

The Internal Logic, Main Connotations, and Contemporary Value of General Secretary Xi Jinping's Important Proposition that "the Greatest Human Right of All Is the Right to a Happy Life"

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Abstract: *General Secretary Xi Jinping's important exposition that "the greatest human right of all is the right to a happy life" is guided by Marxist views on human rights, rooted in the CPC's practical explorations in respecting and protecting human rights, and absorbs and draws on human rights concepts embedded in the fine traditional Chinese culture, thus possessing profound internal logic. This important exposition embodies a teleology of realizing the people's happy life based on the rights to subsistence and development, an axiology of adhering to a people-centered approach to human rights, and a methodology of exploring a path of human rights development based on national conditions and the people's needs. Against the backdrop of severe challenges facing global human rights governance, this important exposition provides guidance for strengthening confidence in China's path of human rights development and advancing China's human rights cause. Also, it carries great significance in breaking the western monopoly on human rights discourse and building a Chinese discourse system on human rights. It thus contributes Chinese experience and wisdom to global human rights governance.*

Keywords: China's path of human rights development ♦ people's happy life ♦ put the people first ♦ contemporary Chinese outlook on human rights

"The greatest human right of all is the right to a happy life" is an original discourse on human rights proposed by the Communist Party of China (CPC) on the basis of the development of China's human rights cause. On December 10, 2018, in his congratulatory letter to a forum commemorating the 70th anniversary of the publication of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, Xi Jinping, general secretary of the Communist Party of China (CPC) Central Committee first put forward the important assertion that "The greatest human

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right of all is the right to a happy life.”¹ Since then, he has repeatedly elaborated on this proposition, which systematically expounds how Chinese Communists in the new era understand and approach the issue of human rights.² This important statement closely links the people’s pursuit of a happy life with their fundamental rights, forming a distinctive discourse on human rights that demonstrates the CPC’s people-centered stance and its value commitment. Since the introduction of this proposition, scholars have examined it from multiple perspectives — including legal theory and human rights theory — discussing its theoretical positioning, practical requirements, and discursive characteristics, thereby enriching research on General Secretary Xi Jinping’s important expositions on respecting and safeguarding human rights. On this basis, by drawing on the Marxist view on human rights as well as the history and theory of the CPC, further exploring the internal logic and cultural foundations of this important proposition, and examining its rich connotations and contemporary value, carries particular significance for better understanding the Party’s original aspiration and mission as well as its broad vision of contributing to the world. It also helps to promote a correct understanding of human rights and to deepen comprehension of the contemporary Chinese perspective on human rights.

I. The Internal Logic of General Secretary Xi Jinping’s Important Proposition that “the Greatest Human Right of All Is the Right to a Happy Life”

General Secretary Xi Jinping’s important exposition that “the greatest human right of all is the right to a happy life” adheres to the Marxist view on human rights as its theoretical guidance, is grounded in the historical practice of the CPC in respecting and safeguarding human rights, and draws upon elements of fine traditional Chinese culture. It thus represents a dialectical unity of theoretical logic, historical logic, and cultural logic.

A. Theoretical logic: the guidance of the Marxist view on human rights

The Marxist view on human rights, through its holistic study of human survival, development, and rights, provides theoretical guidance for the CPC in analyzing and addressing human rights issues and in grasping the relationship

¹ Institute of Party History and Literature of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, *Xi Jinping on Respecting and Protecting Human Rights* (Beijing: Central Party Literature Press, 2021), 7.

² “The Communist Party of China and Human Rights Protection — A 100-Year Quest” notes: “In a congratulatory letter to the symposium commemorating the 70th anniversary of the publication of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Chinese President Xi Jinping put forward the human rights outlook of the new era that ‘The greatest human right of all is the right to a happy life,’ endowing the development of China’s human rights cause in the new era with new significance.” State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China, “The Communist Party of China and Human Rights Protection — A 100-Year Quest,” *People’s Daily*, June 25, 2021.

between people's happy lives and human rights. The important assertion that "the greatest human right of all is the right to a happy life" places the people's happy life at the forefront and upholds the principal position of the people, thereby inheriting and developing the Marxist view on human rights.

On the one hand, the Marxist view on human rights possesses a distinct people-oriented character, which constitutes the fundamental value orientation of the CPC's theory and practice of human rights. As an important achievement of modern political civilization, human rights have historically displayed a dual character. During the bourgeois revolutionary period, western bourgeois theories of human rights played a positive role in opposing the feudal hierarchical system and theocratic rule, demonstrating historical progressiveness. Engels pointed out that dogma and divine authority were replaced by human rights, and the church by the state.³ However, with the victory of bourgeois revolutions, the "universal human rights" championed by the bourgeoisie became essentially private rights of the bourgeois class, and human rights were gradually eternalized and sanctified.⁴ Marx noted that none of the so-called rights of man goes beyond the egoistic individual, beyond the individual as a member of civil society — that is, beyond an individual withdrawn into himself, into his private interests and private arbitrariness, and separated from the community.⁵ Confronted with the phenomenon in capitalist societies where human rights were arbitrarily violated and the right to a happy life was monopolized by a small minority, Marx and Engels exposed and sharply criticized the narrowness and hypocrisy of bourgeois human rights, while pointing out the practical path for the broad proletariat to strive for human rights. Unlike bourgeois human rights theory, which begins with an abstract notion of the individual and engages in empty discussions of rights, the Marxist theory of human rights starts from real human beings — those engaged in material production — and strives for human rights on behalf of the working masses, closely linking human rights with human emancipation and establishing the social ideal of realizing the free and comprehensive development of human beings. The important assertion that "the greatest human right of all is the right to a happy life" inherits and develops these essential characteristics of the Marxist view on human rights by regarding the broad masses of the people as the principal actors in the cause of human rights

³ Central Compilation and Translation Bureau, *Collected Works of Marx and Engels*, vol. 28 (Beijing: People's Publishing House, 2018), 609.

⁴ Contemporary western scholars have also discussed and reflected on this issue. For example, Joseph Eugene Stiglitz, from the perspective of economic policies in the context of globalization, has exposed how western-dominated economic rules have harmed the economic and subsistence rights of people in developing countries, revealing an imbalance in human rights protection.

⁵ Central Compilation and Translation Bureau, *Works of Marx and Engels*, vol. 1 (Beijing: People's Publishing House, 2009), 42.

and closely integrating the realization of human rights with the needs of the people, thereby vividly demonstrating the people-centered character of China's path of human rights development.

On the other hand, the Marxist view on human rights explores the real and historical foundations of human rights from the perspective of historical materialism, emphasizing the intrinsic relationship between material production and human survival and development. This provides important methodological principles for the CPC in understanding human rights issues. In the Marxist view, "the first premise of all human existence" is that "men must be in a position to live in order to be able to 'make history.' But life involves before everything else eating and drinking, a habitation, clothing and many other things. The first historical act is thus the production of the means to satisfy these needs, the production of material life itself."⁶ Marx and Engels began with the material production of society and examined the issues of human survival and development from the perspective of social-economic relations. In doing so, they derived the methodological principles of historical materialism for the study of human rights and provided theoretical guidance for the proletariat and its political parties to grasp human rights issues scientifically. The Marxist view on human rights emphasizes that human rights are not abstract or empty concepts, but are rooted in the material conditions of society and the real needs of the people. The important exposition that "the greatest human right of all is the right to a happy life" upholds a people-centered approach and emphasizes the foundational role of social and economic development in respecting and safeguarding human rights. It profoundly embodies the perspective of historical materialism and demonstrates the theoretical and methodological principles of the Marxist view on human rights.

B. Historical logic: the CPC's practical exploration in respecting and safeguarding human rights

Over the past century since its founding, the CPC has upheld its original aspiration of seeking happiness for the people and has unswervingly striven to realize a happy life for the Chinese people. As General Secretary Xi Jinping noted, "Throughout its century-long history, the Party has united the people and led them in a tireless effort to fight for and to respect, protect, and advance human rights."⁷ The important conclusion that "the greatest human right of all is the right to a happy life" has thus emerged and developed from the CPC's century-long historical practice of respecting and safeguarding human rights.

⁶ Central Compilation and Translation Bureau, *Selected Works of Marx and Engels*, vol. 1 (Beijing: People's Publishing House, 2012), 158.

⁷ Xi Jinping, "Steadfastly Following the Chinese Path to Promote Further Progress in Human Rights," *Qiushi Journal* 12 (2022): 5.

At the beginning of its founding, the CPC clearly recognized that the depth of oppression suffered by the Chinese people and the harshness of their living conditions were rare in world history, and that even the most basic rights to survival and development could not be guaranteed. Chinese laborers were described as "virtually like oxen, horses, or slaves. The wages they earned could mostly not sustain their own livelihood; laborers suffering from hunger and cold could be found everywhere."⁸ During the period of the New Democratic Revolution, the CPC regarded the realization of national independence and the liberation of the people as the prerequisite for a happy life. It therefore struggled to overthrow the oppression of imperialism, feudalism, and bureaucratic capitalism. At the same time, in its local governing practices, the CPC endeavored to improve the living conditions of the people and to secure and protect the rights to survival and development of the broad masses. As Mao Zedong stated, the policies implemented by the CPC were those that would "ensure that people from all walks of life have opportunities to speak, have work to do, and have food to eat."⁹ Such policies were intended to serve the interests of all the people rather than only a portion of them. The victory of the New Democratic Revolution under the leadership of the CPC "put an end to ... the rule of a handful of exploiters over the working people,"¹⁰ thereby providing the fundamental prerequisite for realizing a happy life for the people — the greatest of all human rights.

After the founding of the People's Republic of China, the CPC regarded the improvement of people's livelihoods as the primary concern in respecting and safeguarding the various rights of the people. In the exercise of state power, it emphasized meeting the material and cultural needs of the masses, proposing that "it is necessary to appropriately combine national construction with the improvement of people's livelihoods."¹¹ With an urgent aspiration to change China's backward conditions and to resolve the severe shortages in food, clothing, housing, and transportation faced by the people, the CPC gradually shifted its focus to the recovery and development of the national economy, striving to raise the material and cultural living standards of the population. At the same time, the CPC promoted the abolition of the feudal land ownership system, advanced institutional and systemic transformations, established the

⁸ Institute of Party History and Literature of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, *Selected Important Documents Since the Founding of the Communist Party of China*, vol. 1 (Beijing: Central Party Literature Press, 2011), 65.

⁹ Mao Zedong, *Selected Works of Mao Zedong*, vol. 3 (Beijing: People's Publishing House, 1991), 808.

¹⁰ *Resolution of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China on the Major Achievements and Historical Experience of the Party over the Past Century* (Beijing: People's Publishing House, 2021), 8.

¹¹ The State Archives Administration of the People's Republic of China, *Selected Documents of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China*, vol. 24 (Beijing: People's Publishing House, 2013), 253.

socialist system, and led socialist construction. Although the Party did not explicitly raise the issue of human rights during this period and encountered setbacks in the course of exploration, these extensive and profound social transformations and practices were all aimed at meeting the basic living needs of the people. They achieved important progress in respecting and safeguarding human rights and laid a solid material foundation and fundamental political guarantee for the realization of a happy life for the people.

After the launch of reform and opening-up, the CPC confronted new international developments and struggles surrounding human rights and explored a path of human rights development suited to China's national conditions. On the one hand, in the face of relatively low levels of productive forces that made it difficult to meet the people's growing material and cultural needs, Deng Xiaoping pointed out that "the living standards and cultural levels of our people are still not high; these problems cannot be solved merely by talking about human values or humanitarianism; they can only be solved mainly through active efforts to build material and spiritual civilization. To talk about 'man' apart from these concrete circumstances and tasks is not to talk about real human beings but abstract ones; it is not a Marxist attitude."¹² The CPC adheres to economic development as the central task, treats the problem of subsistence as the greatest human rights issue in China, and closely links the development of productive forces with the improvement of people's living standards, thereby enabling the people's lives to move from subsistence to a moderately prosperous level. On the other hand, the CPC consciously resisted the interference and shortcomings of western human rights concepts in order to ensure that the development of human rights in China remained people-oriented, genuine, and universally beneficial. Deng Xiaoping emphasized: "What are human rights? First of all, whose human rights are they? Are they the human rights of a small minority, or the human rights of the majority, the human rights of the entire people? The so-called 'human rights' in the western world and the human rights we speak of are essentially two different things; the viewpoints are different."¹³ Under this guidance, the CPC led the exploration of a path of human rights development with Chinese characteristics, preventing the monopoly of a happy life by a small minority. This approach demonstrates distinctive Chinese characteristics and institutional advantages.

Since the 18th National Congress of the CPC, the Party has summarized the successful experiences of China's human rights development and creatively advanced the important proposition that "the greatest human right of all is the right to a happy life." This assertion has been identified as a defining feature

¹² Deng Xiaoping, *Selected Works of Deng Xiaoping*, vol. 3 (Beijing: People's Publishing House, 1993), 41.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 125.

and valuable experience of China's human rights development, continuously promoting theoretical and practical innovation in the cause of human rights. First, it emphasizes respecting and safeguarding the fundamental rights encompassed in the "Five-sphere Integrated Plan." In the new era, on the basis of meeting the people's material and cultural needs, the CPC has further proposed satisfying the people's growing needs for a better life and safeguarding the rights of all citizens in economic, political, cultural, social, and ecological dimensions. Second, high-quality development is regarded as the solid foundation for respecting and safeguarding human rights. Since the 18th National Congress, the CPC has responded to changes in the principal contradiction in Chinese society and stressed development that is of higher quality and greater fairness, thereby advancing China's human rights development and protection to a new level. Finally, greater and more substantive progress has been made toward achieving common prosperity for all people. In the new era, under the leadership of the CPC, China won the battle against poverty and built a moderately prosperous society in all respects, historically resolving the problem of absolute poverty. These achievements have provided a stronger material foundation for realizing a happy life for the people and have further advanced the development of the cause of human rights in China.

C. Cultural logic: human rights concepts in the best of traditional Chinese culture

Throughout its long historical development, Chinese civilization has embodied reflections and concerns about human life and value. It emphasizes people-oriented governance and people's livelihood, demonstrating human rights ideas with enduring significance. General Secretary Xi Jinping has noted: "Chinese culture has always stressed the importance of respecting and caring for others. From Confucius who declared that "benevolence has been the greatest priority of governance since ancient times" to Mencius who said, "Finding talents for the country is what benevolence is all about," to Xunzi who believed that people were "most valuable" and Mozi who called on us to "love others as we do ourselves regardless of social status or wealth" — each of these great thinkers stressed the intrinsic value of the person."¹⁴ The important proposition that "the greatest human right of all is the right to a happy life" represents a contemporary continuation of those human rights ideas in the best of traditional Chinese culture that resonate with modern conceptions of human rights, and it possesses profound cultural and national foundations.

¹⁴ Xi Jinping, "Steadfastly Following the Chinese Path to Promote Further Progress in Human Rights," *Qiushi Journal* 12 (2022): 4.

The best of traditional Chinese culture contains cultural elements that emphasize the importance of the people and their basic living conditions, while pursuing happiness in the real world. First, it attaches importance to the role of the people in the state and society. Traditional Chinese political culture contains ideas of valuing and caring for the people, linking these ideas with state governance and social stability, and highlighting the importance of public support and public opinion. Although traditional cultural notions concerning human dignity, equality, and freedom had clear historical limitations, they nevertheless embodied concern for human value at the level of moral philosophy and ethical education, and to some extent reveal the historical roots and cultural soil of the contemporary Chinese view on human rights.¹⁵ Second, traditional Chinese culture emphasizes the foundational role of material production in people's lives. Classical thought stresses that "only when granaries are full do people understand propriety and moderation; only when they have sufficient food and clothing do they know honor and shame."¹⁶ It also advocates the people's livelihood conditions of "being well-fed, warmly clothed, and living in comfort,"¹⁷ highlighting the importance of meeting people's everyday needs and reflecting a simple awareness of the right to subsistence. Finally, Chinese culture emphasizes a conception of happiness in which material and spiritual life, as well as individual and collective interests, exist in harmony. Beyond basic needs such as food and clothing, Chinese thought places particular importance on the inner spiritual fulfillment of individuals and envisions an ideal society characterized by sound material security, virtuous citizens, and social harmony and peace. It is precisely these progressive human rights ideas embedded in the best of traditional Chinese culture that have provided cultural nourishment for the CPC's exploration of a path of human rights development. Moreover, the CPC has carried out creative transformation and innovative development of these traditional human rights concepts, enriching and advancing human rights thought and practice. As General Secretary Xi Jinping has emphasized: "In advancing the human rights cause, we have combined the Marxist outlook on human rights with China's specific realities and the best of traditional Chinese culture, reviewed our Party's successful experience of leading the people in respecting and protecting human rights, and learned from the outstanding achievements of other

¹⁵ Xie Pengcheng and Geng Xiao, "On the Identification and Inheritance of the Concept of Human Rights in Traditional Chinese Culture," *The Journal of Human Rights* 5 (2025): 15.

¹⁶ *Guanzi* · "Mu Min" (On Governing the People).

¹⁷ *Mencius* · "Teng Wen Gong I."

civilizations. This has allowed us to forge a path that is in keeping with the times and the conditions of China."¹⁸

II. The Main Connotations of General Secretary Xi Jinping's Important Exposition that "the Greatest Human Right of All Is the Right to a Happy Life"

General Secretary Xi Jinping's important exposition that "the greatest human right of all is the right to a happy life" clarifies both the foundational conditions of people's happy lives and their high-quality, multi-level content. It demonstrates the people-centered human rights philosophy of the CPC and embodies a methodology for respecting and safeguarding human rights. As such, it contains rich and profound connotations.

A. Goal dimension: a happy life for the people based on the rights to subsistence and development

A happy life for the people refers to a state of life in which needs across multiple dimensions — material, political, cultural, and others — are fulfilled, reflecting the pursuit of a high-quality life. The important proposition that "the greatest human right of all is the right to a happy life" not only emphasizes the foundational role of the rights to subsistence and development in achieving a happy life, but also highlights the importance of satisfying the people's diverse needs through comprehensive development so as to ultimately realize this goal.

First, the rights to subsistence and development are the primary basic human rights and constitute the foundation of a happy life. General Secretary Xi Jinping has emphasized that "subsistence is the basis for the enjoyment of all human rights; the greatest human right of all is the right to a happy life."¹⁹ Subsistence and development are enduring themes of human society, and their dialectical relationship has profoundly shaped social evolution. Natural or human-induced factors that undermine conditions for survival — such as famine or war — often slow, halt, or even reverse social development. Conversely, developments such as technological progress, scientific breakthroughs, and institutional reforms can improve the human living environment, enhance survival capacities, and strengthen societal resilience. From a theoretical perspective, the various rights within the framework of human rights possess equal status and value. However, the focus of human rights development in a given country at different stages is determined by its level of development; this is reflected in its human rights policies.²⁰ For many

¹⁸ Xi Jinping, "Steadfastly Following the Chinese Path to Promote Further Progress in Human Rights," *Qiushi Journal* 12 (2022): 6.

¹⁹ Xi Jinping, *Selected Readings from the Works of Xi Jinping*, vol. 2 (Beijing: People's Publishing House, 2023), 598.

²⁰ Liu Zhiqiang and Yan Naixin: "On the Right to a Happy Life as a Human Right," *The Journal of Human Rights* 6 (2020): 127.

developing countries, issues of subsistence and development are the most urgent concerns. Only when people's basic survival needs are met can the pursuit of a happy life of higher-quality become a reality. Fundamentally, basic material security is an essential condition for survival. This requires political parties and states to prioritize poverty alleviation, food and clothing security, and the improvement of people's livelihoods, while striving to expand opportunities and space for development. On this basis, comprehensive development can further improve living conditions and promote both social progress and the protection of human rights. As General Secretary Xi Jinping has stated, "Since ancient times, the eradication of poverty has been humanity's dream, and freedom from poverty is a basic right of the people of every country in their pursuit of a happy life."²¹

Second, once basic living needs are satisfied, the people have the right to pursue a happy life of higher-quality. What constitutes a "happy life" has long been a central topic of discussion among thinkers throughout history and across cultures. From the perspective of the human rights outlook of the new era, a "happy life for the people" represents a unity of material and spiritual dimensions, as well as of objective conditions and subjective experience. Judging whether such a life has been realized depends not only on the actual protection of people's interests and rights, but also on subjective perceptions such as people's sense of gain and happiness. General Secretary Xi Jinping has pointed out that greater attention should be paid to livelihood issues that concern the people most directly, with targeted measures implemented step by step and year by year, so that the people's sense of gain, happiness, and security becomes more substantial, better guaranteed, and more sustainable.²² Moreover, the concept of a "happy life for the people" possesses a dynamic character. As society develops, the channels through which people achieve happiness become more diverse, and their perceptions and understandings of happiness grow more comprehensive and profound.²³ Consequently, people's aspirations for a happy life increasingly display characteristics of higher quality, broader scope, and greater diversity. The development of the human rights cause should therefore provide support and guarantees for the people in pursuing a higher-quality life and realizing genuine happiness.

Finally, a happy life for the people must ultimately be realized through development — the key to solving human rights issues and the fundamental

²¹ The Institute of Party History and Literature of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, *Xi Jinping on Respecting and Protecting Human Rights* (Beijing: Central Party Literature Press, 2021), 168.

²² Xi Jinping, *Selected Readings from the Works of Xi Jinping*, vol. 2 (Beijing: People's Publishing House, 2023), 139.

²³ Hu Yuhong, "On the Proposition that 'People's Happiness Is the Ultimate Human Right,'" *The Journal of Human Rights* 6 (2024): 5.

means for achieving a happy life. As General Secretary Xi Jinping has stated, "only through development can we ... safeguard the fundamental rights of the people, and meet the ardent hope of our people for a better future."²⁴ The CPC closely links the realization of a happy life for the people with the building of a strong country and the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation. By promoting human rights protection and the comprehensive development of individuals through development, it gradually transforms the ideal of a happy life into reality. General Secretary Xi Jinping has emphasized that "If anything attests to the success of China's development, it is that the lives of hundreds of millions of Chinese people are improving each and every day."²⁵ This experience not only represents a successful path for China's human rights development but also offers insights for the advancement of human rights worldwide. In the contemporary international development of human rights, although both political rights and economic rights are widely recognized as integral components of human rights, some western countries continue to emphasize so-called political rights above all else while giving insufficient attention to economic, social, and developmental rights. In some cases, they even use such claims as a pretext to interfere in the internal affairs of other countries, thereby worsening those countries' human rights conditions.²⁶ By contrast, the CPC adheres to a people-centered approach, continuously improving human rights protection and promoting the ideals and practices of the human rights cause through development; it restores the essence of human rights to the comprehensive development of human beings and their real needs, thereby constructing a path of human rights governance characterized by the coordination of people-orientation, realism, and systemic integration.

B. Value dimension: a people-centered human rights philosophy

The important exposition that "the greatest human right of all is the right to a happy life" emphasizes that the broad masses of the people are the principal participants and beneficiaries of the development of the human rights cause. It takes the interests of the people as both the starting point and the ultimate goal, demonstrating a people-centered human rights philosophy in

²⁴ Xi Jinping, "Towards Win-Win Partnership for Sustainable Development," *People's Daily*, September 27, 2015.

²⁵ Institute of Party History and Literature of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, *Xi Jinping on Respecting and Protecting Human Rights* (Beijing: Central Party Literature Press, 2021), 7.

²⁶ Some scholars hold that the 1789 French *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen* represents the cultural tradition underlying this narrow conception of human rights. To this day, western countries such as the United States have not ratified the *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights*, and have consistently maintained a negative attitude toward the *Declaration on the Right to Development* adopted by the UN General Assembly. Hong Lewei, "The Theoretical Implications and Discourse Strategies of International Human Rights Struggle — Based on the Proposition of the Universality of Human Rights," *Journal of Jishou University (Social Sciences)* 2 (2024).

contemporary Chinese outlook on human rights and embodying the value foundation for respecting and safeguarding human rights.

From the perspective of participation entities, the people are the principal participants in the development of the human rights cause. General Secretary Xi Jinping has emphasized: “The people should become the true masters of their countries and the main participants, contributors and beneficiaries of human rights development.”²⁷ In the development of China’s human rights undertaking, the CPC, as the leading force, respects the principal position of the people, stimulates their enthusiasm, initiative, and creativity, and leads them to unite and strive for the advancement and protection of human rights. As the primary participants in the human rights cause, the people’s participation is both authentic and extensive. Through the practice of whole-process people’s democracy, the people effectively safeguard their own interests and rights. Moreover, “the advancement of human rights is a common undertaking of all humanity”;²⁸ different countries and nationalities share a common aspiration to respect and safeguard human rights and to realize a happy life. In this sense, the people of all countries and nationalities together constitute the participants and promoters of the global human rights cause.

From the perspective of the scope of beneficiaries, the broad masses of the people are the beneficiaries of the development of the human rights cause. General Secretary Xi Jinping has emphasized that “human rights are not special privileges bestowed on some people or a small minority but universal rights to be enjoyed by all the people.”²⁹ In the important proposition that “the greatest human right of all is the right to a happy life,” the beneficiaries of human rights are universal in scope: a happy life is meant to benefit the broad masses rather than to be monopolized by a minority. Since the 18th National Congress of the CPC, China has integrated human rights protection into national development strategies. Through a series of policy measures — including targeted poverty alleviation, rural revitalization, employment-priority policies, and social security programs — the country has worked to narrow regional, urban-rural, and income disparities, enabling the broad masses of the people to share in the full protection of human rights. In this process, the completion of a moderately prosperous society in all respects represents a significant historical milestone in the development of China’s human rights cause. “All-round moderate prosperity means all the people enjoy human rights. In the process of creating this society, China has built a system guaranteeing

²⁷ “Xi Jinping Meets with UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet,” *People’s Daily*, May 26, 2022.

²⁸ Xi Jinping, *Selected Readings from the Works of Xi Jinping*, vol. 2 (Beijing: People’s Publishing House, 2023), 598.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 597.

social equity with equal opportunities, equal rules and equal rights, in which all can participate in, contribute to, and enjoy development."³⁰

From the perspective of development goals, a happy life for the people constitutes the ultimate aim of the human rights cause. General Secretary Xi Jinping has emphasized that "it is important to take the people's interests as the fundamental purpose and goal, make continuous efforts to address the most pressing and immediate issues that concern the people the most, and strive to deliver a better life to the people. That is the biggest human right."³¹ This statement not only defines the value position and objective of a people-centered approach but also reveals the key focus of human rights development. First, addressing poverty is regarded as the foremost task, since it constitutes the fundamental condition for realizing human rights. Since the 18th National Congress of the CPC, the eradication of absolute poverty and the lifting of all impoverished populations out of poverty have been identified as baseline tasks and landmark indicators for building a moderately prosperous society in all respects. By focusing on the most immediate and practical aspects of people's lives — such as food, education, healthcare, and housing — China has ensured the realization of basic living standards. Second, greater emphasis is placed on improving the quality of people's lives in order to achieve the goal of a happy life. At the Fourth Plenary Session of the 20th CPC Central Committee, "adhering to the people-first principle" was listed as one of the guiding principles for economic and social development during the 15th Five-Year Plan period, and "continuously improving the quality of people's lives" was established as an important development objective.³² A people-centered approach thus runs through the entire process of formulating national development strategies and advancing the human rights cause. Third, equal emphasis is placed on the coordinated advancement of economic, social, and cultural rights alongside civil and political rights. Human rights are universal, equal, and indivisible. In developing the human rights cause, the state should coordinate various types of rights and work to "promote all rights — economic, social, and cultural as well as civil and political — in a holistic and balanced way,"³³ thereby ensuring that the people's multidimensional needs are fully satisfied and safeguarded.

³⁰ "Moderate Prosperity in All Respects: Another Milestone Achieved in China's Human Rights," *People's Daily*, August 13, 2021.

³¹ "Xi Jinping Meets with UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet," *People's Daily*, May 26, 2022.

³² "Recommendations of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China for Formulating the 15th Five-Year Plan for National Economic and Social Development," *People's Daily*, October 29, 2025.

³³ Xi Jinping, "Congratulatory Message to the 2015 Beijing Forum on Human Rights," *People's Daily*, September 17, 2015.

C. Methodological dimension: a human rights development path characterized by grounding in reality with openness and inclusiveness

The important exposition that “the greatest human right of all is the right to a happy life” advocates exploring a path of human rights development based on a country’s national conditions and the needs of its people, while adhering to the principles of shared and gradual development. In this sense, it embodies a methodology for advancing the protection and development of human rights.

First, exploring a human rights development path based on national conditions and the needs of the people. One methodological implication of the proposition that “the greatest human right of all is the right to a happy life” is that countries should explore their own human rights development paths according to the needs and aspirations of their people. General Secretary Xi Jinping has emphasized that “efforts to advance human rights in any country must conform to national conditions and the popular will.”³⁴ This important statement contains two core elements: grounding in reality and upholding the people-centered standpoint. In essence, the diversity of national circumstances and the varied needs of different peoples determine the diversity of human rights development paths in the world. Therefore, there is no single fixed model for human rights development. The protection of human rights should conform to national realities and respond to the will of the people, combining universal principles of human rights with a country’s specific conditions. When exploring their own human rights development paths, different countries and nations must first conduct a scientific assessment of their national conditions in order to determine the historical stage and orientation of human rights development, carry out locally grounded innovations in human rights practice, and ultimately open up development paths suited to their national conditions and historical and cultural traditions.

Second, promoting exchanges and mutual learning among different national and civilizational approaches to human rights development. General Secretary Xi Jinping has stressed that “each country is entitled to choose its own approach to promoting human rights, and different civilizations and countries should operate on the basis of mutual respect, inclusiveness, exchange, and mutual learning in this regard.”³⁵ Although countries differ in terms of development levels, historical and cultural traditions, and the needs of their people, they share the common aspiration of achieving a happy life and fully enjoying human rights. The human rights outlook of the new era therefore advocates combining the universality and particularity of human rights development. On the basis of exploring paths suited to their own national

³⁴ Xi Jinping, “Steadfastly Following the Chinese Path to Promote Further Progress in Human Rights,” *Qiushi Journal* 12 (2022): 7.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

conditions and people's needs, countries should engage in exchange and mutual learning among different development paths and pursue cooperation for mutual benefit. Within this vision, the CPC has proposed the concept of the common values of humanity, which serves as a value foundation for building consensus on human rights among countries and promoting the development of the international human rights cause. It also holds great significance for encouraging mutual learning among different human rights development paths and for building a community with a shared future for mankind.

Third, the development of the human rights cause is a gradual and progressive process. General Secretary Xi Jinping has emphasized that "we understand that human rights protection is an ongoing cause, and we are always striving to do better."³⁶ The progression from safeguarding the primary human rights of subsistence and development to realizing the greatest human right — a happy life for the people — reflects the gradual and staged character of human rights development. In this process, development goals at different levels together constitute the ideal vision of human rights advancement, embodying a developmental logic that unifies stage-based progress with an overall trajectory. Moreover, as the times evolve, people's needs and aspirations also change, and the connotations and extensions of a happy life for the people continue to be enriched. This requires adherence to the principles of long-term, collective, and sustained efforts, continuously advancing the human rights cause to higher levels.

In summary, the goal dimension of people's happy lives, the value dimension of a people-centered approach, and the methodological dimension of grounding in reality while maintaining openness and inclusiveness together form the core components of the important exposition that "the greatest human right of all is the right to a happy life." These three aspects are interdependent and mutually reinforcing. The goal dimension — people's happy lives based on the rights to subsistence and development — serves as the concrete manifestation of the value dimension and the practical orientation of the methodology. The value dimension provides the core guidance, clarifying the fundamental standpoint and value orientation of the human rights cause and offering direction for both goals and methods. The methodological dimension represents the path for realization: a human rights development path characterized by grounding in national realities while remaining open and inclusive. It advances human rights based on national conditions while actively drawing upon the outstanding achievements of human civilization, preventing

³⁶ Institute of Party History and Literature of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, *Xi Jinping on Respecting and Protecting Human Rights* (Beijing: Central Party Literature Press, 2021), 3.

the people-centered value concept from becoming abstract and ensuring that both the value and goal dimensions are continuously deepened in practice.

III. The Contemporary Value of Xi Jinping’s Important Proposition that “the Greatest Human Right of All Is the Right to a Happy Life”

The important proposition that “the greatest human right of all is the right to a happy life” integrates the universality and particularity of human rights development and puts forward original concepts and arguments concerning the respect for and protection of human rights. It not only serves as a guiding principle for advancing China’s human rights cause but also contributes Chinese experience and wisdom to global human rights governance.

A. Strengthening confidence in China’s path of human rights development and promoting the advancement of China’s human rights cause

From the perspective of Marxism, the realization of human rights must be grounded in the development of social productive forces. Marx and Engels attached great importance to the foundational role of real material production in human emancipation, arguing that when people cannot ensure sufficient food, drink, housing, and clothing in both quality and quantity, they cannot possibly attain liberation.³⁷ In response to the human rights conditions in modern China, the CPC “began its struggle for democracy and human rights, taking the clear stance that it would strive to save the nation and the people and wage a fight for human rights,”³⁸ and fought to safeguard the basic human rights of the Chinese people. Since the founding of the People’s Republic of China, under the leadership of the CPC, the Chinese people have created the “miracles of rapid economic growth and long-term social stability.” Human rights protection in China has gradually advanced from the initial pursuit of survival and development toward the realization of a happy life. In this process, both the theory and practice of human rights have been continuously enriched and developed, forming the distinctive Chinese path of human rights development. Since the 18th National Congress of the CPC, the Party has inherited and carried forward the successful experience of respecting and safeguarding human rights and has put forward the important proposition that “the greatest human right of all is the right to a happy life.” This proposition has provided clear direction for the development of China’s human rights cause in the contemporary era.

³⁷ Central Compilation and Translation Bureau, *Selected Works of Marx and Engels*, vol. 1 (Beijing: People’s Publishing House, 2012), 154.

³⁸ Xi Jinping, “Steadfastly Following the Chinese Path to Promote Further Progress in Human Rights,” *Qiushi Journal* 12 (2022): 4-5.

First, it concretizes and contemporizes the ultimate goal of the Marxist view on human rights — the realization of the free and comprehensive development of human beings — by placing people's happy lives at the center of human rights protection. Since the 18th National Congress of the CPC, the Party has grounded its approach in China's stage of development and historical and cultural traditions, emphasizing the historical and evolving nature of human rights concepts and establishing a comprehensive, multi-level, and multidimensional human rights protection system. This approach both adheres to the theoretical origins of the Marxist view on human rights and highlights its guiding role in China's contemporary human rights development. At the same time, it upholds the principle of innovation while maintaining continuity, responding to the needs of the times and endowing human rights concepts with distinctive Chinese characteristics and contemporary features, thereby reflecting both the historical and practical dimensions of the human rights cause.

Second, it responds to the new requirements for human rights protection arising from the transformation of the principal contradiction in Chinese society in the new era. The principal contradiction in Chinese society has evolved, with the problem of unbalanced and inadequate development becoming more prominent. Meanwhile, the people have increasingly strong aspirations for a better life, which places higher expectations and demands on the development of the human rights cause. This transformation constitutes an important practical basis for promoting human rights development in the new era. Addressing this issue has therefore become a key problem-oriented foundation for respecting and safeguarding human rights today. The human rights outlook of the new era further focuses human rights protection on meeting the people's growing needs for a better life and promoting the realization of a happy life. This includes not only the continuous improvement of material well-being but also the satisfaction of spiritual and institutional needs, such as the protection of democratic and legal rights, cultural rights, social fairness and justice, and the realization of personal dignity.

Third, it seeks to continuously improve the level of human rights protection in the process of advancing Chinese modernization, using institutional arrangements to safeguard social fairness and justice so that the broad masses of the people may share the fruits of development and achieve common prosperity. Chinese modernization is, in essence, the modernization of human beings themselves. It emphasizes the simultaneous advancement of human rights protection and the modernization process, ultimately aiming at the comprehensive development of individuals and overall social progress. General Secretary Xi Jinping has stressed that "more efforts are needed to achieve development of higher quality, efficiency, equity, sustainability and

security, so as to provide strong safeguards for the advancement of human rights.”³⁹ The human rights outlook of the new era advocates building a solid foundation for the development and protection of human rights through high-quality, inclusive, and equitable development, thereby pointing the way toward an efficient, fair, and sustainable future for the advancement of the human rights cause.

B. Breaking the monopoly of western human rights discourse and building a Chinese human rights discourse system

The full enjoyment of human rights is a common aspiration shared by the peoples of all countries. However, by virtue of their early modernization advantages, western countries have long dominated the international discourse on human rights and established a monopoly over it. As a result, the human rights theories and practices of many countries, including China, have frequently been misrepresented or disparaged. Some scholars have pointed out that “the United States and western countries occupy a dominant position in both the production of discursive content and the channels of dissemination, forming a form of institutionalized discursive hegemony.”⁴⁰ The important proposition that “the greatest human right of all is the right to a happy life,” grounded in the practical foundation of China’s path of human rights development, reshapes the connotations and extensions of human rights discourse through a people-centered value orientation. It therefore holds significant importance for breaking the monopoly of western human rights discourse and constructing a Chinese human rights discourse system.

First, it balances the relationship between collective rights and individual rights, replacing the human rights evaluation model that takes so-called individual freedom as the sole standard. Western human rights concepts are rooted in individual liberty, emphasizing that there is only one innate right, namely, the freedom inherent in every human being.⁴¹ Historically, such ideas played a positive role. According to the American political scientist Hans Morgenthau, the philosophy of the Enlightenment and the political theory of liberalism both advocated respect for human life and the promotion of human happiness; the great political and social transformations of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were inspired by these ideas.⁴² However, the individualistic orientation, universalist tendencies, and double standards evident in the

³⁹ “Xi Jinping Meets with UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet,” *People’s Daily*, May 26, 2022.

⁴⁰ Chen Jimin and Wang Ying: “The International Propositions of the ‘Global South’ and an Evaluation of Their Practices,” *Foreign Theoretical Trends* 4 (2025): 145.

⁴¹ Immanuel Kant: *The Metaphysical Elements of Justice (The Science of Right)*, translated by Shen Shuping (Beijing: The Commercial Press, 1991), 49.

⁴² Hans Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations*, translated by Yang Qiming et al. (Beijing: The Commercial Press, 1993), 482-483.

practice of western human rights discourse have also generated problems such as absolute notions of freedom, social fragmentation, and cultural hegemony. Even today, some western scholars assert that human rights primarily refer to individual rights and deny the existence of collective rights. Jack Donnelly, for example, argues that only individuals possess human rights, and that there are no special human rights that belong to society or to collective entities.⁴³ The human rights outlook of the new era, by contrast, dialectically addresses the relationship between the collective and the individual, and between the state and the individual. It promotes the unity of social harmony, stable development, and the realization of people's happy lives, thereby transcending the western human rights perspective centered exclusively on individual freedom.

Second, it replaces "value exportation" with exchange and mutual learning, thereby deconstructing the myth of western "universalist" human rights. Western human rights concepts and institutions often claim the status of "universal values" and attempt to export their models to developing countries. In essence, this reflects western centrism in the field of human rights. In some developing countries, the uncritical imitation of western human rights concepts and institutional arrangements has led instead to social fragmentation, instability, and disruptions to people's livelihoods. In contrast, the CPC has created a remarkable achievement in human rights development within a large developing country and has opened up a new path for human rights development beyond the western model of modernization. The human rights outlook of the new era advocates that different countries and nations pursue their own paths of human rights development while engaging in exchanges and mutual learning, thereby jointly advancing the global human rights cause. This perspective transcends the western-centric standards and evaluative frameworks of human rights. Such exchange and mutual learning are based on the principles of equality, voluntariness, mutual respect, and mutual benefit; they do not draw boundaries based on geography, ethnicity, nationality, or ideology, but instead aim at the common well-being of all humanity and the advancement of the global human rights cause.

Finally, it replaces vacuous rights discourse with the tangible and perceptible reality of a happy life. True progress in human rights is not reflected in abstract slogans but in whether the broadest segments of the population can live lives of greater dignity and happiness. Western human rights discourse often overlooks the historical stage and national conditions of developing countries, tending to emphasize civil and political rights while neglecting economic development rights, and to stress formal rights while

⁴³ Jack Donnelly, *Universal Human Rights in Theory and Practice*, translated by Wang Puqu et al. (Beijing: China Social Science Press, 2001), 16-17.

downplaying substantive rights. This has led to a disconnect between rights discourse and social realities. Moreover, the hypocrisy of western human rights discourse has become increasingly evident: while advocating the protection of human rights, some western societies continue to experience — or even generate — serious human rights problems such as racial discrimination, widening wealth gaps, gun violence, and refugee crises. By contrast, China's human rights cause in the new era demonstrates the true meaning of human rights through the concrete achievements of improving people's happy lives. It illustrates that human rights are not the exclusive privilege of certain countries but a shared aspiration of the peoples of all nations. The human rights outlook of the new era affirms the right of the broad masses of the people to pursue and realize a happy life and emphasizes the authenticity and universality of human rights. In doing so, it transcends narrow human rights concepts that confine rights to a minority or to particular groups, and contributes to the unity, development, prosperity, and stability of developing countries.

C. Contributing Chinese experience and wisdom to global human rights governance

At present, global human rights governance faces numerous challenges, including unilateralism and double standards. Some countries politicize and instrumentalize human rights and use them as a pretext to interfere crudely in the internal affairs of other states, making the development of the international human rights cause increasingly complex. As some scholars have observed, the essence of the contemporary crisis of human civilization lies in the fact that humanity has not only failed to achieve the good life promised since the western Enlightenment, but also faces serious threats regarding whether humanity can continue to coexist collectively in the modern world.⁴⁴ Against this backdrop, the important proposition that “the greatest human right of all is the right to a happy life” is not only a guiding theory for advancing China's human rights cause but also contributes Chinese experience and wisdom to the development of the global human rights endeavor.

First, it emphasizes the foundational status of the rights to subsistence and development in human rights protection, providing a new perspective for global human rights governance. For a long time, western discourse has tended to place the rights to subsistence and development in opposition to civil and political rights, classifying them as “lower-level” rights in contrast to supposedly “higher-level” rights. Some have even argued that the right to subsistence is not a human right but merely an “animal right.”⁴⁵ As a result, the

⁴⁴ Shen Xiangping and Li Jing, “Realistic Reflection and Contemporary Solution to Marx's ‘Riddle of History’,” *Exploration and Free Views* 5 (2025): 126.

⁴⁵ Gu Chunde, *Research on the Theory and Practice of Human Rights with Chinese Characteristics* (Beijing: China Renmin University Press, 2013), 6-7.

realization of subsistence and development rights worldwide remains a daunting task, while the indiscriminate use of unilateral sanctions has negatively affected the subsistence and development rights of civilians. General Secretary Xi Jinping has emphasized that, for developing countries, the rights to subsistence and development are the primary human rights.⁴⁶ Within this analytical framework, the rights to subsistence and development constitute the foundation for all other human rights. Developing countries, therefore, should prioritize these rights by focusing on development and concentrating their efforts on addressing the most urgent survival issues faced by their populations, while gradually improving the overall level of human rights protection. Moreover, the concept of development within the human rights outlook of the new era transcends narrow notions of development confined to a single country or region or defined by zero-sum competition. Instead, it embodies the values of win-win cooperation and shared development, thereby strengthening the foundation for human rights protection. In 2015, China announced the establishment of the South-South Cooperation Assistance Fund, which has since supported more than one hundred development cooperation projects in over 50 countries across Asia, Africa, and the Americas, covering areas such as disaster relief, health, maternal and child care, refugee assistance, and environmental protection.⁴⁷ As an important member of the Global South, China actively promotes coordination and cooperation among countries in advancing human rights, reflecting the demands and needs of Global South countries in safeguarding basic livelihoods and narrowing development gaps while encouraging coordinated interaction and practical implementation of human rights initiatives.

Second, it emphasizes that the protection of human rights requires the joint participation of different countries and nations, offering a new approach to global human rights governance. Certain western countries present themselves as leaders, judges, and rule-makers in the international human rights arena while pursuing unilateral and exclusionary policies that disregard the voices and aspirations of developing countries. The concept of "people's happy life" in the human rights outlook of the new era refers not only to the well-being of the people of a single country but also to the shared happiness of all humanity, embodying genuine inclusiveness and universality. This implies that global human rights governance requires the joint participation of different countries, nations, and civilizations in order to collectively protect and promote the development of human rights worldwide. General Secretary Xi Jinping has

⁴⁶ "Xi Jinping Meets with UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet," *People's Daily*, May 26, 2022.

⁴⁷ "The Communist Party of China and Human Rights Protection – A 100-Year Quest," *People's Daily*, June 25, 2021.

emphasized that “the Chinese people are willing to work together with the people of all countries, including developing countries, to advance development through cooperation, promote human rights through development, and build a human community with a shared future.”⁴⁸ In the context of global geopolitical turbulence and frequent regional conflicts that generate humanitarian crises, the CPC associates the development of China’s human rights cause with the common well-being of humanity. Through initiatives such as the Global Development Initiative and the Global Civilization Initiative, China seeks to guide the direction of global human rights governance.

Third, it emphasizes that a happy life for the people is the ultimate goal of human rights development, offering a new concept for global human rights governance. Human rights are not abstract concepts but must be concretely reflected in improvements in people’s livelihoods and social progress. Some foreign scholars have argued that the core of China’s human rights philosophy lies in continuously improving the living standards of the Chinese people in all aspects, and that this people-centered human rights perspective — taking people’s well-being as both the starting point and the ultimate goal — offers valuable insights for other countries.⁴⁹ Accordingly, in advancing human rights, all countries should adhere to a people-centered orientation, focus closely on the needs of their populations, maintain historical patience, and establish human rights protection systems that are realistic, scientific, and effective.

Conclusion

In summary, General Secretary Xi Jinping’s important proposition that “the greatest human right of all is the right to a happy life” constitutes a significant manifestation of Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era in the field of human rights and also a significant content of contemporary Chinese outlook on human rights. It is characterized by a distinct people-centered orientation, a strong sense of the times, and a practical dimension. This important proposition embodies the fundamental position of the Marxist view on human rights, inherits the intellectual essence of excellent traditional Chinese culture, and integrates the practical experience of socialism with Chinese characteristics in the new era. It reflects the basic understanding of the CPC regarding what human rights are and how they should be protected and developed. Furthermore, this proposition enriches and advances the theory and practice of human rights from ontological, epistemological, and axiological perspectives. It provides value guidance and theoretical support for the construction of a Chinese human rights discourse

⁴⁸ Institute of Party History and Literature of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, *Xi Jinping on Respecting and Protecting Human Rights* (Beijing: Central Party Literature Press, 2021), 180.

⁴⁹ “Reader Meeting for *Xi Jinping on Respecting and Protecting Human Rights* Held in Madrid,” *China Daily*, June 27, 2025.

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system and establishes new goals and directions for the development of the human rights cause. In the new era, China's human rights cause should continue to be guided by this innovative theory and contribute greater wisdom to the advancement of the global human rights cause.

(Translated by *LI Donglin*)