Theory of new quality productive forces in China: Introducing the views of some current Chinese scholars

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Received: 29 May 2025; published: 01 December 2025
Abstract: *The theory of "new quality productive forces" (新质生产力)[1] proposed by General Secretary of the Communist Party of China Xi Jinping has become a central pillar in China's current development thinking. The article outlines some views of Chinese scholars on this theory, from the Marxist theoretical basis to new contributions and adjustments, as well as its relationship with national governance and digital transformation, which are considered prominent and of reference value for Vietnam.*
Keywords: New Quality Productive Forces, Marxism, Scientific and Technological Innovation, National Governance, Digital Transformation, High-Quality Development, China

1. Introduction

The theory of the "new quality productive forces" (新质生产力), proposed by Xi Jinping, General Secretary of the Communist Party of China, has emerged as a central concept in China's contemporary development thinking. Analyzing this theory offers valuable insights into how China both adapts and advances Marxism, while also illuminating its practical implications for the country's modernization and its potential reference value for other countries.

Chinese scholars argue: "New quality productivity is the inevitable outcome of productivity reaching a certain stage of development - a higher form of advanced productivity. It takes innovation as the primary driving force, digital technology as a crucial enabler, but the essence lies in the recombination and optimization of factors to transform production relations" (Mĭ Shuò et al., 2024). This suggests that the theory of the new quality productive forces is not only a purely economic category, but also a conceptual foundation for the comprehensive restructuring of China's governance system and socio-economic development model. Consequently, the theory not only holds significance for China but also offers potential contributions to contemporary development theory.

2. Overview of the new quality productive forces

The concept of the "new quality productive forces" (新质生产力) was first introduced by General Secretary Xi Jinping in September 2023 during his visit to Hac Long

[1] "New quality productive forces' (新质生产力) can be translated as "New productive forces" or "New productive forces in terms of quality"

Giang province (Xinhua News Agency, 2023), as a guiding framework for China's development trajectory in the new era. Since then, it has rapidly become one of the central concepts in China's contemporary development discourse, reflecting the creative application of Marxism-Leninism to the specific conditions of the digital age. Data from the National Social Science Data Center of China indicate that within just a few months after Xi Jinping first proposed the concept, by 2024, a total of 5,620 academic papers had been published, and by May 2025, the number of scholarly journal articles focusing on - or containing the keyword "new quality productive forces" - had reached 2,293. Excluding publications in mass media and online platforms, approximately 8,000 academic articles have been produced in China on this topic since September 2023 - far exceeding the capacity of an individual to provide a comprehensive overview[1]. In this paper, we aim to select several representative articles that examine the concept of the new quality productive forces from philosophical, political, and Marxist-Leninist perspectives, highlighting features considered prominent and of reference value for Vietnam. The academic challenges, limitations, and practical implementation of this theory have also been analyzed and commented by numerous international scholars[2]; however, those discussions will be addressed in a separate paper.

[1] See: the National Social Science Data Center of China (国家哲学社会科学文献中心), http://www.ncpssd.cn.

[2] For instance, some analyses express skepticism regarding the actual economic effectiveness of the theory, concerns about a potential trend toward top-down economic management centralization, doubts about the feasibility of transforming the growth model, and the sustainability of the strategy.

3. Theoretical foundations and conceptual framework

According to the official definition, new quality productive forces refer to "advanced productive forces in which innovation plays a leading role. Replacing traditional modes of economic growth and conventional pathways of developing productive forces, they are characterized by high technology, high efficiency, high quality, and are consistent with the philosophy of new development" (Leung Wai-qún et al., 2025).

In terms of theoretical structure, the concept of new quality productive forces builds upon K. Marx's three fundamental components of productive forces, yet introduces a qualitative reconfiguration. Specifically, it "centers on the leap in labor power, means of labor, and objects of labor, and their optimal combination as its essential connotation" (Leung Wai-qún et al., 2025). Notably, it emphasizes the "leap" and "optimal combination" rather than merely the existence of these factors.

When examining the relationship between the theory of new quality productive forces and Marx's original theory, it becomes clear that the Communist Party of China strives to preserve formal continuity. According to official documents, the new theory retains the basic theoretical framework of the three elements: "Labor power, means of labor, and objects of labor" (Wáng Fán et al., 2024), thereby maintaining consistency with Marx's classical framework.

From the perspective of historical materialism, "productivity is considered the fundamental driving force of social progress; they not only determine the nature and level of development of the relations of production but also profoundly shape the form and evolutionary logic of

national governance." History has shown that "every revolutionary transformation of the productivity inevitably brings about corresponding adjustments and improvements in the relations of production, as well as renewal within the superstructure" (Mǐ Shuò et al., 2024).

However, the key distinction lies in both approach and emphasis. While Karl Marx focused on analyzing the inherent contradictions within the capitalist system, the Chinese theory aims to construct a proactive development-oriented model. The elevation of science and technology to a "core element" (Mǎ Fú-yùn et al., 2025) can be regarded as a logical extension of Marx's thought, yet it simultaneously reflects China's practical imperative to transform its growth model.

This theory embodies an understanding of the objective laws governing the evolution of productive forces throughout different historical stages. From the agricultural revolution, where agricultural productivity gave rise to a "centralized authoritarian state" characterized by "despotism" and a "self-sufficient economy", to the industrial revolution, in which mechanical productivity fostered a "bureaucratic government" under the framework of "the rule of law", and further to the information revolution, where informational productivity has redefined the "state - society" relationship toward "polycentric governance" (Mǐ Shuò et al., 2024). Each historical stage demonstrates the objective law of interaction between productive forces and the national governance system. The new quality productive forces, characterized by "innovation as the primary driving force and digital technology as a key enabler" (Mǐ Shuò et al., 2024), are now bringing about revolutionary transformations in the relations of production, compelling a fundamental restructuring of the national governance system.

4. Distinctive features and new contributions

Chinese scholars argue that, compared with classical Marxist theory, in which science and technology were viewed as important but not leading factors, the new theory elevates scientific and technological innovation to a "dominant" and "core" position. Within this theoretical framework, science and technology occupy the central role. "Scientific and technological innovation can give rise to new industries, new models, and new drivers of growth, serving as the core element in the development of new quality productive forces" (Leung Wai-qún et al., 2025).

The "new philosophy of development, innovation, coordination, greening, openness, and sharing encapsulates the comprehensive and multifaceted connotations of new quality productive forces". The fundamental distinction between the new quality productive forces and traditional forms lies in "taking innovation as the pioneering driving force for achieving development goals." This marks "a simultaneous leap in both material and ideological forms," leading to "a qualitative leap based on the shift from investment-driven to innovation-driven development" (Mǐ Shuò et al., 2024).

Specifically, innovation encompasses multiple dimensions: "On the one hand, the new quality productive forces position scientific and technological innovation as the central pillar of national development, taking the lead in and anticipate global scientific and technological trends, launching major, pioneering, and strategic projects in both

basic and applied research aiming to develop breakthrough competitiveness "from zero to one" in key and core technologies" (Mǐ Shuò et al., 2024).

A significant contribution of this theory lies in the incorporation of data into the category of productive factors, reflecting the realities of the digital economy. "Data has become a new and crucial factor of production", characterized by their distinctive features of "diversity, ubiquity, and increasing value rather than diminishing in the process of circulation and exchange". "Through the convergence, interaction, and interdisciplinarity of data, it is possible to fully unlock data value, thereby generating additional data, and ultimately achieving a leap in productivity and efficiency in resource allocation". This represents "the core connotation and proper boundaries of data as a factor of production", which is driving "the acceleration of the mode of social reproduction, transforming from traditional physical storage to a data-based form" (Mǐ Shuò et al., 2024).

A distinctive feature of this theory is the incorporation of environmental sustainability into the very definition of the productive forces. According to relevant materials, "green development is the characteristic of high-quality growth, and the new quality productive forces are, in essence, green productive forces" (Leung Wai-qún et al., 2025). This incorporation reflects the integration between economic development and environmental protection, demonstrating a deep awareness of the importance of sustainability in the contemporary era.

The theory is also intended for cross-sectoral application. For instance, in the cultural sphere, it is interpreted that "the new quality productive forces in culture embody a convergence of progressive ideas, concepts, and values that are widely recognized across society, thereby forming a collective consensus" (Lǐ Wéi-dá et al., 2024). In the field of elderly care, the theory is applied to "promote economic transformation and upgrading by empowering new forms of production, services, and business models" (Dù Pēng et al., 2025), among others.

5. The relationship between the new quality productivity and national governance in the context of digital transformation

"The new quality productivity and digital government embody a dialectical interaction: digital government serves as a concentrated expression of new quality productivity in the domain of national governance, while, through institutional innovation, it also ensures the sustained development of this new quality productivity". This interrelation follows four overarching principles, namely: "Integration[1], adaptability, empowerment[2] - constraint, and dialectical evolution (Mǐ Shuò et al., 2024).

"The transformation toward digital government is considered an inevitable requirement to align with the development of the new quality productivity, and to adjust the relations of production" (Mǐ Shuò et al., 2024). This formulation reflects a clear theoretical recognition of the mutual relationship between productive forces and the system of governance, consistent with the Marxist conception of the dialectical relationship between the economic base and the superstructure.

"The new quality productivity drives the development of digital government through three interrelated dimensions". *First*, in

[1] In the original: "内嵌性"

[2] In the original: "赋能性"

terms of institutional foundations, "the data restructures the relations of production, requiring the transformation of government functions and institutional innovation, the optimization of the business environment, and the continual refinement of institutional systems." *Second*, in the social dimension, "as social structures become increasingly differentiated and interest relationships grow more complex and intertwined, a new model of governance emerges and actively engages organizations and groups, thereby reshaping the relationship between government and society". *Third*, at the philosophical level, "new development philosophies such as innovation-driven, people-centered development, and systems thinking serve to guide the restructuring of governance models and the formation of new concepts" (Mǐ Shuò et al., 2024).

"With the support of smart devices and cloud computing platforms, the new quality productive forces have enhanced the intelligence, precision, and coordination of government governance" (Song Jian et al., 2024). Digital technology functions not merely as a tool but as an infrastructural foundation, manifested through three principal modalities (see Song Jian et al., 2024):

First, intelligent integration entails smart decision-making, precise governance, and coordinated government operations. Specifically, "non-material data provides intelligent tools for governmental decision-making, while "the application of advanced algorithms and models within the new quality productive tools enables a deeper exploration and utilization of this new-quality data as an emerging factor of production".

Second, Smart digital participation within the framework of new quality productive forces is realized through intelligent digital means that facilitate citizens' involvement in governance, thereby strengthening their level of political engagement. This is reflected in the "expansion of participants and the scope of participation", as well as the "enhancement of citizens' political activeness.

Third, intelligent digital operation aims to "improve the efficiency and quality of public services while expanding their coverage", with "technological innovation serving as the key driver enabling the new quality productive forces to enhance the effectiveness of public services".

6. Practical context and issues addressed

General Secretary Xi Jinping affirmed: "High-quality development is the foremost task in comprehensively advancing the modernization of our socialist country. Development is the primary mission of the Party in governing and building the nation. Without a solid material and technological foundation, it would be impossible to achieve a comprehensive modernization of a strong socialist country" (Song Jian et al., 2024).

China is currently undergoing a transition from a phase of rapid growth to one of high-quality growth (Leung Wai-qún et al., 2025). Within this context, the new theory has been introduced as a guiding theoretical framework for the transformation. The concept of new quality productive forces seeks to "address the principal contradiction in Chinese society that has changed" (Song Jian et al., 2024) by "transforming the quality, efficiency, and driving forces of economic development, and achieving an overall leap in total factor productivity" (Mǐ Shuò et al., 2024).

The traditional growth model, which relied heavily on "large-scale investment in production factors" (Mǎ Fú-yùn et al., 2025), has revealed its limitations - from

population aging and resource depletion to diminishing returns on investment. The transition toward a model driven by "total factor productivity" is therefore theoretically rational, as evidenced by efforts to promote the transition from primarily factor-based growth to accelerated factor-driven and dual-contribution development" (Mǐ Shuò et al., 2024) in the distribution of national income.

In the context of what has been described as a "once-in-a-century comprehensive transformation" (Mǐ Shuò et al., 2024), and amid an era when "scientific and technological competition has become the focal point of international rivalry" (Leung Wai-qún et al., 2025), China must "dismantle the conceptual and institutional barriers that hinder innovation, and establish a new national development framework with technology as the key driver" (Mǐ Shuò et al., 2024). Guided by the principle that "technology is the core," the theory of new quality productive forces emphasizes achieving "more breakthroughs 'from zero to one'" (Mǐ Shuò et al., 2024) and fostering a self-sustaining innovation ecosystem.

China's focus on "breakthrough technologies" (Lǐ Xuě Qiáo et al., 2024) can be interpreted as the country's response to the technological sanctions and restrictions imposed by major powers (particularly the United States and Western nations) on Chinese technology corporations in recent years. However, the development of "strategic emerging industries" and "future industries" (Wáng Fán et al., 2024) requires not only financial resources but also a well-developed innovation ecosystem.

"Building a digital government is an inevitable requirement for the development of new quality productivity and a key instrument for promoting the modernization of the national governance system and its governance capacity" (Mǐ Shuò et al., 2024). This process is reflected in efforts to "advance the relations of production from the traditional model, based on common ownership and distribution orientation, to one grounded in the right of use and oriented toward innovation (Mǐ Shuò et al., 2024).

The digital government aims to "transform the governance system from being experience-driven to data-driven, from rough management to precision management, and from fragmentation to coordinated and efficient governance" (Mǐ Shuò et al., 2024). In practice, achieving such coordination will pose a significant challenge, requiring profound reforms that may encounter resistance from current interest groups in China.

The new quality productive forces "strengthen the comprehensiveness of the Party's leadership, the depth of its institutional development, and the consolidation of its governing position". This is reflected in three specific dimensions. *First*, enhancing political leadership capacity through "the use of new quality productive tools such as big data and artificial intelligence, enabling real-time monitoring and evaluation of policy implementation effectiveness". *Second*, improving organizational leadership capabilities by applying new quality intelligent digital productive tools to optimize and restructure the Party's organizational system, thereby enhancing its operational efficiency". *Third*, reinforcing ideological work with "online platforms and social media functioning as new quality productive tools that allow the Party's theoretical propaganda and ideological education to reach every Party member and the wider public" (Song Jian et al., 2024).

7. Impacts and significance

The theory of new quality productive forces is described as "a creative application of Marxism-Leninism to the specific conditions of the digital age". It not only inherits the view that "productivity is the fundamental driving force promoting social progress" (Mǐ Shuò et al., 2024) but also enriches this notion by integrating the new distinctive features of the digital era. From a theoretical perspective, it is regarded as an attempt to "diversify and further develop Marx's theory of productive forces" (Leung Wai-qún et al., 2025).

Notably, the use of the term "new quality" underscores China's effort to distinguish its current stage of development from previous ones. According to Chinese theorists, this marks "the first generalization and synthesis of the theory of productive forces from the perspective of 'quality'" (Mǎ Fú-yùn et al., 2025), revealing the leadership's aspiration to construct a new theoretical framework for national development.

"Transformation in national governance, driven by digital government, is reshaping the relationships between humans and nature, among individuals, and between humans and society, thereby shaping a new form of civilizational that marks a leap from industrial civilization to digital civilization". This transformation is reflected in the shift whereby "instrumental rationality gives way to humanistic rationality, and economic growth yields to a people-centered approach" (Mǐ Shuò et al., 2024).

This theory represents an effort to modernize K. Marx's theory of productive forces to align it with the digital age and the knowledge-based economy. The central emphasis on scientific and technological innovation reflects a fundamental transformation in the nature of modern production.

The theory of new quality productive forces has become one of the principal orientations of China's development policy. Its inclusion in the Decision of the Third Plenary Session of the 20th Central Committee of the Communist Party of China[1] demonstrates the high priority attached to this theory by the country's leaders. This emphasis has been translated into concrete policy measures that frame it as a long-term strategic direction to be pursued with persistence rather than haste, and underscore the role of "patient capital" in fostering technological innovation. As articulated, "patient capital functions as a guiding and supportive force, enabling enterprises to grow stronger, better, and more sustainable" (Shì Yù-dōng et al., 2024).

This theory "holds great significance for the development of digital civilization" (Mǐ Shuò et al., 2024) and represents "a new approach to addressing the challenges encountered in the course of development" (Song Jian et al., 2024). From an international academic perspective, it provides a new lens on how a major country seeks to reshape its development model through theoretical innovation. The theory not only addresses China's own challenges but also offers valuable insights for other developing nations searching for models of growth suited to the digital age.

Chinese scholars generally regard the theory of new quality productive forces as a guiding

[1] Communiqué of the Third Plenary Session of the 20th Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, *Xinhua News Agency* dated 18 July, 2024 (中国共产党第二十届中央委员会第三次全体会议公报), https://www.gov.cn/yaowen/liebiao/202407/content_6963409.htm

framework for national development, particularly for economic development from the central and local levels. In addition, it is described as "a fundamental principle for promoting high-quality development" and "a strategic guideline for building an economic power" (Leung Wai-qún et al., 2025). Furthermore, numerous studies indicate that the application of this theory adheres to the principles of "proceeding from reality, advancing before breaking, adapting to local conditions, and decentralized management" (Shì Yù-dōng et al., 2024), reflecting a flexible approach to translating theoretical concepts into local contexts and practices.

8. Conclusion

The theory of new quality productive forces embodies a combination of Karl Marx's theoretical framework with China's contemporary developmental realities. It seeks, on the one hand, to preserve the Marxist theoretical foundation, and on the other, to adapt it to the characteristics of the digital economy and the requirements of sustainable development. More than an economic concept, it constitutes a comprehensive philosophy of development aimed at the goal of "building a socialist country with strong modernization in all respects" (Song Jian et al., 2024). This theoretical approach can be regarded as a rational response to the major challenges currently facing China, from transforming its growth model to global technological competition. Nevertheless, the implementation of the theory encounters numerous practical obstacles, including institutional reform, human resource development, and the pursuit of technological self-reliance, particularly in core technologies amid fierce international competition ❑

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