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Event report

## ***The Place of Chinese Marxism in Domestic and Foreign Policy***

*With Zhengxiang Wei, Professor of Marxism at Tsinghua University, Beijing*

**Thursday, April 15, 2010, 3 – 4.30pm**

In this special online event, Professor Zhengxiang Wei offered a comprehensive account of China's philosophical character. From Confucianism to Marxism and Socialism, Professor Wei detailed the different currents of thought in Chinese society and explained how they are used to inform contemporary policymaking.

### **Part I: The Traditional Chinese Philosophies**

Professor Wei began by giving an overview of the main philosophical schools in China prior to Marxism's arrival: Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism, Mohism and Legalism. Together, she argued, they had worked to solve the different problems of Chinese society for generations, despite only Confucianism having a government-sanctioned status.

She described Confucianism as a philosophy that encourages people to be ambitious and to become government officials. Whilst Taoism believes in the justness of the pursuit of happiness and advocates that people not envy each other's positions in society. For people who have neither ambition nor material wealth, Ch'anism, the most famous strand of Chinese Buddhism, provides solace, for it holds that desires are the source of suffering, so the absence of desire is the key to the happy life. Mohism on the other hand, is a practical philosophy, valuing thrift, utility and cooperation between people. Lastly, Professor Wei characterized Legalism as the guiding set of principles for rulers who wanted to keep order. Like Mohism, Legalism holds that people are principally motivated by self-interest, therefore it reasons that the most effective laws should administer clear rewards and punishments.

Though contradictory, Professor Wei maintained that these philosophies happily coexisted because the Chinese people were content to draw upon whichever was useful in a particular situation.

### **Part II: The Introduction of Western Philosophical Ideas**

With the arrival of the Western philosophical idea of 'the single truth', Professor Wei stressed that these Chinese philosophies began to be challenged by their proponents. How could it be that all these independent philosophies were equally 'true'? In response to this dilemma, the Chinese felt the need to borrow a framework they could use to bring these independent philosophies together into a coherent whole: the one they chose was Marxism.

Theoretically, Marxism was seen to have some similarities with the traditional Chinese philosophies. Firstly, it had at its centre a social ideal, similar to the Confucian concept of the *datong* society, or great sharing society. Secondly, the dialectical logic of Hegel running throughout Marxism was easily translatable to those familiar with Taoism. Finally, Marx's historical materialism, that is, his belief that the causes of development and change in human society are linked to the means by which humans collectively produce the necessities of life, was seen as compatible with the Chinese belief in the circularity of history. Marxism also proved useful as it provided a way of talking about complex philosophical ideas which rendered them accessible to a wide audience.

### Part III: Three 'Foreign Editions' of Marxism

Professor Wei then went on to point out that China had a long tradition of assimilating non-Chinese philosophies. The most famous example was Indian Buddhism, which was adapted to become Ch'anism.

She then outlined three 'foreign editions' of Marxism, and how Chinese Marxism compared to them.

The first, **Original Marxism**, was founded by Marx and Engels. It predicted that revolutions were likely to happen in developed countries as the proletariat (that is, the class in a capitalist society who do not own the means of production) were prepared to use violence to overthrow their capitalist governments to establish a communist society. In contrast, Chinese Marxism insists that developed capitalist countries are very advanced and there is much to learn from how they have developed their productivity. Chinese Marxism does not encourage popular uprisings.

The second, **Soviet Marxism**, espoused by Lenin, argued that the proletariat of developing countries should also rise up against their masters. This view was briefly held by China, before its adoption of the Open Door Policy in 1978 when, under Deng Xiaoping, China began to move towards policies which promoted foreign trade and economic investment.

The third, **Western Marxism**, pays attention to the earlier works of Marx. Whilst agreeing on many problems created by 'advanced technology', Western Marxists do not believe these problems can be solved by establishing a communist society. However, they do not propose an alternative solution. Chinese Marxism also recognizes the problems created by 'advanced technology', but see these as an acceptable price to pay for the benefits derived from technology. Today, China advocates that countries capitalize upon technology to aid their development, whilst also taking into consideration environmental concerns.

### Part IV: The Main Characteristics of Chinese Marxism

In summary, Professor Wei delineated the three characteristics of the current form of Chinese Marxism:

- the social ideal to be realized in the future;
- the willingness to learn from developed capitalist countries; and
- socialism.

Professor Wei stressed that although China still believes in a communist social ideal, it believes this will only be realized in the far future. In the meantime, China is content to practice socialism, which Marx held as the first step towards communism. She stressed that it was important for the Chinese people to have such a goal to aim towards so they may cope with the present's societal problems. To illustrate this, she told the story of an old foolish man who tried to move two mountains in front of his house with hoes. In the beginning, people laughed at him and thought he was silly. But the old man said that when he died, his sons would continue his task, and when his sons died, his grandsons would continue. If they persisted through the generations, one day the task would be finished. Professor Wei ended by saying that this aptly summarized the view of the Chinese people toward the ideal society. She then repeated that China was very willing to learn from capitalist countries, and that privately owned enterprises would be protected and encouraged to develop for a long time.

To conclude, Professor Wei asked rhetorically whether Marxism was a philosophy, as it appears on paper to be a social theory. She said this was a debated question in academic circles in China. She defined philosophies as 'proposals given by different philosophers about how to establish social orders for different countries in their different stages of development'. She then distinguished these from ideologies, which are what develop 'when philosophies are adopted by governments to establish social order.' She said that all the great philosophers had ended up tackling the question of what constitutes a good social order, from Plato to Lao Tzu. She said that a country could not live without a guiding philosophy, and recognized that the conflicting guiding philosophies of different countries could cause political problems. However, she affirmed that she thought Marxism was a philosophy.

## Question and Answer Session

Professor Wei then answered questions from the audience. Topics ranged from the links between Confucianism and Marxism to Chinese Marxism's stance on human rights and China's economic growth in recent decades.

### On the current state of Chinese Marxism

Professor Wei related how she and her delegation had just spent a ten day tour of the leading universities of the United States. She said that many US professors she had talked to thought that Marxism is a marginal philosophy in today's world; in contrast, she reaffirmed that it still has much relevance. Professor Wei said that Marxism could be divided into two separate parts: theory and practice. In her view, Chinese Marxism has kept much of the original theory of Marxism; what it has changed is what this theory looks like in practice. She said that the current state of Chinese Marxism could more accurately be called, 'Socialism with Chinese Characteristics', but that even this body of ideas is constantly evolving, so it is hard for people to adhere to it in their daily lives. She said that the traditional books on how to live a good life, such as *Analects*, do not give reasons as to *why* people should follow their dictums, or rules as to how to practice them. These absences have provided a space for Marxist thought to flourish as the rationale behind certain behaviours recommended in daily life.

### On Confucianism's relevance

Professor Wei contended that Confucianism is still relevant today because in her view, societies need hierarchy in order to function. However, she also said that a hierarchical order can co-exist with an equality of rights and obligations between citizens. She gave the example of a master and a slave. If the master is always the master and the slave a slave, then equality will never exist. However, if they alternate their roles every day, such that the master becomes the slave and the slave becomes the master, then you have a situation where hierarchy exists but at the same time, equality.

### On China's economic policies

In response to a question about China's economic growth which has been achieved through capitalist policies, Professor Wei reaffirmed that Marxism was still at the core of Chinese policy making. She said that in China, before people do anything, they make a plan, and then this plan is justified using Marxist philosophy. Professor Wei said she firmly believed that most people within the party subscribe to this view, though she admitted that there may be a few who join just to receive party benefits. As an aside, Professor Wei said it was important that this philosophy be passed down to succeeding generations, which is why every Chinese student is required to pass a course on Marxism before they graduate.

Professor Wei said that she did not see any incompatibility between Chinese economic policies and its central organizing philosophy. She reminded the audience that Marx believed that the final goal of society was happiness, and his writings addressed the question of how happiness can be found. She said that Marx's answer to this was freedom, and particularly 'freedom from nature', that is, freedom from having to work to survive. She said that whilst in the natural or primitive state, our preoccupation with survival prevented us from being free, and yet, we were equal. Over time, we developed so that we were no longer nature's slaves, but in the process, we lost our equality. Though regrettable, Professor Wei stressed that this was a necessary sacrifice so people could be free to pursue happiness. Similarly China, in pursuing its policies, is trying to 'solve the problem of productivity' and thus create happiness for its people. Since capitalism has proved very successful at doing this, China is co-opting capitalism for the present, but the real end of Chinese society is socialism.

### On the importance of moral reputation

In response to a question on corruption in China, Professor Wei said that at least in Confucianism, a person's moral reputation was very important. She said that Confucianism divided people into different types: the sage, the *jūnzǐ* or morally superior person, the *xiǎorén* or self-interested person, and the morally deficient person. To illustrate this, she told the story of a hero in China who displeased the emperor. Despite his popularity, the displeased emperor decided to confer upon the hero the status of a morally deficient person. The hero was made to walk through the streets, and because of his low status, was bitten to death by the people of the town. Why? Because, Professor Wei explained, a

person without morals is seen as sub-human in Chinese society; in the same way, most Chinese people do not feel bad about cruelty done to animals they are about to eat. To be qualified to be a person she said: 'you need to have morality'. During the Cultural Revolution in China, intellectuals were given a similarly poor reputation by the state authorities. As a result, they were outlawed by their fellow citizens and were subject to intense harassment, and often violence.

### **On free speech**

Professor Wei noted that there were many well known criticisms of the party even from within, yet it is able to weather these criticisms. She underlined that in terms of intellectual freedom, she and her colleagues at Tsinghua University often hold divergent views, but they are still able to work together on the same campus.

Professor Wei explained that the Chinese government's first priority is that their population survive. To that end, she said that China needs to be a stable country, and in order for this to happen, the authorities have to control some kinds of speech. She said she thought that once China becomes a more confident country, speech will be more free. Professor Wei then pointed out that in history, other countries living through instability practiced censorship, such as the United States in the late 1940s and 50s when they censored real and alleged communists. To conclude, she asserted that the more developed a country is, the more freedom of speech it has.