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FROM THE SOVIET MODEL TO SOCIALISM WITH CHINESE
CHARACTERISTICS

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[This document places China's reform movement, and in particular its latest phase under Hu Jintao, into the general history of the socialist movement and world history generally. Socialism with Chinese characteristics, the author claims, is based upon the "scientific development concept," a notion associated with Hu Jintao. The scientific development concept implies a concern for all-around development of the economy and society, with attention to the unintended effects of rapid economic growth, and is a break from an earlier focus on growth alone and for its own sake. The author contrasts the Chinese version with the "Soviet model," associated in particular with Stalin. The Soviet model put a premium on political control of the economy (and everything else) and a one-sided emphasis on the wealth and power of the state regardless of the effects on the people. In actuality the author implicitly identifies at least three (and possibly four) "models" rather than two, since the scientific development concept is juxtaposed not only against the earlier reform policies but also against the policies of the Maoist era. The author is concerned to show that what is going on in China is authentically socialist, not capitalist. The Stalinist approach may have been understandable given the problems of the time, but had a bad effect on China's development during the Maoist era. Nonetheless, not everything from the Soviet Union or, for that matter, the Maoist period, was totally negative. The Chinese system of today shows that socialism remains the mainstream of human historical development. The faults remaining in China are largely holdovers from

the previous Soviet model, and have been addressed especially at the 17th Party Congress, in 2007—which also marked the consolidation of the leading position of Hu Jintao, the putative author of the “scientific development concept.”

The interrelationship between the Soviet model and socialism with Chinese characteristics is a major theme of the history of world socialism over the past 100 years and a major component of the history of human civilization.

Socialism by the Soviet model and socialism with Chinese characteristics are intimately linked, but are also obviously distinct from each other. They are the same doctrine, but two different models. Our understanding of the relationship between them has consequences for China’s developmental direction and road today. If Chinese scholars discuss either of these models without reference to the other it will be difficult to come to a complete and fair evaluation of either of them.

I

Broadly speaking, in the Soviet model the Communist Party rules in a highly centralized manner over a command planned economy and a monolithic culture. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union the Chairman of the Communist Party Russian Federation [Gennady] Zyuganov summarized the lessons taught by the Party’s loss of power: The CPSU exercised a political monopoly, an economic monopoly, and an ideological monopoly. As an exposure of the defects of the Soviet model, this hits the nail precisely on the head.

This essay will focus on the models of development. The thread tying together all aspects of the development of a socialist economy is the leadership of Communists in promoting social construction. “Development” encompasses construction in the

economy, politics, culture, society, and other areas; and it also includes relations with those outside. It encompasses concepts of development, strategies of development, and roads to development. Naturally it also has to do with the structure of society and the mechanisms of change.

The writer recently has summarized the Soviet model of development in terms of “eight important, eight nots.” Politics is considered important, economy not; industry is important, agriculture not; heavy industry is important, light industry is not; military industry is important, civilian use is not; speed is important, efficiency is not; accumulation is important, consumption not; the interests of the state and the collective are important, the interests of the individual are not.

This concept and strategy of development came about in the CPSU in the aftermath of the great debates between Stalin and the Trotsky and Bukharin factions, with the implementation of full-scale agricultural collectivization and the socialization of industry. It took form over the course of two five-year plans. Its formation took place within a certain objective context: the relative backwardness of Soviet economy and culture and the encirclement by and threat of war from imperialism. Both Lenin and Stalin proclaimed that backwardness must be overcome bit by bit, so they set themselves the general strategic goal of surpassing the capitalist powers in industry as rapidly as possible. This is completely understandable.

Given this strategic goal, the Soviets stressed the development of heavy industry, of the arms industry, with special attention to accumulation, to speed, to the national interest. This enabled them to surpass several European capitalist powers within a few years, becoming a major industrial power second only to the United States. This was the

huge material base upon which they were able to defeat German fascist aggression. This historical achievement must be completely affirmed.

The terms “important” and “not” as used here are relative. To say the emphasis was on politics at the expense of the economy is not simply to say that Stalin neglected economic development. He “fiercely grasped” economic development. The problem is that he did not do it correctly. Sometimes he even reversed the appropriate places that politics and economy should hold in overall national strategy. He overemphasized the role of the political and ideological superstructures, sometimes even taking the consolidation of political power to be the “primary task.” Given that the structure of power was incompletely democratic, it sometimes became alienated into the hands of an individual or a small group. It became political power controlled by a political nobility. This could easily lead to a change in the nature of the leadership of the Party and state.

In the overall task of social development naturally not everything can be accorded equal weight. There must be an “important” and a “not so important.” It’s a matter of degree, and the problem is to what degree. According to the famous American Soviet specialist Stephen F. Cohen, in many respects Stalinism “led to unlimited extremism.” “Overly enthusiastic activism is the historical nature of Stalinism.” For example, when a socialist state is encircled by capitalism, what is wrong with strengthening heavy industry that has military applications? The problem with the Soviet Union is that this went beyond the requirements for national defense. It exceeded the capacity of what the country could bear and led the country on the path of seeking world domination. At the same time, in meeting the demands of this goal the internal political, economic, and cultural systems fell into rigidity. The expansion of military industry led to a military-

industrial complex that acted as an obstacle to the country's political and economic reform.

Therefore, if policies are taken as absolutes and applied without regard to time, circumstance, or place, they will lead to a series of problems. There were several major problems with the Soviet Union's development concepts and strategies: 1) There was a lack balance in the development of the national economy, leading especially to long-term backwardness in agriculture. 2) It could not embody the governing concept of socialism, that is, that the people are the root. The overly light weight accorded to agriculture, to light industry, to consumption, to individual interests necessarily limited the extent to which the living standard of the broad masses of the people could be improved. 3) The exaggerated role accorded to politics and ideology necessarily led to an unending series of political movements, political criticisms, purges, repression, exploitation, even to the destruction of inner-Party democracy and people's democracy. How can socialism that shows no concern for democracy and welfare become a socialism that is upheld by the broad masses of the people and by honest and sincere Party member? This is the source of the CPSU's inability to hold on to its ruling base.

II

The Soviet model indeed formed from the beginning the model for China's revolution and construction. The Soviet model took shape in the 1920s and 1930s. The Communist International promoted a high degree of "Bolshevization" based on the centralized model of the CPSU (Bolshevik). This introduced the Soviet experience and model into the CPC and the Chinese revolution. While the CPSU (B), the Comintern, and Stalin gave enormous help to the Chinese revolution, at the same time the Soviet model caused

Marxism within the CPC to become dogmatized, with a tendency to treat the resolutions of the Comintern and the experience of the Soviet Union as if they were sacred scripture. . . . At that time, in building up the political system in the soviet areas,¹ we deprived the propertied classes of the right to vote, we gave unequal representation, we set up a single party system under the CPC—all in imitation of the Soviet Union.

In the first period after the establishment of New China, we treated the Soviet party as “our best teacher.” With the encouragement of Mao Zedong, there was a high tide throughout the country in learning from the Soviet Union, something that penetrated deeply into people’s hearts. This study led to many great successes but it also to more than a few failures. Quite a few errors were imported into our economic system and our cultural development. Later on Mao Zedong said, “Because of our lack of experience, on the matter of economic development we had no option but to imitate the Soviet Union. Especially in the matter of heavy industry, it seems as if everything was copied from the Soviet Union. There was very little creativity of our own. This was something that was absolutely necessary at the time.” But in the course of the study there developed defects of simplification and making everything absolute, even to the point of treating the Soviet experience as if it were “completely beyond doubt.”

But China’s basic political system was not copied from the Soviet Union. There are four differences: 1. We did not import the Soviet dictatorship of the proletariat, but set up a people’s democratic dictatorship based on a worker-peasant alliance led by the proletariat. The two are not the same thing. For example, the Chinese national bourgeoisie was considered to be within the sphere of the people and did not lose their

¹ The reference is to Chinese localities under the control of the Communist party in the 1920s and early 1930s.

franchise. 2. We did not base our structure on soviets, but set up a system of people's representative conferences. 3. China did not adopt the Soviet single-party system, but set up a system multi-party consultation and cooperation under the leadership of the CPC. Representatives of the democratic parties are consulted at every level. This gives the Chinese system a flexibility that makes for responsiveness to critical situations. 4. We did not import the Soviet federal system, but set up a unitary state with the ethnic minorities exercising autonomy within their own districts.

These differences were set up on the basis of China's national character and the experience of the CPC. They contain great creativity. China has kept up this system ever since it embarked on reform and opening. Its vital power is obvious. But we also must realize that prior to reform and opening there was no separation between Party and government; cadres in practice had life-time tenure; there were imperfections in inner-Party democracy and people's democracy; there was overconcentration of power in individuals—all of these serious defects of the Soviet political system. Apart from this, in the relationship of urban and rural areas (the dualistic economic structure), the relative priorities of political and economic duties, and the relationship among the state, the collective, and individual—in all of these areas there are, to different degrees, similarities to the Soviet model.

After the 20th Congress of the CPSU in both the Soviet Union and China the Soviet model underwent, to different degrees, some changes. In 1956 Mao Zedong issued "On the Ten Great Relationships," and the next year he issued "On the Correct Handling of Contradictions Among the People." These are important works that examine the lessons of the experience of the Soviets' development of socialism and explore ways of finding a

path to socialism that fits with Chinese conditions. China changed its direction from “learning from the Soviet Union” to “taking the Soviet Union as a mirror.” Mao Zedong gave prominence to four points: 1. He stressed the overall balance of the national economy, the adjustment of the relations among agriculture, light industry, and heavy industry. There should be much more investment in agriculture and light industry. Later industry and agriculture were to be developed in tandem, with agriculture as the base: a major direction. 2. He proposed the direction of “attention to the whole, with appropriate arrangements.” He stressed that the relationship between the state, the collective, and the individual; between the Center and the localities; between economic development and the development of national defense; and a series of other relationships: “all need to show concern for the whole; we can’t pay attention simply to one side.” 3. He said that in “making plans, carrying out work, and thinking about problems, everything has to begin from the perspective of the 600 million people of our country. This is the concept of policy that takes human beings as the root. 4. He raised fresh criticisms of Stalin’s mistaken notion that “the more we deal with counterrevolution the more counterrevolution there is,” the ideas grab “grab someone and kill all you grab,” “kill everyone who makes a mistake”—overthrow everything, don’t let other parties exist: all these mistaken practices.

With the division between the Chinese and Soviet parties the onset of polemics between them, the CPC moved from opposition to international revisionism to opposition to domestic revisionism. It went in the direction of “class struggle as the net,” of “continued revolution under the dictatorship of the proletariat.” It turned away from the objective laws of the development of a socialist economy. It brought about, over a long

time, the “Great Cultural Revolution,” with the whole country given over to the error of “leftist” deviation. This was a serious obstacle to China’s social development and to the raising of the standard of living of the popular masses. In the Sino-Soviet polemics the CPC and Mao Zedong correctly struggled against Soviet great power chauvinism and hegemonism, defending China’s national interest, going a step further to strengthen China’s international position and influence. On the question of socialism, our theory that the Soviet Union had developed a “privileged class” is a truth not to be denied. However, to treat special privilege as if it amounted to revisionism was a basic theoretical mistake. At a time when the reforms of Khrushchev and Brezhnev had basically not gone beyond Stalin’s model, to treat them as revisionism (or, alternatively, rightist opportunism) and so intensify the criticism against them was ourselves to fall into extreme “leftism,” another error. When we were opposing revisionism internationally and carrying out the Cultural Revolution domestically, and at the same time promoting the cult of the individual, we were using “politics,” “revolution,” and “class struggle” as methods for socialist development. In some respects this went far beyond the Soviet model and became embodied in theory.

The consequences of these departures from the historical materialist perspective seriously hindered our economic and social development. In a certain sense, this was a malignant development of the seeds of the Soviet model in China.

III

The broad mass of cadres and the one billion ordinary people suffered bitterly from the Cultural Revolution. High and low were all of the same heart. After the smashing of the Gang of Four, on the basis of Marxist theory there began the great surging process of

reform and opening. First, we broke the shackles of the cult of the individual, criticized the “two whatevers,” began the debate on the criterion of truth, restored the ideological line of seeking truth from facts. Second, we rejected the thesis that “class struggle is the nexus” in favor of taking the building of socialist modernization as the core of the work of the Party. This was a radical transformation of the strategy of development. It required answers different from the previous ones concerning the motive force of the overall situation in pursuit of the goal of development. Third, we put an end to the policy of isolation or semi-isolation and began to open to the outside; we attached ourselves to the international economy. Fourth, we began the transformation from a planned economic system to a socialist market economy system. Fifth, we gradually readjusted the relationships between agriculture and industry and between the towns and the country. We increased the price of agricultural commodities, rejected the policy that agriculture was the only occupation allowed in rural areas and that peasants were allowed only to work in agriculture. We encouraged villages to develop township and village enterprises and permitted peasants to come to the cities to work in industry. We began to destroy the urban-rural dual economic structure. Sixth, we readjusted the relationships between the state, the collective, and the individual. We gave attention to the full range of human development, recognized differences, permitted and encouraged some people to become rich sooner than others. At the same time we criticized the “rectification politics” of the Cultural Revolution that trampled on democracy and violated human rights and implemented proper policies that step by step created an environment conducive to the all-around development of society.

The report of the 17th Congress [in 2007] of the CPC has a vivid description of that historical period: “The great task of reform and opening was accomplished by the entire Party and the people of all ethnicities throughout the entire country under the leadership of the second generation of CPC leadership, with Comrade Deng Xiaoping as its core.” While making a scientific evaluation of Comrade Mao Zedong and of Mao Zedong thought, the second generation collective Party Central leadership “thoroughly repudiated the mistaken theory and practice of ‘class struggle as the nexus.’” They called instead for building socialism with a Chinese character, formulating Deng Xiaoping theory. This shows that socialism with a Chinese character was formulated after the conclusion of the Cultural Revolution. Deng Xiaoping theory was formulated on the basis of the Thought of Mao Zedong to correct the errors made by Comrade Mao Zedong in his last years. It was a historical demarcation line. It repudiated the idea that in the 30 years prior to reform and opening “all development at that time had at its basis a political premise and a systemic structure,” with a failure to recognize the difference between what came before and what came after reform and opening. It did not recognize that there was “one set of principles” with two different models. None of this fit the historical facts; nor did it fit with the correct conclusions reached by the 17th Congress.

The mission of “building socialism with Chinese characteristics” in itself shows: one, that it is socialist, not western capitalism; two, that socialism maintains a “Chinese character,” not one of the Soviet model and even less one like European democratic socialism. The building of socialism with a Chinese character will be a long-term process, given the profound influence of the Soviet model on China. On this point, Deng Xiaoping had clearly pointed out a few months before the third plenum of the Eleventh

Central Committee: our country's system "has basically come from the Soviet Union; it is a backward thing." We need to rethink the question of system. On the eve of the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Deng Xiaoping once again said, "Previously we worked according to the Soviet model. This caused a lot of problems. We recognized this early on, but did not resolve them properly. Now we need to resolve them properly; we need to build a socialism that has a Chinese character." Here Deng Xiaoping understood the relationship between the attempted to develop socialism along the lines of the Soviet model; this brought with it lots of problems. "We discovered this a long time ago, but did not properly resolve the problems. We need to resolve this correctly now; we need to build a socialist Soviet model and Chinese-style socialism as completely at one with reform and opening."

The late 1980s and early 1990s were a key period in China's reform and opening and also a turning point in world political and economic development. There were three major events: the tragic fall of eastern Europe and the Soviet Union; in 1989 the American economist proposed the "Washington consensus," which in reality meant the implementation of a western-style liberal market economy; in China, at the beginning of 1992 Deng Xiaoping talked about a socialist market economy in his trip south, and the 14th Congress [that same year] made the decision to build a socialist market economic system with the goal of accomplishing China's economic reform.

The combination of the basic socialist system with the development of a market economy is one of the major experiences of China's reform and opening—it is the core "combination" of the ten combinations. But this "combination" is not a matter of three or five years. The goal of those who drafted the program was to combine the excellences of

the socialist system with the strong points of the market economy while eliminating the negative features of each. But social reality is often far more complicated than theory and ideals would have it. The problem is that there are certain sorts of people who treat the Soviet model as orthodox socialism; they like autocracy and don't like democracy, because this is the political guarantee of the privileges they enjoy. Other people treat the western version of the market economy as the universal motor of development and treat the gap between rich and poor, polarization, and social injustice as the ordinary consequences of social development. The influence of these social thought tides cannot be ignored in any arena of society: in politics, economics, or culture. Another issue is that the ruling party has not been implementing the establishment of a socialist market economy for a very long time. The system and institutions are still imperfect. With the implementation of reform and opening the first task was to assure that 1.3 billion people would be sufficiently well-fed, well-clothed, and kept warm from the cold. It was impossible to do other than to focus on the growth of the national economy, putting stress on speed of development," relaxing controls and letting those who could move ahead. Some people had to get rich before others. Therefore, we did not go beyond a crude program of growth and problems of imbalance soon became evident.

Because of the above factors, at the turn of the century, at the same time that the Chinese enterprise was being hailed by the entire world, there appeared on the road to development a series of contradictions, such as overly large income inequalities, squandering of natural resources, environmental damage, general waste; a small number of cadres fell into corruption. In a certain sense these are manifestations of the deep influence of the Soviet model carried over into the market economy.

Given this background, the third plenum of the Sixteenth Central Committee proposed the development perspective of taking human beings as the root and pursuing a program of harmonious adjustments. It should promote the all-round development of the economy, society, and the human person. It stressed that reform and opening should be pursued in accord with a comprehensive program for city and countryside; a comprehensive program for the development of the different localities; a comprehensive program for the development of economy and society; a comprehensive program for the harmonious development of man and nature; a comprehensive program for the demands of domestic reform and opening to the outside.

The scientific development concept is a major component of the theoretical system of developing socialism with a Chinese character. The reason this writer has complete respect for the history, theory, and practical achievements for the scientific development concept is that it has already shown its scientific nature. It not only sums up the experience of the practice of Chinese socialism but also sums up the lessons taught by the experience of the Soviet Union and other socialist countries. It not only sums up the lessons taught by other socialist countries but also sums up the lessons in development to be learned from other countries, especially those in the building of modernization by Latin American countries. Therefore, it is not merely a major theoretical achievement in the history of world socialism but also embraces the theoretical achievements of many western scholars. Its theoretical and practical achievement is that it brings together the development of the socialist road with the road to development of all of human civilization. It unites Marxism with the excellent traditions of different countries; it unites

the glorious work of Communist party members with the universal laws governing the development of society.

IV

Socialism with Chinese characteristics is a giant leap in the development of world socialism. Compared with the already described bankruptcy of the Soviet model, its major points of specialness and excellence include the following:

1. In terms of relations with the outside, the special point of socialism with Chinese characteristics is that it absorbs the outstanding successes of foreign civilizations. In joining the WTO China came onto the same track as the world economy as a whole. In military matters it proclaims that China will never seek hegemony; it will not become a superpower. In politics, not only do we not force our own political system or ideology on other people, but also sincerely warn third world leaders that they should not simply adopt the Chinese model but should pursue the building of modernization according to the situation of their own countries, not just import a system from other countries. This includes not merely policies and strategies but also a scientific world view.

2. In the task of building socialism, Chinese style socialism adheres strongly to reason as the first priority. Economic development is the core and improving people's lives is the point of attention. We need to be responsive in bringing about the transformation from a command planned economy to a socialist market economy. This is in accord with the basic principle of Marxist materialism. Economic, political, and cultural development must all have their place in socialist development. We must correct and prevent the "leftist" errors of the Soviet model and of China prior to reform and opening in having politics and ideology come before everything else.

3. On the matter of political development, the most authoritative pronouncements of the CPC around the turn of the century have proclaimed: “Inner-Party democracy is the lifeline of the Party.” Party members are the concrete manifestations of the Party organization. The soul of the scientific development outlook should be to take human beings as the root. Respect and protection of human rights have been written into the constitution. The building of a civilized politics has been given a prominent place. This is great progress in the history of socialism and also in the history of human civilization. Marx and Lenin promoted a socialist revolution whose basic goal was to set up the broad mass of the workers and peasants as masters of the house and have them enjoy a happy and prosperous life.

4. In culture, Chinese-style socialism is bringing about the transformation from the Soviet model’s monolithic culture and “struggle philosophy” to toleration of diversity and a “philosophy of harmony.” This kind of culture stresses the guidance of Marxism. But this is a Marxism that has been sinicized in accord with the needs of the time, a Marxism with mass appeal. The writer believes that the basis for this culture is China’s excellent tradition. Its spirit is that of the *Doctrine of the Mean*: harmony, not uniformity. This means balance. . . . This finds its best collective expression in the Report of the 17th Congress. The Report sums up the experience of China’s 30 years’ experience in reform and opening in 30 “combinations.” The philosophical significance of these combinations involves the combination of the double aspect of contradictions, taking what is good in each and discarding the passive and negative stuff at either extreme.

China has achieved enormous historical success since reform and opening. In a certain sense this means the elimination of the seeds of the Soviet model. This is a great

victory for Chinese-style socialism. However, in accord with the theory and strategy of the scientific development concept, we recognize that this has been a short period of time and that we need much more and fuller experience in development. We can't take a rest, filled with self-satisfaction. The task of China's development is weighty and prolonged and we are only at the first stage. Seen from the perspective of the history of socialist development there is a whole series of problems that we must resolve. We are in a position comparable to that following the October Revolution. For a long time into the future we must gradually face into the resolution of a set of relations (or contradictions). They can be grouped together as follows: 1. How can we take care of the relationship between domestic and foreign needs—how to maintain independence while participating in globalization; how to uphold the direction of peace while assuring national security; how to absorb the strong points of the experience of other countries while upholding the principles of socialism; so forth? This is the major question of how to handle well our opening to the outside. 2. How do we coordinate the resolution of the contradictions between town and country and between workers and peasants and establish within the next 10 years a comprehensive system of rural and urban economy and socialist development? This is an epochal task in the history of China. 3. How do we prevent in an effective way the continued growth of the gap between rich and poor, establishing a prosperous country where there are indeed differences but not major or pathological ones? This is a matter of decisive significance in the building of socialism, a task that cannot be avoided. 4. How do we resolve the relationship between cadres and masses, between officials and people while upholding the united leadership of the Communist party and the authority of the Center while at the same time safeguarding the rights of the

people and of rank-and-file Party members, so that the democratic political system in Chinese-style socialism can prevent and gradually eliminate all corrupt phenomena so that social stability and harmony are ever-more assured? It is only by accomplishing these tasks that we can assure the continued progress of Chinese-style socialism. This is a genuinely unprecedented task not only in the history of socialism but in the history of human civilization.

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