

Marxist Philosophy in China: From the Reform and Opening-Up to the New Era

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Introduction

This book provides for the first time in English a detailed and critical history of Marxist philosophy in China since the beginning of the reform and opening-up in 1978. That said, it would be remiss of me not to include a chapter on the precursors, from the earliest days in 1923 when Marxist philosophy was introduced to China and including the seminal contributions of early thinkers such as Qu Qiubai, Ai Siqi, Li Da, and of course Mao Zedong as a philosopher. This is the task of the first chapter, after which I focus on the period since 1978. This begins with the “discussion on the question of the criterion for truth” of 1978 and closes with the first half of the 2020s and the relation between the basic principles of Marxism and (traditional) culture, which is embodied in “the two integrations.” After immersing myself in the thousands of research materials, thinking it all through, writing and revising, I have come to the conclusion that this period, from the beginning of the reform and opening-up until today, has seen Marxist philosophy in China flourish as never before. It is also very clear that such developments are very much part of the mainstream of Marxism, since Marxist philosophy in China inherits the full tradition of Marxist thought and has developed it in light of concrete practice. This should not be a surprise, since as many a scholar has pointed out Marxism aligns with Chinese expectations and aspirations for a better life. Simply put, it is the Chinese way.

Background Reasons for the Study

Apart from my own curiosity and a propensity for taking on large or even massive research projects, a question arises: why I would decide to undertake a research project on a topic to which so many Chinese scholars have already devoted much attention and published important studies? The key here is that this research has been overwhelmingly published in Chinese; by contrast, in English – indeed in any other Western language – there is very little at all. In all of my research thus far, I have been able to find perhaps one or two small articles in English on a particular topic within Marxist philosophy in China. But there are no studies concerning the history of Marxist philosophy after 1978, from the beginning of the reform and opening-up until today.

In the past, there has been more interest in developments before 1978, and especially up to the 1950s. To my mind, the best work to date on pre-1978 Marxist philosophy in China is by the Australian scholar, Nick Knight. Among a number of publications, to be noted here is *Marxist Philosophy in China: From Qu Qiubai to Mao Zedong, 1923-1945* (2005). This monograph was the culmination of 30 years of research into the earlier phase of Marxist philosophy in China. Although Knight’s work was framed by Western assumptions and research methods and indeed engages primarily in debate with other Western scholars, it remains the best that is available in English for the earlier period, from the early 1920s to the 1950s. However, an English-language history from the beginning of the reform and opening-up until the time of writing has not yet been written. This is my task, which completes a full history of Marxist philosophy in China from the 1920s until today.

Focus of Analysis

The focus of analysis in this book is Marxist philosophy as an academic discipline. I am concerned with the developments, discussions, and debates that have taken place for almost five decades between Marxist philosophers. The topics include the criterion for truth, practical materialism, the debate between dialectical and practical materialism, the “textbook system” and textual analysis of the classic texts, the Marx-Hegel relation, the Chinese reception of Western Marxism, political philosophy, and the question of culture. All of these are primarily scholarly and scientific topics, and often saw major debates between philosophers.

However, I will not deal with debates that had a primarily public and political dimension to them. These include the relatively brief but very public and policy-focused debates over the success or failure of reform and opening-up, over whether the “public” (公 gong) or “private” (私 si) sectors of the economy would be the major and central aspect, or over whether China was following the “capitalist” (资) or “socialist” (社) road. I will also not discuss the battles waged against destructive foreign and mostly “Western” influences, such as neoliberalism, historical nihilism, bourgeois liberalisation, cultural conservatism, democratic socialism, “universal values” and so on.

This may seem like a somewhat large list of items to be excluded from analysis, but I have already dealt with them in some detail in my earlier *Socialism with Chinese Characteristics: A Guide for Foreigners* (Springer 2021). In that work too I devoted considerable attention to the “general secretary as a thinker,” analysing the contributions especially of Mao Zedong, Deng Xiaoping, and Xi Jinping. Thus, there is no need to present such material again, albeit with one or two exceptions: Mao Zedong as a philosopher in chapter 2 and some a brief coverage of some initial statements on the “two integrations” from Xi Jinping in chapter 10.

Scholarly Resources

A few comments are needed on the scholarly resources used for this book. First, it is imperative to work with Chinese-language sources, which was the initial reason for learning the language more than a decade ago. Any reader who cares to consult my journal articles over the last few years or some recent monographs will see that the vast majority of scientific research material consulted has been published in Chinese. That said, the amount of available material is vast, especially for a study such as this, so I have of necessity mostly restricted references to “core” journals, as listed by the Chinese Social Sciences Citation Index and the Peking University Core Journal list, as well occasional pertinent studies published under the banner of Chinese Humanities and Social Sciences AMI Journal list. Even with these restrictions, I have still read and reflected upon thousands of monographs and journal articles – too many to cite even in the scope of a book. By way of example, the philosopher Chen Xianda in his lifetime published scores of monographs, hundreds of journal articles, and gave many interviews. Limiting the number of Chen Xianda’s works to a little over 200 – as I did in an earlier stage of research – still leaves a significant amount of material to read and analyse. Thus, through a careful analysis, I have selected the most relevant and representative research materials that should be quoted, referred to, and cited. These represent the main developments and scholars responsible for those developments.

Second, what resources are available in English? Here we need to distinguish between traditional Chinese philosophy and Marxist philosophy. In terms of the former, the material published in or translated into English (and other Western languages) is relatively plentiful. Translations of the classic texts continue, along with commentary, exposition, arguments, and so on. The works by and studies on the great thinkers of a tradition of more than two millennia are also increasingly available, as are occasional studies of relatively more recent developments. The problem here is that a reader or student outside China may gain the distorted impression that this is what constitutes “Chinese philosophy.” However, even the most cursory look at the disciplinary concerns of schools, departments, or institutes of philosophy – let alone schools of Marxism – will soon indicate otherwise. I will emphasise this point from time to time: Marxist philosophy has been for some time now the major and central form of philosophy in China. Yet what is available in languages other than Chinese on Marxist philosophy is scarce indeed. I have mentioned Nick Knight’s important work on the earlier period, from the 1920s to the 1950s, but material available from the post-1978 period – when Marxist philosophy has flourished as never before – can be counted on the fingers of two hands. These works are translations of a few leading scholars and are to be commended for being translated, especially by Canut Press and Springer Press. However, these works are by scholars arguing for certain positions and do not offer a historical view of the development of Marxist philosophy in China.

Third, a few words are needed on academic discourse and my propensity to focus on questions of language, translation, and terminology. As for academic discourse, those who wish to venture into Chinese materials will soon find another world from the one to which they have become accustomed. The discourse of Chinese scholarly works has a heritage of millennia, with a host of given assumptions about the way one structures an argument, the type of language one deploys (often literary and with many allusions and sayings), and even the form of citations. For many a long year I have become thoroughly accustomed to such academic discourse, which provides an extremely useful counterpoint to the closed circuit of Western assumptions about such matters. If the reader wishes to delve into Chinese materials, even only in translation, then it is necessary to be prepared for the following: a propensity for comprehensiveness, or what may be called multi-aspect or macroscopic analysis; carefully balanced sections of a study; a host of four-character expressions; literary modes of expression that are distinct from everyday speech; and so on. Keep your eyes, ears, and mind open, and your mouth closed.

In terms of words and their meanings and translations, Wei Xiaoping (2023) puts it very well: “words and concepts are the atoms of language and writing, and language and writing are the foundation for expressing ideas.” I will not infrequently turn to the question of terms in German (the favoured language of Marx and Engels), English, and Chinese. I am particularly interested in the way semantic fields or connotations of a word overlap between languages but do not completely match one another. There is always a range of meaning left over, which may either be lost or forgotten, or may enhance the meaning. In philosophy and textual interpretation it is indeed the case that we begin with and return to the atoms of language.

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Chapter Synopsis

Chapter 1: Introduction: Background, Methodology, and the Education Reforms of 2004-2005

This introductory chapter deals with both background and methodological matters and the all-important education reforms of 2004-2005. As for the background concerns, the main point relates to the need to provide for the first time in English a history of Marxist philosophy in China from the beginning of the reform and opening-up until today. What follows deals with the focus of this study, which is Marxist philosophy as a scholarly discipline. This focus inevitably raises the question of the relation between Marxist philosophy and the theory of a Marxist political party: the two are distinct in China and yet maintain a healthy and productive interaction that is to the benefit of both. A final methodological matter concerns scholarly resources and way these are cited and referenced. The introductory chapter

also includes a detailed treatment of the education reforms of 2004-2005, which established Marxist theory as a first-level discipline with a number of second-level disciplines. These education reforms provide the indispensable foundation and institutional structure for the flourishing of Marxist philosophy. The chapter closes with some reflections on the effects of these reforms a couple of decades later and implications for the future.

Chapter 2: The Precursors: Marxist Philosophy Before the Reform and Opening-Up

This chapter provides an overview of earlier developments in Marxist philosophy in China, so as to indicate the initial breakthroughs and continuities into the period after 1978. I introduce the work of Qu Qiubai, who produced the first works on Marxist philosophy in China in the early 1920s. There follows the contribution of Ai Siqi, who had the ability to communicate mainstream Marxist concepts (from the Soviet Union) to a wide audience. The most substantial work in Marxist philosophy was by Li Da, who initially translated works from Japanese in the 1920s and then wrote some very influential volumes in the 1930s. Ai Siqi was also part of the study circles with Mao Zedong and others in Yan'an during 1936-1937, which was arguably the most creative time in this earlier period. This was the context for Mao Zedong's engagement with and contribution to Marxist philosophy. The chapter closes with a consideration of the Yan'an New Philosophy Association, which was instrumental in promoting Marxist philosophy and ensured that it remained of paramount importance in the years to come.

Chapter 3: The Discussion on the Question of the Criterion for Truth

This chapter concerns the breakthrough "discussion on the question of the criterion for truth," which took place in 1978 on the eve of the reform and opening-up. This was a relatively brief but intense philosophical debate on which the understanding of Marxism turned, especially its integration with China's concrete realities. The conclusion was that practice is the sole criterion for testing truth, a conclusion that recovered the importance of practice that had already been emphasised by Li Da and Mao Zedong in the 1930s. Philosophy was at the forefront, and the struggle and achievement was a recovery of the insights achieved earlier. The chapter has the following sections. After the introduction, there follows an overview of events, from the debate's prelude, through the debate itself, to its aftermath. The section that follows provides a detailed analysis of the essay (published 10-11th May 1978) at the heart of the debate, "Practice is the Sole Criterion for Testing Truth." The essay has been cited on many occasions, but it is difficult to find a careful exegesis of its content and argument. The next section argues that the debate was a significant step in recovering the process of integrating Marxism with China's concrete realities. Here I deal with the questions as to why the debate happened when it did; liberations of thought; the dialectic of basic principles and specific judgements; and what is known as the "first integration," the integration of the basic principles of Marxism with China's concrete realities. The conclusion deals with the implications for Marxist philosophy.

Chapter 4: Practical Materialism: A New Type of Marxist Philosophy?

In the wake of the criterion for truth debate and its concern with practice, the next major phase concerned "practical materialism." Core questions in this movement included the role of practice in Marxist philosophy, epistemology, subjective initiative, Marxist philosophy as a system of thought, and the historical conditions that gave rise to "practical materialism." In more detail, the initial section deals with emergence of practical materialism through the proposals of Xiao Qian in 1983. The second part focuses on epistemology: how a perceiving subject can know objective truth (through practice). Third is the concern with subjective initiative, which was a distinct emphasis of practical materialism, especially since many philosophers argued that subjective initiative had taken second place to objective processes during the initial three decades of socialist construction in China. The fourth deals with one of the most keenly debated questions: whether Marxist philosophy has a unifying principle and how it may be seen as a unified theory. The fifth part concerns the texts used by practical materialism, which were primarily

from the youthful works of Marx and Engels in the 1840s. This textual preference has ramifications for the arguments of practical materialism. In the sixth part we come to the conclusion, which deals with the increasingly contested field of practical materialism and then its lasting contributions.

Chapter 5: The Great Debate: Practical Materialism or Dialectical Materialism?

A significant debate arose from the movement of practical materialism, concerning the very understanding of Marxist philosophy. Would it be, as not a few proponents urged, a new system of thought based on practice? Or would it be the already established worldview provided by dialectical materialism? This debate began in the late 1980s and carried through into the first decades of the 2000s. Although there were many variations, we may distinguish between four main emphases. The first was the most far-reaching, proposing either that practical materialism transcends the older two types of materialism – dialectical and historical – while at the same time drawing them into a new form of Marxist philosophy based on practice, or that practical materialism should supersede the older two materialisms since it was a qualitatively distinct system of (Marxist) thought. The second was a little less ambitious, seeking to restrict and indeed truncate Marxist philosophy to historical materialism, to which practical materialism may contribute. The third proposal was that dialectical materialism really is the home for practical materialism, where it may both contribute in terms of epistemology, human initiative, and changing the practical conditions of human life. The fourth is related but distinct: dialectical materialism as a scientific worldview forms the comprehensive framework for Marxist philosophy, although it constantly needs creative renewal in light of constant developments in the sciences and humanities. In this light, the concerns with human society and practice become necessary and indispensable components of the philosophical system or worldview. This final approach would, through significant struggle, become the generally agreed conclusion to the debate. A final section – apart from the conclusion – situates this debate in the context of the ideological disarray of the 1990s and early 2000s.

Chapter 6: Textbooks, Texts, and Philosophy

This chapter is situated in a broader historical perspective in two respects. The first concerns the process from the old Soviet-derived “textbook system” of Marxist philosophy, which emerged and was consolidated from the 1940s to the 1970s, the criticisms of this system in the 1980s and 1990s, and then the continuing search for a new model of textbooks for the sake of teaching since the 2000s. During this time, some advocated for dispensing completely with the textbook system, while others pointed out that there is a constant need for textbooks for teaching purposes in all levels of education. While the question of textbooks and indeed the ongoing tasks of translating the classics of Marxism is the focus of the first part of the chapter, the second part considers the growth in careful textual study of the manuscripts of Marx, Engels, and the classic writers in the Marxist tradition. While there has always been a need for such careful textual work in the process of translation and analysis, the renewed project of publishing the *Marx-Engels Gesamtausgabe* (MEGA, initially projected at more than 100 volumes but now less) has led to a new wave of interest in such work. In relation to this topic, the chapter elaborates on engagements with the MEGA project, the implications for the revised edition of the Chinese Complete Works of Marx and Engels, analyses and criticisms of the editorial policies of second phase of the MEGA project (MEGA2), and a call for studying closely the achievements and limitations of both the first and second phases of the project (MEGA1 and MEGA2). Apart from my deep-held interest in such matters (I am by training a scholar of texts and textual criticism), I pay attention to the philosophical implications of the basic fact that words and concepts are the atoms of language and writing, and thus of the manifestation of ideas. In other words, the tasks of translation, textual criticism, and analysis have led to reconsideration of some key philosophical concepts and terms used by Marx and Engels.

Chapter 7: The Marx-Hegel Relation

The importance of Hegel's philosophy for the development of the philosophical outlook of Marx and Engels continues to be of significant interest for Chinese scholars. The question remains as to how Marx and Engels understood Hegel, how deeply their thought was influenced by Hegel, and what distinguishes their philosophical, economic, and historical method from Hegel. This chapter tackles these questions in three main sections, moving in chronological order from the earliest to the latest. The first section concerns Marx's *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, which is a commentary written in 1843 but not published in Marx's lifetime (except for a brief introduction). The main issues here concern the lead-up during Marx's long year as editor of the *Rheinische Zeitung* (1842-1843), the "state" understood in the narrow and specific sense of the political system of a country, and the meanings and transformations in the usage of *bürgerliche Gesellschaft* (which is left untranslated), and the contradiction between universal and particular. The second section tackles the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, which again were unpublished during Marx's lifetime. Evincing significant development in Marx's thought, the topics of concern include the approach to labour, the importance of the alienation of labour, and whether these manuscripts constitute a major turning point. The third section moves ahead a decade or more and focuses on the *Economic Manuscripts of 1857-1858* and *Capital*. On the basis of Marx's methodological reflections in relation to Hegel's philosophy, the concern here is with the meanings of and relation between reflecting and translating the material world into forms of thought, the distinction between "narrative" and "research" methods, and the principle of ascending from the abstract to the concrete. The conclusion seeks to sum up this material in terms continuity and discontinuity, as well as indicating the emergence of a relatively new concern with Marx's later ethnological and historical notes of 1880-1882.

Chapter 8: The Chinese Reception of "Western Marxism"

This chapter presents an analytic overview of forty years of study of Western Marxism by Chinese scholars. Organised into four main sections, it begins with a re-emphasis on the wider institutional context of this Chinese research. Here, I deal with the beginnings of research on Western Marxism in China, outline the two main periods of this research, which turn on the important educational reforms of 2004-2005. The next section focuses on the initial period of research on Western Marxism, from the early 1980s to the education reforms, which may be characterised in terms of the work of "wary onlookers" writing introductions to and surveys of Western Marxist scholars. The following section covers the last two decades after the 2004-2005 education reforms. This period is of most interest, so more attention is devoted to developments during this time. It was a time of increasingly confident participants on the world stage, who focused on core issues, realistic demands, and problem-based research. The final section concerns assessments of the limitations of Western Marxism, which have been identified through the in-depth research of the second period. In conclusion, while Western Marxism may be seen as a legitimate development of Marxism in a capitalist context, it is a tributary from the mainstream.

Chapter 9: Marxist Political Philosophy: From Problem Consciousness to Justice

This chapter deals with the relatively more recent – over the last two decades – development of Marxist political philosophy in China. It does so by initially tackling the question of "problem-oriented" research or "problem consciousness." In terms of Marxist philosophy, problem consciousness arose as a consequence of the genuine role of practice within Marxist philosophy; in terms of the social context, this consciousness was a response to growing and explicit contradictions that had emerged in the process of the reform and opening-up during the 1990s and into the early 2000s. These problems gave rise to an initial emphasis on justice and then a more comprehensive interest in political philosophy. While some tried to argue that Marxist political philosophy should be seen as a "department" of Marxist philosophy, the majority came to understand political philosophy as a significant new development. In dealing with

Marxist political philosophy, the chapter moves on to consider the core principle of human liberation and the development of this type of philosophy: from reflections on whether Marxist political philosophy is indeed possible and what its resources might be to a more comprehensive structure of philosophical thought. While there are by now many aspects to Marxist political philosophy, a major focus continues to be the question of justice (in its juridical, value, and economic senses). So it is necessary to consider questions such as: the relation between descriptive and normative justice, as well as between historical materialism and political philosophy; distributive justice; capital-logic; ecological justice; a moral system based on justice; and whether Marxist philosophy is able to produce a qualitatively new and practical form of justice. The chapter closes by reflecting on the role of Marxist political philosophy in light of the overall framework of Marxist philosophy.

Chapter 10: The Question of Culture: Marxist Philosophy in Light of Concrete Conditions and Culture

The question of culture has once again come to the fore in discussions and debates among philosophers in China. On this matter, “culture” includes traditional culture and its bearing today, what the essence or abiding value of this culture may be, and the nature and reality of socialist culture. The chapter begins by setting the scene with an overview of the long and winding path towards the appreciation of traditional culture and the more recent context since 2012 when the “best of” this culture has been emphasised and entered into educational policy. What followed is arguably the most significant development in relation to culture since the founding of the New China: the “two integrations,” the integration of the basic principles of Marxism with China’s concrete realities and with the best of traditional Chinese culture. The bulk of the chapter is devoted to this question and what scholars have been saying, albeit with a distinct emphasis on the philosophical angle. Thus, the second section of the chapter concerns the initial identification of the “two integrations” and their elaboration, with an emphasis on the methodological issues of dialectical thinking and comprehensive analysis embodied within them. Section three focuses on the abiding question of old and new, or on how modernisation relates to traditional culture. In this case, the issue is whether the new is set against the old, or whether the new lies within and arises from the old. The fourth section deals with how the basic principles of Marxism relate to and are integrated with the “best of” traditional culture, arguing for the leading role of the basic principles. Since this is inherently a dialectical relation and thus at core a philosophical question, the rest of this section draws on some concise formulations to express such a relation: making dialectical choices as to what to accept and reject, rejecting the dross and drawing out the essence, bringing forth the new through the new, and so on. This also requires attention to questions of translation, as well as some specific examples of traditional values. The chapter closes with some brief reflections on the implications for Marxist philosophy.

Chapter 11: Conclusion: From Wary Onlookers to Confident Participants on the World Stage

In drawing this work to a close, a number of conclusions may be drawn. To begin with, this work – alongside that of Nick Knight concerning the period from the 1920s to the 1950s – provides the first complete history of Marxist philosophy in China. In light of the research undertaken and the process of reflection and writing, it has become clear not only that Marxist philosophy is the preeminent form of philosophy in China, but also that it has – with some struggle in the earlier days of the reform and opening-up – recovered its role at the vanguard of scholarly disciplines. Further, it is clearly an inheritor of the full tradition of Marxist philosophy and very much part of the mainstream. The final section deals with emerging topics, especially civilisation in the sense of a “new form of human civilisation,” the difficulties faced as Marxist philosophers from China engage internationally, and the distinctive global focus of teaching, research, and contributions. The conclusion is clear: the history of Marxist philosophy in China, from the reform and opening-up to the new era, may be characterised as developing from wary onlookers in the earlier years to confident participants on the world stage today.