

Helmut Peters: Die Volksrepublik China. Aus dem Mittelalter zum Sozialismus. Auf der Suche nach der Furt, Essen, Neue-Impulse-Verlag, 2009. 580 p. ISBN 978-3-910080-71-3.

Reviewed by Sobhanlal Datta Gupta, Calcutta

This is an ambitious book, written by Helmut Peters, a distinguished Sinologist from the former GDR. That the author is a Marxist but not a doctrinaire in his orientation emerges quite clearly from the study. This is a work which constitutes a historical narrative as well as a theoretical interpretation of how China, an ancient Asian civilization, has made its fascinating journey from the Middle Ages to socialism, following its transformation into a People's Republic through the revolution of 1949. Divided into four sections, the first section addresses the important issue relating to the Marxist debate on the characterization of Chinese society under feudalism. This discussion is crucial, since it is this understanding which shaped the Communist Party of China (CPC)'s perception of the strategy and tactics of revolution before and after 1949. The second section examines how the concept of "New Democracy" was developed and practised by Mao Zedong in the period before the Revolution and until 1953. The third section focuses on the period 1953-1978, the most controversial phase of Mao involving the "Leap towards Communism" and the so-called Cultural Revolution. The fourth section is equally debatable, which concerns the post-Mao phase, associated with the Deng and the post-Deng view of how the CPC developed a new understanding of China's advance towards socialism and how it differed from Mao's position.

In the first section the author touches upon some of the interpretations generated recently by central Party institutions under the auspices of the CPC. One such position is: China's conditions of backwardness demanded first the accomplishment of a bourgeois-democratic revolution by putting an end to semi-feudalism. Another position states that the stage of China's economic development suggested that the country occupied an intermediate position between late feudalism and the first stage of entry into communism. A third position argues that it was the negative side of China's traditional culture which explains many of the weaknesses of Mao's ideas, i.e., a vulgarised and oversimplified understanding of Marxism (pp. 42-45). In his estimation of the concept of New Democracy, which was certainly a contribution of Mao, the author observes that the basic understanding which went into its making was that in conditions of China's backwardness without completion of the bourgeois-democratic revolution, which involved a long process, socialist revolution was an impossibility. But the project of New Democracy, as an unavoidable and independent phase of social development in China, was cut short and remained incomplete, as the impression gained ground within the CPC shortly after 1949 that the transition to socialism had been realized and that China would now be heading towards communism. This explains the left-adventurist path of the CPC, associated with the "Cultural Revolution", spearheaded by Mao. However, the "ultraleftism" of Mao is attributed by the author to the influence of Moscow's and thereby Stalin's understanding of Marxism, which was quite different from the position of Lenin. This explains his accent on "the class struggle between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie" under socialism. Thus, Mao's theoretical position was essentially voluntarist, focusing on will, which led him to develop an understanding of socialism that was grounded in politics but which was unrelated to the realities of society and economy of China, namely, her backwardness (pp. 252-253). As a consequence, shortly after 1949 he developed the illusory understanding that China was ready for a "Great Leap Forward" towards communism, oblivious of the fact that China had to traverse a long and tortuous road to socialism and that this backwardness could not be overcome by any voluntarist philosophy. As this understanding gained ground inside the CPC and as, after 1949, the Soviet model

began to be copied, it gave birth to personality cult, centralisation of power in a dictatorial style and the consolidation of a party of the Stalinist type, together with the consolidation of a model of socialism without democracy. Voices of dissent, represented, for instance, by Liu Shaoqui, were brutally silenced.

This is a new interpretation for three reasons. One: Mao's voluntarism and subjectivity has been considered in a positive light by many third world scholars, oriented towards ultra-leftism. The way Peters examines it and views it as a departure from Lenin deserves serious consideration. Two: the author's repeated and categorical formulation that many of Mao's problems were rooted in the fact that he was deeply influenced by Stalin contests a well-known position that Mao consciously distanced himself from Stalin and that it was not Mao but persons like Wang Ming, with whom Mao had serious differences, who were actually Moscow's men in the CPC. Three: The way the author has highlighted the historical and theoretical importance of the concept of New Democracy, together with its possibilities, which remained incomplete, provides a new understanding of many of the problems that China had to face after the victory of the 1949 Revolution.

The death of Mao and the consequent ascent of Deng, eventually followed by his death and the rise of the Hu Jintao / Wen Jiabao leadership have certainly witnessed a reversal of the Maoist strategy but the situation in today's China remains extremely complicated. The author has made a detailed study of all the Congresses of the CPC, including the latest 17th Congress, held in October, 2007. Although in most of the current discussions on China the CPC's emphasis on building a "harmonious socialist society" is highlighted, the way the author has addressed the issue of corruption with reference to the new perspective of the CPC on this question deserves serious attention. Thus, the roots of corruption are being traced to absence of true inner-party democracy and it is now being said that, since it is high concentration of power that largely explains corruption, a reform of the existing system of political power is the need of the hour (p. 511).

The author's own estimation of the present-day Chinese society is made unambiguously clear. He considers it as one which is neither socialist nor capitalist in character. He views it as a society which, economically, corresponds to a special kind of state capitalism, while its political structure is a manifestation of the power of the CPC (p. 561). While this may appear to be a debatable proposition to many, the conclusion drawn by the author would certainly provide food for thought to concerned China scholars.

The author's meticulous study of documents of the CPC is amazing. The most positive aspect of the book is that his excellent coverage of documents has helped him build up a credible narrative but he has not confined himself to a story line. He goes beyond the storyline, as he breaks it up, through a rigorous theoretical exercise, analytically on the level of scholarly interpretations. One only wonders why such an excellent study has not been followed up by an index and a bibliography, two most essential elements integral to such a scholarly work. This is a major gap which should have been avoided.