

# Contemporary Development of Marxist Philosophy in China

There are many points of interest pertaining to the development of Marxist philosophy in contemporary China. This paper will focus on the following areas and problems: the debate about the criterion of truth; Marxist philosophical textbook reform; the inquiry into the human agent and subjectivity; Marxism and Confucianism; Deng Xiaoping's theory; and the socialist market economic system. Let's start with the debate about the criterion of truth, for this is the historical starting-point of contemporary Marxist philosophy in China.

## 1. The Debate about the Criterion of Truth

Academically, the real development of Marxist philosophy in contemporary China started in 1978. In that year, China's intellectual life witnessed a great event. People in every walk of life were engaged in a debate: What is the criterion of truth?

Initially, the debate was related to the political struggle and the ideological debates within the Chinese Communist Party. Chairman Mao Zedong died in 1976, and the Cultural Revolution was officially declared to be ended. However, in ideology nothing seems to change much. The Chair of the Communist Party at that time was handpicked by Mao. As a way to maintain his position, he insisted on the doctrine of the "two whatevers": (1) whatever policy decisions Mao had made must be firmly upheld; (2) whatever instructions Mao had given must be followed unswervingly. Hence, for the opposite faction, led by Deng Xiaoping (who was purged by Mao in 1975) to come back to power, it was necessary to break these "two whatevers."

On May 11, 1978, a prominent Chinese newspaper, the *Guangming Daily*, published an article entitled "Practice Is the Only Criterion for Judging the Truth," signed by "the Special Commentator." The article argued that for all forms of knowledge, including Marxism, the nature of their truth must be judged and proved by practice. All scientific knowledge, including Marxism, should be amenable to revision, supplementation, and development in practice, in accordance with the specific conditions under which it is to be applied. This paper was widely echoed and provoked lively discussions throughout China. These led to a consensus that it is practice, not Mao's words, that can tell us what is right and what is wrong. The immediate consequence of this great debate was that the advocates of the "two whatevers" lost their power, and Deng Xiaoping regained his power and started the Chinese economic reform. In contrast to the "two whatevers," Deng's motto is, "It does not matter whether a cat is black or white; as long as it can catch mice, it is a good cat."

However, the debate has had a far-reaching influence on Chinese social science, in particular, on the study of Marxism itself. Since the Communist party came to power in 1949, Marxism, and its Chinese representative, Mao Zedong's thought, has been regarded as the absolute and as a completed truth system. The only role philosophers could play<sup>3/4</sup>and were required to play<sup>3/4</sup>was to prove the rightness or truth of Marxism and Mao's theory. Only political leaders, actually only Mao himself, could establish new truth and develop Marxism. Just as philosophy was the handmaiden of theology in the medieval West, so in China philosophy became the servant of Mao's politics. Any question or criticism put to Marxism and Mao's theory was regarded as a political challenge. For Mao, the most important thing that Marxist

philosophy can teach is its theory of class struggle and the theory of proletarian dictatorship. Mao's philosophy actually became a kind of "Struggle Philosophy."

Now the debate about the criterion of truth and the establishment of practice as that criterion broke this myth of Marxism and of Mao's theory. Marxism became a subject that could be reflected upon, examined, renewed, and developed. The truth-criterion discussion of 1978 was indeed a movement of enlightenment, a movement of thought liberation. It paved the way for contemporary China's economic development, and it also paved the way for any possible new contributions to Marxism. It used to be the case that one could only "insist" on Marxism; now we could "develop" Marxism, and many now believed that only by developing Marxist philosophy could one really insist on it. It used to be the case that academic philosophy was always subordinate to the leaders' thought and did not have any independent status. Since 1978, however, philosophical research has won a relatively independent academic position.

## **2. Reform of the Philosophical Textbook**

The immediate effect of these developments for Chinese Marxism was the publication of new editions of the Marxist textbook. One would think that a new edition of a textbook is a matter of pedagogy, of the teaching of philosophy, rather than a matter of philosophical development, or development in philosophical thought. This is not the case in China, however. For, generally speaking, it is only the Marxism embodied in the textbook that is regarded as the orthodox Marxism, the "true" Marxism that should be learned. A change in the textbook means therefore a change of attitude towards Marxism. To a great extent, the changes of the textbook mirror the situation of Marxist philosophical research. To get a new edition of the Marxist textbook published, what is essential is not the approval of the referees, but that of the government. Now the situation has changed significantly, yet the reform and reconstruction of the official textbook is still regarded as an important aspect of the progress of Marxist philosophy.

Until 1978, the main textbook of Marxist philosophy in China was Dialectical Materialism and Historical Materialism (edited by Ai Siqu, the former leader of the Party School of the Communist Party). Its contents and structure were basically transplanted and transferred from the textbook of Marxist philosophy in the former Soviet Union, and it was deeply influenced by Stalinist dogmatism. Though political relations between the Soviet Union and China were broken in the early 1960s, this type of official philosophical textbook had remained unchanged.

Since 1978, Chinese philosophers have introduced important modifications or re-formulations to different aspects and levels of Marxist philosophy.

First, breaking away from the constraint of the traditional textbook, they returned to the original works of Marx, Engels, and Lenin. Many concepts have been redefined, such as matter, consciousness, existence, spirit, static, motion, ideals, struggle, social existence, social consciousness, knowledge, truth, practice. Various basic views and positions were re-evaluated, such as, "the basic problem of philosophy," "the challenge of epistemological skepticism," "the relationship between dialectics and metaphysics," "the relationship between materialism and idealism," "the basic contradictions in human society," "epistemological methods," and so on. Some Marxist theories were abandoned, whereas others were re-formulated.

Second, many new concepts and views, mainly derived from Western philosophy and/or sciences, were introduced into the Marxist philosophic textbook, including concepts such as: subject and subjectivity, object and objectivity, medium, element, structure, function, information, feedback, control, social system, social organism, purpose, emotion, will, cognitive model, thinking world, value, evaluation, and so on; and views such as: “the idealist way and the practical way of human understanding of the World”; “the interactive law between subject and object”; “the farsightedness, selection, and creativity of human cognition”; “subjective principle and the system principle in cognition”; “the unity of truth and value”, “the concrete and historical unity among Truth, Good, and Beauty.” Some new research methods were transplanted, and applied to Marxist philosophical research, for example, the methods of genetic theory, atomic analysis, constructive explanation, and functional analysis.

Third, many new domains have been explored, and many new branches have been introduced and developed, for example, axiology, theory of practice, philosophical methodology, philosophical anthropology, the theory of social organisms, the theory of social control, the genetic theory of cognition, the theory of cognitive evolution, philosophy of man, philosophy of science, philosophy of humanities and social science, scientific epistemology, social epistemology, philosophy of daily life, feminist philosophy, philosophy of environment and ecology, and so on.

These philosophical achievements provided the new foundation to the textbook reform and reconstruction of Marxism in China. There are many textbooks with different outlooks. I would like to mention briefly the following four that are the most influential.

a. *Dialectic Materialism and Historical Materialism*, editor-in-chief, Xiao Qian, a professor at the People’s University of China. The book maintains the main structure of Ai Siqui’s textbook but thoroughly absorbs the new achievements of the sciences. It includes sub-divisions such as materialism, dialectics, and epistemology, theory of society and history, and methodology. It is the most influential textbook of Marxist philosophy in China. The problem of this book is that some of the new contents of the philosophy could not find their suitable place in the old system.

b. *The Basic Principles of Marxist Philosophy*, chief editor, Gao Qinghai, a professor at Jilin University. It is based on the historical development of Western philosophy and of Marxist philosophy. The major strength of the book lies in its attempt to locate the historical sources of the main philosophical concepts and its emphasis on understanding Marxist philosophy historically. The problem of this book is its difficulty in distinguishing the content of Marxist philosophy from that of Western philosophy. The other problem is that it is too historical, and somewhat weak in the construction of philosophical arguments.

c. Professor Huang Danshen, of Beijing University, tries to compile a system of Marxist philosophy according to his understanding of Lenin’s *Philosophical Notebooks*. The structure of his textbook system is based on 36 pairs of concepts. Since Lenin’s philosophical notebooks are his reading notes on Hegel’s *Logic*, Huang’s plan carries the obvious influence of Hegel’s philosophy. The other problem of his system is that 36 pairs of concepts are not enough to include all aspects of philosophy.

d. Professor Xia Zhentao of the People’s University of China, and Ouyang Kang [the present author], a professor at Wuhan University, have created another new system of Marxist philosophy according to their understanding to Karl Marx’s “*Practical Materialism*.” We

understand that the major characteristic of Marxist philosophy is its emphasis on “practice.” This is also the basic point of difference between Marxist and non-Marxist philosophy. It is a fact that Karl Marx never called his philosophy dialectical materialism or historical materialism; instead he referred to it as “Practical Materialism” in his *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts* (1844). His most famous sentence was the one that appeared on his tombstone: “Philosophers only explain the world, but the problem is to change it.” Based on Marx’s ideas, we developed a comprehensive understanding of the concept of “practice” and redefined the nature of Marxist philosophy as a kind of Dialectical, Historical, Humanistic, and Practical Materialism. Marxist philosophy is a philosophy of the relationship between Man and the World. The highest function of Marxist philosophy is to help people to recognize, to understand, to evaluate, to control, to develop, and to deal with this relationship more rationally and more efficiently. The new outlook of Marxist philosophy will be a kind of new Subjective-Methodological system.

At the present time, the reform and the reconstruction of the textbook of Marxist philosophy is still going on. We believe that further developments of Marxist philosophy in China should be individualized and personalized, rather than following a unified pattern. Different Marxist philosophers should be encouraged to develop their own philosophical systems based on their own understanding of Marxist philosophy, and they should use their special research methodology.

### **3. Exploring the Human Agent and Subjectivity**

In the past, human beings had little standing in Chinese Marxist philosophy. Even when the notion of man was mentioned occasionally, it mainly referred to the collective, group, class and nation, but not to the individual. This has been criticized as “stressing nature but forgetting man” – i.e., stressing the collective man but forgetting the individual person. Now it is agreed that the individual human being should be the main topic of Marxist philosophy.

With the publication of Marx’s newly discovered *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*,\* Chinese philosophers have become more interested in the problems of humanism and alienation. Some claim that the individual human being should be the starting point of Marxist philosophy. Others think that problems of the individual human being should be the highest target, the primary task, the central subject-matter and the final destination of Marxist philosophy. Still others suggest that humanism can be included in Marxism if it is defined as a basis for ethical consideration. The discussion, however, suffered a setback in the anti-liberalism movement of 1984.

Another related topic is subjectivity. Both subject and object are new concepts of Chinese Marxist philosophy that did not appear in the old philosophical textbook. In the 1980s, discussion of this issue was not limited to Marxist philosophy, but was also found in the literatures of critical theory, ethics, aesthetics, and so on. Why were Chinese intellectuals so interested in the problems of subject, subjectivity, and the subjective principle? The answer is that in discussing subjectivity, the central philosophical position of the individual human being could be established. There are many different positions in the inquiry into subjectivity. Some argue against it on the ground that to emphasize subjectivity would lead to the denial of cognitive objectivity. Others, on the other hand, push the subjective principle to the extreme of advocating an absolute free will. My M.A. thesis is entitled “On Subjective Ability,” and I have published many papers on this topic. I believe that the subjective movement in contemporary Chinese philosophy was actually a thought liberation movement.

In May 1997, Professor Huang Danshen of Beijing University organized a National Association of the Philosophy of Man, which held its first conference in Beijing. The Philosophy of Man has become a very hot topic in China today. One strong feature is to connect this topic with the new outlook of Marxist philosophy. Some claim that the Philosophy of Man is the hallmark of contemporary Marxist philosophy. Others think that the Philosophy of Man is only a part of Marxist philosophy. Nevertheless, the efforts to establish the Philosophy of Man have stimulated much philosophical research and have greatly extended the development of Marxist philosophy in China.

#### **4. Marxist Philosophy and Confucianism**

How should Marxist philosophy deal with its relationship to the traditional Chinese value system?

The controversy between traditionalism and anti-traditionalism has been hot in modern China for many decades. Since the New Cultural Movement of May 4, 1919, anti-traditionalism was the main trend. To some, revolution means rejecting traditional Chinese culture, especially Confucianism. Mao Zedong was deeply influenced by traditional Chinese culture in his early years. But one of the most important aims of his Cultural Revolution was to get rid of Confucianism, and even of all traditional Chinese culture. Traditional Chinese culture is regarded as an obstacle to China's modernization. Others looked down upon Chinese philosophy, and believed that Chinese philosophy was not mature, and that it lacked logic. They admired only Western civilization and philosophy. Meanwhile, the more traditionally-minded scholars insisted that Chinese culture and philosophy should be the mainstream in China. Now the problem is whether it is possible to combine Marxist philosophy with traditional Chinese culture. Can Marxist philosophy be developed without learning from Chinese culture and philosophy? How can Marxist philosophy become intrinsic to contemporary Chinese culture? How can Marxist philosophy find its foundation and roots in Chinese soil? Almost all Chinese philosophers now realize the necessity of combining Marxist philosophy and traditional Chinese philosophy. Integrating Chinese philosophy and culture into Marxist philosophy is the necessary way to develop Marxist philosophy in China. It is also the necessary way to discover and recognize the contemporary meaning of traditional Chinese culture and philosophy. There are many positive elements in traditional Chinese culture and philosophy that may be profitably absorbed into Marxist philosophy. Here we briefly list some of them:

##### *The idea of the unity of Man and Heaven (Nature)*

Now our entire world is deeply involved in the ecological controversy surrounding the relationship between Man and Nature. The sharp opposition between man and nature has been characteristic of much traditional Western culture and philosophy, and Marxism itself is a product of that tradition. To find possible ways to achieve a harmony of man and nature has from the beginning been a basic theme in traditional Chinese philosophy. Chinese philosophers insisted that nature is to be regarded not as the slave of man but as the equal partner in human life and in the formation of humanity. Man should stay on good terms with nature. Human beings should respect and protect nature. To protect nature is to protect the necessary environment of human life. Traditional Chinese philosophy is full of ecological insights and anticipations. The same ecological concerns can be found in Karl Marx's Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts.

##### *The outlook and method of the Mean (Zhong Yong).*

The Mean, also called "the Impartiality" or "the Doctrine of the Mean," is the Middle Way.

Epistemologically, the method of the Mean seeks to master the object in a complete and rounded way by avoiding any kind of extreme, excess, and partiality. In the context of social life, the Middle Way prescribes that each human being should form his own judgment regardless of the opinions of others.

#### *Harmony among peoples*

Chinese philosophy emphasizes peace and harmony among peoples and condemns irrational and unnecessary conflicts and unjust wars. Chinese philosophers insisted that human beings should respect and help each other. And their harmonious relationship is to be based on the common understanding of virtues. Rulers should treat their people as they treat their children. To show respect to the old and to protect youth were regarded as the basic virtues in ancient China. Traditional Chinese virtues, such as diligence and filial piety, have their contemporary meanings in today's human life and should become the intrinsic content of Marxist ethics.

Recently there have been heated discussions on Asian Values in the East and also in the West. It is generally agreed that Confucianism is the main core of Asian values, which include in particular "Family Values." Many Chinese philosophers believe that the teachings of traditional Chinese philosophy could still be applicable to human life today. They retain their relevance in contemporary world culture.

### **5. Deng Xiaoping Theory**

Deng Xiaoping theory is regarded as the new stage and new outlook of Marxist philosophy in contemporary China. It is the guiding ideology in building Socialism with Chinese Characteristics. Deng's thought has been intensively studied.

I think that the most important contributions of Deng Xiaoping theory lie in the liberation of the human spirit in contemporary China. The core and key point of Deng's theory is "emancipating the mind" and "seeking truth from facts." Seeking truth from facts is the quintessence of Marxism-Leninism and Mao Zedong Thought. Deng emphasized this in 1978 and used it to counter the "two whatevers," thus opening up a new area for China. It was called the first Spirit Liberation Movement in China. After the political incidents in 1989, there were some arguments about where China should go, especially whether China should continue its reform and open policy. Deng stressed the emancipation of the mind in his trip to South China in 1992. This affirmation cleared up many important misconceptions about Socialism, and advanced the reform to a new stage. This was called the second Spirit Liberation Movement, which initiated the socialist market system in China. After Deng's death, there have been some debates regarding his theory and practice. Secretary-General Jiang Zemin and the central committee of CPC stressed these two aspects again in its 15th National Congress in September 1997. This was regarded as the third Spirit Liberation in today's China.

Deng Xiaoping's other important contribution to Marxist philosophy is to establish a new criterion for socialist theories. He claimed that the fundamental questions we should ask about socialism are what socialism is and how to build it. He raised three fundamental criteria for judging a proposal or a policy: whether it is favorable for promoting growth of the productive forces in a socialist society, whether it is favorable for increasing the overall strength of the socialist state, and whether it is favorable for raising the people's living standards. The criteria were called the "three favorables." By these three value criteria, people could actually

evaluate all social policy and social administration and could judge between right and wrong and between good and bad.

Deng Xiaoping theory is a system with rich contents. He has greatly contributed to the contemporary development of China. His philosophical ideas give us enlightenment although they do not complete the development of Marxist philosophy in China. Deng's theory itself should be developed in time.

## **6. Marxism and Chinese Socialist Market System**

One special and current problem facing Chinese Marxist philosophers is how Marxist philosophy answers the challenges of constructing a socialist market economic system in China. In the past 20 years, the economic system in China has been changed from the central planning system via planned commercial system to a socialist free market system. The economy has developed rapidly. The new market system has thrown all traditional disciplines, such as philosophy, literature, and history into turmoil. As everyone knows, Marxism in China had a privileged political position in the planning of the social system. Now Marxist philosophical research has become a kind of academic research. The authority of Marxist philosophy can only be based on its content and function, depending on whether it is recognized by society. Marxist philosophers stand on the same level as other scholars. It is not only a kind of challenge but also a fair competition. This situation forces and stimulates Marxist philosophers in China to do their work better than ever. It is the motivating force underlying the development of Marxist philosophy as an academic discipline.

The socialist market economy, as a part of Chinese Marxism, is both a heritage and a development of Marxist economics. In our prior understanding of Marxism, socialism is the opposite of capitalism. The basic nature of capitalism is private ownership, free market economic system, and wealth distribution according to the ownership of capital. As the opposite of capitalism, the basic nature of socialism lies in the public ownership of capital, planned economic system, and wealth distribution according to work. The former Soviet Union, some Eastern European countries, and China had tried for many years to follow these criteria for socialism, and the consequence is not good at all. This situation led the Chinese Communist Party to re-think and re-understand Marx and Engels, especially the ideas of their later years. If one inquires more deeply into why they contrasted socialism with capitalism, one will discover that in their understanding, the highest goal of socialism is to create the higher productive forces, to get rid of social inequality, to destroy poverty, and to make all social groups richer. Socialism is thus a more advanced system than capitalism. But these ideas are not easy to actualize. Each country has to find its own effective and possible way according to its own history and reality. Only when your socialist theory succeeds can it be proved to be true socialism, and only then can your practice be accepted and followed by your people. Otherwise socialism will have no reason and no power to attract the people. Here we should insist that practice is the only criterion to judge the truth of socialism and of Marxism.

The Chinese socialist market economic system is based on following arguments.

- 1). Marxist socialism is not a kind of dogma but an active and practical movement. The highest goal of socialism is to develop productive forces in the most effective way. The basic doctrine of socialism is to enrich all members of society. To meet its goals, the development models of socialism in the world are not universal and unique but variable and multiple. In different countries, socialism requires different models and different ways. This is a necessary way to realize and to develop socialist theory.

2). The market, as an economic form, is neutral in relation to political and ideological systems. The market system does not belong only to capitalism but can also be used by socialism. Today's world is basically a global market economic system. Any individual country should consciously join in the world market system if they want to become a member of international society rather than being isolated. This also applies to China.

3). It is impossible to complete the transition from capitalism to communism in one step. There are some middle stages between them. Socialism is a middle stage in the transitional process. It should contain the characteristics of these two societies.

4). The Socialist free market system with Chinese Characteristics is a new development of Chinese Marxism. On the one hand, it insists that the highest aims of socialism are to develop the productive forces and to enrich people's lives to the greatest extent. On the other hand, it fits with the down-to-earth situation of contemporary China.

5). It has been proven through many years' unsuccessful practice in China before 1978 that the pure central planning economic system was a way neither to develop productive forces nor to raise the people's living standard. The fastest continuous economic development in China since 1978, especially since 1992, has strongly proved the benefits of the socialist market system.

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\*[Ed. note: Although Marx's 1844 manuscripts were first published in 1932 (in Berlin), it was not until 1979 that they were published in China.]

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