

专访|薄国强 Interview: Roland Boer

“我想要理解中国的马克思主义” I want to understand Chinese Marxism. 《海峡通讯》
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1. 在中国研究马克思主义哲学，您觉得最令人兴奋和最难的地方在哪？ What do you think are the most exciting and most difficult aspects of studying Marxist philosophy in China?

Answer:

Let me begin with the most difficult aspect: language. Even though I have studied many languages and even taught some of them, Chinese is one of the most difficult languages in the world to learn. However, when I began to plan a research project on Marxist philosophy in China, I soon realised that I needed to be able to study the research material in the original language: Chinese. So I began the long and arduous process of learning to read, write, speak, and understand Chinese – for the simple reason of wanting to understand Chinese Marxism, and especially Chinese Marxist philosophy.

In regard to the most exciting aspect: after the collapse of the Soviet Union and so on, there was a feeling for a while that Marxism was obsolete and that socialism had “failed.” At the beginning of my interest in Chinese Marxist philosophy, I soon realised that this feeling is mistaken. Marxism is alive and progressing, and Marxist philosophy has taken some very important strides forward. But now this is happening in China. Let me put it this way: after many years of research on Chinese Marxism, I have realised that it is part of the mainstream. It is not a tributary, but the mainstream. What does this mean? The “mainstream” means a full understanding of the whole Marxist tradition, from Marx and Engels until today. This includes the many insights and breakthroughs along the way, but also a recognition of the mistakes made and the ability to learn from these mistakes.

2. 马克思主义基本原理与马克思主义哲学之间是一种怎样的关系？ What kind of relationship exists between the basic principles of Marxism and Marxist philosophy?

The first part of my answer concerns higher education. After the education forms in

China of 2004-2005, the basic principles of Marxism became the first sub-discipline of Marxist theory in schools of Marxism. At that time, there were less than 10 schools of Marxism, but now there are more than 2000. By contrast, Marxist philosophy is a sub-discipline in university schools of philosophy. However, I have noticed that since the education reforms of 2004-2005, the importance of schools of philosophy has grown. The most important development is that Marxist philosophy has become the primary sub-discipline in schools of philosophy.

However, this is only a beginning. Is there a difference between the basic principles of Marxism and Marxist philosophy, and if so, what are the differences? On the one hand, some say that these two terms are different expressions of the same thing. On the other hand, some say that the basic principles of Marxism form the wider context for philosophy. More specifically, the basic principles arise from the classic works of the Marxist tradition – or mainstream Marxism – and form a scientific system with three inter-related components: philosophy, political economy, and scientific socialism. This means that Marxist philosophy is one component of the basic principles.

Thus far, what I have said is not new and is quite well-known. However, I would like to make two further points. To begin with, Marxist philosophy has developed distinct answers to the main questions of philosophy, such as ontology or worldview, epistemology (how human beings can know and understand the objective world), the relation between subjective initiative and objective conditions, between the universal and the particular, and so on. These answers concern a material ontology, an active reflection theory of knowledge with the “active” elements concerning human interaction with the objective world through labour or practice, the need to understand the objective world – as much as we can – so that subjective initiative is effective. Arguably, the most distinctive feature of Marxist philosophy in comparison to other types of philosophy is the combination of two aspects: how the world is and how the world ought to be. In other words, Marxist philosophy is also concerned with the very practical task of transforming the world.

Further, I would like to pick up and take further an earlier point concerning the mainstream and tributaries of Marxist philosophy. A tributary denies or cuts off significant parts of the tradition, the most notable of which is the effort to ignore the important role of Engels and turn Marx into a solitary thinker of the 19th century. This is a problem often found among some Western Marxists, who also ignore many later contributions.

By contrast and as mentioned earlier, the mainstream acknowledges and develops all of the contributions to what is now an 180-year tradition of philosophy. While the

mainstream begins with Marx and Engels, it also includes later clarifications and developments such as dialectical materialism (arising from Marx and Engels but first identified by Plekhanov in the 1890s), contradiction analysis, the importance of practice, political philosophy, and so on. It is important to note here that most of the later contributions arose from the concrete experience of socialist construction, as we find in the Soviet Union and now in China. Why do I emphasise the mainstream? For some foreign scholars, Marxist philosophy in China seems like an offshoot or even a “deviation” from Marxism. By contrast, and after years of study, it is clear to me that Marxist philosophy in China both inherits the mainstream and continues to make contributions to this mainstream.

3. “把马克思主义基本原理同中华优秀传统文化相结合”意味着什么？或者说我们应该用什么样的逻辑“把握”它？在世界史上有过类似的事情发生吗（指两种文明体系的产物重新融合）？ **What does it mean to "integrate the basic principles of Marxism with the best of traditional Chinese culture"? Or, what kind of logic should we use to "grasp" it? Has there been anything similar in world history (referring to the reintegration of the products of two different civilizational systems)?**

There are three parts to my answer: the first concerns translation, the second concerns the distinction between concrete and abstract Marxism, and the third whether or not Marxism is exclusively a type of European or Western philosophy.

First, translation: how do we translate 优秀? One often finds it translated as “fine” or “excellent” – in relation to traditional Chinese culture. More than a year ago, I was speaking with a translator from the Central Institute of Party History and Literature. He told me that they were having much discussion about how to translate 优秀, with some suggesting “fine” or “excellent,” while others felt that it was better to leave it out in translation since it is redundant in English – thus, “traditional Chinese culture.” We then discussed whether “best of” would be a better translation, even though it is not a literal translation of 优秀. He thought this was a very good suggestion. Why? It emphasises a dialectical engagement between the basic principles of Marxism and traditional Chinese culture. More specifically, not all aspects of traditional Chinese culture, which grew out of a Chinese-style feudal system, should or can be taken up and developed further (such as the hierarchical assumptions entailed in Confucian harmony, or the inequality between men and women). Further, those values that can be taken up need to undergo a transformation in the integration with the basic principles of Marxism and in the context of a qualitatively different social system. One example among many concerns the ancient value of selecting or “appointing people on the basis of merit”

(任人唯贤), or more fully, appointing people to responsible positions on the basis of virtue and ability. The traditional context the struggle between was a Chinese-style feudal system and the necessary administration of a large imperial state. More specifically, it was part of a struggle between hereditary or skill-based appointments: should it be someone who comes from a noble family or should it be someone with the necessary experience and skills? The question here is: what kind of transformation (the German is *Aufhebung*, which is translated as 扬弃) is needed for 任人唯贤 to be a value in a socialist system of governance? Elsewhere, I have suggested that some insights from Marx assist us here in the sense that elections or appointments to posts (such as the different levels of people's congresses) are not based on struggles between political parties but on the experience and competence of the candidate.

Second, the distinction between concrete and abstract Marxism was put forward by Mao Zedong in the late 1930s, after in-depth study of Marxist philosophy. There is no such thing as abstract Marxism, which is universally valid everywhere; instead, there is only concrete Marxism, which is Marxism applied and integrated with concrete conditions. While we can see here a clear expression of what is now known as the “first integration,” implicit also is the “second integration.” Let us go a step further: concrete Marxism refers how a Marxist approach enables analysis of specific realities, or concrete conditions, and is able to produce solutions and show the way forward. Wherever we find Marxism genuinely at work, we find concrete Marxism. Someone may ask? How do we know what a Marxist approach is so that we can apply it to concrete conditions? Does not a Marxist approach exist before such an application? Are there not basic principles that can be applied? Of course it does: ever since the time of Marx and Engels there has been a Marxist approach, which has been developing and improving since that time. Now comes the next step of the logic: what we know as a Marxist approach has itself developed from concrete conditions. This is a core aspect of the methodology. To use a couple of other philosophical distinctions: it is through the particularity of Marxism that it becomes a common or universal method, and this enables further particular application. We may also think in terms of the dialectic of theory and practice, but I think – or hope – that the point is clear enough.

This brings me to the third part of my answer, as to whether Marxism is no more than a type of Western philosophy and thus inescapably tied to its origins in a European civilisational system. I do encounter this perspective from time to time outside China: some think that Marxism is a type of Western philosophy. This is where the point concerning concrete Marxism is helpful: from its very beginning, Marxism was concrete Marxism. What does this mean? To begin with, Marx and Engels were German

and were products of German society, education, and culture means that the method they initially developed is already concretised in that context. Of course, it was not merely Germany, since they engaged deeply with French and English thought, and the First International had members from across Europe and North America. This is obvious and a historical fact. However, it does not mean that Marxism is inescapably European or Western, a type of Western thought. Let me emphasise again that the methodology of Marxism is the methodology of concrete Marxism. This means that Marxism has been and can be concretised in other contexts.

Here we should remember that the Marxist method and Marxist philosophy arrived in China as a result of the October Revolution in Russia; further, the mature Marxist philosophy that was studied early on in China had been developed in the Soviet Union of the 1930s. In other words, Marxism has already been concretised in the Soviet Union, through the phases of revolution and socialist construction. (In fact, before the translations of Russian philosophical works, Li Da had in the 1920s been translating works from Japan). What I am trying to say here is that the methodological principle of concrete Marxism had already been realised not only with Marx and Engels in their context, but also in the Soviet Union for the purpose of revolution and construction. It should surprise us that it was this reality that struck such a deep chord in China and was a major impulse for the localisation of Marxism in China.

At the same time, there is another aspect to this question, since Marxism did come to China from other contexts (Western Europe, translations from Japanese, and the concrete Marxism of the Soviet Union). There are quite a few earlier examples, such as the influence of Chinese thought on the European enlightenment (think of Voltaire and Leibniz), or of the transmission of early Greek philosophy via the Arab world and then later into Europe. In a Chinese context, I think of the arrival of Buddhism from India more than a millennium ago. As we know, Buddhism was integrated into Chinese culture, and eventually led to a renewal of Confucian thought with the development of Neo-Confucianism about 800 years ago. In this case – I think of Zhu Xi among others – while Confucianism was the basis, it also drew on elements of Buddhism and Daoism for an integration that was to have profound effects across East Asia. We may say that the history of civilisations is one of civilisational exchange and renewal.

**4. 您如何看待马克思主义中国化？它能解决什么问题？它有助于解决文化霸权主义吗？
How do you view the sinicization of Marxism? What problems can it solve? Is it helpful in addressing cultural hegemonism?**

What is known as the “sinification” of Marxism is a project that has been underway for more than a century in China. Over that time, there times when significant steps forward were made, and each step has come to have a different name. On the one hand, these titles or descriptions express the same process of sinification; on the other hand, they also indicate specific emphases of the time. As examples of these steps we may recall the early work of Qu Qiubai, Ai Siqi, and Li Da, who at the same time sought to be faithful to the mainstream of Marxism and to develop Marxism in light of Chinese conditions. We also have Mao Zedong Thought (from 1945), socialism with Chinese characteristics (of the reform and opening-up) with its emphasis on seeking truth from facts and liberating thought, and more recently Xi Jinping thought on socialism with Chinese characteristics for a new era, or the “new era” as a shorthand. Here the “two integrations” is the clear expression of the new era. The “sinicisation” of Marxism remains an ongoing project and in the future we can anticipate further major steps forward.

When I try to explain what “sinification” means to foreigners, I say that it means concrete Marxism, or the localisation of Marxism in light of China’s concrete conditions. As I suggested earlier, this is intrinsic to a Marxist approach: it is how we define Marxism.

As for what problems can be solved, we can also see what problems have already been solved, encapsulated in 救亡 (saving the country from destruction). From my perspective, in the search to solve some major contradictions in economic development some 50 years ago, the reform and opening-up has been an overall successful project. Regarding further problems, I could provide a list of well-known problems that have been identified and on which work is underway, such as imbalanced and uneven development and the need for a better life, the significant transition with qualitatively new productive forces and the need for adjustments in the relations of production, the project of rural revitalisation, and so on. Many others continue to undertake research on these problems, so I do not need to add to that work here.

However, there is one problem that I and a colleague are researching now: what can Marxism contribute to the question of civilisation, or indeed a “new form of human civilisation”? Actually, there are many contributions, but I would to focus on one important aspect. Already in their early works, Marx and Engels argued that a civilisation is built on a strong economic foundation. They noted that Western civilisation really only arose when the capitalist economies of Western countries began to improve (with all the problems entailed). Importantly, they noted that the development of science and technology was very much part of and indeed crucial to this

economic growth. The underlying principle is very important, and Engels in particular emphasised that the qualitatively higher form of a communist socioeconomic system would also lead to much higher level of civilisation at a global level. Of course, the actuality of this situation remains in the future, but we can gain an insight into what is required for a “new form of human civilisation.” A concrete example: I am sometimes asked what I think about artificial intelligence (AI) and the commonly expressed fear that it will replace human jobs. My reply is that AI is a tool; yes, a highly sophisticated tool at a whole new level, but still a tool that human beings use. Further, AI is one of a number of qualitatively new productive forces. As these develop further – with China in the lead for most of them (57 out of 64) – they have the potential for a significant change in the way economies and societies work. It remains to be seen, of course, whether and how these new productive forces can contribute to projects such as “common prosperity,” but the point here is that they potentially can provide a stronger foundation for civilisational development. By way of a footnote, the methodological principle mentioned earlier also applies to the study of ancient civilisations. In their earlier times, the civilisations of Iran, Egypt, India, South America, and of course China were built on what at the time were relatively strong economic foundations.

A short reply to the final part of the question concerning cultural hegemonism. The one we know today is Western cultural arrogance, although it is under severe pressure from the widely-acknowledged multi-dimensional crisis (多重危机) of the West. In light of my earlier observations concerning concrete Marxism, and that the universality of Marxism (basic principles) is due to its constant process of concretisation, it is impossible for Marxism to contribute to cultural arrogance and hegemonism. It follows that if Marxism remains central, then it is also impossible for “cultural confidence” to become “cultural arrogance.”

5. 关于马克思主义中国化，尤其是“第二个结合”，我们还需要做些什么？ Regarding the sinicization of Marxism, especially the "second integration," what else do we need to do?

There are four parts to my answer: the assessments of risks; sustained practical analysis of what aspects of traditional culture should be taken up and transformed; how traditional values relate to core socialist values, and Marxist political philosophy.

First, there is a need for the continued assessment of the risks involved in the second integration. One risk is that some may place too much emphasis on traditional culture and thereby minimise the role of Marxism. Others sometimes say that the two are

difficult to integrate, since – for example – the Confucian value of harmony contrasts with the Marxist emphasis on contradictions and struggle. To my mind, it is important to keep the basic principles of Marxism as the key and especially the role of the dialectical method. We may say that Marxism should be the principal aspect of this particular contradiction. At the same time, I also find the “second integration” a very good strategy, since it draws those who perhaps took refuge in traditional culture or who see it as sufficient in itself into an engagement with Marxism.

Second, there is a need for continued and sustained analysis of what aspects of traditional culture should still be cast aside as dross or feudal relics and what aspects need to be taken further and transformed in light of a new context. I know that many specialists are now working on this problem. The traditional values that can be taken up are not necessarily givens. True, there are widely recognised values that people practice in their daily lives, but these also need careful analysis. At the same, it seems to me that at the level of daily practice there is already a process underway for this integration. Perhaps I can put it this way: in one sense, it is already the practice of many people, in another sense, it still needs work. We need to remember here that cultures are constantly in the process of transformation and renewal. This is the reality of a culture; think here of the meaning of the two characters 文化.

Related is the third point, which concerns the relation between traditional values and core socialist values. Most of the core socialist values relate to traditional values in some way, but four have more modern connotations: freedom, democracy, equality, and rule of law. At a superficial level, they seem very similar to the values promoted in, for example, the French Revolution’s *Declaration of the Rights of Man* (1789) and the American *Declaration of Independence* (1776). What is the difference? We need to ask: for whom and for whose benefit? The texts mentioned indicate that the values in question relate to a capitalist system, which pays lip service to freedom, equality, democracy, and rule of law, but actually restricts them to what the Italian Marxist Domenico Losurdo defines as the small “community of the free and its domination over those unworthy of freedom.” Many in capitalist systems are actually excluded from freedom, democracy, equality, and rule of law. In a socialist context, the meanings of these values obviously have a different meaning, and there is now more than a century of experience of the construction of such systems. However, the task of seeing how they may integrate with traditional values is an important task.

A good example is the value of 孝 (*xiao*), which as we know has the character 子 beneath the character 老. Personally, I must say that I like this value, since a little more 孝 from my children would be a good thing. However, the question here is that in a

traditional context it indicates the complex hierarchical relations between people, from parent-child relations through society to the state. How can it be transformed in a new context? In terms of respect for those who have already made contributions to society, this is clear. But how does it relate to the core socialist value of equality? Perhaps in terms of not forgetting and not dismissing those who are older and treating them as useless and even a drain on society (as happens too often in Western countries). In other words, they need to be treated equally.

Fourth, the role of Marxist political philosophy, which takes human liberation as its core. For example, in this light we can understand the important work on justice undertaken by Chinese scholars and experts. From my research on this topic, I have noticed a distinct emphasis on practical and whole-of-society measures. However, the proof comes with the practice; theory is by no means enough. Under the umbrella of Marxist political philosophy, we may also include questions such as community, civilisation, and so on, but this would require too many more words.