**Liu Jianjun: On the Historical Time Span of the Primary Stage of Socialism in China**

**Author: Liu Jianjun, Professor, School of Marxism, Renmin University of China**

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**Translated by Deniz Kizilcec**

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In-depth understanding of the major political judgments and theoretical views of the 19th National Congress on the entry of socialism with Chinese characteristics into a new era and the change of the main contradiction in China's society, it is necessary to think deeply about the theory of the primary stage of socialism, in particular to give a principled answer to the question of "how long will the primary stage last".

The length of the primary stage of socialism depends mainly on its historical mission, i.e. the historical tasks it undertakes. Since the historical task undertaken by the "primary stage of socialism" has changed from one historical task to two tasks, the primary stage has not been shortened, but rather lengthened, despite the acceleration of the process of socialism with Chinese characteristics. For this reason, a specific historical staging is needed within the primary stage of socialism, which can be divided into a preparatory stage, an exploratory stage, an unfolding stage, and an extension stage to better reflect the stage changes within the primary stage.

The 19th CPC National Congress declared that socialism with Chinese characteristics has entered a new era, defined a new historical orientation for China's development, and proposed that the main contradiction in China's society has undergone a historic change that affects the overall situation, and then planned a new strategic step for the next two steps; (2017-2035) and (2035-2049). These are all very important major theoretical views that need to be explained in depth, and in order to understand and explain these major theoretical views and judgments in depth, it is necessary to explore the theory of the primary stage of socialism that is used to support these theoretical views and political judgments, and in particular to study the question of the historical span of the primary stage of socialism.

**Chapter 1 - The importance of clarifying the historical span of the primary stage of socialism**

The question of the primary stage of socialism is a major issue relating to the legitimate foundation, historical process and future destiny of socialism with Chinese characteristics, and the theory of the primary stage of socialism is an important element that occupies a fundamental position and plays a guiding role in the theory of socialism with Chinese characteristics. The theory of the primary stage of socialism is very rich in content and involves many issues.

The question of historical span, i.e., length of time, is a prominent one. In fact, this issue was originally the title of the primary stage of socialism, and it was initially only a relatively abstract and not urgent issue at that time, but when socialism with Chinese characteristics entered the reform and opening up and pushed reform deeper and deeper, and when socialism with Chinese characteristics entered a new era, especially when the 19th National Congress of the CPC began to carry out a new historical positioning of our country's development, it became a more urgent theoretical issue and has attracted attention. It is now necessary to concentrate on the question of the duration of the primary stage of socialism, i.e., the span of history.

**First of all, the primary stage of socialism is the general basis of socialism with Chinese characteristics, and clarifying the historical span of the primary stage of socialism is an inevitable requirement for grasping the historical process of socialism with Chinese characteristics as a whole.**

The theory of the primary stage of socialism is a great creation of our Party, which does not exist in the classic Marxist writings and in traditional theories of socialism. This theory is based on the actual national conditions of our country, since we won the revolution in a large eastern country with a relatively backward economy and culture, and entered a socialist society from a semi-colonial and semi-feudal society through a transitional period of a new democratic nature. This is not the same as the traditional historical orientation, which needs to be determined according to one's own national circumstances. The proposal of the theory of the primary stage of socialism clearly defined China's national conditions, laid down the theoretical foundation of socialism with Chinese characteristics, and became the general basis of socialism with Chinese characteristics. The primary stage of socialism is the greatest national condition in contemporary China, and it is the fundamental foothold and basic starting point for the Party in formulating its routes and policies.

There has been a lot of research on the primary stage in the academic and theoretical circles, but in the past, the main concern has been the nature, role and requirements of the primary stage, and not enough attention has been paid to the question of how long its time span is, how long its duration will be, and whether it is possible and necessary to carry out a specific staging within the primary stage. But these are questions that the theory of the primary stage must answer, otherwise there will be limitations in our overall grasp of socialism with Chinese characteristics.

**Secondly, clarifying the historical span of the primary stage of socialism is an urgent need at present to accurately grasp the new era of socialism with Chinese characteristics and the new changes in the main contradictions in our society.**

The 19th CPC National Congress pointed out that socialism with Chinese characteristics has entered a new era, and the main contradiction in our society has changed from "the contradiction between the people's growing material and cultural needs and backward social production" to "the contradiction between the people's growing needs for a better life and unbalanced and inadequate development in the country". This is a major political judgment and theoretical innovation that needs to be grasped comprehensively and correctly. For this reason, the report of the 19th National Congress (2017), after expressing the change in the main contradiction in society, explicitly put forward two "must recognize": on the one hand, it must be recognized that the change in the main contradiction in our society is a historic change that affects the overall situation, and that it puts forward a lot of new requirements for the work of the Party and the State. On the other hand, it is important to recognize that the change in the main contradictions in our society has not changed our judgement of the historical stage of socialism in our country, that the basic national situation of our country, which is still at the primary stage of socialism and will remain so for a long time, and our international status as the world's largest developing country have not changed.

In this way, it leads us from the question of the main social contradictions to the question of the primary stage of socialism. This suggests that in order to clarify the historical orientation of the new era of socialism with Chinese characteristics and accurately grasp the new changes in the main contradictions of our society, it is necessary to deepen the understanding of the historical span of the primary stage of socialism. And, furthermore, this issue is not only related to the learning and understanding of the spirit of the 19th Congress, but also to the policies and steps that will be developed and taken in the future.

**Finally, clarifying the historical span of the primary stage of socialism will help enrich and develop the theory of scientific socialism on the stages of development of socialist society.**

The question of the stages of development of socialist society, especially concerning the beginning/initial stage of socialist society, is an important element in the theoretical system of scientific socialism. Although there is no view and discussion of the primary stage of socialism in the classic Marxist writers, there is corresponding methodological guidance. In his Critique of the Gotha Program, Marx mentioned the "first stage" and "advanced stage" of the future communist society, and the "first stage" is actually the primary stage. Lenin called the first stage "socialist society" and the advanced stage communist society, based on this division made by Marx.

Within socialist societies, Mao Zedong had proposed underdeveloped socialism and more developed socialism, and the so-called underdeveloped socialism was in fact equivalent to socialism at the primary stage. Deng Xiaoping clearly stated that "socialism itself is the primary stage of communism, and we are in the primary stage of socialism."[1] This was in fact the use of the term "primary stage" to characterize the beginning of the development of communism and socialism, making it an important theoretical concept.

In particular, the theory of the primary stage of socialism was put forward in response to the historical fact that China started socialism from a point of relative economical and cultural backwardness, reflecting the theoretical thinking of the Chinese Communists on the construction of socialism in those countries with relative economic and cultural backwardness, and that if we make theoretical breakthroughs and innovations on this issue, then we will be able to make a contribution to scientific socialism. Because building socialism in economically and culturally relatively backward countries is a major problem encountered in the development of the theory of scientific socialism and urgently needed to be explored and answered. After decades of exploration, we have accumulated quite a lot of new experience and understanding of the primary stage of socialism, and if we can, on this basis, make the historical span of the primary stage of socialism clear in general or in principle, then we will be making a new contribution to the question of the stages of development of socialist society.

**Chapter 2 - The long-term nature of the primary stage of socialism and its basis**

The long-term nature of the primary stage of socialism has been recognized by the Party from the very beginning when the primary stage was proposed, and has been emphasized throughout the years. In our Party's literature, when we talk about the primary stage of socialism, we often use such qualifying words as "long-term" and "long", and we have also formed a fixed phrase: "Our country is in the primary stage of socialism and will be in this stage for a long time". The term "our country is in and will be in the primary stage of socialism for a long time" has also become fixed. All our Party congresses since the 16th Congress (2002) have repeatedly reaffirmed such a judgment. This shows that there is a consensus on the long-term nature of the primary stage of socialism.

So, **what is included in the "long-term"?** **What is its historical span and how long will it last?**

Of course, there is no specific numeric figure for this question, but there can be a general range of figures. From our party documents, the rough general statement is at least 100 years. In the report of the Thirteenth Party Congress (1987), which marked the introduction of the theory of the primary stage, its long-term nature was expressed in this way: our country belongs to the primary stage of socialism from the time when the socialist transformation of the private ownership of the means of production was basically completed in the 1950s to the time when socialist modernization was basically realized, a period of at least a hundred years. The 14th Party Congress (1992) further pointed out that the primary stage of socialism in China is a very long historical stage that will last at least 100 years. Deng Xiaoping also said clearly that the basic line at the primary stage should govern for 100 years and this basic line should not be shaken. These are our basic understanding of the historical span of the primary stage of socialism.

**How were these realizations and conclusions reached?** What are the reasons for the long-term nature of the primary stage?

Broadly speaking, it is mainly determined by the backward historical starting point of our semi-colonial and semi-feudal society. The report of the Thirteenth Congress (1987) pointed out that, because our socialism was born out of a semi-colonial and semi-feudal society, and the level of productive forces lagged far behind that of the developed capitalist countries, it was determined that we had to go through a very long primary stage in order to achieve the industrialization and the commodification, socialization and modernization of production that had been accomplished by many countries under capitalist conditions. There are two aspects involved here: **a semi-colonial and semi-feudal society, and very backward social productive forces, and from these two aspects, the primary stage of our country will not be short-lived.** At the same time, this conclusion is also the result of our party's summarizing the lessons learned from the mistakes made in the past that transcended the historical stage.

This lesson of history is as much for our own country as it is for the world socialist movement. Various socialist countries, including the USSR, have, to varying degrees, have transcended historical stages in building socialism. These practices, which go beyond the stage of social development, have caused serious damage to socialist construction and people's lives. Therefore, based on the lessons of history in this regard, our Party, in determining its historical position and in looking ahead to its future development, focuses on the long term and tries its best to avoid short-term behaviors and hasty advances. Our Party even prefers to talk about it for a longer period of time, believing that it makes us more proactive.

**Chapter 3 - Time Span of the Primary Stage of Socialism**

Under the historical conditions of socialism with Chinese characteristics entering a new era, the problem of the long-term nature of the primary stage of socialism has once again come to the fore. (New Era began in 2012 with 18th Party Congress). The questions of concern are: why, given the conditions of China's considerable economic and social development, the entry of socialism with Chinese characteristics into a new era and the historic change in the main contradictions of Chinese society, has the basic national condition of the primary stage of socialism remained unchanged? **How long is the time span of the primary stage of socialism? At what point in the development process can the Party declare the end of the primary stage of socialism, and why?**

For this reason, we cannot be satisfied with our previous understanding of the long-term nature of the primary stage of socialism, and in particular we cannot remain in our previous understanding of the theoretical basis of the long-term nature of the primary stage, but rather we need to make new reflections on this issue and deepen our understanding of it in the light of the new situation of the present era and future development.

**Theoretically, the length of the primary stage of socialism is determined by its historical mission, i.e., it is closely related to the historical tasks it undertakes and the fulfilment of these tasks**.

The primary stage of socialism will end only when it has accomplished the historical tasks it has undertaken and thus fulfilled its historical mission. If we reorganize and reflect on the historical tasks undertaken at the primary stage of socialism, we will find that it is quietly changing itself, that is to say: from undertaking one historical task as initially envisaged, it has evolved to undertaking two historical tasks in the future.

The first historical task is to solve the historical problem of the low starting point of socialism in China, that is, the need for economically and culturally backward countries to engage in socialism to "realize industrialization and the commodification (marketization), socialization and modernization of production", so as to enable socialism in China to move from "unqualified" to "qualified" status.

The second historical task is to move forward from the starting point of "qualified" socialism to the initial consolidation and development of socialism after the completion of the first historical task.The historical span of the primary stage of socialism depends not only on the time needed to accomplish the first historical task, but also on the time needed to accomplish the second historical task.

In sum, the historical span of the primary stage of socialism depends primarily on the sum of the time needed to accomplish these two historical tasks in succession.

**The theory of the primary stage of socialism was put forward in order to solve the problem of the underdevelopment of our economy and culture, especially the problem of backward economic development**.

China did not go through the historical stage of the full development of capitalism, but embarked on the road to socialism on the basis of semi-colonialism and semi-feudalism and through the stage of New Democracy, with a relatively backward economy and culture. This problem is not only a problem for China, but also a common problem faced by all socialist countries. This issue has plagued the socialist movement for many years. Solving this problem once and for all is a prerequisite for socialism to find legitimacy and superiority for itself.

In China, this task is realized through the formulation of the theory of the primary stage of socialism and, in particular, the implementation of the basic line to be followed during the primary stage of socialism: Adhering to economic construction, reform and opening up, Adhering to the four cardinal principles[[1]](#footnote-1), the vigorous development of the socialist commodity economy, the establishment of a socialist market economy, and the realization of China's socialist modernization through the "three-step" strategy.

It is necessary to do so because our socialism had a low starting point and is not yet at the starting point of true socialism; in the words of Deng Xiaoping, our socialism was still "unqualified". Therefore, our first task was to make up for the shortcomings in economic and cultural development and reach the normal starting point of socialism. When we have completed this task of "filling in the shortcomings", we will be at the starting point of "qualified" socialism, and we will not have to refer to ourselves as "economically and culturally backward" and so on every time. This would be the true historical starting point of a socialist society.

**From China's actual situation, the completion of this task of "making up for the shortcomings" should be at the time of the basic realization of modernization**.

In terms of the originally determined strategic goal of development, the basic realization of modernization in China was to be achieved by 2049, which means that the primary stage should end by 2049 at the earliest prediction. Xi Jinping pointed out that "building a rich, strong, democratic, civilized, harmonious and modernized socialist country in accordance with the 'three-step' strategic plan for modernization is the goal of our Party and the country throughout the primary stage of socialism."[2] Since the building of a modern socialist country is the goal of the "entire primary stage of socialism", when this goal is achieved by the middle of this century, it should also be the end of the primary stage of socialism.

**Specifically, it may end in 2056, if the original 100-year vision of the primary stage of socialism is taken into account**.

The primary stage of socialism began from 1956, when the basic level of socialist system was established, to 2056, it will be exactly one hundred years. This goal should be said to roughly overlap with our second centennial goal, with slight difference of time. In fact, in order to better understand the 100-year time point of the primary stage, one can advance its starting point from 1956 to 1949. This is because with the founding of New China in 1949, the socialist state power and basic level of political system was established, and although in 1949 the basic level socialist economic system was not yet established, the new democratic revolution has already taken on a socialist revolutionary character by overthrowing the rule of "bureaucratic capitalism". Moreover, the historical starting point of the primary stage need not be viewed as too specific, but rather as consistent with the larger historical point.

In that case, the one hundred years of the primary stage and the one hundred years of the founding of New China have realized an overlap. The date of the centennial of the founding of New China (2049) is also the time when the century-old primary stage of socialism comes to an end. This is in line with our Party's original conception of the historical span of the primary stage and with the goal set for China to achieve modernization. Of course, due to the accelerated development of the cause of building socialism with Chinese characteristics, and especially due to the unprecedented rapid advancement of the Party and the country's undertakings since the 18th National Congress, according to the report of the 19th National Congress, the date for the basic level of realization of modernization in China has been brought forward by 15 years, to 2035.

That is to say, in terms of accomplishing the first historical task which we said in our original statements, basic level of realization of modernization will be completed by 2035. Therefore, if we go a little earlier, then in 2035 we can say that the primary stage of socialism will be over. And later still, by the middle of this century, when we have fully realized modernization and built a rich, strong, democratic, civilized, harmonious and beautiful modern socialist power, the primary stage of socialism should end anyway.

**However, judging from the 19th Party Congress' statement on the primary stage of socialism, even at that time, our Party may not declare that the primary stage over**.

The 19th Congress' statement on the primary stage of socialism is noteworthy. Originally, the rhythm of the 19th National Congress was one of acceleration and speeding up, one that emphasized the new changes. 19th National Congress announced that socialism with Chinese characteristics had entered a new era, and it also pointed out that the main contradiction in Chinese society had changed in relation to the overall situation, and advanced the period for the realization of the future goals, but there was not the slightest loosening of attitudes at the primary stage.

It puts forward the "three firms", which expresses a very clear attitude: firmly grasp the basic national situation of the primary stage of socialism, firmly base ourselves on the greatest reality of the primary stage of socialism, and firmly adhere to the Party's basic line at the primary stage of socialism. **This is so because, on the one hand, the Party has not yet formed a clear judgment as to when the primary stage of socialism will end**, and in the absence of a new judgment, of course, it cannot casually change the formulation. The primary stage of socialism is the greatest and most important national condition of China, and it is the general basis for all the lines and policies we adopt, so we cannot easily change this basic judgment.

This change will not be made, at least not until the phases are extremely clear on this point, and until this has been thoroughly studied and thought quite throughly by our party. Moreover, the Party originally envisioned the primary stage to last "at least a hundred years", but it did not say the at most end point. Because it was a rough ballpark estimate, and the orientation is to say it may go to be longer. At the same time, we should also take into account that the theoretical design of the "primary stage" has provided the Party with a great deal of policy space, enabling it to take a strategic initiative in formulating policies. This enables the Party to take the strategic initiative by making decisions entirely from a practical point of view. However, if we easily change and give up this basic basis because we have already developed, it is tantamount to narrowing our decision-making space, thus lose our strategic initiative in decision-making and easily falling into passivity.

However, we believe that in addition to this **there is a more important reason, which is that the primary stage adds to its historical mission, after the first historical task, a new historical task: that of standing on the starting point of qualified socialism and, after a historical period of development, bringing about the initial consolidation and development of the socialist system**.

This is the true that "primary stage of socialism", as the beginning stage that any socialist society must go through. In contrast, the "primary stage of socialism", which has as its historical mission the fulfilment of the first historical task, that is, the task of "making up for the shortcomings", is only a special "primary stage", it is only China's own primary stage. It can be said that the period **from 2035 to 2050 is a period of transition, i.e., from the first historical task of the primary stage of socialism to the second historical task**.

**Thus, in the course of China's socialist development, two "primary stages" have emerged, one with the mission of turning back to "make up for the shortcomings" and the other with the mission of moving forward on the basis of its own development.**

How then should the relationship between these two "primary stages" be dealt with? The first stage is already called the "primary stage of socialism", and if the second stage is still named in this way, it will be a simple repetition and cause confusion in theory. However, we cannot say that the first stage is "Primary Stage I" and the second is "Primary Stage II". Therefore, the simplest and most reasonable approach is to link the two "primary stages" and combine them to form a general "socialist primary stage". In this way, the "primary stage of socialism" has actually changed or expanded the scope of its tasks as history has evolved, and thus has actually lengthened its historical span.

**Socialist society, in terms of its normal course, can be divided into primary, intermediate and advanced stages**.

Among them, the primary stage is the consolidation and development of the socialist society at the primary level on its own basis, which is itself a separate historical period and necessarily a relatively long one. Therefore, it is not easy to predict or speculate on where the "primary stage of socialism" itself will end. Therefore, in 2020, when a moderately prosperous society is fully built, our party will not announce the end of the primary stage; and after another 15 years of basic modernization till 2035 we will not declare the end of the primary stage.

We think the realization of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation by 2050 will also probably not declare the end of the primary stage, but a new interpretation of the "primary stage of socialism" can and should be made to indicate that what will begin thereafter is a "primary stage of socialism" in a new sense (new conception). Thus, this will mean that the "primary stage of socialism" can and should be interpreted in a new way to indicate that a "primary stage of socialism" in a new sense is beginning. In this way, the new sense of "primary stage of socialism" will extend to at least until the end of the twenty-first century. Finally, the day when the primary stage of socialism ends is the day when the intermediate stage of socialism will be launched.

**Chapter 4 - Historical Phases of the Primary Stage of Socialism**

Since the primary stage of socialism is a long historical process, it is structured within itself and can be staged again. Only in this way can the nature and functions of the primary stage be grasped as a whole, while at the same time it means paying attention to the new characteristics of the primary stage at different times. According to the author, the primary stage of socialism can be roughly divided into the following four periods:

**Preparatory period: 1949-1956, from the founding of New China to the establishment of the basic level of socialist economic system:** establishment of the basic level socialist political and basic level economic system, consolidation of socialist power, socialist transformation of the ownership of the means of production, and realization of the transition from a new democratic society to a socialist society. All these prepared the way for the subsequent socialist construction of our country, especially for the exploration of the path of socialist construction with Chinese characteristics. Although it was a "preparatory period", it is not appropriate to simply exclude it from the "primary stage of socialism". This is both necessary for the completeness of the theoretical model and for other certain objective reasons.

**Exploration period: 1956-1978, from the basic level completion of socialist transformation to the time of reform and opening up:** during this period, large-scale socialist construction was carried out with a socialist planned economy, and some detours and zigzags were made in the process of exploring the road to socialist construction.This period in fact belonged to the primary stage of socialism, but there was no subjective understanding in the Party that this period belonged to the "primary stage of socialism," let alone was there a theoretical discussion and confirmation of this point.

**Unfolding period: 1978-2050, the period of reform and opening up:** during this period, the Party launched a new era of reform, opening up and socialist modernization, decided the "three-step" strategic goal, opened up the road of socialism with Chinese characteristics, and pushed forward socialism with Chinese characteristics along this correct road.

It is possible to roughly divide this historical period (**1978-2050)** into the first half and the second half, with the first half running from the launch of reform and opening up to the 18th Party Congress (1978-2012), and the second half running from the 18th Congress to 2049. The first half can be called "Socialism with Chinese Characteristics in the New Period" and the second half can be called "Socialism with Chinese Characteristics in the New Era". Both 2 phases are building and advancing socialism with Chinese characteristics, but the second half will achieve a major historic leap.

**Extension period: 2050-2100, which is an extension period that continues forward after the realization of socialist modernization and after the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation:** The goal of this **extension period** is to consolidate and develop socialism with Chinese characteristics and to be at the forefront of the world.In fact, the so-called "extension period" is speaking from today's standpoint, but if we speak about the period of 2050 and beyond, it is not a simple "extension", but the historical beginning of the construction of socialism in a truly comprehensive manner, a period of true epochal subjectivity. It is a period of real subjectivity of the times.

**At that time, the construction and development of Chinese society would not only reach the world's advanced level in terms of productive forces and scientific and technological level of development, but would also have fuller socialist attributes and more communist elements in terms of social relations**. At that time, on the question of China's social nature, no one would easily say something like China is practicing "capitalism with Chinese characteristics".

**Deep Notes:**

[1] Deng Xiaoping's Selected Writings: Volume 3. Beijing: People's Publishing House, 1993: page 252.

[2] Central Documentation Research Office of the CPC Central Committee, ed. Selected Articles on Important Speeches of General Secretary Xi Jinping. Beijing: Central Literature Publishing House, Party Building Readings Publishing House, 2016: page12.

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1. The **Four Cardinal Principles** were stated by [Deng Xiaoping](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Deng_Xiaoping) in March 1979, during the early phase of [Reform and Opening-up](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reform_and_opening_up), and are the four issues for which debate should not be allowed within the [People's Republic of China](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/People%27s_Republic_of_China).

   The principles include:

   1. The principle of upholding the [socialist path](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Socialism_(Marxism))
   2. The principle of upholding the [people's democratic dictatorship](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/People%27s_democratic_dictatorship)
   3. The principle of upholding the leadership of the [Chinese Communist Party](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chinese_Communist_Party) (CCP)
   4. The principle of upholding [Mao Zedong Thought](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mao_Zedong_Thought) and [Marxism–Leninism](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marxism%E2%80%93Leninism)

   [↑](#footnote-ref-1)