

# A Review on Western Studies on the Socialist Transformation in China

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## Abstract

Based on the literature analysis of the research on China's socialist transformation in Western academia, this paper briefly reviews the historical status of Western academia's research since the founding of the People's Republic of China, taking the normalization of China-US relations as the node time. The study on China's socialist transformation has experienced more than half a century of development, showing its own unique characteristics. Due to the influence of their own cultural concepts, ideologies, research paradigms and research methods, Western scholars' understanding of relevant issues inevitably shows some one-sided and arbitrary perspectives. However, the novelty of Western scholars' research perspectives, the diversification of data sources, and the interdisciplinary comprehensive research methods have certain reference significance for China's domestic academia to further advance the research on socialist transformation.

## Keywords

Socialist Transformation, China Studies, Communist Party of China

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## 1. Introduction

In the 1950s, after the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC), scholars in the field of Chinese studies in European countries and the United States turned their eyes to this newborn regime. In particular, the establishment of the Joint Committee on Contemporary China (JCCC) in the United States in 1959 marked an important step in the development of Chinese studies, which were then more focused on the political and economic aspects of contemporary PRC, rather than on the traditional Chinese culture as the so-called sinology in the very beginning. Along with the gradual establishment of the research paradigm and discourse system, mainly accomplished in the United States, the field of

contemporary China studies in the Western academy has grown rapidly.

Socialist transformation, as one of the most important historical movements in the history of the PRC, is naturally a focus of China studies in Western academia. However, there is still no review article, to the best of our knowledge, on the research about socialist transformation in China conducted by Western academia of China studies. Therefore, this paper aims to present a brief review of the historical status of China's socialist transformation research carried out by Western academia, mainly from the United States. Although the number of these specialized works is relatively small, due to the novelty of their research perspectives, the diversification of data sources, and the use of interdisciplinary and comprehensive research methods, these works show a great value in studying contemporary China and the development of China-US relations. For the same reason, this article takes the development of China-US relations around the 1970s as the time node of the review, and divides the Western research on China's socialist transformation into three periods, including the era before the normalization of China-US relations, the era after the normalization of China-US relations, and the 2000s.

## **2. Before the Normalization of China-US Relations (1949-1978)**

After the founding of PRC, there have been more than 20 years of political confrontation between China and the United States due to Cold War, which makes it impossible for American scholars to enter China for field investigation and data collection. Moreover, the lack of full understanding of the subtle points on Chinese language, classics, and historical knowledge also hinders many of them to conduct more in-depth researches. In the mid-to-late 1950s, the prevailing McCarthyism environment, which heightened political repression and persecution of left-wing individuals, further suppressed the development of Chinese studies, and renowned scholars of Chinese studies, including John K. Fairbank, John M. H. Lindbeck and many others, were victims due to their benevolent attitudes towards China. During this period, American scholars of Chinese studies had to adopt the remote research method to study China, that is, they mainly used second-hand data to conduct research without entering China's territory for a survey (Harding, 1984). The lack of data will inevitably affect the depth, breadth and scientificity of these researches on China. Before the normalization of China-US relations, there were few Western works on China's socialist transformation. Research literature in the field could only be found in miscellaneous works dealing with the general situations of Chinese politics, economy and culture at that time.

In 1949 and 1950s, China studies in the United States showed strong timeliness with close observations with the political and social activities in China, and therefore the research works during this period inevitably covered the movement of socialist transformation in China. However, due to the difference of ideology and core values between US and China, American scholars did not fully

trust China's official records and documents, which led them to be skeptical and critical of China's socialist transformation. Yuan-li Wu in the book *An Economic Survey of Communist China* published in 1956, focused on the socialist transformation of China's industry and the planned economic system based on Chinese official records (Wu, 1956). The economic achievements of the plan were appraised. The 1959 paper by Choh-ming Li on the economic development of PRC during the First Five-Year Plan, actually demonstrated his distrust in the official statistics made available by Chinese government, and argued the implementation of joint private-state ownership after the Five-Anti Movement could lead to a decline in private capitalist economic output, thereby reducing China's overall economic output (Li, 1959). These works presented a general introduction to China's economic situation and socialist transformation in the early days of PRC. However, due to the limited sources of information at that time and the presence of more or less ideological bias, the conclusions drawn were to some extent one-sided.

In the 1960s, Western researches on China's socialist transformation were mostly scattered in treatises on the relationship between the Communist Party of China (CPC) and China's political economy. In 1964, A. Doak Barnett edited the collection of essays *Communist China: The Early Years, 1949-1955*, which deeply studied the history of China's Five Anti Movement and socialist transformation movement, and made a preliminary analysis of the possible long-term effects and consequences of a series of these political movements (Barnett, 1964). There were also treatises on the relationship between China's central government and local governments, which also involved China's socialist transformation. In 1969, Ezra F. Vogel's well-known book on the historical picture in Guangdong province after 1949, demonstrated for the first time an in-depth study on the political and economic development of Guangdong province in the socialist transformation movement at that time (Vogel, 1969). In the same year, A. Doak Barnett edited the collection of essays *Chinese Communist Politics in Action*, which included more analytical papers on the political policies in the process of China's socialist transformation (Barnett, 1969). Western scholars mainly published papers in the journal *China Quarterly*, which was founded and firstly edited by John K. Fairbank. For instance, John P. Emerson analyzed the growth relationship between the urban population and the non-agricultural working population in China from 1953 to 1958 (Emerson, 1961). C. W. Shih analyzed the socialist transformation of agriculture in China based on Chinese novels and literary materials (Shih, 1963). Kenneth R. Walker paid careful attention to the process of socialist transformation of agriculture in China (Walker, 1966). He pointed out that the CPC believed that agricultural cooperation is the premise of industrialization and mechanization, which then accelerated the process of socialist transformation of China's agriculture. In 1967, Thomas P. Bernstein compared the characteristics of the agricultural cooperation movement between China and the Soviet Union from the perspective of comparative politics (Bernstein, 1967). In 1969, Chung-Kuan Cheng focused on the people's

commune movement China's socialist transformation (Cheng, 1969).

In the 1970s, especially after 1976, due to the end of the Chinese Cultural Revolution and the death of Mao Zedong and other important leaders, a wave emerged among Western scholars on China studies in which they attempted to summarize the history of Mao Zedong's era, in which some representative specialized works were also published to introduce China's socialist transformation movement. In 1976, Vivienne V. Shue, a professor of contemporary China studies at Oxford University, published a paper which mainly analyzed the grain purchase policy in the socialist transformation of agriculture (Shue, 1976). Victor D. Lippit focused his research on land transformation, agricultural cooperation and the development of people's communes in China (Lippit, 1977). Lynn T. White III specifically focused on the situation in Shanghai, analyzed the development of capitalist industrial and commercial enterprises in Shanghai from 1949 to 1967 emphatically, and pointed out two main characteristics of Shanghai's capitalist industrial and commercial during this period: first, the Chinese government's control over small capitalist enterprises showed a gradually increasing trend; second, the Chinese government's control of small enterprises was carried out through the collective of private firms virtually by themselves. In this situation the Chinese government's regulation over small firms were sometimes tight and sometimes loose, which left some development opportunities for them in an economy dominated by the public sector (White III, 1978). During this period, Western scholars' research on China's socialist transformation became more concrete, but it still failed to demonstrate a fully objective attitude without any ideological bias due to the Cold War situation.

### **3. After the Normalization of US-China Relations (1979-1999)**

In January 1979, China and the United States formally established diplomatic relations. Western scholars began to get the opportunity to enter China to collect relatively rich first-hand documents. The use of original archival materials for research was a major feature of Western research on China's socialist transformation during this period. Many studies were developing towards specific, in-depth, and diverse perspectives.

In the 1980s, a number of classic works on the generalization of China's socialist transformation appeared, and the research focus shifted from the political field to the field of economy (Kraus, 1982; Fairbank, 1986; Riskin, 1987; Dirlik & Meisner, 1989). In Volume 14 of *the Cambridge History of China: The Emergence of Revolutionary China 1949-1965*, the book affirmed the achievements of China's socialist transformation and the First Five-Year Plan, and introduced in detail the growth of state-owned industry and commerce as well as the regulation over private industry and commerce. It also summarized the detailed process of the socialist transformation of China's agriculture and capitalist industry and commerce, comparing it with the Soviet Union's cooperative movement (Fairbank & MacFarquhar, 1987). In addition, research works on more

microscopic historical details had appeared during this period. For instance, in 1980, Kenneth Lieberthal recorded Tianjin's socialist transformation process based on the city's historical archives (Lieberthal, 1980). In the same year, Elizabeth J. Perry studied the situations of Shanghai's working class after the founding of PRC (Perry, 1980). At the same time, a new batch of international journals on China studies emerged, such as *Twentieth-Century China*, *The China Review*, *The China Journal* and *The Journal of Contemporary China Studies*. In 1984, Andrew G. Walder pointed out that China's socialist transformation had reshaped its working class and industry, and promoted the flow of population to cities as well as China's urbanization process (Walder, 1984). Thomas B. Gold studied China's private economy from the founding of PRC to the 1980s based on Chinese journal materials, and pointed out that the Five Anti Movement and the socialist transformation movement weakened the development of China's private capitalist industry and commerce (Gold, 1989). In 1988, Glen D. Peterson took a different approach to study the historical process of the socialist transformation of the returned overseas Chinese inhabited areas, and believed that the radical and changeable ideology in the transformation had adversely affected the overseas Chinese (Peterson, 1988).

In the 1990s, due to the initial accomplishments of China's reform and opening up, Western academia began to further explore the relationship between the development of China's private economy and its socialist system, which involved substantial investigations on the living conditions of the private economy before and after the socialist transformation. In 1990, John Gittings published the book *The Changing Face of China: The Road from Revolution, 1949 to 1989*, based on Chinese official public information, the first half of which analyzed the process of China's socialist transformation and the socialist economy in detail (Gittings, 1990). In 1991, Willy Kraus wrote *Private Business in China: Revival Between Ideology and Pragmatism*, based on the historical archives of Tianjin, and put forward the so-called "premature theory" of China's socialist transformation, arguing that the government should fully support China's development of current private sector economy (Kraus, 1991). Afterwards, Chan and Kerkvliet conducted a comparative study on the socialist transformation history of China and Vietnam (Chan & Kerkvliet, 1999). In 1999, the 50th anniversary of the founding of PRC, Maurice J. Meisner published a commentary on China's communist revolution (Meisner, 1999). He acknowledged that China's socialist transformation had laid the foundation for subsequent economic construction and socialist reform, but he also believed that China's transition from the new democratic stage to the socialist stage was too rapid, also supporting the premature theory. In terms of journal articles, the research subject was further expanded. For example, French sinologist Christian Henriot studied the history of the abolition of the prostitute industry in PRC based on archives in Shanghai, and the author praised the CPC's efforts for transforming prostitutes from exploited and oppressed proletarian victims into dignified laborers of the new society (Henriot, 1995). He believed that China's socialist transformation had pro-

vided a good social atmosphere for them to regain their dignity.

#### 4. In the 2000s

Since the 21st century, Western academia's research on China's socialist transformation has been further detailed and deepened, developing towards historical details and multidisciplinary comprehensive research.

First, writings from this period focus on reviewing the historical details of China's socialist transformation and its impact on the contemporary Chinese economy. Yunxiang Yan's *Private Life under Socialism: Love, Intimacy and Family Change in a Chinese Village 1949-1999*, based on the field survey data of Xiajia Village, the author believed that China's socialist transformation had broken the traditional rural Confucian patriarchal authoritarian system, gave more freedom to young Chinese people (Yan, 2003). Morris Bian conducted an in-depth analysis and discussion on the historical process and willingness of China's state-owned enterprise system in 2005 (Bian, 2005). In 2006 Chun Lin discussed in depth the relationship between socialist transformation and socialist reform, and believed that China's development momentum can be analyzed in the framework of socialism-statism-developmentalism, which unified socialist transformation and socialist reform (Lin, 2006). In 2008, Kelly G. Cai explored the impact of China's socialist transformation and pointed out that although China's socialist transformation has promoted the rapid growth of the scale of economy, the people's living standards had not improved significantly (Cai, 2008). In 2010 Thomas P. Bernstein and Huayu Li edited the collection of essays *China Learns from the Soviet Union, 1949-Present*, which included several papers expounding China's reference and transplantation of the Soviet Union's experiences in the process of socialist transformation (Bernstein & Li, 2010). In 2015, Andrew G. Walder stated that the CPC had taken full control of the entire Chinese economy through the socialist transformation of agriculture, industry and commerce (Walder, 2015).

Second, Western academia's research on China's socialist transformation has become more and more concrete, especially with a growing number of regional researches. James Gao, based on the latest open archives of Hangzhou, conducted a detailed study of the CPC's takeover, economic recovery and socialist transformation of the Hangzhou city (Gao, 2004). In 2007 Nara Dillon conducted a study on the socialist transformation of Shanghai's private charitable industry based on the archives of Shanghai, and believed that the CPC could further attack the legitimacy of the old regime and class by transforming the corruption of the old-fashioned private charitable industry, so as to achieve an effective control over the industry (Dillon, 2007). In the same year, Sherman Cochran sorted out the process of socialist transformation of the Liu family (Hongsheng Liu) in Shanghai based on the family's archives, including private letters, memoirs and so on (Cochran, 2007). In 2012, Benno R. Weiner took Zeku County as an example to study China's socialist transformation of Tibet (Weiner, 2012). In 2015, Jake Werner, from an interdisciplinary viewpoint in

economic and cultural fields, discussed Shanghai's public awareness of workers' political participation in socialist transformation, which shaped everyday popular culture (Werner, 2015). In 2016, Carles B. Broggi studied the trade exchanges between Shanghai and Hong Kong from the founding of the PRC to the period of socialist transformation and its development process (Broggi, 2016). Therefore, it can be seen that the research on China's socialist transformation has long received attention from Western academia and constitutes an important research field in the field of Chinese studies.

## 5. Conclusion

In general, except for some studies that deliberately criticized China with strong ideological bias and intended to facilitate the so-called peaceful evolution, most Western research could provide valuable viewpoints and materials. These studies show the following trends and characteristics: 1) An interdisciplinary and integrated research approach is usually adopted; 2) The interpretation method based on different paradigms is used; 3) Analysis methods focusing on microscopic exploration are applied; 4) Quantitative methods focusing on data models are frequently used; 5) They usually employed qualitative methods focusing on comparative research between different objects. However, there are also some limitations, including a variety of inherent culture difference that leads to a different understanding of phenomena, excessive reliance on specific research paradigms into which they sometimes fit research data or arguments, and reliance on technical models without strong theoretical backgrounds.

To sum up, Western academia's research on China's socialist transformation has gone through more than half a century, showing its own unique characteristics. Undoubtedly, the research conducted by Western scholars over the years has undergone significant changes not only in the particular research topics, but also in the research paradigms. Under today's social and international conditions, a review of the development context of Western scholars' research on China's socialist transformation will help China's domestic scholars to give full play to their advantages of having more first-hand historical materials, and combine interdisciplinary and diversified research methods of Western scholars, so as to accomplish more innovative researches with both depth and breadth.

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## Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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