

CONTEMPORARY MARXISM IN CHINA AND PROCESS THOUGHT

(Contents)

Professor Dr. Kang Ouyang

1. The Debate about the Criterion of Truth

- 1) A brief review of modern history of China
- 2) The discussion and the meaning of truth criterion

2. Marxism and Confucianism

- 1) The debate between traditionalism and anti-traditionalism
- 2) Possible resources of traditional Chinese culture

3. Deng Xiaoping Theory

- 1) Three stages of spirit liberation in China
- 2) New understanding of socialism

4. Marxism and Chinese Socialist Market System

- 1) The debate about market economy
- 2) Five points to support socialist market system

5. Postmodernism in China

- 1) The fate of Western thought including postmodernism in China
- 2) What can we learn from process philosophy and postmodern thought?
- 3) Some questions about postmodernism

The speaker: Prof. Dr. Ouyang, Kang, President Assistant, Director of the Institute of Philosophy, Huazhong University of Science and Technology, Wuhan, Hubei 430074, P. R. China, Tel/Fax 011-86-27-87882755(H), 87684705, Email: kouyang@whu.edu.cn; kangouyang@263.net.

CONTEMPORARY MARXISM IN CHINA AND PROCESS THOUGHT

Professor Dr. Kang Ouyang
President Assistant
Huazhong University of Science and Technology
P. R. China

This paper will focus on the following areas and problems: the debate about the criterion of truth; Marxism and Confucianism; Deng Xiaoping's theory; the socialist market economic system; and process thought. In what follows, I will give an outline for each of these issues, and would be glad to fill in the details in our discussion.

1. The Debate about the Criterion of Truth

Academically, the real development of Marxism in contemporary China started in 1978. This year, there is a warm discussion about the truth criterion. We called it a discussion about "practice as the only 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 position of "two whatever"s: (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 whatever"s.

On May 11, 1978, one important Chinese newspaper, *Guangming Daily*, published an article entitled "Practice Is the Only Criterion for Judging the Truth". The paper was signed by "the Special Commentator" but was actually written by a philosopher in Nanjing University. The article argued that for all forms of knowledge, including Marxism, their nature of truth must be judged and proved by practice. This paper was widely echoed and provoked lively discussions in China. Innumerable papers and books about the issues raised by this paper were published, and a great number of academic conferences were held with the same regard. In the end one consensus was achieved--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 whatever"s lost their power, and Deng Xiaoping regained his power, and started the Chinese economical reform. In contrast to the "two whatever"s, 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 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, have been regarded as absolute, and the completed truth system. Only political leaders--actually only Mao himself--could establish new truth and develop Marxism. Any question and 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 proletariat 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 the criterion broke this myth of Marxism and of Mao's theory. Marxism became a subject that could be reflected, examined, renewed, and developed. It paved the way for contemporary China's economical development, and it also paved the way for any possible new contributions to Marxism. Since 1978, however, Marxist research has won a relatively independent academic position and achieved much valuable theoretical progress. Because of the time is limited, I will not list all achievements here. If you are interested to know the details, you may find that in my papers and other places.

2. Marxism and Confucianism

How should Marxism deal with its relationship with the traditional Chinese value system? This is an important problem to Marxist studies in China.

From the historical angle, 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, even *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, without logic. They only admired Western civilization and philosophy. Meanwhile, the more traditionally-minded scholars insisted that Chinese culture and philosophy should be the mainstream in China. After long discussion, now almost all Chinese philosophers realized the necessity of *combining* Marxism and traditional Chinese culture.

Now the problem is what can we learn from traditional Chinese culture and philosophy? Here we briefly list some of the areas:

A. 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. But to find possible ways to achieve a harmony of man and nature has been, from the beginning, a basic theme in traditional Chinese philosophy. Chinese philosophers insisted that nature is not to be regarded as the slave of man but the equal partner in human life and in the formation of his/her humanity. Man should stay on good terms with 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 Philosophical Manuscripts* (1844).

B. The outlook and method of the Mean (Zhong Yong). The Mean, also called as "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.

C. Harmony among the 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. The rulers should treat their people as they treat their children. Showing respect to the old and protecting the young were regarded as the basic virtues in ancient China. The traditional Chinese virtues 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 the West as well. Behind the various understandings of the concept of Asian Values, we may find that one central topic is to explain the meaning of traditional Asian values. 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.

3. Deng Xiaoping Theory

Deng Xiaoping Theory has been regarded as continuity and the new stage and new outlook of Marxist philosophy in contemporary China. It is the guiding ideology in building Socialism with Chinese characteristics.

I think that the most important contributions of Deng Xiaoping Theory lie in the liberation of the human spirit in contemporary China. The core of Deng's theory is "emancipating (liberating) 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 whatever"s and opened 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 its open policy. Deng stressed again the emancipation of the mind in his trip to South China in 1992. This affirmation cleared up many important misconceptions of Socialism, and advanced the reform to a new stage. This was called the second Spirit Liberation Movement that initiated the socialist market system in China. After Deng's death, there have been some debates regarding Deng's theory and practice. The 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.

Another of Deng Xiaoping's important contributions to Marxism has been 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 things: whether it is favorable to promote the growth of the productive forces in a socialist society, whether it is favorable to increase the overall strength of the socialist state, whether it is favorable to raise the people's living standards. The criteria were called the "three favorable"s. By these three value criteria, people could actually evaluate all social policy and social administration and judge between right and wrong and between good and bad.

Recently, President Jiang Zemin stressed that the Chinese Communist Party should be able to be "three representatives": representing the most advanced social productive forces; representing most people's basic needs; representing the developing direction of advance in Chinese culture. He had a lecture in the conference for the 80th celebration of Chinese Communist Party and said that the CPC will allow private productive owners to become members of the Communist Party.

4. Marxism and Chinese Socialist Market System

One special problem facing Chinese Marxists is how Marxism answers the challenges from the construction of the Socialist market economic system in China. In the past 20 years, the economic system in China has been changed from a central planning system via a planned commercial system to a Socialist free market system. The economy has developed rapidly. But the problem is whether Marxism is combatable with a free market economic system.

We think that the socialist market economy 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 capital ownership. As the opposite of capitalism, the basic nature of socialism lies in the public ownership of capital, a 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 instructions about socialism and the consequence is not good at all. This situation made the Chinese Communist Party re-think and re-understand Marx and Engels, especially their ideas in 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 your socialist theory be proved to be true socialism, and 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 the truth 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 these purposes, the development models of socialism in the world are not universal or unique but variable and multiple. In different countries, socialism should find different models and different ways. This is the necessary way to realize and to develop socialist theory.

2). The Market, as an economic form, is neutral to political and ideological systems. Market systems not only belong 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 is the same with China.

3). It is impossible to finish 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 before 1978 in China 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.

5. Postmodern Thought in China

1) The fate of Western thought including postmodernism in China may be divided into two periods since 1949.

The first stage is 1949 to 1978. Since 1949, almost all Western thought and philosophies have been criticized and refused as a part of capitalist spirit in China—including Professor Whitehead and process thought. Chinese readers can only learn Western philosophy as a kind of “opposite text reading materials” in some special informally published books.

The second stage started in 1978; the attitude to Western philosophy and culture has been greatly changed. Western cultures and Western philosophies were introduced into China more and more, and their influence has greatly increased. Since the 1990's, postmodernism attracted more and more attention from Chinese scholars. But many Chinese scholars only know Derrida, Foucault, Lyotard, and so on, and their *deconstructive* postmodernism. That really caused some misunderstandings of postmodernism. However, Professor Zhihe Wang and his colleagues have done very important work to introduce the views of *constructive* postmodernism into China and have played very active and positive roles in the spread of postmodernism in China. The publishing of several books and papers on constructive postmodernism in the middle of 1990s was one of the most important effects.

However, there are still different kinds of attitudes to postmodernism. Some scholars still hold very sharp and strong critical attitudes toward postmodernism and publish papers criticizing postmodernism—including *constructive* postmodernism. However, more and more Chinese scholars hold more open and rational attitudes to postmodernism and try to understand it better in order to get some enlightenment from postmodernism and postmodern movements.

I myself noted the influence of postmodernism recently and tried to get some enlightenment from it in order to develop my own philosophical thought. There is a chapter on postmodern social sciences in my book titled Philosophy of Humanities and Social Sciences. The book will be published very soon. One of my papers on that topic may have been published by now in China.

However, though my knowledge of postmodernism is still very limited, postmodernism has become one of the hottest topics in China. I am sure that its influence will increase very quickly.

2) What can we learn from process philosophy and postmodernism?

First, we noted that many postmodernists have a very strong consciousness of social responsibility. They hold critical attitudes to the main trends of Western capitalist society, especially its evil sides and want to get rid of their negative functions for human life. They are deeply concerned about the fate and the future of human beings. They give many useful suggestions in order to help society to develop itself in a more rational direction and with a better way. The main trend of western society may not like the critical voice of postmodernism, but postmodernism may really help societies to know their own problems and develop themselves better on their way to the future.

Second, from the methodological angle, we can get much enlightenment from Process Philosophy. For example, Professor Whitehead and his colleagues paid very close attention to Values and stressed its special position in philosophical thinking. They asked us to understand the world as a whole and stressed the methodology of Holism. They emphasized original thought and especially the social origin of thought. They stressed the relationship, and especially the interaction and cooperation between, individuals. They stressed process, and thought of the world as a kind of evolutionary development process. Though these thoughts belong not only to Whitehead and the other process thinkers, Whitehead and his colleagues have made special and important contributions to these aspects; so their ideas certainly should be treated as one of most valuable resources. Actually, I do think that many of these thoughts are compatible with the new understanding of Marxism, especially Karl Marx's original and processive thought about human history.

Third, constructive postmodernists and their suggestions may hold great benefits for curing the modern illness, for reducing the possible negative functions of capitalism, and for preventing the possible disasters in a time of globalization. These ideas strongly urge us to construct a kind of new science that unifies the sciences and technology *with* humanism, to develop a kind of sustainable economy compatible with continuing economic development (Professor Cobb), to unify individuals and society in order to move beyond *absolute* individualism, to prompt the co-existence of different kind of cultures, to protect nature and to construct a harmonious world, and so on. Since the developing direction of western countries will continue to lead world development, it is certainly a positive contribution to the rational development of world civilization.

Fourth, postmodernism is helps the developing countries to understand Western society better and to make sure what is their own right way to go. Most postmodernists live in Western society and know the inner contradiction and conflicts of capitalism very well. While most of the developing countries are trying their best to learn from Western kinds of modernization, postmodernists have pointed out the problems of Western civilization. As Professor Griffin mentioned in his preface to the Chinese version of his book The Reenchantment of Science, "China may avoid the negative influence by learning the mistakes Western world has made and to be a real postmodern society actually."

Fifth, as a Chinese scholar, I especially noted that many postmodernists are very friendly to Chinese people and Chinese culture. The Center of Process Studies has set a good example in this regard. Many postmodernists stress the importance of Chinese culture in overcoming modern problems and trying to find enlightenment from traditional Chinese culture. This will certainly stimulate Chinese scholars to study their own traditional culture, to discover other possible resources, and to enlarge its influence in the further development of world culture.

3). Some questions for postmodernism

However, since postmodernism faces such a complex world and such varied processes, there are some questions that we need to think about and research more carefully.

First of all, is the *modern* spirit out of date? Is today's world *really* a *postmodern* world? May we not say that modernity is still the right direction of today's world? Actually we may find that the whole world is still in its process of modernization. Both in reality and spirit they are the same. If this is true, how can we think about a realistic foundation of postmodernism?

Second, is postmodernism useful to the developing countries, like China? To what extent and to what degree it is useful? What are the universal meanings of postmodernism to today's world? Or is it only limited to some *developed* countries?

Third, how can we criticize or deconstruct modern Western society in a way that is more rational and more compatible with the main trend of Western society? How can we put constructive postmodernism and their suggestions into practice?

Fourth, I highly admire the attitudes of *constructive* postmodernism and its positive functions. However, how can we distinguish it more clearly from *deconstructive* postmodernism? Is it necessary and/or possible? How can we get rid of the absolute and negative influence of postmodernism especially the *deconstructive* postmodern attitudes?

Fifth, will it still work, or not, if we choose *not* to relate process thought with religion and/or theology? While postmodernists stress the creative nature of human beings, is it absolutely necessary and invariable to connect postmodernism with religions and theology?

The author: Prof. Dr. Ouyang, Kang, President Assistant, Director of the Institute of Philosophy, Huazhong University of Science and Technology, Wuhan, Hubei 430074, P. R. China, Tel/Fax 0086-27-87882755(H), 87684705, Email: kouyang@whu.edu.cn; kangouyang@263.net.