



**CPC's 20<sup>th</sup> National Congress, 'Socialism with Chinese Characteristics', and Xi Jinping's Third Term**

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# CPC's 20<sup>th</sup> National Congress, 'Socialism with Chinese Characteristics', and Xi Jinping's Third Term

## Abstract

An added significance about the 20<sup>th</sup> National Congress of the Communist Party of China (CPC) last fall was that the year 2022 was the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the theoretical phrase "Socialism with Chinese Characteristics" (SCC). The understudied political phrase was first introduced by the "paramount" Chinese leader, Deng Xiaoping, also known as the chief architect of China's reform and opening up policy. At the 20<sup>th</sup> Congress of the CPC, Xi Jinping pledged to hold high the banner of SCC. Despite claims by China watchers around the world that Xi Jinping had abandoned the mantra of "economy in command" laid down by Deng after Mao's death in 1976, the CPC under Xi has reaffirmed its commitment to uphold the party line of SCC. Four decades ago, Deng Xiaoping had ingeniously invented the slogan to silence the "left" within the Party to garner legitimacy for introducing market capitalism. Yet in Marxist theory, especially when viewed from the ideological lens of Marxism-Leninism (and Mao Zedong Thought, if you wish), how does one define "Socialism with Chinese Characteristics"? Is it to preserve institutions of socialism and public ownership while importing sophisticated management experience and advanced market mechanisms from developed countries as the Chinese would have us believe? Or as China watchers tell us, far from being Marxism or socialism, the SCC is a deliberate misnomer which is best described as the CPC's "capitalist dogma".

**Keywords:** Socialism with Chinese Characteristics, market capitalism, the primary stage of socialism, Mao "era", Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era

The Twentieth Congress of the Communist Party of China (CPC) concluded in October 2022 with general secretary Xi Jinping crowned with the Mandate of Heaven to rule China for the third time. The global media, by its meticulously detailed coverage of the once-in-five-years Chinese political “circus”<sup>1</sup> (some foreign media described the 7-day event as a once-in-a-decade “change of guard” (Nuttin 2012) within party political power transfer exercise) focused on how Xi staged a silent political “coup”. He not only stacked the party’s top political decision-making body, the seven-member standing committee of the political bureau (PBSC), with his loyalists and supporters, clearing his path to rule China for at least another decade if not more, but also manipulated the incorporation of “Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era.” in the party’s constitution (Buckley 2022).

To the absolute delight of the foreign media and foreign observers alike, what is otherwise reported as a dull, boring, mechanical rubber-stamp-like and well-choreographed week-long proceeding, the 20<sup>th</sup> Party Congress presented a rare, unscripted drama on the final day (Harrison 2022). A 43-second video footage appeared on social media, first in China and then in foreign media, showing Hu Jintao – China’s former leader and Xi’s predecessor, being forced to get up from his seat and leave the final session’s proceedings. As reports suggested, Hu was also leading the anti-Xi faction in the inner party power struggle. According to the Party Congress protocol, Hu was seated next to Xi on the presidium. Interestingly, no one knows what actually happened. In between Xi’s maneuvering and the final-day drama, hardly anyone noticed or reported that Xi’s 105-minute political report to the Congress on the first day had begun by declaring that “the theme of this Congress is holding high the banner of *socialism with Chinese characteristics*, fully implementing the thought on *socialism with Chinese characteristics*” (Xi 2022). (*Emphasis added*).

So, what is “socialism with Chinese Characteristics”? Why did Xi Jinping, like all previous post-Deng leaders of the CPC, not only adhere to the Deng dictum but paid particular attention to the term at the so-called crucial 20<sup>th</sup> Congress of the CPC?

Forty years ago, the slogan “Building Socialism with Chinese Characteristics” was first heard at the 12<sup>th</sup> National Congress of the CPC in 1982. Though the political report to the Congress was presented by the then General Secretary Hu Yaobang, it was Deng Xiaoping who

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<sup>1</sup> Double quotation marks have been added to lay emphasis. This shall be the case for the following few terms, unless specified otherwise.

introduced the concept in his opening address. Since then the slogan has been guiding the Deng-initiated policy of *gaige kaifang*, or ‘reform and opening-up’. All successive Party Congresses have duly acknowledged and pledged to responsibly and fully uphold the cause of implementing socialism with Chinese Characteristics. Originally worded as “Building Socialism with A Specifically Chinese Character”, Deng’s inaugural speech at the Congress in 1982 was published two years later in the Party organ *Renmin Ribao*, or People’s Daily, in 1984 (Deng 1984).

After Mao’s death in 1976, Deng managed to regain power with the support of more liberal-minded party veterans and renewed his long-held agenda of free markets, private investment, and private ownership. Once the dismantling of the Mao-era rural cooperatives and rural collectives, better known as “people’s communes”<sup>2</sup> was completed, Deng announced his “socialist” programme for developing the productive forces. As per the prevailing political discourse in the People’s Republic of China, aimed at fundamentally changing the direction of China’s development path away from the path of a ruined “socialist,” and “egalitarian” economy under Mao, Deng advocated a new ideological line in order to adhere to Marxism and integrate it with Chinese realities.

The following paragraph from Deng’s speech published in the *People’s Daily* explains the basic essence of liberalising the Chinese economy (Deng 1984):

“What is socialism and what is Marxism? We were not quite clear about this in the past. Marxism attaches utmost importance to developing productive forces. We have said that socialism is the primary stage of communism and that at the advanced stage the principle of from each according to his ability and to each according to his needs will be applied. This calls for highly developed productive forces and an overwhelming abundance of material wealth. Therefore, the fundamental task for the socialist stage is to develop productive forces. The superiority of the socialist system is demonstrated, in the final analysis, by faster and greater development of those forces than under the capitalist system. As they develop, people’s material and cultural life will constantly improve. One of our shortcomings after the founding of the People’s Republic was that we didn’t pay enough attention to developing productive forces. Socialism means eliminating poverty. Pauperism is not socialism, still less communism ...”

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<sup>2</sup> The next several terms have been placed within double quotation marks to emphasise upon the change in their implied meaning during the Deng era as compared to their ideological or political meanings during Mao’s “socialist era”.

In China, the official discourse unambiguously defines the term SCC as “a social and political development concept innovated by the CPC, one that connects a socialistic vision with Chinese realities” (Beijing Review 2022). As per the CPC convention, the political report to the 18<sup>th</sup> National Congress (held in October 2012) was presented by Xi’s predecessor and the outgoing general secretary Hu Yaobang, but as soon as Xi got his chance as the new general secretary to address the new Central Committee three months later, he began his speech by emphasising that to adhere to SCC was the paramount question for the future of the Party.

In January 2013, while presiding over the seminar of the members and alternate members of the newly elected CPCCC for implementing the guiding principles of the party’s 18<sup>th</sup> National Congress, Xi (2013) said:

“The year 2013 is the 31<sup>st</sup> year since Deng Xiaoping put forward the concept of building socialism with Chinese characteristics. Socialism with Chinese characteristics is socialism and nothing else. Developing Chinese socialism is a great cause. Deng Xiaoping clearly defined some basic thoughts and principles on the subject. The Central Committee headed by Jiang Zemin, and later by Hu Jintao also added some outstanding chapters to it. Now, the job of the Communists of our generation is to continue with this mission.”

Again at the 19<sup>th</sup> CPC National Congress in 2017, in his opening speech as the party general secretary, Xi (2017) said:

“The theme of the Congress is to remain true to our original aspiration and keep our mission firmly in mind, hold high the banner of socialism with Chinese characteristics, secure a decisive victory in building a moderately prosperous society in all respects, and strive for the great success of socialism with Chinese characteristics for a new era.”

Xi Jinping continued to show his allegiance to Deng and adherence to Deng’s theory of SSC in his political report to the 20<sup>th</sup> National Congress. As mentioned, General Secretary Xi (2022) began his work report by appealing to all over 2000 delegates to “remain confident in [our] history, exhibit greater historical initiative, and write an even more significant chapter for socialism with Chinese characteristics in the new era.” Additionally, known for frequently citing ancient Chinese texts and quoting historical Chinese figures, Xi recalled a Qing dynasty (1644-1911) writer, calligrapher Zheng Xie (1693-1765) who had described tenacity as the bamboo’s best quality. Comparing SCC with the bamboo, Xi said: “We must be as

tenacious as bamboo, as described by Zheng Xie: In the face of all blows, not bending low, it still stands fast. Whether from east, west, south or north the wind doth blast” (Xi 2013).

Interestingly, notwithstanding the fact that SCC is upheld as the Party’s theoretical guideline throughout the reform era, the concept itself has been received and interpreted variously in the political discourse in China,. For example, Deng Xiaoping employed SCC to once and for all, put an end to the beliefs of the Mao-inspired communist “left” (Li 1995). According to Professor J G Mahoney, who teaches politics and international relations at the prestigious East China Normal University in Shanghai, SSC is fundamentally a social and development concept innovated by the CPC, and it connects a socialist vision with Chinese realities (Mahoney 2022).

Writing for China’s official news weekly, *Beijing Review*, Mahoney (2022) recently explained “Its [SSC] fundamental aim is to realize China's national rejuvenation or reach the country’s full potential to better meet its people's needs and expectations. It does so by achieving development goals that link with socialistic progress, like eliminating extreme poverty, pursuing green development, expanding access to healthcare and health insurance, improving the quality of education, advancing rural development, effectively confronting disease outbreaks, and providing an adequate national defence, to name a few. This is signified in part by the recent achievements of establishing a moderately prosperous (or *Xiaokang* in Chinese) society, and containing and recovering from COVID-19.”

However, in one of the strongest critiques of the SCC, a Chinese writer described it as a “basket of abusive political slogans in mainland China,” and “anything can be put in it.” Qian Gang, a well-known media figure, who was dismissed by the authorities from the post of the executive deputy editor of the controversial Shanghai weekly *Southern Weekend* (*Nanfang zhoubao*), once observed that top CPC leaders have been known for patenting generic slogans. Just like Deng Xiaoping formulated SSC in 1982 to target Mao-style socialism, past leaders such as Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao are known for coining the phrases “Three Represents” and “Harmonious Society” respectively. In an article for the Chinese language *New York Times*, written days before the 18th National Congress in 2012, Qian announced, almost as a foregone conclusion, that the phrase “no doubt will appear in the political report of the 18<sup>th</sup> Congress of the CPC with high frequency” (Qian 2012).



Indeed, the phrase not only appeared prominently at the 18<sup>th</sup> Congress, but it dominated the work reports subsequently both at the 19<sup>th</sup> and just concluded 20<sup>th</sup> Congress respectively. Take the main headlines of the past three party congresses under Xi. The 18<sup>th</sup> National Congress of the Communist Party of China: “Hold high the banner of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics and strive for new victories in building a moderately prosperous society in an all-round way”; the 19<sup>th</sup> Congress: “Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era”; The 20<sup>th</sup> Congress: “Hold High the Great Banner of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics and Strive in Unity to Build a Modern Socialist Society in All Respects” (Xi 2022).

The key question one needs to understand is what to make of the fact that in the work report of every Party Congress since the 12<sup>th</sup> CPC National Congress in 1982, the phrase SSC has remained one of the fundamental ideological tenets of the Party. In the eyes of ordinary people in China, and perhaps also for China watchers abroad, the reiteration of the phrase was like “mandarins reciting the scriptures.” But a closer look could simultaneously reveal both fierce factional contestation and ideological struggle between reformers and “leftists.” Although Deng had first formulated the phrase at the 12<sup>th</sup> National Congress in 1982, interestingly, it did not at all figure in the work report presented by the then general secretary Hu Yaobang. Ostensibly, it was in order to warn the party of the dangers of jumping the first stage of socialism, called the primary stage of socialism which should be based on the “socialist principle of distribution according to work”, and which was not upheld during Mao’s “socialist era” from 1956 to 1976. It is of crucial political significance, therefore, to understand why Deng alerted the party of a greater danger coming from “left”<sup>3</sup> forces and not the right within the party. Deng also advocated the slogan *fan ‘zuo’ fangyou* (Oppose “left”, be vigilant of right).

Further, at the 13<sup>th</sup> National Congress, the then acting general secretary Zhao Ziyang delivered the work report entitled “Advance along the road of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics” and emphasised that China was a socialist society, but that China was in the primary stage of socialism” (He 2001). According to Qian Gang (2012), both in the run-up to and during the 13<sup>th</sup> Party Congress, there had been fierce political, and ideological battles

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<sup>3</sup> Emphasis has been placed on “left”, to refer to the orthodox or conservative Maoist left, which was opposed to the reform and opening up of China. This has been clarified in Qian Gang. 2012. ‘Socialism with Chinese Characteristics is a Basket’ (中国特色社会主义是个筐), 28 September, <https://cn.nytimes.com/china/20120928/cc28qiangang10/>.

between the reformers and leftists. Then again at the 14<sup>th</sup> Congress (1992), which was held three years after the 4 June 1989 Tiananmen massacre, fearing the danger of “leftists” reversing the reform agenda, Deng Xiaoping conducted his now famous “southern tour” in the spring of 1992. While touring Guangdong province, he called for vigorously restarting economic reforms. In the work report to the Congress, general secretary Jiang Zemin incorporated Deng’s words *in toto* and said that the Party, especially leading cadres, should be vigilant against the right, but the main thing is to prevent the “left”. It is pertinent to note that following the decade-long successful implementation of economic reforms and the integration with the global market economy, China was now required to further introduce market mechanisms and that was done by Jiang during the 14<sup>th</sup> Congress in the name of a “Socialist Market Economy (SME)” (Vogel 2011).

Five years later at the 15<sup>th</sup> Congress, while continuing to forewarn the Party of the threat from the “Left,” Jiang Zemin (1997) further clarified “what was the economy, politics, and culture of socialism with Chinese characteristics in the primary stage of socialism”. According to some, the 15<sup>th</sup> Congress actually declared to the world that China was now a fully market economy and was ready to be admitted into the World Trade Organization (Qian 2012). By the time the 16<sup>th</sup> Congress was held in 2002, China had been admitted into the WTO which in a way also established that the threat from the “Left” had completely waned. For the first time since the 12<sup>th</sup> Congress in 1982 therefore, there was no direct or indirect mention of vigilance against the “Left”. Most significantly, Jiang even proposed at the 16<sup>th</sup> Congress that SCC was actually the “Three Represents.” It may be pertinent to recall that it was under the “Three Represents” guiding principle that the CPC officially began embracing Chinese “capitalists” into the party. A few months before the Congress, the party general secretary and China’s President Jiang himself announced that the Communist Party would accept private businessmen as members (Pomfret 2001).

Since the CPC announced the implementation of reform and opening-up policy at the 3<sup>rd</sup> plenary session of the 11<sup>th</sup> Central Committee in December 1978, and following the end of Mao’s “socialist era” all party congresses since 1982 have made effective use of the phrase, SCC as a “basket” to justify, ideologically, theoretically, and politically, China’s integration into the global market economy. Whether one views it as pragmatic ingenuity or ideological bankruptcy, Deng Xiaoping – rightfully hailed in China as the chief designer of economic reform policy, devised the slogan of SCC. He also came up with catchphrases such as “to get

rich is glorious,” “work more to earn more,” and “let a few people become rich first” in order to rationalise the implementation of “capitalism” in China. Arguably, it also succeeded in generating legitimacy for the rule of the CPC. As pointed out, China’s entry into the WTO in the new millennium reflected that the party had successfully bid farewell to the erstwhile inner party ideological battles such as the “two-line struggle” and “leaning on one side.” Moreover, as the work reports of the successive party congresses over last two decades demonstrated, the party’s goal now was to work toward making China not a socialist society but a modern and strong great power (Patanik 2021).

To return to the theme of the 20<sup>th</sup> Congress, though the cynosure of attention has been on Xi’s 3<sup>rd</sup> five-year tenure, very little to no attention was paid to why Xi and his loyalists continue to emphasise holding high the banner of socialism with Chinese characteristics. There has been absolutely no discussion, especially in the global media and among China analysts overseas, about what to make of why the CPC needed to incorporate ‘Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era’ into the party constitution. Merely focusing on and simply highlighting Xi’s emergence from the 20<sup>th</sup> Congress into a more powerful, more authoritarian, and “Bonapartist ruler” does not tell us much about what is actually happening in China internally. Nor is it helpful in understanding how fast-changing internal dynamics will be reflected in China becoming more aggressive diplomatically and militarily.

The truth is, over the past three or four decades, the CPC reform regime has used the “basket” term Socialism with Chinese Characteristics, including phrases such as ‘primary stage of socialism’ and ‘socialist market economy,’ in order to introduce and implement market-oriented reforms. Additionally, in order to theoretically and ideologically justify inviting foreign businesses, foreign capital, and foreign technology into China, the CPC continued to gradually abdicate its “socialist” responsibility toward working people in urban areas and rural countryside, and toward the ordinary people. According to critics within mainland China, within four years since the policy of reform and opening up was declared in December 1978, the CPC reform regime had abolished the rural people’s commune system established by Mao, and market-capitalism reforms were being rolled out across the board. As a Chinese commentator observed, “[W]hat Deng Xiaoping wanted to do was actually capitalism with Chinese characteristics, but due to the strong resistance of conservatives [aka the “Left” – Qian Gang] and the political bottom line he needed to stick to, he came up with the tactical term Socialism with Chinese Characteristics” (Qian 2012).

The crux of Deng's formulation lies in *Chinese Characteristics* and not in *Socialism*; the emphasis Deng laid was on enhancing China's productive forces by integrating the Chinese economy with the global market economy. Overall, the phrase SCC has remained and continues to remain, the "greatest common divisor" of the party's various factions, who compromised with each other to safeguard their respective "class" interests and adhered to the catchphrase "core leadership of the party".

Finally, it is against the above backdrop, the ritualistic and stage-managed affair lauding Xi as the party's "core" during the party's 20<sup>th</sup> Congress, belies the enormous crisis that confronts the CPC reform regime on every front. The elevation and incessant promotion of Xi as a great leader is not a sign of strength, but rather of weakness. The so-called various factions – the Jiang-Hu faction or the Communist Youth League faction – all profess their loyalty and adherence to the weird and rather idiosyncratic slogan of SCC. Looking beyond the rhetoric and noise generated around the installation of Xi for the third term as party general secretary, his two-hour speech, though full of details about the serious challenges and profound problems confronting the party, was silent on providing a solution to the difficulties listed in his report. Take the issue of China's ever-increasing number of rural migrant workers. According to reports, there were 30 million rural migrant workers in China in the year 1980 – during the first and early phase of the implementation of reform and opening up policy. In 2022, the number of China's 农民工 *nongmingong* 'rural migrant workers', (China's sociologists have even coined a unique term to describe the phenomena specific to Chinese conditions, i.e. 流动人口 *Liudong renkou* or 'floating population') had reached a staggering 376 million, more than the entire population of the United States of America. Under Xi's ten years of rule, over 10 million rural migrant workers have entered the "floating population" annually. Just like in the previous CPC National Congresses, there was no mention of the rural migrant workers and their marginalisation in society in Xi's work report. Xi's work report to the 20<sup>th</sup> Congress left no doubt that the CPC is committed to carrying forward market capitalism for the coming five years. To borrow from Rana Mitter's recent commentary, the much-awaited 7-day closed-door deliberations in mid-October offered only "new style" but "no substance" (Mitter 2022). Among various new phrases and slogans born during the 20<sup>th</sup> Congress, two phrases will continue to be discussed in the months and years to come – the "Chinese way of modernization" and "Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era."

As mentioned at the outset, Xi began his opening speech by declaring that “the theme of this Congress is holding high the banner of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics, fully implementing the thought of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics.” In simple words, what this meant was that under the “core” leadership of Xi Jinping, the CPC would continue with the policy of market capitalism in China. Further, Xi’s stacking of the party’s top decision-making bodies with his loyalists meant the CPC too reckons that Xi is a “safe bet” and he will not “rock the boat.” In fact, it should not be seen as surprising as even before the 20<sup>th</sup> Congress Xi had consolidated his control over the party and that was quite obvious in at least three ways: Xi’s larger-than-life leadership style; Xi’s aggressive style of flexing muscles on the global stage; and China mounting unprecedented pressure under Xi’s decade-long rule on Taiwan for reunification with mainland China (Adlakha 2022). This explains why the Communist Party of China decided to crown Xi with the Mandate of Heaven for the third time.

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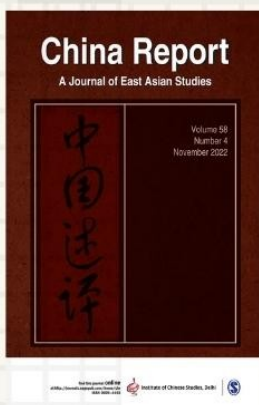


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