



Shi Zhengyi on China Ethnic Minority Areas Economic System Reform

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ABSTRACT

This article introduces Professor Shi Zhengyi's early theoretical thinking on reforming the Chinese ethnic minority economic system. Due to historical and political reasons, China had built a planned economic system after the founding of the People's Republic of China before the reform. That economic system helped China develop its industries. But that rigid economic system became incompatible with product development, especially in ethnic minority areas. Ethnic minority areas were backward in production and unbalanced in development. After 1978, China gradually built its new socialist economic system, a planned commodity economy based on public ownership. It suggested that in this economic system reform, the minority autonomous areas should be open to foreign countries, introduce advanced technology and investment, and develop import and export trade. At the same time, the minority autonomous areas should strengthen economic cooperation with other regions. Ethnic minority areas must also carry out comprehensive economic system reform, which should fully consider the specific characteristics of these areas, especially the ethnic and regional factors.

Keywords: China ethnic minority area ; self-sufficient natural economy ; unbalanced ; economic system reform ; ethnic feature ; regional characteristics

INTRODUCTION

From 1949 to 1976, China finished industrialization and built its national economic system. But China's economic efficiency is backward to that of countries and regions with rapid development, and its economic vigor is also insufficient. In 1978, China's politics changed considerably. China's economy began to reform. It effectively promoted the transformation from a planned economy to a market economy. Chinese leaders are aware that the market is conducive to promoting economic efficiency and vitality and put forward the idea of respecting the autonomy of economic subjects, which has triggered a wave of independent operation of farmers and urban self-employed operators across the country. The complexity of the economic system in Chinese ethnic minority areas and the difficulty of its reform required considering ethnic and regional elements to establish a new economic system in ethnic minority areas. Professor Shi stated three principles in studying ethnic minority economy: integrity, interrelation and optimization (Shi, 1984).

Professor Shi proposed the comprehensive opening-up policy for ethnic minority areas be an international and domestic two-way opening and circulation (Shi, 1985). Professor Shi believed the substantial resource advantages of the western region would play an invaluable role in the westward shift of national construction priorities (Shi, 1996). Professor Shi

proposed ethnic minority areas adjust measures to local conditions and give full play to local advantages. Ethnic minority areas should develop comprehensively and strengthen horizontal economic ties between regions. Professor Shi indicated the unbalance and backwardness of the economy in ethnic minority areas are more desirable and suitable for diverse economic forms and management styles. He also stressed the characteristics of ethnic minority areas mainly included the following aspects: ethnic, regional, backward, complex, and international (Shi, 1984).

This article introduces Professor Shi Zhengyi's early theoretical thinking and primary contributions to reforming the Chinese ethnic minority economic system. The contents in this article came from the collected works of Shi Zhengyi (2001), and we just edited and sorted them. So, the theoretical contribution of this article is attributed to Professor Shi Zhengyi. We will take the whole responsibility for all mistakes in this article.

THE FOUNDATIONS OF CHINA'S ECONOMIC SYSTEM

Before founding the People's Republic of China, China was a semi-colonial and semi-feudal society. China's economy was highly backward then, and the self-sufficient natural economy had an absolute advantage. Therefore, the "Natural Economic Theory" inevitably negatively influenced the construction of China's economic system.

The Chinese revolution was a process of long-term armed struggle. The "supply system" of military communism was formed in the harsh war environment. It made an essential contribution to the victory of the revolution. The old revolutionaries were familiar with the system and quite used to it. Therefore, the economic system formed after the establishment of New China was inevitably mixed with factors of the supply system.

The imperialist invasion brought great disaster to China's people of all ethnic groups. This naturally made the masses hate and despise Western countries. In addition, Western countries have adopted economic blockade policies against New China. Therefore, to build China's new economic system, the Chinese people did not want to absorb western capitalist countries' economic management methods. In addition, people couldn't do so even if they wanted to.

In building a new socialist economic system, China's guiding ideology was "leaning to one side" and "comprehensively learning from the Soviet Union." In this process, China learned a lot of valuable things. However, we inevitably accepted many useless and even harmful items to our country in the meantime. For example, from the perspective of the economic system, the degree of national concentration was too high, the production of goods was restricted, and the law of value was ignored. These disorders greatly impacted the economic system established in China in the early days.

In socialist transformation, China successfully utilized, restricted, and transformed capitalist industry and commerce. However, the practice of unified purchase and exclusive sales implemented during the transformation was kept in the subsequent economic system. Under the guidance of ultra-leftist thinking, China vigorously implemented the "great, public, high (high speed), fast (fast transition)" strategy. This has dramatically enhanced the concentration

of power in various sectors of the national economy. At the same time, China launched a campaign to “cut the tail of capitalism.” In this process, the commodity economy was criticized as capitalism. As a result, the role of market mechanisms became less and less. The planned economic system became a rigid model.

On the above bases, China established its economic system and model. It is a traditional centrally planned economy model with many military communist supply system elements. In establishing the socialist economic system, to a certain extent, this economic system adapted to the backward production and difficult financial conditions at that time. Therefore, it played a positive role. However, it became increasingly incompatible with further product development in the subsequent development process.

At the same time, because this economic system had an intense concentration of power, it had an even more significant effect and a more profound impact on the backward economy in the ethnic minority areas.

First, in terms of economic form, ethnic minority areas were not only backward in production but also unbalanced in development. It objectively required multiple economic conditions or economic components to promote product development. But the traditional, centralized planned economy required a single form of public ownership and unified management. As a result, the economies of ethnic minority areas were more severely restricted than common areas.

Second, regarding the management system, ethnic minority areas, especially ethnic autonomous regions, should have greater economic autonomy. However, the centralized economic management system implemented the measures of unifying government and enterprises, dividing lines and sectors, suppressing up and squeezing down. These measures significantly limited the autonomy of autonomous regions. It was a fundamental reason for the lack of vitality of the economic management system in ethnic minority areas.

Third, the economy of ethnic minority areas was more backward, and the influence of the “Natural Economic Theory” was more Profound. This would have required accelerating the development of the commodity economy to promote modernization. However, the management system and methods of the traditional and centralized planned economy excluded the market economy. It had seriously hindered the historical process of the transformation from natural economy to commodity economy in ethnic minority areas.

Fourth, the state ran mines, factories, and forest farms in ethnic minority areas. This was initially to revitalize the economy of ethnic minority areas and help people of all ethnic groups get rid of poverty and become rich. However, due to the constraints of the traditional planned economic system, state ownership and direct state management were equated. It caused conflicts between these state-owned enterprises and the local people regarding economic relations. Sometimes, it even directly damages the interests of ethnic minorities, causing ethnic disputes and disputes.

Fifth, in the agricultural and animal husbandry production in minority areas, the contradiction between the traditional and centralized planned economic system and the actual productivity development was more prominent. Initially, it was the common aspiration of all ethnic groups to take the socialist path. The establishment of mutual aid groups, the development of cooperatives and the public ownership of means of production were also supported by farmers and herders. However, in the process of collectivization, the specific characteristics of ethnic minority areas were not fully considered. Instead, the practice in the Han areas was directly copied. Production in ethnic minority areas was highly backward, and substantial economic, cultural, and social development gaps were ignored. The campaign of “big and public” was carried out, and labor management systems such as “three-level ownership, team ownership foundation,” and “work evaluation and scoring” were implemented. This approach was difficult to mobilize producers’ enthusiasm for production. In addition, it significantly increased the material and spiritual burdens unbearable for producers.

Due to the lack of organizational ability of the leaders, or their blind commanding, production was seriously affected, livestock died or were injured, and the ecological balance was destroyed. Even the limited social productivity was damaged. Dominated by the wrong left-leaning ideas, it was believed that the causes of these problems were “the shortcomings of grassroots cadres in their work” or “the poor ability of ethnic cadres.” Nobody thought it was the problem of the economic system itself. Lenin once said that it was inevitable that all nations would develop towards socialism. But each nation’s path to socialism would not be the same. Every nation has its characteristics. It would be reflected in the form of democracy, the type of dictatorship of the proletariat, and the speed of socialist transformation in all aspects of social life (Lenin, 1990). In terms of the economic system, ethnic minorities also have their characteristics. After long-term development, the traditional and centralized planned economic system exposed a lot of disorders. It severely hampered the development of China’s social productivity and hindered the economic revitalization of ethnic minority areas. It had plunged the entire national economy (including the economy in ethnic minority areas) into a vicious circle. The Central Committee of the Communist Party of China had repeatedly proposed adjustments and reforms and delegated power. However, only the management authority of the central and local lines and blocks was adjusted, and only some specific management systems were reformed. The old model had not been fundamentally transformed. As a result, the original framework still constrained the national economy.

In this context, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China believes it must be determined to transform China’s economic system from the ground up. Only in this way could a new socialist economic system full of vigor and vitality with Chinese characteristics be established. In ethnic minority areas, this economic system must be more flexible. It should reflect not only regional characteristics but also ethnic characteristics. It must combine ethnic and regional elements to establish a new economic system in ethnic minority areas (Shi, 2001:609-612).

BUILDING A NEW ECONOMIC SYSTEM WITH NEW THEORIES

The Third Plenary Session of the Twelfth Central Committee of the Communist Party of China passed the “Decision on Economic System Reform.” It proposed the following new perspectives and theories:

First, “the basic task of China’s economic system reform was to establish a socialist economic system full of vigor and vitality with Chinese characteristics to promote the development of productive social forces.” It was a creative theoretical contribution. It emphasized Chinese characteristics and emphasized being full of vigor and vitality. As a brand-new social system, socialism should be full of energy and vitality. But it became a rigid structure due to the constraints of the old and centralized planned economic system. This wooden structure also caged the backward natural economy in ethnic minority areas.

Second, “in the past, the state-controlled enterprises too much and the control was too rigid. An important reason is that ownership by the whole people and state agencies’ direct management of enterprises were confused.” The distinction between the ownership and management’s right had important practical and theoretical significance. It was conducive to promoting the production responsibility system in all industries. At the same time, in theory, it could be demonstrated that it was consistent with the perfection of socialist public ownership. It is a new theoretical basis for further expanding economic autonomy in ethnic minority areas.

Third, “the socialist planning system should be a system that combines unity and flexibility.” “In reforming the planned system, we must first break the traditional concept of opposing the planned economy and the commodity economy. We must realize that the socialist planned economy must consciously base itself on and apply the law of value. It should be a planned commodity economy based on public ownership.” This scientific assertion theoretically overthrew the long-established wall of traditional concepts in a socialist political economy. It vastly broadened the horizons of theoretical researchers. At the same time, it pushed the academic study of Marxist political economy to a new stage of development.

Moreover, it pointed out that the full development of the commodity economy was an insurmountable stage in social and economic development and a necessary condition for China to realize its economic modernization. It is the theoretical basis for reforming the economic system in ethnic minority areas. If the commodity economy was not vigorously developed, the socialist modernization in ethnic minority areas could not be realized.

Fourth, “the relationship between socialist enterprises is first a relationship of cooperation and support. But it does not exclude competition.” Introducing “competition” into socialist economic activities is a breakthrough in the Marxist political economy. For the economic development of ethnic minority areas, it is of practical significance to emphasize that the relationship is “first a relationship of cooperation and support.” But from the perspective of opening to the outside world, the relatively backward regions can take advantage of the competition among advanced countries, regions and sectors to introduce science, technologies and capital. Moreover, they can also take advantage of natural resources to develop in the competition rapidly.

Fifth, “we must make full use of domestic resources and tap foreign resources to develop the domestic market and foreign markets,” and “blockades between economically developed and less developed regions should be removed. So should the blockades between coastal areas, inland and frontier regions, those between urban and rural areas, and those between different industries.” It proposes to “make use of two resources,” “tap two markets,” and comprehensively open up. This had a direct effect on speeding up the development of coastal areas. In addition, it also has positive significance for speeding up the construction of ethnic minority areas. The comprehensive opening-up policy for ethnic minority areas included two aspects: the first was to implement an opening-up policy to foreign countries, introduce needed advanced technology and investment, and develop import and export trade; the second was to open to other regions in the country, especially the coastal areas, to strengthen economic cooperation and support; at the same time, ethnic autonomous areas should also be open to one another. Not only could they learn from one another, but they could also make up for what others lacked.

The above five points were only put forward from the perspective of economics. The “Decision” also raised many new views. Even some “old views” included new content. But just by looking at the new things included in these five views, we can see that the new theory expounded in the “Decision” had broken through the traditional socialist economic theory. It described the new economic model with Chinese characteristics we would establish. This new economic model has the following features:

It is not a single public ownership structure characterized by “big and public.” Instead, it is a complex of various economic forms. It is dominated by the ownership of the whole people and includes collaborative economy, individual economy and even various economic associations of different natures.

Second, it is not a planning system based on directives and is implemented by administrative means. Instead, it focuses on guidance and combines planning regulation with market mechanisms. It is a designed socialist commodity economic system.

In this system, not all major economic decisions are concentrated in the upper-level executive leadership. Instead, national, collective and individual interests are combined. The enterprises’ economic benefits and the employees’ economic income are combined.

It does not directly confuse the ownership by the whole people with the direct operation of enterprises by state agencies. It implements the separation of administration and enterprise. It is an economic organization system with the central cities as the hubs and the horizontal connection as the network.

According to the above characteristics, this new economic system can be called a financial system with both planning and vigor and can consciously apply the law of value. It could be called a “flexible and planned system of commodity economy.” Only by establishing such an economic system can the advantages of the socialist system be brought into full play. Only by doing so can we speed up the four modernizations of socialism and promote the shared

prosperity and development of all ethnic groups. Therefore, ethnic minority areas must also carry out comprehensive economic system reform under the guidance of this new economic theory. In this way, they can create an economic system that adapts to the actual local conditions and reflects the characteristics of the local ethnic groups (Shi, 2001: 612-615).

ECONOMIC SYSTEM REFORM AND LOCAL CHARACTERISTICS

The economic system reform in ethnic minority areas should fully consider the specific characteristics of these areas. This is very important. It is not only the objective requirement of regional differences but also the experience and lessons we have learned in ethnic work. In leading the people of various ethnic groups to carry out democratic reforms, the Communist Party of China thoroughly considered the conditions and characteristics of different ethnic regions. It had thus obtained great success and extensive experience. Still, in the later stage of socialist transformation, especially in the process of the "Great Leap Forward," "commune transformation," and "learning from Dazhai in agriculture," it ignored the actual situation and characteristics of ethnic minority areas. Instead, it adopted the "one-size-for-all approach." As a result, it encountered severe setbacks. This reform can be seen as eradicating the negative consequences of tremendous social change.

It can also be seen as a development of the positive implications of that significant social change. Therefore, this reform was closely related to the previous one, and their purpose was ultimately the same. If the last overhaul were meant to establish a socialist system in ethnic minority areas, this reform would further develop and improve the socialist system in ethnic minority areas. It aimed to give full play to the superiority of the socialist system. Therefore, this economic system reform in ethnic minority areas was another far-reaching social change, both in breadth and depth. In such a significant change, the central government's policies and the situation in ethnic minority areas should be combined correctly. If the specific characteristics of ethnic minority areas are not fully considered, this will not be done well. How can we correctly understand the aspects of ethnic minority areas? What are the most important economic characteristics of ethnic minorities at this stage?

In 1984, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China held a symposium on work in Tibet. In the summary of the seminar, it was proposed to re-understand the characteristics of ethnic minority areas, and the method of doing so was scientifically explained. *Tibet Daily* had a detailed report on this. Later, *Red Flag* magazine published the article *On Re-understanding* for a systematic discussion. It mainly contained the following contents:

To correctly understand the characteristics of ethnic minority areas, we must first be based on reality. Here, practice is emphasized. That is, awareness should be enhanced through training and re-practices. This is extremely important for reforming the economic system in ethnic minority areas. As pointed out in the Decision, all practices in the reform must be tested by practice, and new experiences must be drawn from practice.

Suppose we want to understand the objective reality and specific characteristics of ethnic minority areas. In that case, our thinking process must rise from individual to general or concrete to abstract. Without such a development process, it is impossible to correctly understand the nature and laws of the economic system reform in ethnic minority areas. We

must correctly implement the guidelines, policies and principles of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China on guiding the economic system reform into practice in ethnic minority areas. Our cognition must return from the general and abstract awareness to the individual and concrete comprehension. Suppose our understanding does not go through this stage of further development. In that case, we will not be able to perfect and develop the economic system reform guidelines, policies, and principles or have a comprehensive understanding of the economic system reform in ethnic minority areas.

Under the guidance of the correct method of understanding, we can understand the characteristics of ethnic minority areas. Generally speaking, ethnic minority areas' features differ from those of Han areas. Other ethnic minority areas can also be compared with one another. For example, Tibet can be compared with ethnic minority areas such as Inner Mongolia, Xinjiang, and Yunnan, revealing many characteristics. Many features will also be displayed if we compare the attributes of the same ethnic region or the entire ethnic group. Let's compare different development stages of the same ethnic region or the whole ethnic minority region, for example, the economic reform in the 1980s with the social system reform in the 1950s. The same result will be obtained.

Mao Zedong delivered a speech *On the Draft Constitution of the People's Republic of China* in 1954. In his remarks, he discussed that "the issues of ethnic minorities have both commonalities and particularities." He pointed out that "ethnic minorities have their own political, economic, and cultural characteristics. What are the economic characteristics of ethnic minorities? Article 5 states four types of ownership of production means in the People's Republic of China. But there are other forms of ownership in ethnic minority areas. Does the original commune ownership still exist? In some ethnic minorities, it may still exist. There is still slave ownership and there is still feudal ownership. " This is about the economic characteristics of ethnic minority areas before the social system reform. Analyzing these characteristics is to clarify the guidelines and policies for social system reform. The purpose of examining these characteristics is to explain the principles and procedures of social system reform and provide an objective basis for democratic and socialist reform. It is a vital scientific work to comprehensively and systematically analyze and understand the characteristics of ethnic minority areas. It is also a traditional practice of the Chinese Communist Party.

In a general sense, the characteristics of ethnic minority areas are mainly reflected in two aspects, namely, the ethnic features and the regional characteristics. Ethnic differences naturally lead to differences in ethnic history, ethnic culture, ethnic, economic life, etc., thus forming different aspects. Due to regional differences, or various natural conditions, there will inevitably be other production conditions and living customs. For example, mountains, forests, plains, and coastal areas are different, and life in pastoral areas is very different from that in agricultural areas. In a nutshell, the characteristics of ethnic minority areas mainly include the following aspects:

First, it is about the ethnic characteristics. Every ethnic group has its features. The composition of ethnic minority areas is diverse. Ethnic minority areas, including five autonomous regions, 31 autonomous prefectures, and 86 autonomous counties, are all

inhabited by the Han nationality and not only by one ethnic minority. Multi-ethnic living is a common feature of all ethnic minority areas. Therefore, many problems in ethnic minority areas often have elements of ethnic issues. The economic construction and economic system reform in those areas are no exception.

Second, it is about the regional characteristics. China has a vast territory, and ethnic minorities live in scattered places. Most of them live in remote and frontier areas. It makes the natural conditions of ethnic minority areas very different. The development of an ethnic economy needs to be based on the characteristics formed by complex regions. The economic system reform also needs to fully consider the traditional aspects of each ethnic group caused by these differences.

Third, it is about the backward characteristics. As far as the development level of social economy and science and technology is concerned, China's current situation is the same as the resource mentioned above development, forming a wave-shaped form in the opposite direction, with the east higher than the west. The eastern coastal areas have the highest level of development. The plains in the center are at an intermediate level. The western plateaus have the lowest level of development. Most ethnic minorities are located in the backward regions in the west. Generally speaking, the socio-economic, scientific and technological status of the ethnic minority areas is relatively backward, and social progress is unbalanced. The traditions of various ethnic groups are also very different. If the particular circumstances of these regions are not fully considered, the reforms in these regions cannot be carried out well.

Fourth, it is about the complex characteristics. Ethnic minority areas are considered more difficult. It is because they have the same contradictions and problems as in other regions and the difficulties of ethnic relations. There are also religious issues in many ethnic minority areas. For example, Lamaism Profoundly influences the masses in Tibet, while Islam extensively influences ethnic minorities in the northwest regions. It further complicates many issues. Ethnic minority areas have complex characteristics, and many contradictions are intertwined. Therefore, in reforming the economic system in ethnic minority areas, we must fully understand and consider this complexity and carefully deal with various problems brought about by this complexity. Naturally, our work should also be carried out on this basis.

Fifth, it is about the international characteristics. Most of China's ethnic minorities live in frontier regions. Many of them live in different countries on both sides of the border. Therefore, the socialist development in ethnic minority areas will directly influence internationally. The success or failure of the economic system reform in these ethnic minority areas is directly related to the country's reputation. It requires that reforms be based on these regions' specific characteristics. The guidelines and policies of the central government must be creatively implemented. We must ensure the smooth progress of the reform and maintain the unity of the country and the unity of all ethnic groups.

The above points are some of the main characteristics abstracted from the actual situation common to China's multi-ethnic regions. Each ethnic minority area has its own more diverse features. Therefore, in the economic system reform in ethnic minority areas, we must fully consider the typical characteristics of ethnic minority areas and the different and unique

features of each ethnic minority area. Only by doing this can our work genuinely meet the “Decision’s requirements,” and we can guarantee the complete victory of creating economic system reform in ethnic minority areas (Shi, 2001: 615-619).

CONCLUSION

The economic system reform beginning in the late 1970s is one of China’s most significant social reforms that helped China’s economy and society gain substantial progress. Ethnic minority areas in China were far more backward than Han areas regarding economy and society because of many historical and natural reasons. So we should take extraordinary measures to speed up economic system reform and promote the development of the economy and society in ethnic minority areas. Chinese Ethnologic Economics theorists, represented by Professor Shi Zhengyi, conducted a comprehensive study on this issue and pointed out that the foundation of China’s economic system is a highly backward and self-sufficient natural economy. They suggested that China build a new economic system under the guidance of new theories and further expand the economic autonomy function of ethnic minority areas. As to economic system reform, the state should fully consider the characteristics of ethnic minority areas and make significant contributions to the economic system reform and economic and social development of ethnic minority areas.

There are certain deficiencies in these early theorists’ research owing to the limitations of historical cognition, such as not learning from western development economics theory and research results of economic anthropology well, discussing insufficiently on commonness and individuality in ethnic minority areas, etc. Fortunately, these deficiencies have been made up with the efforts of later Chinese theorists in ethnologic economics.

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