese people from repeated aggression by foreign powers and the ravages of war since modern times, and a clear judgment of the then situation of the War of Resistance, with profound historical reasons and realistic connotations.

With the development of the War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression and the War of Liberation, the CPC, from the perspective of building a new democratic society, attached increasing importance to economic development and explicitly put forward industrialization. Guided by historical materialism, Mao Zedong pointed out that the foundation of a new democratic society cannot be a small-scale peasant economy; its main foundation must be industry. The industry represents advanced productive forces and is "the most developing, most vital force capable of bringing about all changes"(Party Literature Research Center of the Central Committee of the CPC, 1996: 146-147). In his report On the Coalition Government delivered on April 23, 1945, Mao Zedong proposed to "transform China from an agricultural country into an industrial country" and "strive for the industrialization and agricultural modernization of China"(Mao, 1991b: 1081). Despite being in the midst of war, the CPC still conducted in-depth analysis and reflection on China's industrialization and modernization, demonstrating the orientation of Chinese modernization that "we must never establish a capitalist society of the European and American type, still less restore the old semi-feudal society"(Party Literature Research Center of the Central Committee of the CPC, & Central Archives, 2011: 385).

3.2 The Exploration of Modernization During the Period of Socialist Revolution and Construction

After the founding of the People's Republic of China, the CPC officially rose to become the leading force, leading the people of the whole country to leap over the "Caudine Forks" of capitalism and embark on the exploration of the path of socialist modernization. Although the CPC repeatedly emphasized learning from and drawing on the experience of Soviet industrialization before and after the founding of the New China, it did not mechanically copy the Soviet model. Instead, it explored its own path of modernization in light of China's specific national conditions. In 1954, in the opening speech at the First Session of the First National People's Congress, Mao Zedong put forward: "We are prepared, within the scope of several five-year plans, to build our country, which is now economically and culturally backward, into a great industrialized country with a high level of modern culture."(Dai, 2019) In December 1964, in accordance with Mao Zedong's instructions, Zhou Enlai explicitly stated in the Report on the Work of the Government delivered at the First Session of the Third National People's Congress that China should "build itself into a powerful socialist country with modern agriculture, modern industry, modern national defense and modern science and technology"(Party Literature Research Center of the Central Committee of the CPC, 2011: 423), clearly putting forward the goal of the "Four Modernizations". It also outlined a two-step strategic plan: first, to establish an independent and relatively complete industrial system and national economic system; second, to fully realize the modernization of agriculture, industry, national defense and science and technology, so that China's economy would rank among the forefront of the world (Yang, 2023).

During the period of socialist revolution and construction, the CPC's understanding of the connotation of modernization evolved from the "One Modernization" of "national socialist industrialization", to the "Two Modernizations" of "building a modern industry and a modern agriculture" or the "Three Modernizations" of

“modern industry, modern agriculture and modern science and culture”, and then to the “Four Modernizations” by “adding modernization of national defense” beyond the “Three Modernizations” (Yu, 2023). As the understanding of modernization developed from the “One Modernization” to the “Four Modernizations”, the path of Chinese modernization also broadened from “the path of China’s industrialization” to “the path of China’s socialist construction”. The early exploration of the modernization path during the period of socialist revolution and construction provided valuable experience, theoretical preparation and material foundation for the creation of socialism with Chinese characteristics after the reform and opening up.

3.3 The Exploration of Modernization in the New Era of Reform and Opening Up and Socialist Modernization Drive

After the Third Plenary Session of the 11th Central Committee of the CPC, the CPC shifted the focus of the work of the Party and the country to a socialist modernization drive, regarding the realization of the “Four Modernizations” as “an extensive and profound revolution” (Party Literature Research Center of the Central Committee of the CPC, 2008: 15). In 1979, with the historical consciousness that “the realization of the Four Modernizations determines the destiny of our country and nation”(Deng, 1993), Deng Xiaoping took the lead in putting forward the concepts of “Chinese modernization-oriented Four Modernizations” and “a moderately prosperous family”. Taking the realization of China’s millennium-long pursuit of a “moderately prosperous society” as a vivid metaphor, he not only gave an answer to the development level of China’s “Four Modernizations” that is imbued with fine traditional Chinese culture, but also put forward a goal with broad recognition for the Chinese nation. He further emphasized that we should “take a path toward Chinese modernization”(Deng, 1993), closely linking “the modernization we are striving for is Chinese modernization” with “the socialism we are building is socialism with Chinese characteristics”, revealing the logical evolution from the attribute of “Chinese-style” to the essential feature of “with Chinese characteristics” (Sun, 2023).

In addition, based on China’s actual conditions and the characteristics of the times, Deng Xiaoping put forward the “three-step” strategy for the modernization drive, and for the first time proposed the development goal of basically realizing modernization by the middle of the 21st century. Since then, “modernization” and “a moderately prosperous society” have been condensed into the Party’s “Two Centenary Goals”, which are a concentrated and vivid embodiment of the goals of Chinese modernization. Reform and opening up are a crucial move to realize Chinese modernization. After more than 40 years of efforts since the reform and opening up, the Party’s exploration of Chinese modernization has made breakthroughs in both theory and practice, forming a complete theoretical system and institutional framework for Chinese modernization, creating a world miracle in China’s economic development. The theory of Chinese modernization, as contemporary Chinese Marxism, has gradually matured (Yang, 2023).

3.4 The Exploration of Modernization in the New Era of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics

Since the 18th National Congress of the CPC, socialism with Chinese characteristics has entered a new era. The CPC Central Committee, with Comrade Xi Jinping at its core, basing itself on the strategic overall situation of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation and the profound changes unseen in a century in the world, has followed the laws of governance by the Communist Party, the laws of socialist construction, and the laws of human social development. Focusing closely on the major task of building a modern socialist country in all respects, it has put forward a series of

new ideas, new thinking and new strategies for governance. Chinese modernization is socialist modernization pursued under the leadership of the Communist Party of China. It contains elements that are common to the modernization processes of all countries, but it is more characterized by features that are unique to the Chinese context (Xi, 2022b). However, the “restart of the modernization discourse”(Ren, 2023) in the new era is not a simple return to the “Chinese-style modernization” proposed by Deng Xiaoping, but a “return” based on theoretical and practical innovations and breakthroughs.

In November 2021, the Sixth Plenary Session of the 19th CPC Central Committee deliberated and adopted the Resolution of the CPC Central Committee on the Major Achievements and Historical Experience of the Party over the Past Century, which pointed out: “They have produced a profound influence on the course of world history. The Party has led the people in pioneering a uniquely Chinese path to modernization, creating a new model for human advancement, and expanding the channels for developing countries to achieve modernization.”(Xinhua News Agency, 2021) Chinese modernization has achieved a series of innovative breakthroughs in theory and practice, greatly deepening the CPC’s understanding of the laws of socialist modernization drive, providing fundamental guidance and theoretical direction for building a great modern socialist country in all respects and advancing the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation through Chinese modernization, and injecting strong impetus. In addition, as the latest major achievement of scientific socialism, Chinese modernization has transcended the old path of Western modernization in its essential provisions and practical paths. It has answered the historical question of whether and how to leap over the “Caudine Forks” with a Chinese solution, and has confirmed both theoretically and practically that China’s leaping over the “Caudine Forks” to follow a path of socialist modernization with Chinese characteristics is highly realistic and feasible.

4 Chinese Modernization: Practical Breakthroughs in the Leap Over the “Caudine Forks”

Marx’s theoretical vision of the leap over the “Caudine Forks” was grounded in the world-historical context of the 19th century, with its core concern being whether Eastern societies could bypass the capitalist stage. However, constrained by the limitations of his era, Marx’s discussions on how to achieve this crossing remained largely at the level of possibility. He failed to systematically address the critical issues faced by late-developing countries in the process of crossing, such as how to develop productive forces, how to adapt production relations, and how to construct a form of civilization. Rooted in the context of globalization in the 21st century, Chinese modernization has driven a fundamental theoretical breakthrough through rich practical exploration. In the three dimensions of productive forces, production relations, and civilization formation, it has transformed Marx’s vision of crossing from a theoretical possibility into a feasible and pragmatic path. In doing so, Chinese modernization has achieved a systematic development and epochal transcendence of the “Caudine Forks” theory.

4.1 Breakthroughs in the Dimension of Productive Forces

Marx’s discourse on the leap of productive forces focused on the need for late-developing countries to actively absorb all the positive achievements created by the capitalist system, with the implicit premise that the development of

productive forces must rely, to a certain extent, on the technology and markets of the capitalist core. Theoretically, this line of thinking failed to fully address how late-developing countries could break free from dependent development and achieve a genuine autonomous leap in productive forces. In practice, Chinese modernization has broken through this theoretical limitation and constructed a new paradigm for the development of productive forces characterized by “independent innovation, multi-dimensional coordination, and equal openness”.

First, Chinese modernization takes self-reliance and self-strengthening in science and technology as the core driving force of productive forces to break through the trap of technological dependence. In Marx’s era of capitalism, capitalist countries maintained their advantages over late-developing countries through technological monopolies, and technological progress was often regarded as a product of spontaneous competition in the capitalist market, leaving late-developing countries trapped in a passive cycle of “technology introduction—backwardness—re-introduction”. However, Marx did not directly answer the practical question of how late-developing countries could break through technological blockades, and some socialist countries in the 20th century also faced passive productive force development due to dependence on technology introduction in their specific practices. Chinese modernization clearly puts forward that “science and technology as our primary productive force, talent as our primary resource, and innovation as our primary driver of growth”(Xi, 2022a), elevating self-reliance and self-strengthening in science and technology to a national strategy. Through institutional designs such as the new nationwide system for breakthroughs in key core technologies, it systematically integrates basic research, technological breakthroughs, and industrial transformation, forming a full-chain innovation system. This path theoretically breaks through the dogma that technological progress must rely on capitalist logic, practically proves the feasibility of achieving key technological breakthroughs under a non-capitalist system, and establishes a new logic for catching up in science and technology through strategic guidance under the socialist system.

Second, Chinese modernization breaks through the single industrialization path with a multi-dimensionally coordinated system of productive forces. Marx’s understanding of productive forces focused on the large-scale machine industry, and constrained by the conditions of his time, he did not foresee the reshaping of modernization by informatization, greening, and urbanization. In the practice of capitalist modernization, the single industrialization model has led to systemic problems such as urban-rural dualism and ecological crisis. Chinese modernization, by contrast, puts forward the concept of the coordinated development of new-type industrialization, informatization, urbanization, agricultural modernization, and greening, emphasizing the unification of technological iteration, spatial restructuring, and ecological protection in the development of productive forces. This theoretical framework rejects the linear development model of “pollution first, treatment later” and “urban first, rural later” in Western modernization, advocating the integration of multi-dimensional goals from the early stage of development, thereby building a sustainable and well-rounded productive force system. Particularly in urban-rural relations, it proposes to activate the endogenous driving force of rural areas through “rural revitalization”, forming a new pattern of two-way flow and complementary progress of production factors between urban and rural areas, enriching the Marxist theory of integrated urban-rural development.

Third, Chinese modernization breaks through the center-periphery system with a theory of global productive force interaction based on equitable opening-up. Traditional globalization theory bears the distinct characteristics of a center-periphery structure, making it easy for late-developing countries to fall into the development dilemma of core countries exploiting peripheral countries in the process of opening up. Guided by the concept of a community with a

shared future for mankind, Chinese modernization advocates a global development vision of extensive consultation, joint contribution, and shared benefits, asserting that opening up is not dependence, and cooperation is not plunder, breaking the theoretical myth that late-developing countries are bound to be exploited when opening up to the outside world. At the level of productive forces, this means that late-developing countries can absorb high-quality global factors through equal cooperation while maintaining independent development, and at the same time provide new momentum for the world market. This theory reconstructs the logic of productive force interaction, featuring the two-way flow of productive force factors between late-developing and core countries against the backdrop of globalization, providing a theoretical basis and practical path for late-developing countries to achieve independent development while participating in globalization.

4.2 Breakthroughs in the Dimension of Production Relations

Marx's theory of the leap over the "Caudine Forks" centered on the idea of bypassing capitalist production relations to establish a socialist system, yet it did not directly specify what concrete production relations should be built after the leap. He mentioned that the Russian commune system might serve as an institutional starting point for the leap over the "Caudine Forks", but he did not elaborate on a specific operational mechanism. The practices of some socialist countries in the 20th century also exposed practical problems such as a single ownership structure and rigid resource allocation, which led to a disconnect between production relations and the developmental needs of productive forces. Chinese modernization has broken through this theoretical limitation and constructed a new form of production relations adapted to the development of multi-level productive forces adapted to the requirements of multi-level productive force development.

First, Chinese modernization upholds public ownership as the mainstay and the common development of diverse forms of ownership, breaking through the institutional dogma of sole public ownership. While adhering to the dominant position of public ownership, Chinese modernization fully affirms the important role of the non-public sector in stimulating market vitality, absorbing employment, and promoting innovation. Theoretically, the dominant position of public ownership is mainly reflected in its control and leading role over the lifelines of the national economy, rather than pursuing full coverage in all fields. Meanwhile, through the development of a mixed-ownership economy, it promotes the complementary advantages and coordinated development of capital from different ownership forms, which not only preserves the fundamental socialist nature but also enhances the adaptability and innovativeness of the economic system. This institutional design breaks the traditional theoretical mindset of absolute opposition between public and private ownership, achieving a major development in socialist ownership theory.

Second, Chinese modernization adheres to distribution according to work as the mainstay and the coexistence of diverse modes of distribution, breaking through the dilemma of opposing efficiency and fairness. The report to the 20th National Congress of the CPC states: "The system of income distribution is the foundational system for promoting common prosperity. We will keep distribution according to work as the mainstay with multiple forms of distribution existing alongside it, and we will build an institutional framework under which primary, secondary, and tertiary distribution are well coordinated and mutually complementary."(Xi, 2022a) Addressing the egalitarian tendencies in traditional socialist practices and the polarization in capitalist societies, Chinese modernization has built a distribution system featuring the coordination and complementarity of primary, secondary, and tertiary distribution. This three-tier distribution system not only consolidates the ownership structure of "public ownership as the mainstay and diverse

forms of ownership developing together” but also incentivizes the development of productive forces. It motivates all types of entities to create wealth while ensuring that the fruits of development are more fairly shared by all people, providing an institutional path for achieving common prosperity.

Third, Chinese modernization upholds the socialist market economy system, breaking through the theoretical misunderstanding that only the planned economy is valid. Chinese modernization treats both planning and the market as means of resource allocation, breaking the traditional notion that a planned economy equals socialism and a market economy equals capitalism, and establishing the theory of the socialist market economy. This theory clarifies the compatibility between the socialist system and the market economy, forming a new mechanism where the “efficient market” and the “proactive and responsible government” reinforce each other, and construct a new logic of resource allocation that synergizes market mechanisms with institutional advantages. This system not only absorbs the efficiency advantages of the market economy but also leverages the overall planning capacity of the socialist system. It breaks the extreme perceptions of the government taking on everything or the omnipotence of the market, and puts forward the institutional requirement that “the government does not overstep, does not abdicate, and does not misplace”, providing institutional guarantee for the sustained development of productive forces.

4.3 Breakthroughs in the Dimension of Civilizational Form

The socialism established by backward countries leaping over the capitalist “Caudine Forks” as envisioned by Marx is a new type of civilizational form, transcending capitalist civilization. However, constrained by the historical conditions of his time, Marx did not systematically elaborate on the specific form of socialist civilization. For a long time, the West has regarded “modernization = Westernization = capitalist civilization” as the only model of modernization, and its drawbacks, such as the expansion of materialism, ecological crises, and hegemonic expansion, have become increasingly prominent. Distinctly different from the West, China needs to directly face and resolve the flaws of the previous modernity models represented by the West to create a new landscape of modern civilization, while also building a new modern civilization based on China’s unique social, cultural, and historical background (Wei, 2024).

First, Chinese modernization pursues the coordination of material civilization and spiritual civilization, breaking through the civilizational trap of materialistic expansion. Capitalist civilization regards the growth of material wealth as the sole criterion of civilization, leading to systemic problems such as spiritual emptiness and moral decline. Rejecting the development model of prioritizing material over spiritual civilization in Western modernization, Chinese modernization emphasizes the coordinated development of material and spiritual civilization, theoretically defining the comprehensiveness of modernization. Chinese modernization is not merely about economic growth, but also about the improvement of people’s spiritual literacy and the enhancement of social civilization. It advocates taking socialist core values as the guide, promoting the creative transformation and innovative development of fine traditional Chinese culture, and continuously improving national quality and social civilization. This view of civilization not only focuses on the material achievements of economic development but also emphasizes the all-round development of people and social progress, transcending the phenomena of “the ‘one-dimensional man’” and “alienation”, and injecting profound spiritual connotations into modernization.

Second, Chinese modernization establishes an ecological outlook of harmonious coexistence between humans and nature, breaking through the civilizational contradiction of man-nature opposition. Centered on the core concept of anthropocentrism, capitalist civilization treats nature as an object to be conquered by humans, ultimately resulting

in severe ecological crises. Targeting the drawback of the opposition between humans and nature in capitalist modernization, Chinese modernization puts forward the development concept that “lucid waters and lush mountains are invaluable assets”, integrates ecological civilization construction into the entire process of economic and social development, and regards ecological civilization as a new model for human advancement rather than a supplement to traditional civilization. Chinese modernization clarifies the dialectical relationship between ecological environmental protection and economic development, promotes the formation of green development modes and lifestyles, and provides new ideas for global ecological governance through the establishment of a strict ecological environmental protection system and the implementation of a sustainable development strategy, breaking the path dependence of the traditional modernization model of “pollution first, treatment later”.

Third, Chinese modernization pioneers a new path of human civilization featuring peaceful development, breaking through the civilizational logic of hegemonic expansion (i.e., the expansion model of capitalist civilization based on colonialism and plunder). The expansion logic of capitalist civilization is characterized by hegemonism and colonialism, and its theories regard violence and plunder as natural means for civilizational expansion. Fundamentally different from the historical path of Western modernization achieved through colonial expansion, Chinese modernization adheres unswervingly to the path of peaceful development, advocates building a community with a shared future for mankind, and asserts that “civilizations are diverse and the world is colorful”, offering an alternative to Western-centric narratives such as civilizational superiority or the clash of civilizations. Chinese modernization adheres to the path of peaceful development, representing a synergy between global peace and civilizational advancement. It provides a practical platform for the coexistence and common prosperity of different civilizations, proving that modernization can be achieved through peaceful and cooperative means, and opening up new possibilities for the progress of human civilization.

In summary, the breakthroughs made by Chinese modernization in the three dimensions of productive forces, production relations, and civilizational form in advancing Marx’s theory of the leap over the “Caudine Forks” are not isolated, but dialectically unified. The independent innovation and coordinated development in the dimension of productive forces serve as the material foundation for the crossing; the institutional innovation and unity of efficiency and fairness in the dimension of production relations provide the institutional guarantee for the crossing; and the comprehensive coordination and peaceful development in the dimension of civilizational form act as the value guide for the crossing. These three breakthroughs not only uphold the core spirit of Marx’s theory of the leap over the “Caudine Forks”—bypassing the capitalist trap and moving towards socialism—but also, based on the characteristics of the 21st century, address the crucial question of how to cross that Marx did not fully resolve, elevating the vision of crossing into a systematic theory.

5 Chinese Modernization: Value Enlightenments of the leap over the “Caudine Forks”

Chinese modernization constitutes an important organic component of the historical process of world modernization, and it inevitably embodies the commonality that conforms to the direction of historical development. However, in the pursuit of modernization, “there is no uniform sequence, no single path, no law of development. Every late-developing industrialized country, namely the so-called ‘emulating countries’, no matter how much influenced

by the British experience—to some extent inspired, to some extent shocked or intimidated—has developed its own path to modernization”(Landes, 2010: 330). The great practice of Chinese modernization provides profound value and enlightenment for late-developing countries in their pursuit of modernization and for the overall evolution of human civilization. Such enlightenments are not a simple duplication of paths, but an organic unity of methodology, values and civilization outlook, which together constitute an innovative contribution to the path of human modernization.

5.1 Methodological Enlightenment: The Dialectical Unity of Universal Laws and Specific Paths

Chinese modernization has successfully achieved an effective integration of the universal laws of historical development with the specific realities of each country, breaking the linear, single-track view of history that equates modernization with Westernization. The Western-centric narrative of modernization has framed the capitalist path as an insurmountable historical stage for all nations, essentially universalizing regional experience into a global law. In contrast, Chinese modernization proves that the universal laws of history are not identical to specific paths of development. It upholds the civilizational orientation of socialism as a social form, yet firmly rejects the idea that the Western capitalist stage is a historical inevitability for all nations. It challenges the teleological assumption of a single modernization path and reaffirms the inherent open-endedness and plurality of historical development.

The path of Chinese modernization as a historical leap is neither a dogmatic application of classic works nor a simple replication of other countries' models. Instead, it integrates the basic tenets of Marxism with China's specific realities and fine traditional Chinese culture. As Xi Jinping (2023b) pointed out: “The result of this ‘integration’ is mutual achievement, creating an organically unified new cultural life form, making Marxism Chinese and fine traditional Chinese culture modern.” He also noted that “Chinese modernization endows Chinese civilization with modern strength, and Chinese civilization endows Chinese modernization with profound heritage.” Whether in scientific and technological innovation under the new system of mobilizing resources nationwide or in the institutional construction of the socialist market economy, China has demonstrated its capacity for institutional innovation based on its national conditions. This profoundly enlightens us that a genuine historical leap must be a specific construction rooted in national conditions and imbued with national characteristics. Its essence lies in methodological consciousness and self-confidence, rather than imitation and copying of models.

5.2 Value Enlightenment: The Dynamic Balance of Multiple Value Goals

Chinese modernization has successfully broken through the predicament of opposing value goals in the process of Western modernization, realizing the harmonious unity of core values such as efficiency and fairness, and humans and nature. In terms of the relationship between efficiency and fairness, capitalist modernization has always struggled to shake off the antinomy of either fairness or efficiency. Through the organic integration of an efficient market and a promising government and the institutional arrangement of coordinated and complementary primary, redistribution, and tertiary distribution, China has proved the compatibility of efficiency and fairness in practice. The socialist market economy system not only emancipates and develops productive forces through market mechanisms, but also safeguards social fairness through the socialist system, forming a positive interaction between economic growth and social development. This institutional innovation demonstrates that fairness is not the opposite of efficiency, but a necessary condition for sustainable development; nor does efficiency inevitably lead to polarization, but rather serves as the

material foundation for achieving common prosperity.

In the relationship between humans and nature, Chinese modernization has achieved a paradigm shift from conquering nature to harmonious coexistence between humans and nature. Western industrial civilization is built on the philosophical foundation of anthropocentrism, regarding nature as an object of unlimited exploitation. In contrast, China has embedded ecological civilization construction into the overall layout of modernization, put forward the important concept that “lucid waters and lush mountains are invaluable assets”, and promoted the comprehensive green transformation of economic and social development. This development concept is not only a transcendence of the traditional industrialization model, but also a redefinition of the connotation of modernization, indicating that high-quality development can be advanced in tandem with ecological environmental protection.

5.3 Civilizational Outlook Enlightenment: Paradigm Innovation in the Evolutionary Path of Civilization

Chinese modernization has pioneered a new form of civilization for national rejuvenation through peaceful development, providing an entirely new paradigm for the evolution of human civilization. In terms of the path of civilizational development, Chinese modernization has broken through the historical logic that a strong country is bound to seek hegemony. The rise of major Western powers in modern times has invariably been accompanied by colonization, plunder and war, which was regarded as an inescapable fate in the process of modernization. Yet through its own practice, Chinese modernization has proven that a country can fully achieve modernization goals by virtue of its own efforts, institutional innovation and peaceful cooperation. The choice of this path of peaceful development stems not only from the socialist system’s inherent negation of exploitation and plunder, but also from the strong resolve and firm stance of the Chinese nation in upholding confidence in its path. “This firm confidence and resolve to follow our own path is the foothold of all our Party’s theories and practices.”(Xi, 2024: 29)

In the dimension of civilizational exchanges, Chinese modernization has transcended the narrow narrative of the clash of civilizations. By proposing the vision of “building a community with a shared future for mankind” and the Three Global Initiatives (the Global Development Initiative, the Global Security Initiative, and the Global Civilization Initiative), China advocates equality, mutual learning, dialogue and inclusiveness among civilizations, offering a new paradigm for civilizational exchanges in the era of globalization. The significance of Chinese modernization does not lie in providing an alternative hegemony, but in proving that countries with different civilizational backgrounds can all find a modernization path suited to their own conditions. It proclaims that the progress of human civilization is not a process of promoting a single model, but a historical process of the common development and mutual appreciation of diverse civilizations.

In summary, the value enlightenments brought by Chinese modernization’s leaping over the “Caudine Forks” are systematic and profound. In terms of methodology, it highlights the unity of historical universality and particularity, dispelling the myth that modernization equates to Westernization. In terms of values, it pursues the harmonious coexistence of efficiency and fairness, and of humans and nature, reshaping the ethical core of modernization. In terms of civilizational outlook, it adheres to the path of peaceful development and pioneers a new form of inclusive and mutually learning human civilization. These three enlightenments all point to a core proposition: modernization is by no means a single template, and humanity has the wisdom and ability to choose a more just, sustainable and peaceful development path. It is in this sense that Chinese modernization has elevated from the practice of one nation to a precious enlightenment of world historical significance.

6 Conclusion

The theoretical vision of Marx and Engels regarding the leap of Eastern societies over the capitalist “Caudine Forks” was once a theoretical possibility in the world-historical context of the 19th century. However, the century-long exploration and the new-era practice of Chinese modernization have transformed this proposition into a practical answer. From laying the foundation for modernization during the New Democratic Revolution, to outlining the blueprint of the “Four Modernizations” in the period of socialist revolution and construction; from pioneering the path of socialism with Chinese characteristics for modernization after the reform and opening-up drive, to promoting systematic breakthroughs through the Five-Sphere Integrated Plan (economic, political, cultural, social, and ecological progress) in the new era, the CPC has always adhered to the fundamental principle of the contradictory movement between productive forces and production relations, with the full stimulation of people’s subjectivity as the core. By evading the institutional traps of capitalism and absorbing the positive achievements of human civilization, China has blazed a path of non-capitalist modernization.

What is particularly crucial is that at the practical level, Chinese modernization has constructed a complete logic of “independent leap of productive forces—dynamic adaptation of production relations—innovative breakthrough of civilizational form”. It has broken the predicaments of technological dependence and single-track industrialization through self-reliance and self-strengthening in science and technology, coupled with multi-dimensional coordinated development; resolved the binary opposition between efficiency and fairness by virtue of the socialist market economy system; and reshaped the evolutionary path of civilization through the coordinated development of material and spiritual civilization as well as the harmonious coexistence between humans and nature. These threefold breakthroughs have not only verified the historical inevitability of the leap over the “Caudine Forks” but also elevated Marxist theories of social development to a new height.

Standing at a new historical starting point, the concrete practice of Chinese modernization is still advancing. Its significance lies not only in providing a solid path choice for the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation, but also in deconstructing the conceptual equivalence between modernization and Westernization by contributing to a new model for human advancement, thus offering a reference for late-developing countries to independently choose their own development paths. Looking ahead, as Chinese modernization progresses, the theoretical and practical implications of the leap over the “Caudine Forks” will be further enriched, and the contemporary value of scientific socialism as well as the diverse possibilities for the development of human civilization will be more fully manifested in this process.

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