
China's Modernization (1860–1978): Exploration and Practice

Mohammad Shakil Bhuiyan

*School of Political Science and Public Management,
Shanxi University, Shanxi, Taiyuan, P.R. China;
Shahjalal University of Science and Technology, Sylhet,
Bangladesh*

K. M. Mahiuddin

Jahangirnagar University, Dhaka, Bangladesh

Wang Yi

*School of Political Science and Public Management,
Shanxi University, Shanxi, Taiyuan, P.R. China*

ABSTRACT

This review explores China's modernization process from 1860 to 1978, focusing on theoretical contexts and practical applications. Over the course of almost a century, split into two phases, with differing levels of accomplishments, each phase having distinctive contributions to China's modernization. The early phase of modernization in China, before the People's Republic of China was proclaimed (in 1949), witnessed a transition towards modernization influenced by Western capitalist ideas. The phase encompassed various struggles that facilitated the shift from a traditional feudal society to a semi-feudal and small-scale capitalist republic, and ultimately to colonial China to New China. However, it failed to achieve true modernization in China due to domestic and external influences. The active phase of modernization and the quest for an independent path began in New China under Mao Zedong's leadership. The construction period of

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socialist modernization has left a lasting impact on China's journey towards modernization. The achievements during the socialist modernization era, particularly in the institutional mechanism development, were phenomenal. The period from 1860 to 1949 laid the fundamental condition leading to the establishment of the PRC, while the years from 1949 to 1978 set the foundation for China's unique style of modernization. The subsequent phase of modernization, the era of reform and opening-up, has spurred a historic and unprecedented economic transformation which has outstripped all previous records of national progress. China has established itself as the factory of the world and a manufacturing powerhouse, with its modern infrastructure network becoming an example globally. Today, China is one of the world leading countries in the terms of innovation and technology adoption, a testament to its successful modernization efforts over the years. This concise yet comprehensive discussion provides insights into China's modernization trajectory and its historical perspective on the matter.

Keywords: *China's modernization, early modernization, capitalist modernization, socialist construction.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Modernization simply means a shift from ‘traditional’ to ‘modern’ society through processes such as industrialization, urbanization, technological change, rising literacy, mass communication, and expanded political participation (Weiner 1966; Lerner 1958; Smelser 1964; Deutsch 1961). The objective is to promote productivity, industrial practices, and lifestyles that outperform those of traditional societies (Tang and Shi 2023). In economics, modernization was often framed as a staged development trajectory – from a ‘traditional society’ through ‘take-off’ toward ‘high mass consumption’ (Rostow 1960). However, the modernization idea has evolved from classical, linear ‘stages’ models into more complex, evidence-based, and critical approaches. Inkeles and Smith (1974) operationalized modernization through an attitude–value–behavior scale, connecting development to social change at the individual level. Later scholars argue that modernization is a broad process of societal change in which economic growth reshapes culture, increasingly favoring personal autonomy, empowerment, and democracy (Inglehart and Welzel 2005). Newer scholarship, however, argues that modernization can also trigger crises when institutions fail to keep pace with rapid change (Grinin 2013); such situations can be-

come ‘modernization traps’ that heighten instability (Grinin 2022). Consistent with these debates, Korotayev *et al.* (2020) also show that modernization is associated with shifts in human values, although the patterns and pace of change vary across societies.

Modernization is a long, historical, and continual process. It does not happen overnight. It is a global process, and nearly all states and regions go through different stages of this transition. This transition is expected to show significant diversity, disparities, imbalances, and competition (Hu 2022). Differences in history, culture, institutional choices, and geopolitical factors among countries have led to the diversification of modernization development paths (Lu and Gao 2022). The modernization process also follows some common laws regarding industrialization, marketization, informatization, and economic globalization. However, there is no one-size-fits-all model for modernization. In the journey towards modernization, a country must follow general modernization laws while considering its unique national conditions and characteristics (Qiu and Wu 2024). While experiences of developed nations are valuable, each country must chart a path that suits its specific conditions for successful modernization (Huang 2021). However, certain Western powers stubbornly cling to their early advantages and established models, refusing to acknowledge the independent choices made by latecomers regarding their modernization paths. This stance poses significant challenges to global modernization development (Wu Z. 2022). This argument aligns with the postcolonial and historical-sociology critiques which point out that classical modernization theory often treated Western trajectories as universal and underplayed global power inequalities, meaning that modernization does not follow a single route everywhere (Bhambra 2011).

In the context of the world modernization course, modernization originated from capitalist forces in Western Europe and steadily spreads to other regions through overseas expansion and colonial exploitation. The modernized countries and regions can be roughly categorized into two forms based on varying initiation times, approaches, and developmental stages: the ‘first-mover endogenous type’ and the ‘later-mover exogenous type’ (Shang and Liang 2023: 2). Professor Zheng Yongnian divides modernization into three echelons: material modernization, institutional modernization, and modernization of people (Zhang X. 2022). China, a late-developing category nation, has remarkably changed its destiny in an unprecedented manner for a country of its size. Its rapid national progress is guided by Chinese-style

modernization,¹ distinct from the Western path of modernization. Chinese-style modernization exhibits universal modernization traits seen in all countries, as well as unique Chinese attributes derived from its specific national conditions (Zhuo 2023). However, Chinese-style modernization has not suddenly fallen from the sky, but has taken centuries-long twists and turns to reach its current form. The entire process of the Chinese nation's pursuit and realization of modernization has two hundred years of connections and legacy. This means that Chinese-style modernization has gone through several time nodes connected in order and has experienced different development stages that are inherited and built upon each other (Shang and Liang 2023). Chinese scholars frequently used the terms 'Chinese modernization' and 'Chinese-style modernization' to characterize the historical development of modernization before and after the establishment of the People's Republic of China, respectively. In broad terms the initial stage of China's modernization, known as the first stage of modernization, roughly spanned a hundred years from the middle of the nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth century. The next hundred years, from the mid-twentieth century to this century mid-point, can be considered the latter stage of China's modernization development. Some explained China's modernization development in three stages: 1st – the preparation and start-up stage of capitalist modernization during the late nineteenth century and the mid-twentieth century before the founding of New China; 2nd – the adjustment stage during learning from and breaking through the Soviet socialist modernization model after the founding of New China; and the 3rd – implementation stage of Chinese-style modernization after reform and opening-up.

This secondary study is a small attempt to figure out China's modernization exploration and practices from 1860 to 1978 in order to gain a comprehensive insight into the development of China's process of modernization. This concise analysis was constructed using mostly Chinese scholarly works, presenting a native viewpoint on the narrative of China's history of modernization.

2. EARLY MODERNIZATION STAGE (1860–1949)

There are two schools of thought regarding China's early modernization: first, the Endogenous perspective argues that China's modernization was not imported from the West; second, the Exogenous viewpoint contends that the process was brought by Western capitalism through invasion, rather than internally generated. China's modern history commenced in 1840, yet the modernization process had al-

ready started and progressed through a long development phase. When exploring China's modernization history, we must acknowledge the progress made before the Opium War and recognize the interconnectedness of China's history before and after 1840. Both the late Ming dynasty and the Qing dynasty significantly influenced early modernization in China, across economic, political, and social domains. Capitalism began to emerge during the Ming dynasty. During the Ming dynasty, notable developments included the emergence of the Chinese bureaucratic system, a long period of peace, an environment conducive to intellectual freedom, significant flows of silver from Japan and later Europe, and remarkable economic prosperity. This economic prosperity was evident not just in urban centers known for silk and ceramic production, but also in rural regions supported by commercial farming and high-yield crops brought in from the New World (Ke 2002). In the early Qing dynasty, Chinese society indeed began a shift from tradition to modernity. This was accompanied by the easing of government control over grassroots social politics, the growth of personal freedoms for ordinary individuals, the thriving commodity economy, and the rise of capitalism, and the diffusion of anti-traditional thoughts aligned with these shifts (Gao X. 2000). Some scholars believe that if there had been no invasion of major powers at that time, China's feudal society might have collapsed and degenerated into a capitalist society due to the development of negative factors contained within it. Mao Zedong also pointed out that as commodity production expanded within China's feudal order, early capitalist tendencies started to emerge. Without the intrusion of foreign capitalism, this trend may have slowly unfolded towards capitalism.²

The early modernization of China was characterized by distinctive, late-developing endogenous features driven by internal dynamics, which gradually accrued and broadened in scope. The invasion and colonization of China by major powers during modern times derailed China's initial modernization path, pushing it into a semi-colonial and semi-feudal society. This situation also influenced the objectives, directions, paths, and future of the modern Chinese revolution (Wang 2023). The most prevalent view among other Chinese scholars is that China's early modernization falls under the category of exogenous modernization. After the Opium War, China was forced to accept greater Western access. The intervention of imperialist powers kickstarted China's modernization passively. China's defeat in the First Opium War triggered early attempts at naval modernization, which achieved little and were largely ineffective (Elleman 2021). The war

and the treaties that followed changed the way China dealt with the outside world – Western powers gained more trade and diplomatic access, Qing authority weakened, and China was pushed to navigate new foreign rules and demands (Horowitz 2020). On the other hand, the Taiping Rebellion ‘triggered the decline of land taxation and the rise of local indirect taxation’ (Deng 2021: 3) and pushed for military and institutional modernization. After the Qing Dynasty's defeat in the Second Opium War in 1860, intellectuals within the ruling class realized that adhering to outdated traditions would not safeguard the nation, emphasizing the necessity of learning from the West. Historians argue that the crisis after the Opium Wars set the stage for the Self-Strengthening Movement – building arsenals and shipyards, and adopting some Western technology (Gray 2003; Huang R. 1997). However, these reforms were often limited by politics, bureaucratic resistance, and inconsistent support. Sheng and Shaw (2007) say that the Opium Wars were a major break with the past and are often viewed as the starting point of modern Chinese history.

The Westernization Movement, or the Self-Strengthening Movement (洋務運動/自強運動), began after China's mortifying losses in the Opium Wars and aimed to promote modernization through the adoption of advanced Western technology. It promoted ‘self-strengthening’ and ‘seeking wealth’ and endorsed the fusion of ‘Chinese learning as the basis, and Western learning as the application.’ Westernization efforts initiated the modernization drive with an emphasis on heavy industry. This effort laid the groundwork for heavy industry development through strategies like ‘official supervision and business management,’ and ‘government-business collaboration,’ which included the construction of a modern railway and maritime transportation network (Li, Yang, and Wu 2023: 33). The Westernization Movement sought to improve China's industrial and military prowess through the adoption of Western industrial technologies and managerial methodologies. Foreign capitalist intruders established modern industrial businesses in the trading ports of Hong Kong, Guangzhou, and Shanghai. The bureaucrats of the Qing dynasty established enterprises for machinery, weapons, mining, iron smelting, and textiles. Various industries began to emerge in Shanghai, Tianjin, Nanjing, Wu-xi, and other locations. Several private firms emerged in the textile, apparel, and food processing sectors. Japan established coal mines and steel mills in Northeast China to exploit resources and facilitate its assertiveness (Liu and Sun 2021). Though these transformations

did not entirely revolutionize China's traditional economy, they established an initial foundation for industrialization and intellectual enlightenment. This foundation sets the stage for future modernization efforts (Li 2024). Overall, the wars and conflicts had positive effects as a catalyst for reform and trigger for knowledge, but negative effects through coercive 'opening,' loss of autonomy, and instability that repeatedly undermine sustained modernization (Fay 1998; Hsü 2000; Lovell 2011).

The Reform Movement of 1898 aspired to model a constitutional monarchy in order to reform the national system and, to some extent, advance the modernization of China's government system. The bourgeois reformists led by Kang Youwei and Liang Qichao started the Reform Movement by promoting the establishment of a constitutional monarchy through hierarchical reforms within the feudal system, inspired by the Meiji Restoration in Japan (Sun 2021). The Reformists believed that establishing a favorable institutional environment was crucial to ensuring the long-term development of the country's economy and culture. They were the first to systematically and comprehensively introduce the concept of 'institutional' reform. The push for a constitutional monarchy in the Reform Movement was derailed by feudal powers, leading to the short-lived 'Hundred Days' Reform.' The Qing government's 'constitutionalism imitation' led to a superficial 'royal cabinet,' ending in failure for the bourgeois reformists (Wu 2023: 3). The reformists and the reform movement failed to realize the 'root' of China's problems, namely the feudal autocratic system that lasted for two thousand years. However, the Westernization Movement and the Reform Movement paved the way for China's modernization, aligning it with global trends and initiating China's distinctive journey towards modernity (Xiong and Yang 2024).

The subsequent important phase of this stage began with the 1911 Revolution and concluded with the formation of the PRC in 1949. This phase is known as the New Democratic Revolution era. The 1911 Revolution led to the fall of the Qing Dynasty's rule and initiated the exploration of China's social modernization. The establishment of a republic after the revolution marked China's transition from a traditional, closed society to a modern, democratic republic system. In 1919, Yat-sen's book 'The International Development of China' translated the revolutionary motto 'Revive China' into a plan for modernizing China (Wang 2023: 106). He envisioned modernization as 'not only industrial progress but also harnessing China's ancient civilization to create a nation with refined politics and contented citizens, owned,

governed, and enjoyed by the people' (Shang and Liang 2023: 3). The New Cultural Movement also laid the basis for China's cultural modernization in the republic era. China started to use the word 'modernization' in the 1920s. After that, Shenbao (申报), Ta Kung Pao (大公报), Eastern Magazine (东方杂志) and other publications began to use 'modernization' more frequently (Tang and Shi 2023: 8).

The founding of the Communist Party of China was a crucial milestone in China's modernization. At the Second National Congress, the party's core goal of eliminating warlords and foreign powers provided a clear roadmap for leading the new democratic revolution. The CCP's primary goals during the New Democratic Revolution era included 'opposing imperialism, feudalism, and bureaucratic capitalism, working towards national independence and the people's liberation, and creating the necessary social conditions for the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.'³ The CCP, after a thorough analysis of China's historical context, understood that to achieve national salvation and rejuvenation, two essential steps were necessary: firstly, to remove outdated production relations and barriers to social development in order to facilitate modernization and rejuvenate; and secondly, to rapidly advance social productivity in order to propel modernization and national revival. Considering China's severely underdeveloped economy, society, and culture, Mao Zedong explicitly outlined the modernization objectives of transitioning 'from an agrarian to an industrial nation' and achieving 'industrialization and modernization of agriculture'. Subsequently, phrases like 'shifting from agrarian to industrial,' 'China's industrialization and agricultural modernization', and 'realizing industrialization' became prevalent in the speeches given by the central leadership of the party. Mao Zedong believed that modern industry is 'the most promising, the most vital force that could cause all changes' (Du and Wang 2022: 16). He emphasised the significance of industrialization as 'Without industry, there can be no consolidated national defense, no people's welfare, and no national prosperity and strength.'⁴ Realizing China's need for industrialization and modernization of agriculture was set as the party's priority. Zhou Enlai presented the notions of 'modernized military industry,' 'equipment modernization,' and 'army modernization' in 'How to Conduct Protracted War.' He emphasized that these were essential for the military struggle at that time. In May 1938, Mao Zedong, in 'On Protracted War', stressed the importance of modernization in restructuring the military system. Mao highlighted that the working class's role exten-

ded beyond establishing a new democratic state to driving China's industrial and agricultural modernization at the Seventh National Congress in 1945. Mao advocated for a new, modernized national economy in talks with Soviet leader Mikoyan in February 1949.

On the brink of the Chinese Revolution, the Second Plenary Session of the Seventh Central Committee of the CCP clearly charted China's development from an agrarian to an industrialized state and from a new democratic society to a socialist one. During the New Democratic Revolution and until the establishment of the Communist Party of China, pursuing modernization remained the primary goal of the revolutionary struggle in China. The thoughts of CCP leaders regarding modernization during this period laid the basis for China's modernization efforts in the socialist transformation and construction phase. The primary objective of modern China from the Opium War until the establishment of the People's Republic of China was: a) to prevent national extinction, b) to attain national independence, and c) to lay down the essential foundations and conditions for autonomous advancement of modernization (Shang and Liang 2023). The Chinese nation's early pursuit of modernization has always been intertwined with national salvation and independence. This whole era of Chinese modernization efforts can be called the passive phase of 'modernization in China.' This stage makes the ground for the active phases of China's modernization, called 'China in modernization' in subsequent years.

3. SOCIALIST REVOLUTION AND CONSTRUCTION STAGE (1949–1978)

Active Chinese modernization began with the proclamation of the PRC in 1949. China's modernization has obtained the fundamental social conditions for independence and self-reliance in 'New China.' Modernization discussions and debates have always been on the priority list of the CCP's top leadership since its foundation. On the eve of the national revolution, at the Second Plenary Session of the Seventh Central Committee of the CCP, Mao Zedong proposed a goal to gradually shift China from an agrarian country into an industrial nation and to develop it into a powerful socialist state (Wang 2022). Mao stated: After victory, priorities would be given to rapid economic recovery, dealing with imperialist interference, a phased transition from agriculture to industry, and the construction of a strong socialist country.⁵ In April 1949, seeing China's condition, Mao proposed a crucial economic policy called 'four directions': emphasis on public and pri-

vate interests, shared gains for labor and capital, urban–rural cooperation, and both domestic and overseas exchange. From a broad perspective, these four directions for economic construction were the guiding principles for the economic recovery period after the establishment of the PRC (Du and Liang 2021).

The ‘National Economic Recovery’ (1949–1952) was a period when the CCP used to repair severely dented productivity, distorted development construction and chaotic markets due to years of war in pre-1949 China. In the early years of the socialist revolution and construction era, the party adopted ‘two-step’ objective to modernize the country along socialist lines. The two steps are: a) changing the ‘poverty and backwardness’ condition as quickly as possible to ensure people’s good living, and b) achieving shared prosperity for all people. Revolutionary transformations have been carried out in the social and economic fields to establish a socialist system. The feudal head and marriage system was abolished, and prostitution, drug abuse and drug trafficking were banned. The ‘three antis’ (三反) and ‘five antis’ (五反) campaigns were launched to curb corruption and illegal capitalist activities. The bureaucratic capital was seized promptly. The state-owned economy was initiated, and the fiscal and economic affairs of the whole country were unified. The illegitimate capitalist market was crashed, and inflation was also effectually controlled. In rural areas land reforms were finalized, granting farmers 700 million mu of land and production materials. In urban areas, reforms in enterprise management systems and property rights were undertaken (Tian and Li 2021). After just over three years of hard work, the damage from the long wars was primarily healed. The responsibilities left over from the democratic revolution were completed. The national economy was restored, and the new people’s regime was uninterruptedly consolidated (Gao 2020). ‘The total industrial and agricultural productivity worth touched ¥ 81 billion 1952, an increase of 77.6 % over 1949. The national income in 1952 increased by 69.8 % over 1949.’⁶ At the end of 1952, a strategy for the transition phase was proposed by the party to basically achieve a socialist industrial economy and restructure farming and handicraft production, and private capitalist business over a reasonable period.⁷ It is known as the ‘One modernization and three reforms’ strategy for transitioning to socialism after initial recovery of the national economy.

After the establishment of ‘New China’, the central leadership of the CCP, with Mao’s thought at the core, set industrialization and urbanization as two crucial tasks for the transition period. Mao’s indus-

trialization-related ideas on modernization were guiding forces for the era. Scholars divide Mao Zedong's thoughts on the path to industrialization into four historical stages: germination (1944–1949), foundation (1949–1956), formation (1956–1962) and tortuous development (1962–1976). They believe that Mao Zedong advocated a Chinese-style, modern, coordinated, leapfrog, and open path for industrialization (Lei 2004). The 'First Five-Year Plan' (1953–1957) was pitched in 1953 and established the guiding principle for the expansion of heavy industry. Its implementation strengthened China's heavy industry. The plan contributed to the development of China's aircraft, motor vehicles, power generation machinery, advanced machine tools, precision devices, smelting aluminum, seamless steel tubes, alloy steels, plastics, radios and other industries (Li, Yang, and Wu 2023). The First Five-Year Plan created new industrial cities and centers in North, Northwest, Central, and Southwest China.

Chou Enlai, the first Premier of the PRC, proposed the 'four modernizations' concept at the First National People's Congress session in 1954. He stated that to eradicate poverty and backwardness, we must develop 'modernized industry, modernized agriculture, modernized transportation and national defense.'⁸ In 1956, at the Second Plenary Session of the Eighth Central Committee of the CCP, a policy was adopted to simultaneously develop central and local industries, large- and medium-sized enterprises, and domestic and foreign production methods was adopted in order to harness the active engagement of all actors and accelerate the process of industrialization. The policy practically encouraged the construction of many industrial projects in local areas. These local industrial projects helped to increase agricultural output and improve people's lives, while simultaneously supporting large-scale industrial production and exports. The process of socialist restructuring of agriculture, crafts, and capitalist industry and businesses started one after another in 1953 and completed the basic transition from private ownership in production to public ownership by the end of 1956. In the essay 'On the Correct Handling of Contradictions Among the People,' Mao introduced the idea of prioritizing heavy industry, managing the balance between agriculture, light industry, and heavy industry correctly, and advancing China's industrialization journey by establishing 'agriculture as the base and industry as the driving force' as the fundamental policy for modernization development. In the initial years of the PRC, Mao Zedong pursued industrialization through an 'inward accumulation model,' transferring sur-

plus from agriculture to industry to build a self-sufficient industrial system (Gong 2023: 172).

In both the ‘First Five-Year Plan’ and the initial strategies of socialist construction, China practically followed the Soviet Union model. The adoption of such an approach was caused by the Western blockade, and the only frightful example of social construction at that time was the Soviet Union. Soviet assistance provided major external support for China's early modernization in the 1950s, especially during the period of the First Five-Year Plan. A core mechanism was the Soviet-assisted ‘156 Projects’ – a package of large capital-intensive industrial facilities that helped China build a more complete elementary industrial system and the initial ‘skeleton’ of a defense-industrial base (‘The ‘156’ Project,’ 2025). Importantly, the Soviet support went beyond loans and physical equipment: it combined the transfer of Soviet machinery for the ‘156’ projects with sustained technical support and knowledge transfer from Soviet specialists, including training and on-site guidance for Chinese counterparts, which strengthened China's technical and managerial capabilities (Giorcelli and Li 2021; Zhang, Zhang and Yao 2006). Zhou (2015) argues that China's acceptance of Soviet assistance was a deliberate strategic choice and a necessary stage in building the capacity needed for eventual independence and autonomy. In contrast, Jin (2021) claims that participation in these programs significantly dampens long-run innovation incentives for local firms.

However, as modernization progressed, Mao Zedong astutely identified the substantial shortcomings of the Soviet model and presciently advocated for ‘learning from the Soviet Union’ while pursuing an independent path. Mao instigated the reform of the centralized planning management system and implemented local decentralization reforms distinct from the Soviet system. Mao stated that ‘We must avoid the Soviet-style tendency to concentrate power entirely at the center, which restricts local authorities, leaving them with no maneuverability.’⁹ He promoted the principle of ‘with China as the main body’ when learning the cultures of other countries (Luo 2021). He firmly declared that China must adhere to the universal ideals of Marxism-Leninism, combining them with the specific realities of the Chinese revolution and seeking a unique trajectory in accordance with its national conditions. In contrast to the Soviet planned economic model, Mao Zedong's reform initiatives endowed China's planned economic system with distinct features. Mao Zedong's reform efforts laid the

bases for the distinctive starting conditions of subsequent reforms and opening-up policies (Han 2018).

Mao's 'On the Ten Major Relationships' (论十大关系) doctrine is another significant theoretical exploration of the socialist path of development. It highlights the political, ideological, and economic objectives of the CCP in their pursuit of China's socialist development (Sun 2018). Under Marxist-Leninist principles, with China's context, incorporating Marx's theory of 'product deduction,' Lenin's idea of 'national insurance,' and China's traditional culture, such as the 'Great Harmony Society,' Mao era launched social security programs encompassing relief, welfare, insurance, employment security, and healthcare to address citizen's needs (Li and Ke 2012: 43–44). These innovative theoretical explanations and practices enabled a new line of exploration into the Chinese path of modernization.

Three more five-year plans were implemented during the socialist revolution and the construction stage. The 'Second Five-Year Plan' (1958–1962) had three main objectives: continued industrial construction focused on heavy industry, laying a strong foundation for China's socialist industrialization, and developing a complete industrial system within three five-year plans. The Second Five-Year Plan boosted backward industries, including petroleum, chemicals, and radio, and enhanced the Chinese industry's technological capacity. However, the 'Great Leap Forward' (大跃进) drive for speedy success resulted in severe economic imbalances. In this context, the CCP enacted policies focusing on restructuring domestic industries, closing and transferring unprofitable enterprises, and the enhancement of enterprise management. These helped the economy recovery from the setbacks caused by the 'Great Leap Forward' and stabilization by 1962. In 1964, based on Mao Zedong's suggestion, Zhou Enlai added modern science and technology to the 'four modernizations' concept at the first session of the Third National People's Congress. Zhou avowed: 'In a not-too-long historical period, we must build our country into a socialist power with modern agriculture, industry, defense and modern science and technology, and catch up with and surpass the world's level.'¹⁰ In the same year, the Party Central Committee formulated a long-term modernization plan and proposed a 'two-step' strategy. The strategy envisaged two phases: first, building an autonomous and fairly comprehensive industrial base and national economic system; and second, achieving modernization in agriculture, manufacturing, defense capabilities, and science and technology.¹¹

Another groundbreaking initiative, called the ‘Third Front Construction’ (三线建设), was launched by the CCP in 1964. At that time, national defense needs drove this initiative. Nevertheless, the initiative promoted significant infrastructure development in the western region, including transportation, industry, and scientific research institutions. This paved the way for the modernization of the Western region and set the stage for its substantial growth during the reform and opening-up period (Liu 2024). During the ‘Third Five-Year Plan’ (1966–1970) and the ‘Fourth Five-Year Plan’ (1971–1975), efforts were made to bolster national defense construction and achieve advances in cutting-edge technology. The focus was on strengthening industries supporting agriculture and national defense to build a self-reliant and well-rounded manufacturing and economic structure. However, due to the initial turbulent phase of the Cultural Revolution, the planned projections did not reach their expected levels. Nevertheless, strategies like the ‘third front construction’ and local ‘five small’ industries helped keep the economy on track despite a few sufferings.

The ‘Four-Three’ (四三方案) scheme was another distinctive initiative introduced by the first-generation CCP central leadership in the early 1970s. Under this scheme, China imported advanced technology and technical equipment from the West to modernize its industries. This open-door policy facilitated the construction of many extensive industrial ventures in the eastern coastal regions. The policy is considered a significant inspiration for economic reform practices in the subsequent decades (Li *et al.* 2024). Even amidst the twists and turns of modernization construction during the ‘cultural revolution’ era, Zhou Enlai again emphasized the goals of the ‘four modernizations’ at the first session of the Fourth National People's Congress in 1975. From 1952 to 1978, China was able to manage some notable socioeconomic achievements despite various challenging national and international circumstances. The percentage of manufacturing and secondary industry-added value in the GDP grew from 17.6 % and 20.9 % to 44.08 % and 48.20 %, respectively. By 1978, industrial sectors including energy, metal, machinery, chemical, and defense had seen substantial growth. Additionally, advancements were evident in aeronautics, microelectronics, aviation, vehicles, precision equipment, nuclear expertise, and petrochemical manufacturing (Liu and Sun 2021: 8). Other major achievements of this era include:

- From 1952 to 1978, the industrial sector saw an average annual growth of 11.2 %, with the total output value rising by fifteen times, notably, heavy industry expanding by 28 times. About 350,000 industrial enterprises were established, and state-owned enterprises' fixed assets soared to 320 billion yuan – 25 times the industrial fixed assets accumulated in old China over nearly a century.

- In terms of major industrial output: steel production surged from 160,000 tons (1949) to 4.47 Mt (1956) and 31.78 Mt (1978); electricity generation increased from 4.3 billion kWh in 1949, to 16.6 billion kWh in 1956 and 256.6 billion kWh in 1978; crude oil production rose from 120,000 tons (1949) to 1.16 Mt (1956) and 104.05 Mt (1978); and automobile manufacturing escalated from 100 vehicles annually in 1955 to 145,910 vehicles per year in 1978.

- Between 1963 and 1966, the annual average GDP growth rate exceeded 14 %, marking one of the most prosperous developmental phases in the PRC's history. The total national industrial output value increased by 172.6 % in volume, growing at an average yearly rate of 9.55%.

- The mortality ratio decreased from 20 per 1,000 in 1949 to 6.25 per 1,000 in 1978. The average life expectancy rose from 35 years (1949) to 57 years (1957), and reached 68 years (1981). National illiteracy rates dropped from 80 % in 1949 to 33.58 % in 1964 and 22.81 % in 1982. According to the World Bank's 1979 country report, the net enrolment ratio at the primary school level in China reached 93 %, which was 30 % higher than the typical enrollment rate of 925 in other developing countries.

- In 1952, 1956, and 1978, the combined power of agricultural machinery amounted to 184,000 kilowatts, 1,214,000 kilowatts, and 117.49 million kilowatts, respectively. The irrigated area in the country expanded to 19,959,000 hectares, 27,339,000 hectares, and 44,965,000 hectares during the same periods. Grain production increased from 192.74 Mt in 1956 to 304.76 Mt in 1978.

Source: compiled from Ouyang 2019: 40–49.

In the socialist revolution and construction era, China implemented a distinct strategy for industrialization based on Mao Zedong's 'three simultaneous developments' doctrine. The 'three simultaneous developments' meant advancing agriculture alongside light and heavy industrial production concurrently, fostering growth in the coastal belt

and inland regions, and balancing economic progress with national defense capabilities. Some scholars, however, have criticized the efficiency of industrialization during the planned economy era, emphasizing low efficiency compared to market standards. They tend to disregard the significance of prioritizing heavy industry development strategy that provided the material and technological basis for the country's future development (Wu and Li 2021). The industrialization of that era served as the foundation for China's modernization (Liu and Li 2021). Although annual progress in living standards was modest, the era met the basic needs of nearly one quarter of the world's population, which China represented at the time. The contribution of Mao Zedong's generation to industrialization and economic development can be seen in American scholar Morris Meisner's following comment: Despite a few errors and setbacks, people still conclude that the Mao Zedong era was the era of China's modern industrial shift (cited in Wu 2024).

The first-generation collective CCP leadership set up the politico-economic framework for modernization and created the political, social, cultural, and institutional foundations that are now visible in modern China. Unlike other developing nations, China did not adopt Western political systems but established a socialist state and government structures consisting of a people's democratic dictatorship, a people's representative assembly system, a unified multi-ethnic state with ethnic autonomy, and a multi-party cooperation system led by the CCP.¹² The 'long-term coexistence and mutual supervision' policies at the party level, as well as 'letting a hundred flowers bloom and a hundred schools of thought contend' in cultural and political domains, provide ideological guidance and a theoretical basis for promoting and expanding the Chinese-style modernization path. The pioneering social programs of that time provided the basis for effectively managing people's well-being in education, employment, social security, and healthcare. These historical experiences provide essential lessons for strengthening and modernizing social governance in the contemporary era (Li 2021). Mao Zedong's 'Phoenix Nirvana' (凤凰涅槃)-style tortuous exploration of a Chinese-style socialist path includes both successful and unsuccessful aspects. The successful aspects left the bedrock political proposition and institutional basis for the creation of China's distinctive socialist path and provided valuable experience, a theoretical base, and material support; the unsuccessful aspects provided important references for the formation of a Chinese-style social-

ist path from the opposite side (Ren 2024). This socialist system, based on a planned economic system, was pivotal in promoting China's modernization course. During this period, China began to gradually form a reasonably integrated industrial system and a national economy, as well as a preliminary modernized system of social initiatives, such as education, science, technology, culture, and health. However, due to a lack of experience in socialist modernization and subjective deviations in understanding national conditions at some points, the modernization process in China also took many detours, so its construction of modernization did not achieve the greater achievements it should have (Xie 2019). Maoist thought provided scientific guidance for the foundation and practical exploration of the impressive cause of China's transformation (Zhang 2023). Mao's explorations of a unique development path inspired future generations and influenced the reform and opening-up policy. Through strategic shifts in global positioning and initiatives like renewing Sino-U.S. relations and China's re-entry into the UN, Mao set the stage for China's emergence onto the global arena (Dong 2014). Many reform initiatives and achievements during the latter stage were actually rooted in, benefitted from, or grew out of Mao's policies, including decisions on international relations, economic decentralization, and industrialization without excessive urbanization (Wei 2011). In summary, this era left an enduring mark on the historical development and progress of New China, laying the basis for governance and the structural framework for all the advancement and development in modern-day China.

After 1978, China's modernization accelerated through 'reform and opening up,' replacing central planning with gradual, experimental market reforms. Chinese scholars emphasize Deng Xiaoping's role in shaping the direction of reform and opening, which marked an important shift in China's approach to economic development and modernization (Zhang and Feng 2019). As reforms deepened, opening up to the world became a key driver. Ju and Yu (2018) show that since 1978, trade, foreign investment, and participation in global production networks had provided essential support for China's long-term growth and industrial upgrading. They also describe China's opening-up as unfolding in 'waves' that expanded the scope and depth of integration over time (Yu 2018).

China's early modernization from the Self-Strengthening era (from 1861) closely matched classical modernization ideas about

catching up through technology and adapting external institutional diffusions. The Qing elites adopted Western military and industrial techniques as a practical response to external pressures and changing world conditions (Kuo and Liu 1978). During the 1901–1911 New Policies, modernization expanded beyond the military and finance into state-building and educational reforms, as the Qing used new schooling and administrative changes to strengthen governance and reshape society (Frölich 2014). During the PRC period, the First Five-Year Plan (1953–1957) reflected a Rostow-style ‘industrial push’ logic (state-led heavy industry), strongly influenced by Soviet technical transfer and large-scale industrial projects (Chen and Zofka 2022). At the same time, China's experience with the ‘Great Leap Forward’ also supports Grinin's (2013 and 2022) warning that modernization can lead to crises and ‘traps’ when institutions fail to manage rapid transformation, which can create upheavals and leave significant long-term costs under ‘technological exaggeration’ (Mao 2013). However, these experiences significantly shaped their later modernization path, in line with national circumstances.

4. CONCLUSION

The modernization of a nation is a complex historical progression. The early stage of Chinese modernization lasted for almost a century. Despite the limited achievements throughout this period, it marked the beginning of a new chapter in China's social transformation process. During this period, the transformation of the Chinese political system set the stage for the country to move from tradition to modernity at the institutional level. However, challenges within the economy, social, and governmental structures prevented the attainment of domestic political unity and hindered entry into an active phase of modernization. China entered an active phase of development following the establishment of the PRC. This period marks the transition from a new democratic society to a socialist, planned economic structure. The implementation of this socialist system, rooted in planned economics, significantly contributed to advancing China's modernization efforts. China steadily developed a robust industrial and national economic infrastructure, while also establishing the foundation for modernized social sectors such as education, science, technology, culture, and healthcare, setting the stage for the subsequent phase of modernization. The next phase of modernization, known as the period of reform and opening-up, brought Chinese-style modernization, which is a form of socialism uniquely adapted to China's context. The period was

marked by rapid economic development, referred to as the ‘China miracle.’ China has been a leading force in reducing extreme global poverty between 1981 and 2017. Since 1978, its poverty reduction initiatives have helped nearly 800 million individuals escape extreme poverty. Today, China produces nearly one-third of the world's manufactured goods, which is why it is named the ‘world's factory.’ As of 2025, more than two-thirds of high-speed rail networks in the world were in China. The country has become one of the countries with the largest installed renewable energy capacities in the world, and its solar energy capacity has exceeded that of the United States and others. Over the past decade, China has emerged as the world's largest official creditor. China's economic advancement effect is reflected in substantial improvements in human development and other areas. Today, China is a leading technological innovator in the world, spanning all sectors such as education, industry, and the military. The Chinese developmental success was not accidental. It is the result of prudently crafted strategies and systematic reforms implemented during its modernization efforts, particularly since the establishment of the PRC.

NOTES

¹ The term ‘Chinese-style modernization’ surfaced in the 1990s and was endorsed by the Chinese Communist Party since the 18th CCP Congress to delineate China's unique path to modernization.

² Selected Works of Mao Tse-tung, vol. II (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1965), 309. <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/sw-in-pdf/sw-flp-1965-v2.pdf>.

³ 中共中央关于党的百年奋斗重大成就和历史经验的决议 [Resolution of the CPC Central Committee on the Major Achievements and Historical Experiences of the Party's Century-Long Struggle], People's Daily, November 17, 2021. <https://www.crecg.com/web/ztzl2/10183803/10183804/2025021110041199003/index.html>.

⁴ 新中国如何实施前两个五年计划 [How New China Implemented the First Two Five-Year Plans]. *CPC News (People's Daily Online)*, November 4, 2025. <https://cpc.people.com.cn/n1/2025/1104/c443712-40596140.html>.

⁵ Mao Tse-tung, Selected Works of Mao Tse-tung, vol. IV (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1965), 373. <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/sw-in-pdf/sw-flp-1965-v4.pdf>.

⁶ 国民经济的全面恢复和初步增长 [Comprehensive Recovery and Initial Growth of the National Economy]. <https://www.dswxyjy.org.cn/n1/2016/0226/c244520-28153401.html>.

⁷ 过渡时期总路线的提出和对资本主义工商业利用、限制、改造方针的制定” [The Proposal of the General Line for the Transition Period and the Formulation of the Policy of Utilizing, Restricting, and Transforming Capitalist Industry and Commerce], CPC News (People's Daily Online). <https://cpc.people.com.cn/GB/64107/65708/65722/4444874.html>.

⁸ 周恩来与“四个现代化”的提出 [Zhou Enlai and the Proposal of the ‘Four Modernizations’]. Communist Party Member Network (12371.cn), March 5, 2023. <https://www.12371.cn/2023/03/05/ART11677984038054722.shtm>.

⁹ Mao Tse-tung, ‘On the Ten Major Relationships,’ Apr. 25, 1956, Selected Works of Mao Tse-tung. https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-5/mswv5_51.htm.

¹⁰ Peking Review (Beijing), no. 1 (January 1, 1965): 10, ‘Premier Chou En-lai Reports on the Work of the Government,’ <https://www.marxists.org/subject/china/peking-review/1965/PR1965-01.pdf>.

¹¹ Xinhua News Agency, Understanding Chinese Modernization (PDF), 10, quoting that ‘the CPC Central Committee put forward a two-step development plan in 1964...,’ [https://english.news.cn/20240504/ae50c03d5f544ae8a651f146c08e5be9_332fa818c707734567b4c3c4f2ad406eb0.pdf](https://english.news.cn/20240504/ae50c03d5f544ae8a651f146c08e5be9/20240504ae50c03d5f544ae8a651f146c08e5be9_332fa818c707734567b4c3c4f2ad406eb0.pdf).

¹² State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China (2005, October). *Building of political democracy in China* (White paper). China Daily. https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/english/doc/2005-10/19/content_486206.htm.

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