

# The Dissemination of Marxist Biographical Literature in Modern China

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## Abstract

This paper explores the spread of Marxist biographical literature in modern China, focusing on the translation, interpretation, and influence of these works on Chinese intellectual and political landscapes. It examines key figures and events that facilitated the introduction of Marxist ideas to China, highlighting the role of translations and publications in shaping the discourse around Marxism and its foundational figures. The narrative traces the evolution of Marxist thought in China, from its initial reception to its adaptation within various Chinese political and social contexts.

## Keywords

Marxism, Labor Movement, Ideological Propagation, Biographical Research

## 1. Introduction

The introduction of Marxist biographical literature into modern China marked a pivotal moment in the country's intellectual and political development. This phenomenon was not merely an academic exercise but a transformative movement that influenced the ideological foundation of modern Chinese society. The translation and publication of these works played a crucial role in disseminating Marxist ideas, making them accessible to a broad Chinese audience and integrating them into the national discourse (Knight, 2005).

The translation of key Marxist works, including biographies of Marx and Engels, was instrumental in spreading Marxist ideas (Musto, 2008). These translations were not mere linguistic transpositions but involved a process of interpretation and adaptation to the Chinese context, often reflecting the translators' own understanding and biases.

The biographies of Karl Marx written by German scholars in the first half of

the 20th century can be broadly classified into three categories: firstly, the orthodox Marxist accounts exemplified by Franz Mehring's "Karl Marx: The Story of His Life" (1918); secondly, politically neutral biographies, such as Tönnies' "The Life and Doctrine of Karl Marx" (1921); and thirdly, anti-Marxist narratives that employed psychoanalytic methods, like Otto Rühle's "Karl Marx: His Life and Works" (1928) and Schwarzschild's "The Red Prussian: The Life and Legend of Karl Marx" (1947). Since the People's Republic of China era, numerous Chinese translations of these German biographies have been published, including translations by Yi Zhen and Luo Jinan, among others. Soviet biographies, represented by Lenin's "Karl Marx" (1914) and Liadov's "Marx and Engels" (1927), emphasized Marx's role as a proletarian revolutionary leader but were also marked by a strong ideological bias and a tendency to gloss over sensitive topics (Liu, 2019; Lu, 2018).

In the latter half of the 20th century, Western scholars, based on the comprehensive study of MEGA (Marx-Engels-Gesamtausgabe) documents, authored biographies of Marx that trended towards a more scholarly and analytical approach, establishing models like "Life-Doctrine", "Critical Reconstruction", and "Historical Restoration". During the period of the Democratic Revolution, original Chinese biographies like Li Ji's "Biography of Marx" (1926) expanded Marx's influence in China, corrected misconceptions about figures like Lassalle and Bakunin, and enriched the study of Marx's later thoughts (White, 1996).

Translations and original works in Chinese, both from foreign languages and domestically produced, formed the basis of Marx biographies in China. Translated works from authors like Engels, Lenin, and Liadov were widely disseminated through books and serialized in party newspapers. Original Chinese works included comprehensive biographies and shorter accounts that contributed to the popularization of Marxism in China.

## 2. The Significance of Biography Research

Biography research holds profound significance in the realm of academia and beyond, offering a nuanced understanding of individuals, societies, and the intricate interplay between them. Here, we delve into the multifaceted importance of biography research.

Biographies stand as guardians of historical memory, encapsulating the life stories of individuals within the wider context of their era. Through diligent research and skilled storytelling, biographers ensure that the legacies of notable figures are remembered, anchoring their life's work and contributions within the annals of history. This not only keeps the past alive but also deepens our collective grasp of historical events, shedding light on the cultural, social, and political milieus that shaped different periods.

Delving into the realm of biography research is akin to celebrating the multifaceted nature of human existence. By exploring the lives of people from varied backgrounds, biographers reveal the universal experiences of joy, sorrow, suc-

cess, and challenge that echo through time. Engaging with their subjects empathetically, they unravel the complexities of human behavior and emotion, offering insights into what drives people, what they aspire to, and what conflicts they face. This exploration nurtures a sense of empathy and a richer appreciation for humanity's diverse journey.

In reconstructing historical narratives, biographies offer fresh viewpoints and give voice to those who have been historically sidelined. This aspect of biography research broadens the horizons of historical study, bringing to light overlooked stories and challenging established historical narratives. Through thorough archival research and cross-disciplinary analysis, biographers are able to debunk myths, address historical wrongs, and present a more comprehensive and equitable view of history.

Biography research is a source of inspiration, showcasing individuals who embody resilience, integrity, and perseverance. These stories motivate others to pursue greatness, navigate hardships, and contribute positively to society. Biographies of scientists, activists, and artists, among others, not only celebrate their achievements but also encourage readers to envision and work towards a better future, illustrating the impact one individual can have on the world.

Furthermore, biography research is inherently interdisciplinary, bridging various fields of study. By integrating insights from history, psychology, sociology, literature, and more, biographers craft rich, multidimensional portraits of their subjects. This interdisciplinary approach promotes academic dialogue, spurs innovation, and contributes to a deeper, more rounded understanding of both individuals and the broader context in which they lived. Through biography research, the interconnectedness of different disciplines is highlighted, enriching our understanding of the past and its relevance to contemporary issues. In conclusion, biography research occupies a pivotal position in academia and society, offering profound insights into the human condition, enriching our understanding of the past, and inspiring future generations to pursue excellence and social justice. By preserving historical memory, exploring human experience, reconstructing historical narratives, inspiring role modeling, and contributing to interdisciplinary scholarship, biography research leaves an indelible mark on the fabric of human knowledge and culture.

### **3. The Spread of Marx's Biography in Late Qing China**

In February 1899, the Shanghai Society for the Extensive Study released the 121st volume of *The Globe Magazine*, which had a distribution of nearly 4000 copies. This issue began serializing "Datongxue" (The Study of Universal Brotherhood), a work co-translated by British missionary Timothy Richard and Chinese scholar Cai Erkang. This piece was an abridged and interpretive translation of the first four chapters of "Social Evolution" by British sociologist Benjamin Kidd. The first installment, titled "The Current World Scene", mentioned a notable figure in the realm of various professions, "the Englishman Marx", quoting him

as saying, “The influence of those engaged in managing joint-stock companies extends over all continents, far surpassing the dominion of sovereigns and ministers within a single country” (this quote is a paraphrase from *The Communist Manifesto*, which is more commonly translated today as, “The bourgeoisie, by exploiting the global market, has made the production and consumption of all countries cosmopolitan”). The translators initially misattributed Marx’s nationality, so in April, when the third chapter, “The Principle of Competitive Advancement,” was published, they made a correction: “Among recent schools of thought, there exists a faction advocating for the novel education of ensuring people’s welfare, such as the German Marx (i.e., Karl Marx), a proponent of capital theory (notably authoring *Das Kapital*—the first mention of this work in domestic publications).” This marked the first appearance of Marx’s illustrious name in our country, capturing the attention of the intellectual community.

The Society for the Extensive Study, initially called the Tongwen Book Club, was a publishing entity established in 1887 in Shanghai by European and American missionaries. It published around a hundred titles annually, and during the Emperor Guangxu’s preparation for reform and modernization, 129 of its books were procured, 89 of which were printed by the society. Among the more than ten publications it sponsored, *The Globe Magazine* had the largest circulation and referred to various socialist theories from Europe and America as “Datongxue” or “the new learning for the people’s peace.” Among the Chinese scholars employed to assist in the dissemination of Western knowledge, Cai Erkang, originally from Nanxiang in Jiading and later residing within the boundaries of Nanhui County (now part of Pudong New District), lived in Shanghai for an extended period and worked successively for newspapers like *Shenbao*, *Zilin Shanghai News*, *Xinwen Bao*, and *The Globe Magazine*. While serving as the chief editor for the Chinese section of *The Globe Magazine*, his exceptional abilities earned him a substantial remuneration; for instance, the person in charge once paid Mr. Cai “a bonus of 315 yuan for eleven months of work.” The society’s method of translating Western works typically involved “translating from the West and narrating in Chinese,” as was the case with the publication of “Datongxue” in May 1899, which compiled the first four chapters previously published in *The Globe Magazine* and six unpublished chapters, with a first print run of 2000 copies. This was done through Timothy Richard’s oral translation and Cai Erkang’s written narration. In chapter eight, “Strategies for Nurturing the People in the Modern World,” it mentions “German scholars advocating for the welfare of the people, among whom are notable figures such as Marx and Engels (Frederick Engels, this being the first mention of him in domestic publications).” This indicates that Cai Erkang was the first to translate “Marx” as “马克思” in Chinese, a rendering close to the German pronunciation and in line with Chinese linguistic habits, which eventually became the standard Chinese name for the co-founder of Marxism.

Subsequently, various Chinese translations of “Marx” appeared in publica-

tions, including “麦喀士,” “马尔克斯,” “加陆·马陆科斯,” “卡尔·马尔克,” “玛鲁珂士,” “楷尔·麦克,” and “马格斯.” However, Cai Erkang’s inspired translation of “Marx” as “马克思,” which closely matched the German pronunciation and was easily readable and writable in Chinese, ultimately became the accepted Chinese name for this principal founder of Marxism.

In 1907, a bookstore under the sign of the World Society on Wangping Street (currently the section of Shandong Middle Road between Fuzhou Road and East Nanjing Road) in Shanghai sold a large picture album titled “Sixty Famous Persons of the Recent World,” which included a portrait of Marx taken in London, England, in 1875 (when he was 57 years old), and described him as “Marx (马格斯), a German sociologist and jurist,” who “later in London, devoted himself to writing. In 1864, he founded the ‘International Workingmen’s Association’ (commonly known as the First International). His most famous work is ‘Capital’ (Das Kapital).” This was the first appearance of Marx’s portrait in China, rendered lifelike due to the high quality of printing.

In the summer of 1920, the Chinese Communist Party, then in its formative stage, established the earliest Red printing facility in Shanghai, the Yousin Printery, to print Chen Wangdao’s translation of *The Communist Manifesto*. In August, the first Chinese translation of the manifesto was published, totaling 1000 copies. The cover featured a half-portrait of Marx with the words “Socialist Studies Series No. 1,” “Co-authored by Marx (马格斯) and Engels (恩格斯),” and “Translated by Chen Wangdao.” In September, a second edition was issued, also printing 1000 copies. The cover portrait of Marx in this book was sourced from “Sixty Famous Persons of the Recent World.”

In December 1920, under the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party’s founding group, the Shanghai Printing Workers’ Union was established. The 18th issue of the weekly *Labor World* reported: “Workers from various large and small printing houses in the city, seeking the happiness that workers deserve, have initiated the formation of a ‘Shanghai Printing Workers’ Union.’” “They have also started a publication called *The Friend of the World* magazine, dedicated to promoting the improvement of workers’ lives and aiming at social transformation.” The cover of the inaugural issue of *The Friend of the World* featured a portrait of Marx in the upper left corner, with handwritten “Karl Marx,” and “THE WORLD FRIEND” written in English at the top right, with a globe printed in the lower right corner, clearly embodying the idea of “Workers of the world, unite!” The Marx portrait in *The Friend of the World* was also based on “Sixty Famous Persons of the Recent World.”

The World Society, which published “Sixty Famous Persons of the Recent World,” was initiated in 1906 in Paris, France, by Li Shizeng, Zhang Jingjiang, Wu Zhihui, and others. They published the weekly magazine *The New Century* and *The World* magazine (with “Sixty Famous Persons of the Recent World” as a special issue) and had a bookstore in Shanghai. However, “due to the establishment of the People’s Republic of China, the compatriots living in Paris grad-

ually returned to China, leading to the cessation of *The World* magazine after only two issues and ‘Sixty Famous Persons of the Recent World’ after just one volume,” according to Wu Zhihui. In 1936, Li Shizeng used the indemnity money returned by France from the Boxer Rebellion to re-establish the World Society at 393 Fokasen Road (now Wukang Road) in Shanghai and founded the World School. He later negotiated an investment with the Shanghai World Book Company, and in 1937, the company reprinted “Sixty Famous Persons of the Recent World.”

#### **4. The First Publication of “Marx Memorial Volume” in China**

In July 1921, the First National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party convened in Shanghai. The “First Resolution of the Chinese Communist Party” adopted at the congress declared, “The primary task of the party is to establish trade unions. Wherever there is more than one industrial sector, trade unions should be organized; in places where there is no large industry but only one or two factories, factory unions that are more suited to local conditions should be established.” On August 11th, the central organization leading the national workers’ movement, the Chinese Labor Union Secretariat, was established in Shanghai. It was then that China first introduced the “Marx Memorial Volume,” compiled and printed by the Chinese Labor Union Secretariat.

The “Marx Memorial Volume” was a 32 mo size booklet of 35 pages, with a half-portrait of Marx on the cover (sourced from “Sixty Famous Persons of the Recent World”), and was marked “Published on May 5, 1922,” as a “not-for-sale” item. The volume contained three articles. In “A Tribute to Workers and Students on the 104th Anniversary of Marx’s Birth,” Marx was praised as “not only a learned and great thinker but also a warrior in the practical movement for social transformation.” It clearly stated, “We should remember him as a great economist, for he invented the unique theory of value and surplus value, giving a new and true interpretation to the significance of capital and labor,” “We should remember him as a great sociologist and philosopher of history, for he developed the materialist conception of history, giving us the principles of the historical movement of human society and a scientific method for studying sociology and history,” “We should remember him as a most powerful socialist, for he formulated the theory of class struggle and the dictatorship of the proletariat, providing a guideline for the self-emancipation of the proletariat worldwide.” The call to action for workers and students was to “learn from Marx and be a warrior who struggles and fights.”

A translated excerpt of “Marx’s Biography” by Wilhelm Liebknecht, a founder of the German Social Democratic Party, vividly narrated Marx’s life dedicated to the proletarian revolutionary cause. Chen Duxiu’s “Marx’s Doctrine,” divided into four parts, systematically expounded on the theories of surplus value, materialist conception of history, class struggle, and dictatorship of the proletariat within Marxist doctrine, extensively citing discussions from “The Communist

Manifesto,” “Das Kapital,” “The Civil War in France,” and “Critique of the Gotha Program.”

May 5, 1922, marked the 104th anniversary of Marx’s birth. For the first time, the Chinese Communist Party held commemorative events on a grand scale, with memorial meetings organized in cities across the country where the party had established its presence. In Shanghai, the memorial meeting was held under the guise of the academic community at the Huai En Church on North Sichuan Road (currently Sichuan North Road). On June 30th, “The Report of Chen Duxiu, Secretary of the Central Executive Committee of the Communist Party of China, to the Communist International” stated, “On May 5th, memorial meetings for Marx were held in all locations where the Communist Party was present, and 20,000 copies of the Marx Memorial Volume were distributed.” This highlights the extensive influence and wide distribution of the “Marx Memorial Volume.”

The efforts of the Chinese Communist Party in translating and propagating Marx’s biographies made him one of the most extensively introduced foreigners in modern China, laying the groundwork for the localization, modernization, and popularization of Marxism. These biographies played a crucial role not only as literature but also in supporting discourse, mobilizing society, and shaping beliefs, helping to posit Marx as a revolutionary teacher capable of addressing China’s challenges and bolstering the narrative and value alignment needed in the struggle for public opinion.

## 5. Lenin’s “Karl Marx” and Its Spread in China

“Karl Marx” by Lenin represents an early comprehensive study of Marxist philosophy, articulating Marx’s theories with precision and pioneering a new framework for interpreting Marxist ideas, thereby marking a new chapter in the history of Marxist thought. Despite some differences in theoretical approach and specific strategies between Marx and Lenin, Lenin’s significant contributions to advancing Marxism to a new phase cannot be overlooked. This work thoroughly explains Marx’s doctrines, including his philosophical, economic, and socialist theories, as well as strategies for proletarian class struggle, establishing a foundational understanding of Marxism.

“Karl Marx” represents Lenin’s initial achievements in systematically studying Marxist philosophy. It not only thoroughly and accurately elaborates on Marx’s theoretical doctrines but also pioneers a new framework for interpreting Marx’s theories, turning a new page in the history of Marxist thought. Despite some differences between Marx and Lenin in theoretical approaches and specific strategies, Lenin’s significant contributions to advancing Marxism into a new phase cannot be denied.

The text not only succinctly delineates the fundamental stages of Marx’s life but also comprehensively expounds on his philosophical doctrines, economic theories, socialism, and the strategies of proletarian class struggle. Lenin pointed out before discussing Marx’s doctrines that “Marxism is a system of views and

teachings of Marx. Marx is the brilliant successor and finisher of the three major intellectual trends of the most advanced countries of the 19th century—German classical philosophy, English classical political economy, and French socialism linked with all revolutionary doctrines.” This was the first precise definition of Marxism, clarifying its three components and theoretical origins. Lenin believed that economic theory was at the core of Marxism, with “Das Kapital” profoundly and comprehensively demonstrating and applying Marx’s theories. Philosophy served as the theoretical premise for all of Marx’s doctrines. Before delving into Marx’s economic theory, a brief overview of his entire worldview, namely his philosophical thoughts, was deemed necessary.

Firstly, materialist philosophy forms the foundation of Marx’s philosophical worldview. Through Lenin’s writings, we discover that due to historical constraints, he had not accessed critical works such as “Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844” and “The German Ideology,” inevitably leading to some historically limited judgments and comments. Lenin primarily drew from Engels’s discussions on the material unity of the world and the fundamental problems of philosophy, categorizing philosophy into materialism and idealism. He pointed out three main shortcomings of traditional materialism and Feuerbachian materialism. Lenin’s discussions on Marx’s philosophical materialism are largely accurate, but his understanding of Marx’s new materialist philosophical worldview and philosophical revolution remains incomplete. The essence of Marx’s philosophical innovation is the new materialism that starts and ends with the concept of practice, characterized by three aspects: dialectical materialism at the methodological and worldview level, historical materialism in the research domain and main innovations, and practical materialism at the theoretical inception and philosophical function.

Secondly, the section on dialectics represents Lenin’s early efforts in systematically studying dialectical theory. Despite the translation of this section being just over 1300 words, its purpose was to introduce readers to “all the most important statements” of Marx, including those on materialist dialectics. Krupskaya, closely associated with Lenin at the time, directly pointed out the profound significance of Lenin’s dedicated writing on “dialectics”: “While vigorously opposing the betrayal of the proletarian cause by the Second International, Lenin immediately started writing the article ‘Karl Marx’ for the Granat Encyclopaedia upon returning to Bern. In this article, while elucidating Marx’s doctrines, he first summarily explained Marx’s worldview, starting with sections on ‘philosophical materialism’ and ‘dialectics’... Marx’s teachings are generally not described in this way.” Lenin consistently disagreed with most theorists of the Second International, who reduced Marxist philosophy to historical materialism alone. He believed that the worldview, epistemology, and methodology of dialectical materialism are the three fundamental components of Marxist philosophy, each deserving independent elucidation.

Thirdly, historical materialism extends the application of materialist philoso-



phy to the realm of social phenomena. Lenin's main ideas on Marx's historical materialism originated from the "Preface to A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy." He believed that historical materialism overcame two major shortcomings of previous historical theories: "Firstly, previous historical theories at most examined the ideological motives of human historical activities without investigating the causes of these motives, without exploring the objective laws of the development of social relations, and without considering the level of material production as the root of these relations; secondly, previous theories consistently overlooked the activities of the mass population, and only historical materialism enabled us to study the social conditions of mass life and the changes in these conditions with the precision of natural science."

Lenin's work on Karl Marx delves into various aspects of Marxist philosophy, shedding light on Marx's theoretical doctrines and pioneering a new framework for interpreting his theories (Lenin, 1974). Lenin emphasized the core components of Marxism, highlighting the significance of economic theory as demonstrated in "Das Kapital." Additionally, Lenin's exploration of Marx's philosophical materialism and dialectical theory showcases his efforts to systematically study these foundational elements of Marxist thought.

Lenin's analysis of Marx's philosophical worldview underscores the importance of materialist philosophy, with a focus on the concept of practice as a key innovation in Marx's new materialist philosophical framework. Furthermore, Lenin's early studies on dialectics aimed to present readers with essential statements by Marx, particularly on materialist dialectics, challenging prevailing interpretations that reduced Marxist philosophy solely to historical materialism.

Historical materialism, an extension of materialist philosophy, is a central theme in Marxist thought. It applies materialist principles to the analysis of history, emphasizing the role of productive forces and class struggle in shaping societal development (Shimp, 2009). This approach seeks to uncover the underlying processes and laws governing historical evolution, moving beyond isolated historical facts to reveal broader patterns in human history.

## 6. Conclusion

The dissemination of Marxist biographical literature in modern China represents a significant endeavor with far-reaching implications, echoing the broader significance of biography research outlined above. Through the lens of Marxism, biographers in China have embarked on a journey to explore the lives of individuals within the context of historical materialism, dialectical materialism, and class struggle, thus enriching our understanding of both the past and the present.

Furthermore, Marxist biographical literature contributes to the reconstruction of historical narratives, offering alternative perspectives and marginalized voices that challenge prevailing interpretations of China's past. Through their meticulous research and critical analysis, biographers have shed light on overlooked aspects of history, rectified historical injustices, and fostered a more inclusive un-

derstanding of the nation's collective memory.

Additionally, the dissemination of Marxist biographical literature serves as a source of inspiration and role modeling for present and future generations. By showcasing the courage, resilience, and moral fortitude of individuals who have dedicated their lives to the pursuit of social justice and equality, biographers inspire others to follow in their footsteps and strive for a better world.

Finally, the dissemination of Marxist biographical literature contributes to interdisciplinary scholarship, fostering dialogue and collaboration across academic disciplines. By drawing upon insights from history, politics, sociology, and literature, biographers enrich their narratives with diverse perspectives and methodologies, thereby advancing our understanding of China's revolutionary past and its implications for the future.

In conclusion, the spread of Marxist biographical literature has significantly shaped China's intellectual and political landscape. Through careful translation, interpretation, and publication, these works have embedded Marxist thought deeply within Chinese society. The journey of this literature, from its initial introduction to its widespread adoption, highlights the dynamic relationship between foreign ideologies and local realities. Works like Lenin's "Karl Marx," along with other key Marxist biographies, have been instrumental in elucidating Marxist philosophy for Chinese intellectuals and the wider public. These biographies of Marx not only offer an essential introduction to his life and contributions but also serve as powerful tools for propagating Marxist principles. The translation and dissemination of Marx's biographies by international scholars have become crucial channels for the Chinese people to explore and understand Marx's life and legacy.

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## Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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