

Original Contributions of Chinese-style Modernization to the Marxist Theory of Modernization

Jingrui Wu*

Northeastern University, Shenyang, 110000, China

*Corresponding author: jiajiayin2025@163.com

Abstract: Chinese-style modernization is an important achievement in the Sinicization and modernization of the Marxist theory of modernization. Its theoretical contributions are not limited to summarizing developmental experiences, but rather, from the perspective of historical materialism, offer new interpretations of the generative mechanisms, subject structure, value goals, and civilizational implications of modernization. The Marxist theory of modernization reveals the logic of modern society's emergence through changes in the mode of production, explains the global expansion of modernization from the perspective of world history, and establishes the value criterion based on the free and comprehensive development of human beings. On the basis of adhering to these fundamental principles, Chinese-style modernization breaks through the explanatory framework centered on capital accumulation and taking the Western path as the sole model, incorporating people's subjectivity, common prosperity, independent development, and innovation in forms of civilization into the theory of modernization. Thus, modernization is no longer understood as mere economic growth, technological diffusion, or institutional transplantation, but rather as a historical process that unifies the development of productive forces, social equity, human development, and civilizational progress.

Keywords: Chinese-style modernization; Marxist theory of modernization; common prosperity; forms of civilization.

1. The basic issues of the Marxist theory of modernization

To elucidate the theoretical contributions of Chinese-style modernization, it is necessary to first return to the basic theoretical domain of Marxism regarding the emergence and development of modern society. Although Marx and Engels did not label their intellectual system as "modernization theory," they nonetheless provided a fundamental explanation of modernization from the aspects of changes in the mode of production, the formation of world history, the critique of capitalist modernity, and the free and comprehensive development of human beings. Chinese-style modernization is precisely a contemporary response, based on these fundamental principles, to the paths, goals, and value criteria of modernization.

1.1 Changes in the mode of production and the emergence of modern society

In the theoretical perspective of Marxism, modernization is not primarily a matter of mere technological progress, industrial upgrading, or expansion of economic scale, but rather a holistic social transformation grounded in changes in the mode of production. Marx points out in the "Preface to A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy": "The mode of production of material life conditions the general process of social, political and intellectual life."^[1] This thesis indicates that the emergence of modern society must be grasped through the mode of production and its inherent contradictions. Without the development of productive forces, the adjustment of relations of production, and the transformation of social structures, modernization would easily be narrowed down to renewal at the mere material level.

The Marxist theory of modernization analyzes modernization within the movement of basic social contradictions. Capitalist modernization, historically supported by large-scale machine industry, the world market, and the wage-labor system, promotes the development of productive forces and also breaks the fetters of the natural economy and hierarchical relations. However, in the process of creating enormous

material wealth, the capitalist mode of production continuously reproduces the antagonism between capital and labor, the conflict between the socialization of production and private appropriation of capital, and the alienated relations in which human activities are dominated by the power of things.

Therefore, the essence of modernization is not merely the renewal of productive tools and the expansion of economic aggregate, but rather the transformation of social relations, institutional structures, and modes of human existence brought about by changes in the mode of production. In judging whether a path of modernization possesses historical rationality, it is necessary to examine not only its capacity to promote the development of productive forces, but also its ability to address the relationships between growth and equity, efficiency and order, and material progress and human development. This provides the fundamental method for understanding Chinese-style modernization: modernization must be approached from concrete socio-historical conditions, rather than from an abstract Western empirical model.

1.2 The unfolding of world history and the emergence of national paths

The Marxist theory of modernization is characterized by a distinct world-historical perspective. Modernization is not a closed process occurring spontaneously within isolated nation-states, but rather a historical process unfolding in the development of productive forces, the expansion of intercourse, and the formation of the world market. Marx and Engels point out: "The bourgeoisie, by the rapid improvement of all instruments of production, by the immensely facilitated means of communication, draws all, even the most barbarian, nations into civilization. ... It has created enormous cities, has greatly increased the urban population as compared with the rural, and has thus rescued a considerable part of the population from the idiocy of rural life. ... It draws the most barbarian nations into the world market."

This thesis reveals the world-historical nature of capitalist modernization: capital, mediated by the world market, draws originally dispersed and closed nations and regions into a unified world-historical process.

However, the Marxist theory of world history does not imply that the Western capitalist path is the sole template for modernization of all countries. The process by which capitalism opens up world history is also a process in which unequal relations, such as those between center and periphery and between development and deprivation, are formed. Although capitalism has opened up the space of world history, it has not truly realized the modern vision of equal development for all nations.

Therefore, the Marxist theory of modernization both acknowledges that modernization has a universal trend in world history and opposes the absolutization of any particular path as a universal model. The universality of modernization is not manifested as the homogenization of institutional forms and path choices, but rather as the independent exploration of various nation-states in the process of developing productive forces, transforming social structures, and improving people's livelihoods. The significance of Chinese-style modernization lies precisely in integrating the universal laws of modernization with China's specific realities, thereby forming a socialist modernization path that differs from Western capitalist modernization.

1.3 The free and comprehensive development of human beings and the socialist value criterion

The most fundamental value criterion of the Marxist theory of modernization is the free and comprehensive development of human beings. Unlike the conception of capitalist modernization that reduces modernization to capital accumulation, wealth growth, and efficiency improvement, Marxism always understands modernization from the perspective of the unity of human emancipation and social progress. Marx and Engels point out that the future society should be "an association, in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all."^[2] This thesis defines the value height of the Marxist theory of modernization: modernization does not take the enrichment of a minority or the expansion of capital as its ultimate end, but should take the development of all members of society as its destination.

From this value criterion, capitalist modernization has historically insurmountable limitations. While creating enormous productive forces, it also places human development under the domination of the logic of capital, subsuming people's capacities, relations, and needs into the process of commodity exchange and

the expansion of capital. If modernization only pursues the expansion of economic aggregate without responding to issues such as social differentiation, labor alienation, and the weakening of subjectivity, it has not transcended the internal predicament of capitalist modernity.

Thus, the socialist orientation constitutes the internal requirement of the Marxist theory of modernization. Socialist modernization is not a mere pursuit of capitalist modernization, nor is it an institutional transplantation of the Western modernization model, but rather, on the basis of developing social productive forces, it gradually overcomes the domination of human beings by the logic of capital, so that the fruits of modernization benefit all people more equitably. The change in the mode of production answers the question of "why modernization occurs," the process of world history answers the question of "in what space modernization unfolds," and the comprehensive development of human beings answers the question of "for whom and toward where modernization is directed."

2. The Chinese expression of Chinese-style modernization to the Marxist theory of modernization

If the Marxist theory of modernization provides the basic method and value criterion for understanding the development of modern society, then the theoretical significance of Chinese-style modernization lies in the fact that it does not remain at the level of general principles, but rather transforms these principles into concrete institutional arrangements and development paths through long-term exploration. Its theoretical contributions are particularly embodied in the redefinition of the subject and goals of modernization, transforming modernization from a capital-centered historical process into a socialist modernization practice that is people-centered and aims at common prosperity.

2.1 Surpassing the logic of capital with people's subjectivity

In the process of capitalist modernization, although concepts such as "freedom" and "equality" have been widely proclaimed, the actual operational logic of modernization has always been centered on the expansion of capital. Production, exchange, and even social institutional arrangements serve the needs of capital accumulation to a considerable extent, thereby reducing human activities to subsidiary links in the movement of capital. Marx points out in Volume 3 of *Capital*: "Capital is not a thing, but rather a definite social relation of production belonging to a definite historical social formation, which is embodied in a thing and imparts to it a specific social character."^[3] This judgment reveals the essence of the logic of capital: capital is not a neutral economic tool, but rather a dominant structure of social relations.

The original contribution of Chinese-style modernization is first embodied in its surpassing of the dominant position of the logic of capital. It does not deny the role of market mechanisms in resource allocation, nor does it deny that capital, as a factor of production, has certain positive functions within a limited scope. However, it does not elevate capital to the supreme principle governing social operation. Instead, through socialist institutional arrangements, it shifts the leading force of modernization from capital to the people. From a theoretical perspective, this transformation means that the subject of modernization changes from "capital" to "the people," that is, it regards the people as the practical subject, the value subject, and the beneficiary subject of modernization.

People's subjectivity is reflected not only in the dimension of political participation, but also in economic development, social construction, and cultural creation. Chinese-style modernization, through institutional arrangements, embeds the interests of the people into national development strategies, thereby continuously transforming developmental achievements into improvements in the quality of life. This people-centered development logic alters the value orientation of modernization and also provides new practical support for the Marxist theory of modernization.

2.2 Reshaping the goals of modernization through common prosperity

Corresponding to the logic of the subject, the goal setting of modernization also reflects fundamental differences between different theoretical systems. Capitalist modernization usually takes economic growth, efficiency improvement, and wealth accumulation as its main indicators, and its inherent operational result tends to be the concentration of wealth in the hands of a minority, accompanied by social differentiation. The deep predicament of capitalist modernization lies in the fact that it can create wealth, yet it is

institutionally unable to eliminate the structural tension between wealth possession and social equity.

The innovation of Chinese-style modernization in goal setting is centrally embodied in the proposal and advancement of common prosperity. Common prosperity is not simple egalitarianism, nor is it an abstract aspiration divorced from the stage of development; rather, on the basis of high-quality development, it continuously narrows regional disparities, urban-rural disparities, and income disparities through institutional arrangements, enabling all people to more fully share the fruits of modernization. Relevant research points out that Chinese-style modernization is an organic unity of the common features of modernization and Chinese characteristics, among which common prosperity serves as an important hallmark distinguishing it from capitalist modernization.

The theoretical significance of this goal lies in the fact that it transforms the Marxist value criterion of human development into an institutional goal in the practice of modernization. Modernization is no longer merely a process of "getting rich," but rather a process in which the conditions for development of all members of society are continuously improved, development opportunities are continuously expanded, and the fruits of development are shared more equitably. Thus, Chinese-style modernization revises the explanatory approach in traditional modernization theory that regards growth priority, tolerance of differentiation, and ex post compensation as universal laws.

3. The reconstruction of the narrative of world modernization theory by Chinese-style modernization

The theoretical significance of Chinese-style modernization is not limited to China's own development practice, but also lies in its profound breakthrough against the modernization narrative that has long been centered on Western experience. In the existing theoretical systems of modernization, Western experience is often taken as an implicit frame of reference, thereby forming an explanatory framework centered on the path of capitalist development. The proposal and practice of Chinese-style modernization have shifted modernization from a single paradigm to a pluralistic generation, providing new intellectual resources for re-understanding the choice of modernization paths, institutional forms, and civilizational implications.

3.1 Breaking the theoretical myth that "modernization equals Westernization."

Since modern times, with the global expansion of capitalism, the historical experience of Western countries has gradually been generalized as the general model of modernization. In this narrative, industrialization, marketization, liberalization, and their corresponding institutional arrangements are regarded as the only path to modern society. The theoretical inertia thus formed often places the modernization practices of late-developing countries within the coordinates of "imitation-catch-up," and modernization is equated with the replication of the Western path.

Although Marxism reveals the objective role of capitalism in creating world history, it does not regard capitalist modernization as the ultimate form of human development. On the contrary, through its critique of the logic of capital, Marxism points out that the process of modernization has inherent contradictions and harbors the possibility of transition to a higher social form. It is precisely within this theoretical horizon that Chinese-style modernization breaks through the understanding of modernization that takes the West as the sole reference. Relevant research holds that Chinese-style modernization has pioneered a non-capitalist path of modernization, whose characteristics of modernity are embodied in the unity of social progress and human development, and the unity of instrumentality and purpose.^[4]

The theoretical significance of this breakthrough lies in the fact that it liberates modernization from the narrative structure of unilinear evolution, making modernization no longer a process of approaching a predetermined end, but rather an open process that is continuously generated in different historical contexts. The diversity of modernization paths is not a denial of the universal laws of modernization, but rather the concrete unfolding of these universal laws under different historical and cultural conditions.

3.2 Opening up the space for independent modernization of late-developing countries

In traditional modernization theory, late-developing countries are often placed within the framework of dependent development, and their modernization paths are understood as following and modifying the

experiences of early-developing countries. However, practice shows that such a path is not only difficult to replicate, but also tends to aggravate developmental dilemmas through institutional transplantation and structural mismatches. Through long-term practice, Chinese-style modernization provides a possibility different from dependent development, namely, adhering to independent and self-reliant advancement of modernization under the conditions of world history.

This "autonomy" does not mean closed development, but rather emphasizes the maintenance of independence in development strategies, institutional arrangements, and value orientations while participating in the global division of labor and international exchanges. From a theoretical perspective, this practice expands the Marxist understanding of the relationship between national history and world history. Relevant research points out that from China's modernization to Chinese-style modernization, it signifies that the concept of modernization has undergone transformation, elevation, and optimization in the Chinese context, and also nurtures new theoretical innovations and practical creations.^[8]

Chinese-style modernization proves that late-developing countries can achieve modernization without replicating the Western model. This experience has changed the long-established theoretical framework of "late-development-dependency-catch-up," and provides developing countries with a more flexible path space. Its global significance does not lie in providing a fixed template that can be simply transplanted, but rather in demonstrating that modernization must be grounded in national conditions and develop endogenous mechanisms in handling the relationships between state and market, efficiency and equity, development and stability, and openness and autonomy.

3.3 Enriching the theoretical landscape of modernization through innovation in forms of civilization

The deeper significance of Chinese-style modernization lies in its elevation of the modernization issue to the level of forms of civilization. Traditional modernization theories tend to regard modernization as a phased process of economic and social development, while paying less attention to the corresponding civilizational structures and their inherent value orientations. Chinese-style modernization, with the new form of human civilization as its theoretical expression, makes modernization not merely a matter of development, but also a matter of civilization.

From the perspective of Marxism, the succession of social formations is essentially also the evolution of forms of civilization. Capitalist modernization has created a highly developed material civilization, but at the same time it has brought about problems such as social differentiation, value alienation, and developmental imbalances. Chinese-style modernization does not negate the universal achievements of modern civilization; rather, on this basis, it achieves the organic integration of different civilizational elements. Relevant research points out that Chinese-style modernization is not modernization in a single field, but rather a theoretical form that encompasses a goal system, a value system, and a practical system.^[6]

In this process, modernization is no longer manifested as a simple replacement of tradition, but rather as creative transformation and synthesis between tradition and modernity, and between the nation and the world. Relevant research points out that the civilizational view of Chinese-style modernization, formed on the premise of following the Marxist view of civilization and based on cultural traditions, practical creation, experience summary, and theoretical sublimation, embodies the civilizational creative significance of the modernization path.^[7] Other research holds that socialism with Chinese characteristics creates a new form of human civilization, which centrally demonstrates the civilizational significance of the Chinese-style modernization path.^[5]

By introducing the dimension of forms of civilization, Chinese-style modernization elevates modernization theory from a "development paradigm" to a "civilization paradigm." This not only expands the explanatory space of the Marxist theory of modernization, but also changes the basic structure of the narrative of world modernization theory. Modernization is no longer a history of the diffusion of Western experience, but rather a history of the unfolding of different nations creating their own modern forms of civilization in the process of world history.

Conclusion

Overall, the original contributions of Chinese-style modernization to the Marxist theory of

modernization do not merely consist in proposing a development path different from that of the West; rather, they provide systematic answers in terms of the theoretical premises, subject structure, value goals, path forms, and civilizational implications of modernization. Chinese-style modernization not only adheres to the fundamental principles of Marxism concerning changes in the mode of production, the world-historical process, and the free and comprehensive development of human beings, but also promotes the new unfolding of these principles through China's concrete practices. Thus, Chinese-style modernization not only deepens the understanding of the laws of socialist modernization, but also breaks through the theoretical limitations of the Western-centric modernization narrative, expands the path space for developing countries to achieve modernization, and enriches the theoretical landscape of modernization through innovation in forms of civilization.

References

- [1] Marx, K., & Engels, F. *Collected Works of Marx and Engels, Vol. 2, trans. by the Compilation and Translation Bureau for the Works of Marx, Engels, Lenin and Stalin under the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, Beijing: People's Publishing House, 2009, p. 591.*
- [2] Marx, K., & Engels, F. *Collected Works of Marx and Engels, Vol. 2, trans. by the Compilation and Translation Bureau for the Works of Marx, Engels, Lenin and Stalin under the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, Beijing: People's Publishing House, 2009, pp. 35, 53.*
- [3] Marx, K., & Engels, F. *Collected Works of Marx and Engels, Vol. 7, trans. by the Compilation and Translation Bureau for the Works of Marx, Engels, Lenin and Stalin under the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, Beijing: People's Publishing House, 2009, p. 922.*
- [4] Zhao Yiliang. "Chinese-style Modernization and the Modernity Characteristics of China's Path." *Social Sciences in China*, 2023(3): 47-59, 205.
- [5] Liu Jianjun. "On Socialism with Chinese Characteristics Creating a New Form of Human Civilization." *Social Sciences in China*, 2023(3): 60-74, 205-206.
- [6] Xiang Jiuyu. "The Theoretical System of Chinese-style Modernization." *Marxist Studies*, 2023(3): 1-9, 163.
- [7] Chen Jinlong. "On the Civilizational View of Chinese-style Modernization." *Marxism and Reality*, 2023(3): 1-7, 203.
- [8] Zhao Jinying. "From China's Modernization to Chinese-style Modernization." *Teaching and Research*, 2023(4): 18-28.