

Research on the Marxist School of Early Chinese Sociology

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Abstract

The “Marxist School” in the early stage of Chinese sociology had played a vital role in the development of Sociology and the spread of Marxism in China. This article introduces the social and historical contexts for the emergence of the Marxist School of Chinese Sociology in the early 20th century, the school’s representatives and main academic activities, the school’s academic characteristics, and their contributions to the localization and innovation of early Chinese sociological theory and empirical research. The prominent representative scholars of the Marxist school were also the early core members of the Communist Party of China. Therefore, their academic activities and research findings also played an essential supporting role in the early stage of constructing the theoretical system and revolutionary practice of the Communist Party of China. They also have enlightenment significance for social science research and social construction in contemporary China.

Keywords

History of Sociology, Marxist Sociology, China, Sinicization of Marxism

1. Introduction

At the end of the 19th century, China was in national peril under the rule of the late Qing government. The dual oppression of feudalism and imperialism intensified social contradictions and unprecedented social crises. In various Western thoughts and theories, the reformists and intellectuals from the ruling class tried to search for ways to save the nation. They constantly tried to improve the political system, develop the industrial economy, ease internal and external contradictions, and strived to survive in the cracks. The seedlings of Chinese sociology grew up in this complex historical background and social environment. It has strong practical significance as a discipline that studies social laws and opera-

tions.

Before the October Revolution, the democratic and scientific thoughts of the western bourgeoisie dominated the ideological field in China. Still, the translated works introducing and discussing Marx and Engels' ideas had already been presented to the public sporadically. After the victory of the October Revolution, a few progressive Chinese scholars began to systematically study Marxist theory so that Marx's thought started to be widely spread. After the May 4th Movement, significant changes took place in the Chinese ideological field. At the same time, Chinese sociology entered the growth stage from the embryonic stage. With the spread and development of Marxism in China, historical materialism provided a new logical and theoretical perspective for sociological research. Historical materialism made scholars look for a unified explanation logic behind the social phenomenon and created a new academic discourse system linking history and logic (Li, 2009). More and more progressive intellectuals had supported Marx's social thought. Sociology guided by Marxist historical materialism had gradually formed a relatively mature theoretical and methodological system and developed their teaching and research institutions. These scholars who adhered to the guiding principles of Marxism were called the "Marxist school".

However, the "Marxist school" was considered a kind of unorthodox doctrine by academia in the beginning (Zhao, 1948). In the early years of sociology history in China, the "college school", which inherited the tradition of western sociology, was regarded as the orthodoxy of Chinese sociology. Scholars of the "college school" explored ways to save and transform Chinese society through western social theory and social experiments. The Marxist school firmly believed in the scientific nature of the guiding ideology of historical materialism and actively carried out academic research and practical exploration to save the country. With the natural practice field of China's Democratic Revolution, the Marxist school gradually became an influential theoretical school in early Chinese sociology by the 1930s. Marxist sociology became one of the most scientific and practical academic theories for guiding China's development.

2. Literature Review

After the restoration of sociology in 1979, there has been an active study of Marxist sociology in China. Some Chinese scholars believe that historical materialism equals Marxist sociology, However, some scholars believe that historical materialism and sociology have different academic independence (Han, 1987). Since the beginning of this century, scholars represented by Zheng Hangsheng have proposed to adhere to and develop Marxist sociology. The two forms of Marxist sociology proposed by Zheng, namely "revolutionary critical sociology" and "maintenance and construction sociology" (Zheng, 1985), provide ideas and theoretical basis for scholars to study Marxist sociology with Chinese characteristics. With the gradual attention to the study of Chinese sociology history, the Marxist School, which has played an essential role in Chinese sociology, has also

attracted more and more attention.

Since the 1980s, some books on Chinese sociology history have begun to introduce the history of Marxist sociology in China. There were two traditions at the beginning of sociology's introduction into China, western sociology represented by Comte and Marxist sociology defined by Marx and Engels' social thoughts and theories (Zheng, 2001). From the academic perspective, although Marx and Engels had never publicly used the concept of "sociology" in their masterpieces, this does not affect Marx's being recognized as a great sociologist. Scholars believe that in the early years of Chinese sociology, the "Marxist School" is an important part, and the key members of this school were the original members of the Communist Party of China, such as Li Dazhao, Chen Duxiu, Qu Qiubai, Li Da, Mao Zedong, and Chen Han-Sheng, etc. (Zheng & Li, 2000). As the Marxist School at that time, the content of "historical materialism sociology" was closely related to the basic problems of the Chinese social revolution (Li, 2009).

Some scholars have focused on the academic thoughts and achievements of the representative scholars of the Marxist School. Li Dazhao is regarded as the founder of Chinese Marxist sociology. He used the Marxist method to investigate Chinese social problems, thus making a historic contribution to the establishment of Chinese Marxist Sociology (Wu, 2002). In propagating Marxism, Chen Duxiu systematically expounded the sociological thought of Marxism, which laid a theoretical foundation for the establishment of Chinese Marxist Sociology (Wu, 2000). Qu Qiubai firstly used the basic principles of Marxism to observe society and summarized the theoretical system of materialist Sociology (Liu, 1998). Li Da used critical thinking to analyze the social psychology theory, social contract theory, and social biology theory prevailing in the west and adhered to the value of materialist dialectics to sociological research (Shu & Chen, 2015). Mao Zedong's class analysis in studying China's social structure is a concrete application model of Marxism (Zhang, 2010). Chen Han-Sheng's rural surveys provided empirical data for a comprehensive understanding of Chinese Society in the 1920s and 1930s (Zhao, 2019).

However, the research on the contribution of the Marxist school to the development of early Chinese sociology and the localization of Marxist theory in China is not comprehensive enough and needs to be further explored.

3. The Marxist School's Representatives and Academic Activities

The early sociological Marxist school representatives mainly include Li Dazhao, Qu Qiubai, Mao Zedong, Li Da, Zheng Zhenduo, Xu Deheng, Chen Han-Sheng, etc. Most of them were also the founders of the Communist Party of China and the core force of China's Democratic Revolution. They spread Marxism theory through translation, writing books, giving lectures, offering education, investigation, and research. They also promoted Marxist theory's in-depth and continuous publicity and research with sociology teaching and research institutions as the position. This period of history is a remarkable process of academic innova-

tion in Chinese sociology and the beginning of combining Marx's theory with Chinese social practice.

The Chinese academia generally agrees that Li Dazhao is the first to promote Marxist sociology spreading in China. Although Li Dazhao was influenced by Spencer's social evolution theory and the mutualism of Russian anarchists in the early stage, he finally stood for Marx's sociological thought. Based on Marxist theory and his teaching of Marxism in colleges, Li's research and investigations on Chinese society prompted social science researchers to re-examine and study Chinese society and solve social problems from reality.

In the history of Chinese sociology, the Sociology Department of Shanghai University in the 1920s was a pioneer in Marxist sociology teaching in high education institutions. There were a group of outstanding political theorists in the early Communist Party of China, such as Qu Qiubai, Deng Zhongxia, Cai Hesen, Yun Daiying, Xiao Chunv, Zhang Tailei, etc. teaching in this department. They were all cadres engaged in the theoretical work of the CPC. In the syllabus formulated by Deng Zhongxia and Qu Qiubai, Marxist principles and social thoughts were systematically disseminated through the teaching classes of sociology principles, social change history, social evolution, economics, political science, and general philosophy courses. When the students recalled Qu Qiubai's lecture on *Sociology*, they believed that what Qu taught was undoubtedly "Marxist dialectical materialism and historical materialism philosophy" (Wang & Cai, 1982). The teaching staff in the Department of Sociology spread Marxist theory in the classroom and let students deeply analyze China's actual national conditions and understand the essence of Marxist thought by organizing student unions and academic groups, creating various publications, and holding sociology lectures. They also extended the dissemination of Marxist ideas to people outside the school through lectures.

As one of the most honorable social scientists in modern China, Li Da was committed to reforming and localizing western sociology with historical materialism. Compared with some western sociological theories such as social contract theory and bio-social theory, Li Da believed that only Marx's theory about society showed the essential law of social development and was the only scientific explanation of the process and regulation of social development. Li Da's works, such as *Modern Sociology* and *Sociology Outline*, promoted the acceptance and attention of Marxist viewpoints in early Chinese sociological theory and are still the most important classical works of literature in the study of Marxism and sociology nowadays.

Mao Zedong, who was one of the pioneers and founders of the Marxist school of early Chinese sociology, used the principles of Marxism and dialectics to analyze China's social structure and nature and developed the theoretical perspective and methodology of the early sociological research. Mao Zedong, Zhang Wentian, Chen Han-Sheng, and others carried out many rural social surveys in liberated areas and Kuomintang-ruled areas, enriched the development of Chinese rural sociology and social survey methods, provided empirical data for a

comprehensive understanding of the nature of Chinese society (Zheng & Li, 2000).

4. The Marxist School's Academic Characteristics

4.1. Insisting on Historical Materialism as the Theoretical Philosophy of Sociology

In the early stage of Chinese sociology, social contract theory, social organism theory, and social psychology dominated the academic mainstream based on Western sociological theories. With the spread of Marxism, the basic principles of Marxism elaborated in historical materialism, as known as productivity determining production relations, material determining consciousness, and economic foundation determining superstructure, revealed the primary process and general law of social generation and development in essence. They provided a more scientific explanation for social structure movement and social system change. Li Dazhao pointed out that historical materialism had extensively promoted the development and progress of sociological research. He clearly stated that “historical materialism is the fundamental law of sociological research” (Li, 1984). Following this rule to investigate complex social phenomena would help scholars get more accurate results about social reality. In the book *Modern Sociology*, Li Da pointed out that the mission of sociology was to discover the core of the social organization, express the direction of social evolution and provide the policy of social transformation (Li, 2007). Historical materialism could explain the main issues discussed in sociology, and its contribution to sociology was indelible.

Marx's sociology principle is dialectical and critical. The revolutionary critical feature of the Marxist school was the most obvious difference in academic position and value orientation between the Marxist school and other academic schools in the early period of Chinese sociology. Scholars who firmly believed in Marxism gradually broke free from the influence of western sociological theories and began to understand and analyze China's society with historical materialism actively. Starting from the law of social development, they resolutely criticized the old social order, set the goal of social reform to completely overthrow the unreasonable social system, and build a new society without class differences, exploitation, and oppression.

4.2. Advocated Studying Social Structure from the Economic Factor

In the study of social structure, the western sociological theory focuses on the external structure of society, while Marx's sociology thought focuses on the inside structure of society. According to the viewpoint of historical materialism, the Marxist school proposed that society was consisted of “basic structure” and “surface structure” (Zheng & Li, 2000). The “basic structure” stands for the economic foundation, is the sum of human social production relations, is objective,

unshakable, is the root cause of all other social phenomena. The “surface structure” refers to political, legal, ethical, philosophical, and other spiritual existence, which changes with economic structure change. Li Dazhao pointed out, “the economic factor is the determining factor to constraint the social class changes and social life in social structure” (Li, 1984).

Early scholars also made an in-depth analysis of social classes in China from macro and micro perspectives. Mao Zedong analyzed China’s social structure comprehensively based on Marx’s class theory. In addition to taking the economic foundation as the decisive factor, he also considered the political attitudes of different social stratum, presenting the structural characteristics and main contradictions of the whole Chinese society from the macro level and clarifying the revolution leaders, allies, and revolutionary objects of China’s New Democratic Revolution.

4.3. The Scientific Understanding of the Law of Social Development

Under the guidance of historical materialism, scholars of the Marxist school had put forward their new understanding of the law of social change. Li Da pointed out that the change of productivity would be affected by various factors such as labor, workers, labor means, the development of civilization, the transformation of the political environment, etc. When the social relations were no longer suitable for productivity development, it was necessary to make adjustments. Otherwise, it would hinder the progress and development of social production. If the mismatch between production relations and productivity were not adjusted in time, social contradictions and social conflicts would break out. Taking the French Revolution as an example, Li Da explained the conflict and violent revolutions caused by the relations of production hindering the development of productive forces. The interaction and adaptation between productive forces and production relations is the law of social development, and it is also the root source of social change. Acknowledging this basic principle is a prerequisite for a better understanding of the underlying causes of the victory of the October Revolution. With the inspiration from the victory of the October Revolution, the Marxist school emphasized that only by seizing power, overthrowing the old political system, and establishing a new social system that met the requirements of social productivity could genuinely solve the fundamental problems of Chinese society crisis.

The “college school” scholars, who admired gentle reform methods, also attempted to change Chinese society through social improvement movements, such as the “rural construction movement” led by Liang Suming, Yan Yangchu in the 1920s and 1930s. However, these experimental movements could only temporarily ease the social contradictions and failed to solve the nation’s crucial problems (Yang, 1987). Marx’s social theory directly faces the essential social contradictions rather than fixing problems on the shallow surface, and this is the fundamental difference between western sociology and Marxist sociology. Qu

Qiubai pointed out: “When the needs of social development conflict with the social structure, there will be a revolutionary mutation” (Qu, 1988). The revolutionary practice of the Communist Party of China also proves that, after exploring various roads to save China’s national crisis, the revolution was finally won by armed struggle under the guidance of Marxism.

4.4. Innovation of Social Investigation Methodology

The social investigation is an integral part of sociology research and application. From the beginning of sociology, social investigation has played a direct role in exposing social problems, criticizing social reality, and inspiring and reforming society. In the 1920s and 1930s, China’s social problems, especially rural issues, were extremely special under specific social and historical conditions. The “college school” scholars’ research, mainly based on western sociological theory and methodology, was limited by the research perspective, and their social investigations could not present the urgent and essential problems of Chinese society. Scholars of the Marxist school were aware of China’s social conflicts’ particularity and believed that it was necessary to solve China’s problems from China’s experience, so their findings could reveal the essence of social problems from a deeper level.

Li Dazhao wrote many articles on the poverty of workers and farmers, and his survey reports revealed living situations from different social classes in the early 20th century in China. He paid attention to the population problem, women’s living conditions, social ethics problems, and suicide. During the May 4th Movement, Zheng Zhenduo, Qu Qiubai jointly organized a journal named *New Society*, publishing all kinds of surveys and articles that reflected social reality and ideological problems, hoping to promote social transformation. This journal was also regarded as the earliest special issue of sociology in modern China, which has far-reaching influence on exploring social reality (Chen, 1983).

Rural surveys organized by Mao Zedong, Chen Han-Sheng, etc., are typical representatives of sociology localization and methodology innovation of Chinese sociology. In the 1930s, Mao Zedong accumulated a lot of precious research materials in the liberated areas. Class analysis was a feature in Mao’s investigation process, and he created his unique investigation method known as symposiums. In the same period, many large-scale rural surveys had been conducted by Chen Han-Sheng and his research team in the rural areas of Jiangnan, Hebei, and Guangdong provinces in the Kuomintang-controlled areas. Those rural surveys were designed with academic norms and organized professionally, providing valuable first-hand data for an accurate understanding of China’s rural society. The social surveys of the Marxist school not only contributed to the localization of the investigation methodology for Chinese sociology but also provided the most potent basis and guaranteed for the Communist Party of China to define the nature of Chinese society and formulate land revolution policies and revolutionary strategies.

5. Conclusion

5.1. Significant Contributions to the Localization of Marxist Sociology in China

In early Chinese sociology, the development of the Marxist school was very tortuous. In the beginning, it was despised by the mainstream schools, who believed that dialectical materialism theory did not belong to pure sociology. However, with the unremitting efforts of Marxist scholars and the extraordinary vitality of Marxist sociological theory in analyzing and solving China's problems, the Marxist school had considerable influence since the 1930s. It was not only in sociology but almost became a universal social trend of thought (Yang, 1997). Under the guidance of Marxism, scholars had transformed and localized classic sociology. The Marxist school successfully combined Marxist sociology with Chinese social facts, studied sociology as the weapon for understanding China's national conditions, solving social problems, ending the country's poverty and weakness, and reforming the social system. Li Dazhao, Cai Hesen, and other spreaders of Marxism realized that they could not just dogmatically introduce the ideological theory while translating and introducing Marxist works and thoughts. They realized it was much more necessary to combine the theories with China's practical issues, analyze specific social facts with Marxist theory, and bring fresh vitality into Marxism theory. During the Democratic Revolution, Mao Zedong realized that the best way to combine Marxism with the concrete practice of the Chinese revolution was through investigation and research. "A concrete analysis of concrete conditions" was also a typical usage of the concretization and localization of Marxism in practice. In the process of revolutionary practice, the representatives of the Marxist school used the social research methods of historical materialism, which provided a natural practice field for the localization development of sociology, enriched understanding and application of Marxism at the academic level, and improved the school's academic thoughts and theoretical system. Undoubtedly, Marxist sociology and its critical forms could only thrive in China through localization and sinicization (Zheng, 2001).

5.2. Support for the Communist Party of China's Early Theoretical System Construction

Due to the multiple social roles of representative groups-revolutionaries, theorists, educators, communists, especially their special status in the early days of the founding of the Communist Party of China, the theoretical research results and practical investigation conclusions of the early Marxist social school provided a professional academic foundation for the construction of the Party's early theoretical system (Li, 2011). Firstly, the school's understanding of social evolution and change provided a theoretical basis for the Communist Party to lead the democratic revolution. These revolutionists of the Communist Party of China concluded the nature of China's society as "semi-colonial and semi-feudal"

based on the scientific principles of the objective laws of social change. According to the accurate definition of China's social nature, the Communist Party of China put forward the development goal of building a socialist society. Second, Marxist sociology reflects social consciousness that requires reform and change. The theoretical construction and development goal of the Communist Party of China conformed to the social consciousness and historical laws. Marxist scholars summed up their experience in the complex revolutionary environment, explaining where to go and answering how. The Communist Party of China resolutely recognized the inevitability of the armed revolution. Marxist sociological theory provided theoretical guidance for the revolutionary practice of the Communist Party of China.

5.3. Enlightenment for Contemporary Social Sciences and Social Construction in Contemporary China

Throughout the history of Chinese academic development in the first half of the 20th century, after the introduction of Marxism into China, it not only became the theoretical weapon of the Chinese revolution but also significantly changed the traditional way of academic research that lasted for thousands of years due to the influence of historical materialism on Chinese intellectuals. Historical materialism has brought new research logic to the social science in China, especially in history, economics, politics, literature, philosophy, and other humanities. The introduction and development of Marxist sociology in China is a part of this stirring academic transformation. Although in the early stage of development, the theoretical direction, principles, and dissemination of Marxist school were challenged and restricted, scholars who firmly believed in science had never abandoned the exploration and persistence of truth. Facing all kinds of difficulties, they closely integrated academic research with revolutionary practice, gave persuasiveness and vitality to academic viewpoints in practical, and successfully developed a sociological theoretical system with Chinese characteristics. Because of historical and political reasons, the tradition of Marxist sociology research was interrupted after the foundation of the People's Republic of China. However, the academic history of these decades from the early 20th century left endless thinking and exploration to later generations. Since the recovery and development of sociology from 1978, the dominance of academic research has fluctuated. After the reform and opening up, the development of sociology and the analysis and interpretation of social phenomena are inseparable from the western sociological theory. Because of the complexity of Chinese social structure and the internal and external social environment, it also needs dialectical Marxist sociology to guide and maintain the social system and the stability of social order under the socialist system. Reviewing the process of localization of Marxist sociology and learning the persistence and innovation of scientific theories by the Marxist school's scholars also have important implications for the development of social sciences in contemporary China.

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Conflicts of Interest

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

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