

Myths of Capitalism, Marxism, and Chinese Socialism under the Global Division of Labor

Jing Shu*

School of International Chinese Language Education, Beijing Normal University, Beijing, China

*Corresponding author

Abstract: This paper explores the evolution of the mythological systems of capitalism, Marxism, and socialism with Chinese characteristics within the context of the globalized division of labor. The study highlights how globalization, by altering production modes and breaking traditional geographical and cultural boundaries, has driven productivity growth while shaping new societal values and ideological myths. The Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution facilitated the formation of the myths of capitalist rationalism and instrumental rationality. These myths promoted technological progress and economic growth but also exacerbated labor alienation and ecological crises. Rooted in historical materialism and surplus value theory, Marxism reveals the contradictions within capitalist production relations and proposes a pathway to comprehensive human development through socialist transformation. Building on this foundation, socialism with Chinese characteristics integrates Marxism with China's specific conditions to establish a distinctive development model, differing from both traditional capitalism and classical socialism. This model offers new solutions to the issues of inequality and ecological challenges in the globalized division of labor. Finally, this paper analyzes the evolution and driving forces behind modern myths, elucidating the deep interactions among globalization, capitalism, Marxism, and socialism with Chinese characteristics.

Keywords: Globalized division of labor, Myths, Capitalism, Marxism, Chinese Socialism.

1. Introduction

Ancient myths are often closely tied to specific geographical environments and cultural traditions, reflecting local natural conditions, social structures, and modes of production. For example, ancient Chinese myths are closely associated with plains and agricultural civilizations, while ancient Greek myths are linked to the sea, war, and trade. However, with the accelerated development of globalization, modern myths have taken on entirely new characteristics under the influence of the globalized division of labor.

As a core feature of modern economic globalization, the globalized division of labor has profoundly reshaped production patterns and resource allocation, significantly influencing contemporary society's economic development and cultural construction. Within this context, capitalism and Marxism, as two dominant discursive systems, have shaped modern social production relations and ideological narratives. Simultaneously, socialism with Chinese characteristics has flourished in this environment, forming a unique socio-economic model deeply integrated with globalization. This model not only incorporates the market mechanisms of capitalism but also maintains the value orientation of socialism [1,2].

Roland Barthes, in his *Mythologies*, argues that myth is a process of re-encoding symbols, capable of concealing the historical and power relations behind them, and naturalizing social and cultural constructions into self-evident "common sense." This theoretical framework provides valuable insights for understanding the myths of capitalism, Marxism, and socialism with Chinese characteristics. Capitalism, through commodity fetishism, instrumental rationality, and market logic, packages the inherent inequalities of production relations as universal economic laws, thus forming the myth of capitalism. Marxism, on the other hand, seeks to critique these myths by exposing the exploitative nature of capitalist

production relations and constructing a new narrative aimed at the comprehensive liberation of humanity. However, in its dissemination and practice, Marxism has not entirely escaped the tendency toward mythologization, with its utopian vision of a future society becoming another form of historical narrative.

Amid the process of globalization, socialism with Chinese characteristics has responded to both capitalist myths and the shortcomings of traditional socialism by actively integrating into the international division of labor networks while adhering to core socialist values. Through reform and opening-up, China has introduced market economy mechanisms into the socialist framework, becoming a key link in global production chains. In this process, socialism with Chinese characteristics has not only benefited from the globalized division of labor but has also attempted to reshape the structure of global economic governance through initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the promotion of inclusive globalization.

Despite extensive research on capitalist and Marxist ideologies, as well as emerging scholarship on socialism with Chinese characteristics, few studies have systematically examined the interaction of these three ideological systems within the framework of globalization and the globalized division of labor. Existing literature often treats these systems in isolation, neglecting the dynamic interplay between them and their mutual influence on the evolution of modern myths. Furthermore, while globalization is frequently critiqued for perpetuating inequality and ecological crises, insufficient attention has been paid to how alternative systems, such as socialism with Chinese characteristics, offer innovative responses to these challenges.

This paper seeks to fill these research gaps by providing a comparative analysis of the myths of capitalism, Marxism, and socialism with Chinese characteristics within the context of the globalized division of labor. By analyzing how the

Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution contributed to the creation of capitalist myths, as well as how Marxism critiques and transcends the capitalist mode of production, the paper further reveals how socialism with Chinese characteristics inherits and innovates upon Marxist theory in the context of globalization, forming a distinctive ideological and developmental model. This model not only enhances production efficiency through international division of labor but also proposes corrective solutions to the shortcomings of globalization dominated by capitalism.

By addressing these gaps, this paper offers the following contributions: First, it highlights the interconnections between the three ideological systems, rather than treating them as isolated phenomena. Second, it explores the potential of socialism with Chinese characteristics as a practical response to the inequalities and ecological challenges of globalization. Third, it provides a theoretical framework for understanding the evolution of modern myths within the globalized division of labor, contributing to broader discussions on sustainable and equitable global development. Studying the evolution of the myths of capitalism, Marxism, and socialism with Chinese characteristics helps to uncover the profound impact of the globalized division of labor on modern societal values, while also offering theoretical guidance for exploring more just and sustainable pathways for social transformation.

2. Roland Barthes' Theory of Myth

Roland Barthes, a French semiotician and cultural critic, developed one of his most influential theories: the concept of "myth." In his seminal work *Mythologies* [3], Barthes analyzed various cultural phenomena in everyday life and proposed a new understanding of myth as a key mechanism for the production of social meaning. Unlike traditional religious myths, Barthes' theory of myth focuses on the symbolic systems in modern society that appear natural but in reality, carry implicit ideological functions. Through his analysis of symbols, Barthes demonstrated how myths obscure power relations by naturalizing them, transforming them into unquestioned "common sense." In this paper's analysis of the myths of capitalism, Marxism, and socialism with Chinese characteristics, Barthes' theory of myth provides an essential framework for uncovering the mechanisms of ideological operation.

In *Mythologies*, Barthes defines myth as a "system of speech." He asserts that myths are not limited to specific texts or stories but are a form of cultural practice that conveys meaning through symbols. These practices can be expressed through language, images, or behaviors. The core feature of myth is its ability to "re-encode" symbolic meaning by distorting the original meaning of symbols to serve specific social and political purposes.

Barthes argues that the essence of myth lies in its "naturalizing" function. Myths naturalize specific social and cultural phenomena, making them appear as universal and indisputable "common sense," thereby concealing their historical and socially constructed nature. For example, the capitalist phenomenon of commodity fetishism operates through the symbolic function of commodities, concealing the social relations and production processes behind them, reducing them to mere acts of personal consumption. In this way, the exploitative relationships embedded in production remain invisible.

Barthes' method of myth analysis is grounded in semiotics.

Drawing on Ferdinand de Saussure's semiotic model, Barthes divided symbols into the "signifier" and the "signified" and built upon this framework to propose a three-tiered structure of meaning in myths:

(1) The First Layer: The Linguistic Level of the Sign

At the basic semiotic level, the signifier and the signified combine to form a sign. For instance, "rose" at the linguistic level is a sign, where the signifier is the image of a rose, and the signified is the plant itself.

(2) The Second Layer: The Mythical Level of the Sign

At the level of myth, the sign is further reinterpreted to generate a new "signified"—an additional social meaning. For example, at the mythological level, a rose may be interpreted as a symbol of "romance" or "love."

(3) The Third Layer: The Naturalization Process

Through the operation of myth, this additional social meaning is naturalized, obscuring its historical and arbitrary nature as a social construct. For instance, people gradually accept "a rose symbolizes romance" as a universal truth, without questioning the cultural construction behind this association.

Barthes' theory of myth provides significant insights for analyzing capitalism, Marxism, and socialism with Chinese characteristics. In capitalism, the myths of commodities, capital, and money obscure exploitative relationships and social inequalities, constructing a seemingly natural economic logic. Marxism, in contrast, attempts to reveal the mechanisms of capitalist myths and reconstruct a social narrative aimed at the comprehensive development of humanity. However, in practice, Marxism itself may develop into a new historical myth, such as the utopian narrative of socialism. Chinese Socialism seeks to reconstruct the mythic framework of the globalized division of labor by absorbing the market mechanisms of capitalism and innovatively applying Marxist theory. For example, initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the policy of "common prosperity" aim to challenge the narrative of inequality inherent in traditional globalization while constructing a myth of inclusive development. By applying Barthes' theoretical framework, we can more deeply understand the formation and evolution of the myths of capitalism, Marxism, and socialism with Chinese characteristics. This understanding provides a theoretical foundation for the cultural critique of modern society and the reflection on its institutional structures.

3. The Myth of Capitalism

3.1. The Background of the Rise of the Capitalist Myth

The Reformation in the 16th century weakened the authority of the Catholic Church, prompting people to reflect on traditional religious beliefs and explore new ideas. This shift laid the groundwork for intellectual emancipation and facilitated a transformation in social value systems. Between the 17th and 18th centuries, with the gradual decline of feudalism, capitalist economies began to emerge. Urbanization and the development of commerce reshaped social structures, and the growing bourgeoisie increasingly demanded greater political and economic rights [4].

Against this backdrop, the Enlightenment arose in France, Britain, and Germany, becoming a key force in advancing capitalist ideology. Enlightenment thinkers such as Voltaire, Locke, and Montesquieu emphasized reason as a central tool for understanding the world and improving society. They

advocated solving social problems through science and reason, which further catalyzed intellectual liberation. Meanwhile, advances in printing technology and the accelerated dissemination of knowledge allowed Enlightenment ideas to reach broader sections of society, providing a cultural and intellectual foundation for the rise of capitalism. Furthermore, scientific breakthroughs, such as Newtonian mechanics, laid the theoretical groundwork for technological innovation during the Industrial Revolution.

However, although the Enlightenment aimed to liberate humanity through reason, it inadvertently gave rise to a "myth of reason." This myth sought to reduce diversity and complexity into singular logical frameworks, turning reason into a tool that overlooked the richness and variability of human nature. This tendency paved the way for the further development of instrumental reason during the Industrial Revolution.

The Industrial Revolution marked a major leap in modern productive forces, characterized by mechanization and large-scale production. The rationalist ideas and scientific progress championed during the Enlightenment became critical drivers of this transformation. Through technological innovations and the factory system, the Industrial Revolution significantly accelerated the transition from an agrarian economy to an industrial economy, creating conditions for the establishment of capitalist production relations. However, during this process, instrumental reason began to dominate. Horkheimer and Adorno, in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, criticized instrumental reasons for their oppressive impact on human freedom and individuality. While industrialization increased efficiency, it neglected value judgments and humanistic concerns, leading to an overemphasis on "truth" and efficiency at the expense of "goodness."

Although critical theorists such as the Frankfurt School and Michel Foucault critiqued instrumental reason, its logic continued to deeply influence modern society's technical governance and production systems. The Industrial Revolution not only propelled the productivity of capitalism but also reinforced the narrative of the capitalist myth through instrumental reason. By advancing rationality and technology, capitalism appeared to offer greater societal efficiency and material security, but the issues hidden beneath this narrative laid the groundwork for later critiques of capitalism.

3.2. The Formation of the Capitalist Myth

The Industrial Revolution significantly strengthened capitalist production relations and established the foundation of modern industrial capitalism. Its core characteristics include private ownership of the means of production, wage labor, and commodity production. Capitalists own the means of production, employ workers, and pay them wages in exchange for their labor. The purpose of production is to achieve capital accumulation and profit maximization through commodity exchange. While this system improved efficiency through market competition and drove economic growth and technological innovation, it also created inequality and exploitation.

In addition to the Enlightenment and Industrial Revolution, religious thought also contributed to the development of capitalism. Max Weber, in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, argued that Protestant ethics played a crucial role in the rise of capitalism. Protestantism encouraged individuals to pursue success through hard work and commerce, aligning religious principles with capitalist

economic logic, and promoting the development of the capitalist system [5].

While the capitalist production model introduced an abundance of commodities and enriched material life, it also exacerbated the alienation of workers. In *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, Marx criticized how workers were reduced to mere tools of production, with their labor controlled by capitalists. This alienation deprived workers of agency over their own labor. At the same time, the accumulation of capital led to social stratification, creating a divide between a minority owning property and the majority comprising the working class.

Marx further elaborated on the mystifications within capitalist society in *Das Kapital*, identifying three major forms of fetishism: commodity fetishism, capital fetishism, and money fetishism. These forms of fetishism obscure the value of labor and the social relations embedded in production, presenting commodities, capital, and money as independent, almost mystical entities. Marx argued that this phenomenon separated workers from the results of their labor and naturalized capitalism's inequalities and exploitative structures, making them appear unquestionable and eternal.

Simultaneously, capitalism disrupted the relationship between humanity and nature. In ancient societies, people often regarded nature with reverence, viewing it as sacred. In contrast, modern capitalist society commodifies nature, treating it as an inexhaustible resource to be exploited. This anthropocentric perspective has exacerbated ecological crises, including climate change, biodiversity loss, and environmental pollution. While capitalism has driven the development of productive forces, its associated costs—worker alienation and environmental degradation—have increasingly emerged as pressing contradictions in modern society [1].

4. The Myth of Marxism

Marxism emerged in mid-19th century Europe as a critique and reflection on the industrialization process of capitalism and the social inequalities it created. Through their study of historical materialism and the laws of social development, Marx and Engels developed a new theory of social change and the evolution of economic systems.

At its core, Marxism is based on the historical materialist perspective, which posits that societal development depends on the level of productive forces and that the economic base determines the superstructure. The mode of production profoundly shapes social structures and ideologies. A key component of Marxist economics is the theory of surplus value, which states that the value created by workers exceeds the wages they receive, and capitalists extract this surplus value through exploitation to sustain the capitalist system. Marxism asserts that capitalism is not eternal but a transient product of historical development. As productive forces advance and contradictions intensify, capitalism will eventually collapse under its own internal contradictions and be replaced by a socialist mode of production [6,7].

Central to Marxism is the idea of class struggle as the driving force of historical development. Marx divided society into two main classes: (1) The bourgeoisie, who own the means of production and control capital. (2) The proletariat, who sell their labor for wages.

Marx introduced the concept of alienation to describe the estrangement of workers in a capitalist system. Alienation dehumanizes workers and reduces them to commodities,

creating a profound psychological and social disconnect. Under capitalism, workers are alienated from:

The products of their labor, are owned and sold by capitalists.

The production process, which they have no control over.

Their fellow workers, as competition replaces solidarity.

Labor becomes a means of survival rather than self-expression.

Marx argued that the antagonistic relationship between these classes would inevitably lead to revolutionary change, as the proletariat becomes increasingly conscious of its exploitation and unites to overthrow the bourgeoisie. Marxism distinguishes itself from earlier socialist theories, such as utopian socialism, by presenting socialism as a scientific theory grounded in historical and economic analysis. Marx believed that socialism was not an abstract ideal but the inevitable result of capitalism's internal contradictions, achievable through the conscious action of the proletariat.

As a political economy and social theory, Marxism critiques the exploitation and inequality inherent in capitalism. It advocates for the working class to overthrow capitalist rule through revolution and establish a socialist society aimed at the comprehensive development of humanity. However, Marx also recognized the challenges of overthrowing capitalism, noting that merely understanding its flaws is insufficient to bring about change. Instead, social action and control over the means of production are necessary for true emancipation. Marx emphasized that the exploitative nature of capitalist production not only dominates the working class but also controls society as a whole, becoming an alien force. Only when society can systematically control the means of production and eliminate this alien force can humanity break free from the chains of capitalism and achieve comprehensive liberation and development [8].

In summary, Marxism critiques capitalist myths by exposing the exploitative nature of production relations and proposing an alternative social narrative centered on human emancipation. However, in its dissemination and practical application, Marxism itself has not entirely escaped the tendency toward mythologization. The utopian vision of a future communist society, free from class divisions and exploitation, can be seen as a form of historical narrative imbued with mythic qualities. For example, Marxist movements often elevate revolution as an almost sacred event, portraying it as the inevitable and ultimate resolution to class conflict. This narrative, while mobilizing and inspiring, sometimes oversimplifies the complexities of social change and economic development. Additionally, Marxism's emphasis on linear progress—from feudalism to capitalism, then to socialism and communism—can inadvertently reflect the same deterministic logic it critiques in capitalist narratives. Nevertheless, Marxism remains a powerful analytical tool for critiquing inequality, understanding class dynamics, and envisioning alternatives to neoliberal capitalism.

5. Socialism with Chinese Characteristics

Marxism has had a profound impact on global political, economic, and social systems. In the 20th century, it inspired revolutionary movements and the establishment of socialist states in countries such as Russia, China, Cuba, and Vietnam. These movements adapted Marxist theory to their specific historical and cultural contexts, leading to diverse

interpretations and applications. Chinese Socialism is a unique socialist practice that creatively applies and develops Marxism based on China's specific conditions. Its essence remains socialism, but it deeply integrates elements of capitalist market economics and the trends of globalization. As a response to the contradictions of capitalism and the transcendence of traditional socialist models, it has formed a new socio-economic development model distinct from both classical capitalism and socialism [8].

This model emphasizes economic development as its core, using market mechanisms within a socialist framework to liberate productivity and drive modernization. Unlike the traditional Marxist emphasis on public ownership and planned economies, socialism with Chinese characteristics combines socialist values of equity with the efficiency of resource allocation in capitalist markets. Through policies like the rural household contract responsibility system, the establishment of special economic zones, and state-owned enterprise reforms, China has released productive forces, improved living standards, and advanced national modernization, reflecting the flexibility of Marxist theory when adapted to specific contexts [10,11].

While capitalism prioritizes private ownership and profit maximization, leading to issues such as inequality, ecological crises, and economic cycles, socialism with Chinese characteristics addresses these drawbacks through regulation and state intervention. For example, by maintaining the dominance of state-owned enterprises in critical sectors and promoting the coexistence of multiple ownership structures, it prevents private capital from monopolizing economic benefits, ensuring national and public interests remain prioritized. Additionally, policies like poverty alleviation, rural revitalization, and interventions in housing, healthcare, and education demonstrate China's focus on reducing inequality and safeguarding citizens' rights, contrasting with the profit-driven logic of capitalism.

Chinese Socialism interacts dynamically with globalization. It has both benefited from the globalized division of labor, driving rapid economic growth and influenced the global economic system through its unique development model. China's active participation in international trade and value chains has positioned it as the "world's factory," while initiatives like the Belt and Road (BRI) have expanded global economic integration. By building infrastructure and fostering inclusive globalization, China addresses imbalances in traditional global trade structures, showcasing its evolving role in shaping a fairer global order.

Beyond its economic framework, socialism with Chinese characteristics also serves as a source of national identity and collective cohesion. As an ideological system, it functions like a myth, in Roland Barthes' sense, by naturalizing historical institutional arrangements into a universally accepted societal narrative. Through education, media, and policy, it reinforces its legitimacy and fosters a collective belief in its role as the path to China's national rejuvenation. By linking itself to China's rich cultural history and emphasizing collective welfare over individualism, socialism with Chinese characteristics has created a distinct socio-cultural environment, strengthening societal unity and resisting external capitalist ideological influences.

6. Conclusion

By analyzing the myths of capitalism, Marxism, and socialism with Chinese characteristics in the context of the

globalized division of labor, this paper reveals the multi-layered interactions and evolutionary logic of modern ideological systems. As the core driving force of the modern economy, the globalized division of labor has provided the foundation for the expansion of capitalist production modes, further solidifying the myths of scientific rationality and instrumental rationality. While these myths have driven the development of global productive forces, they have also exacerbated social inequality, labor alienation, and ecological crises.

Marxism, rooted in historical materialism, has critically exposed and analyzed the contradictions and shortcomings of capitalist myths. Through the theory of surplus value and the concept of labor alienation, Marxism outlines the potential pathway for achieving human freedom and development through social transformation. However, the utopian narrative embedded in the practical application of Marxism has, to some extent, created another form of historical myth, often reliant on a linear logic of progress.

Chinese Socialism has developed a unique response to the challenges posed by globalization. By incorporating market mechanisms into the socialist framework, it has effectively integrated into global production networks, enabling rapid economic growth while avoiding the widespread social inequalities commonly associated with capitalism through policy regulation. Furthermore, through initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), socialism with Chinese characteristics seeks to promote a more balanced international division of labor and address the inequities of traditional globalization. This model of "inclusive globalization" serves as both a critique of capitalist myths and an innovative application of Marxist theory.

In summary, this paper argues that the interactions and evolution of capitalism, Marxism, and socialism with Chinese characteristics under the framework of globalization have profoundly influenced modern production relations and value systems. Understanding the formation and transformation of

these myths offers crucial insights into finding more equitable and sustainable development models amidst the opportunities and challenges of globalization. As a flexible and innovative practice, socialism with Chinese characteristics provides valuable experiences and perspectives for addressing the inequalities and ecological crises inherent in the globalized division of labor.

References

- [1] J. E. Stiglitz: *Globalization and Its Discontents* (W.W. Norton & Company, USA 2002).
- [2] Wallerstein: *World-Systems Analysis: An Introduction* (Duke University Press, USA 2004).
- [3] R. Barthes: *Mythologies* (Hill and Wang, USA 1972).
- [4] K. Polanyi: *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time* (Beacon Press, USA 1944).
- [5] M. Weber: *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (Routledge, UK 2005).
- [6] *Collected Works of Marx and Engels, Vol. 1* (People's Press, China 2012).
- [7] *Collected Works of Marx and Engels, Vol. 2* (People's Press, China 2012).
- [8] J. B. Foster: *Marx's Ecology: Materialism and Nature* (Monthly Review Press, USA 2000).
- [9] J.P. Xi: *The Governance of China* (Foreign Languages Press, China 2014).
- [10] Y.K. Zhang: Theoretical Logic of the Worldview and Methodology of Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era, *Journal of Ideological and Theoretical Education*, Vol. 31 (2024) No.10, p.41-48.
- [11] X.W. Lu and J.K. Li: On the Generation Logic and Value Implications of Chinese Spirit from the Perspective of Marx's Theory of Spiritual Production, *Journal of Zhengzhou University (Philosophy and Social Sciences Edition)*, Vol. 55 (2022) No.1, p.24-29.