

Li Zehou and His Rocky Relationship with Marx: Class Struggle as a Form of Kantian Transcendental Illusion¹

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Abstract

The present paper deals with Li Zehou's contributions to the discussions of Marxism in the second half of the 20th century. In Li's philosophy, Marx's theories were reshaped, modified, and upgraded in a theoretical framework that differed from the original. He agreed with Marx's presumption that the making and using of tools was the basic material practice, which made human evolution possible. Nevertheless, he saw Marx's further development of this theory as problematic, because he saw it as being one-sided: progress from the means of production to the relations of production, and then on to the superstructure, only concerned the external developments of the relation between the manufacture and use of tools. At this point, Li was more interested in their internal influences, i.e., in the ways in which the making and use of tools has reshaped the human mind. He was highly sceptical of Marxist economic theories and criticized the crucial concepts elaborated by Marx in his *Capital* through the lens of Kantian "transcendental illusions." Proceeding from his combination of Marx and Kant, the present paper will critically analyse some crucial differences between the Marxian idea of the class struggle as a driving force of social progress, and Li's own version of historical materialism.

Keywords: Li Zehou, Kant, Marx, transcendental illusion, Sinisation of Marxism

Li Zehou in njegovi burni odnosi z Marxom: razredni boj kot oblika Kantovske transcendentalne iluzije

Izveček

Članek obravnava Li Zehoujeve prispevke k diskusiji marksizma v drugi polovici 20. stoletja. V svoji filozofiji je Li Marxove teorije preoblikoval, spremenil in nadgradil ter jih postavil v teoretsko ogrodje, ki je bilo drugačno od izvirnega. Strinjal se je z Marxovo predpostavko o tem, da je izdelava in uporaba orodja osnovna materialna praksa, ki omogoča evolucijo človeštva. Vendar je menil, da je kasnejši razvoj Marxove teorije

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problematičen, saj je bila ta kasnejša teorija po njegovem mestu enostranska. Marx je namreč napredek od proizvodnih sredstev k proizvodnim odnosom in potem k nadgradnji videl zgolj kot produkt zunanjih razvojev, ki so plod izdelave in uporabe orodja. Na tej točki je Lija bolj zanimal notranji učinek tega razvoja, tj. način, kako je izdelava in uporaba orodja preoblikovala človeško zavest. Zelo skeptičen je bil tudi glede Marxovih ekonomskih teorij in je kritiziral osrednje koncepte njegovega *Kapitala* skozi optiko kantovske »transcendentalne iluzije«. Članek izhaja iz tovrstne Lijeve kombinacije Marxa in Kanta in kritično analizira nekatere osrednje razlike med Marxovo idejo razrednega boja kot gonilne sile družbenega napredka in Lijeve lastne različice zgodovinskega materializma.

Ključne besede: Li Zehou, Kant, Marx, transcendentalna iluzija, sinizacija marksizma

Introduction

Li Zehou is doubtless among the most influential and well-known, but also the most controversial, contemporary Chinese philosophers. Due to his intellectual brilliance and charisma, he had a great impact on Chinese youth, most likely because of his emphasis on individual autonomy and democracy, and his questioning of formal authority (Li 2002, 1–19), a “disobedience” that also found expression in his theoretical essays. Therefore, it is not coincidental that the notion of “subjectality” (*zbutixing* 主体性) is at the centre of his theory. It is based upon the notion of an active subject forming an independent entity as a potential bearer for the realisation of ideals (Li 2002a, 174). It is therefore not difficult to understand the seeds of this attraction; Li Zehou sincerely and genuinely believed in the young people of Chinese, in their intellectual, emotional, and creative potential. As one of the central representatives of the post-Mao Enlightenment movement, he criticised the remains of traditional gerontocracy that suppressed any form of creativity and independent thought. He openly condemned the academic authorities who demanded only blind obedience from young people, memorisation of prescribed texts and uncritical accumulation of factual knowledge, and encouraged them to believe in themselves: “Young people should be confident; they should not allow themselves to be swallowed and overwhelmed by the huge piles of old Chinese papers...” (Li 1985, 4). Just like China itself, the young people exploring its culture should also leave the old, outdated things behind them and go towards the future (*ibid.*, 5). Li saw the innovative potential possessed by the young as something Chinese society still did not value enough. For him, the automatic authority of the old was a relic of the remote past:

I always feel this is the heritage of primitive societies. In primitive societies, it was clear that people who lived the longest and who had gone through the most things also possessed the best “education.” But pre-modern and modern societies are not like that; there are many young

people among the genuine inventors. Although they are not so experienced and they don't possess so much knowledge, they can discover a lot and generate numerous important inventions.

我总感觉这好像是原始社会的遗风。在原始社会谁的胡子长，谁的权威就最大。因为他活得长，经历的事情多，「学问」当然也最大。但近现代社会并不是这样。真正的创新家经常有青年人。他们并没有那么多的学问、知识、经验，却偏偏能做出非常重要的发现或发明。(Li 2016, 154.)

Li was convinced that China could not rely exclusively on experts with masses accumulated data-driven information, but that it also needed thinkers,² and since youth is the best time to develop one's ability to reason and think independently, young people should make the most of it and not waste their time living in fear of the authorities.

Hence, it was not so surprising that immediately after the Tiananmen Square incidents in 1989 Li found himself on the list of Chinese intellectuals who were marked as “black hands” (*hei shou* 黑手), and thus reproached for attempting to manipulate students to achieve for their own goals. Li Zehou was mentioned by name in the official report of the so-called “turmoil” as one of the elite scholars causing chaos. As a result of his criticism of the Chinese government's response to the protests, soon after the massacre he was branded a “thought criminal” and forbidden to leave Beijing. In 1991, following massive international pressure, he was granted permission to leave the country and visit the United States and Germany. He was given permanent residency in the former shortly after arriving.

Li Zehou's contribution to the Sinisation of Marxist thought can be found in his attempts to criticize Marx through Kant, and to complement the latter through the former. In this regard, certain elements of classical Confucian thought are also of utmost importance, especially regarding its historicist, dynamic referential framework (Brusadelli 2017, 119). However, in the present paper, we will primarily focus upon Li's critique of Marxist economic theories through the lens of Kant's notion of transcendental illusion.

2 Li has elaborated on the difference between these two categories of knowledge in greater detail. In his view the experts were good in storing, systemizing, and ordering the information, while the thinkers could also process it in the sense of analyzing and, above all, synthesizing the data—therefore transforming quantitative information into qualitative knowledge. In a later essay, which he also wrote to and for young readers (see Li 1996, 85), he pointed out that in the future experts could be replaced by computers and artificial brains, while thinkers would always remain nonpareil.

Li's Synthesis of Marx and Kant

We cannot understand Li's criticism of Marxist thought without being at least basically familiar with the broader context of his writings. They can be described as the search for a synthesis between Western and traditional Chinese thought, driven by the goal of elaborating a system of ideas and values capable of resolving the social and political problems that arise in modern life. In most of his works, Li thus attempted to reconcile "Western" (especially Kantian and Marxist) theories with "traditional Chinese" (especially Confucian, but to a certain extent also Daoist) ideas, concepts and values, in order to create a theoretical model of modernisation that would not be confused or equated with "Westernisation."

It is not coincidental that early Marx and Kant belonged to the central sources of inspiration for Li Zehou's own theory. However, his system cannot be seen as a mere blend of these philosophies; it exceeds a plain "synthesis of Kant and Marx" by combining their thought with Hegel's and, above all, with that of Confucius. Besides, Li Zehou's thought comprises several inventive essential features that cannot be found in the work of previous philosophers.

He became familiar with the work of Marx from his studies at Beijing University and was fascinated by his concept of historical materialism and the early Marxist humanism. But later, as he became acquainted with Kant's transcendental philosophy, the young Chinese philosopher was very much impressed by his emphasis on the idea of human subjectivity and the human subject as an independent, free, active and morally autonomous agent.

Kant's conception of subjectivity, however, was rooted in the existence of the transcendental forms that decisively influenced and reshaped the (human perception of) objective reality. While for Kant, these forms were *a priori*, i.e., independent of any kind of (individual or social and historical) experience, Li, who also presupposed the existence of similar forms of subjectivity, placed them into a framework of a dynamic historical development. He tried to relocate Kant's transcendental forms into a dynamic and historical context, defined by the principles of a materialist development of humankind. In this sense, he complemented Kant with Marx.

At the same time, Li complemented Marx with Kant. He modified the teleological and deterministic Hegelian-Marxist view of social development through the element of the (morally aware, yet unpredictable) human subject, her free will and his autonomy.

In this sense, the "meeting point" of Marx and Kant was for him particularly relevant (Li 2016, 154).

Li Zehou agreed with Marx's presumption that tools represented the basic means of production. Nevertheless, he saw Marx's further development of this theory as problematic because he saw it as being one-sided: progress from the means of production to the relations of production, and then on to the superstructure, only concerned the external developments of the relation between the manufacture and use of tools.

At this point, Li was more interested in their internal influences, i.e., in the ways in which the making and use of tools have reshaped the human mind. In other words, Li was interested in establishing and investigating the phenomenon of the cultural-psychological formations that were shaped in the human psyche in this process. For Li, this was a phenomenon tightly linked to the central questions of humanness (*ren xing* 人性), for it could reveal the actual difference between human beings and animals (Li and Liu 2011, 77).

In order to proceed a step further on this path of reasoning, Li also offered his own, unique hypothetical definition of this difference outside of the constructs of behavioural norms, ethics, upright posture, language, or the construction and use of tools. These are not uniquely and specifically human, for they are also displayed by various of animals. Li identifies the crucial difference in the fact that, for human beings, tools are a universal necessity (*ibid.*). If humans had only their bodily biological conditions to rely on, they could never survive (as human beings). In Li's view, this is also why humans are "supra-biological" beings.

Marxist Aesthetics and the Secret Readings of Kant

Following this line of thought, Li has also contributed some fresh and innovative insights to the development and a dynamic upgrading of Marxist ideas.

His main goal was to clarify the relation between Kant and Marx (neither of whom, in his view, was understood very well in China) and provide for the creative development of the synthesis of their philosophical contributions. In this regard he tried to supplement Kant through Marx, and vice versa. Hence, as already mentioned, the "intersection" of these two theories was of utmost importance (Li 2016, 154). However, he went even further: following this path Li took elements from both philosophies that he valued most. At some point he disagreed with both, and from then on developed his own theory and followed his own way. He created the great majority of his new, self-termed concepts during the period of the Cultural Revolution, in which he systematically connected Kant and Marx, positing their philosophies in a mutually complementary relation.

As already noted, he became acquainted with Marx during his regular studies of philosophy at Beijing University. Soon after graduation, he started to participate in academic discussions regarding various interpretations of certain Marxist notions. In this respect, he gained a lot of attention in intellectual circles as early as 1956 (when he was 26 years old) with the publication of his first mature theoretical essay, entitled “On the Aesthetic Feeling, Beauty, and Art” (*Lun meigan, mei he yishu* 论美感, 美和艺术). Later on, he further developed his own interpretations of Marxist ideas, especially in the framework of his aesthetics and epistemology.

His relationship with Kant, however, began under completely different circumstances.

From 1970 until 1972, he was sent to a re-education work camp at the “May 7th Cadre School” in Henan province. He managed to smuggle into this an English volume of Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*. There he used to read it secretly, under the cover of *Chairman Mao’s Quotes*, pretending to be deeply immersed in this universally enforced practice. In some way, his cynical comments on this situation are quite logical: “In a difficult situation it is good to read a difficult book” (Li 2008, 318).

However, the fact that he took precisely this book along to the re-education camp was mainly the result of a highly pragmatic decision: it was relatively light, which was ideal since the weight of the luggage he was allowed to take with him was very limited. Also, the book was complex and difficult to understand, which meant that, although a small book, he could read it slowly and it would keep his mind busy and give him intellectual satisfaction for the longest possible time (*ibid.*).

In this camp, he also began to work on his first major theoretical monograph *Critique of the Critical Philosophy—A New Approach to Kant* (see Li 1990). With this work, Li’s own way was paved with a solid theoretical foundation. He often admits that, while interpreting Kant, he actually wrote his own philosophy (see for instance Li 2016, 153). In this, he aimed to synthesise Kant with Marx, providing the first with a Marxist historical dimension, but also criticising the latter because of his mechanistic nature and lack of consideration of the important role of the Kantian human subject.

His later version of Sinicised Marxism was completed in the 1990s and published in Hong Kong as late as 2006 in a book entitled *Marxism in China (Makesizhuyi zai Zhongguo)* 馬克思主義在中國, see Li 2006). Among other issues, Li tried in this work to incorporate some Kantian elements into the framework of Marxist dialectical materialism. On the other hand, he also criticised the later Marxist works through the lens of Kant’s notion of “transcendental illusions.”

Problems of Abstraction and Transcendental Illusions

This aspect of criticism was directed towards Marxist economic theories. In creating his philosophical theory, which is widely known under the name anthropo-historical ontology, Li Zehou was namely mainly following early Marxist theories. He was always highly sceptical of Marxist economic theories and criticized the crucial concepts elaborated in *Capital*, claiming that Marx had summed up the “two-fold character of commodities” in the “two-fold character of labour.” Here, the crucial point was that Marx saw “exchange value” as a product of “abstract labour,” since for him the exchange of commodities was an act characterised by a total abstraction from use value.

In chapter 1 of *Capital*, Marx described this abstraction of human labour in the following way:

Along with the useful qualities of the products themselves, we put out of sight both the useful character of the various kinds of labour embodied in them, and the concrete forms of that labour; there is nothing left but what is common to them all; all are reduced to one and the same sort of labour, human labour in the abstract³ (Marx 2015, 28).

According to Li, ideas such as socially necessary labour time, which were derived from the concept of abstract human labour, do make sense in rational analysis, but since they are completely separated from the actual circumstances of concrete human lives they are not empirically operational. In Li’s view, Marx has thus completely separated the concept of labour from its concrete empirical environment; he abstracted the “labour-power” from the actual labour and from the concrete historical practice of making and using tools. This caused him to slip into an abstract Hegelian idealistic speculation, in which he aimed to prove his concept of surplus value through a unified and homogenised, abstract idea of the “expenditure of human labour-power.”

In this abstract construct, the class struggle and the proletarian revolution became necessary, since Marx did not consider any of the complex, historically determined elements (as for instance the developmental stage of technologies in different societies and cultures). In Li’s view, such elements decisively influence the development of societies, which was in Marx’s view determined by the relations

3 The German original reads: Mit dem nützlichen Charakter der Arbeitsprodukte verschwindet der nützliche Charakter der in ihnen dargestellten Arbeiten, es verschwinden also auch die verschiedenen konkreten Formen dieser Arbeiten, sie unterscheiden sich nicht länger, sondern sind allzusamt reduziert auf gleiche menschliche Arbeit, abstrakt menschliche Arbeit (Marx 1876, 42).

between the class of the owners of the means of production and commodity-possessors on the one hand, and the working class on the other.

According to Li, this idea of class struggle between capital and the labour led Marx to the necessity of eliminating the market-guided production of commodities, which he replaced with a planned economy, in which social distribution should be organised according to the maxim: “From each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs.” In Li’s view, such a logic is problematic (Li 2006, 141). As he pointed out:

At the same time, I believe that this logic has no necessary relation with the core part of historical materialism, which I am emphasising, namely with the using and making of tools (and the formation of human language, which stems from it).

同时我也认为这一逻辑与我强调的唯物史观的核心部分，即使用 - 制造工具的实践（以及由之而产生人类语言）并无必然的关系。(ibid.)

Li considers the above-mentioned abstracted concepts of Marx’ economic theory as a form of Kantian “transcendental illusions.” Kant defined them as types of illusion,

which influence principles whose use is not ever meant for experience, since in that case we would at least have a touchstone for their correctness, but which instead, contrary to all the warnings of criticism, carries us away beyond the empirical use of the categories, and holds out to us the semblance of extending the pure understanding⁴ (Kant 1987, 385 /B 352/).

In Li’s view, such illusions represent conceptions of objects that can only be thought of, but not known, because they are shaped through abstract reasoning without any empirical foundation (ibid. 148). They are ideal illusions produced by transcendental reason. Such transcendental illusions are still actively effective in guiding and organising human thought, for they help us to achieve the greatest possible unity of reason (ibid., 389 /B359/). In this regard, Li emphasises, they positively influence the human ability to act and to change the world. As such, they have a profound philosophical significance.

4 The German original reads: “Wir haben es mit dem *transzendentalen Scheine* allein zu tun, der auf Grundsätze einfließt, deren Gebrauch nicht einmal auf Erfahrung angelegt ist, als in welchem Falle wir doch wenigstens einen Probestein ihrer Richtigkeit haben würden, sondern der uns selbst, wider alle Warnungen der Kritik, gänzlich über den empirischen Gebrauch der Kategorien wegführt und uns mit dem Blendwerke einer Erweiterung des *reinen Verstandes* hinhält” (Kant 1998, 405).

However, because of their transcendental nature, i.e. because they are completely separated from the empirical world, they cannot be directly applied in the concrete strategies and policies that are used in actual societies:

The system of equal distribution that has been implemented in the past in our people's communes was such a case: it seemingly aimed to achieve justice and equality. However, because it did not consider or take into account multifarious other aspects and complex empirical factors, it resulted in stagnation and regression of productive forces. The economic wages were overall equal, but the living standard and the quality of life of the people were stagnating or even deteriorating.

列入以前我們人民公社所採取的工分制，就因為沒有考慮，計算其他方面的複雜經驗因素，貌似公正，平等，造成的卻是生產力的停滯和倒退；經濟收入大體平等了，人民生活水準和質量卻停滯或下降了。(Li 2006, 146)

In Li's view, this was also the reason why Marx's economic studies could not be developed in the framework of a general economic theory, and why his theory of labour value was replaced by various concrete price theories. Although his theory of labour value has a great historical, philosophical and ethical significance, it completely lacks empirical operability.

A Critical Evaluation of Li's Critique

However, in many ways Li's critique of Marx seems to be too generalised or simply too harsh. In the following, I will hence show some of these, which are in my view based on a very superficial reading of *Capital* and the *Communist Manifesto*.

First of all, Li seems to have misunderstood some of the crucial notions pertaining to the Marxist idea of humanism. At least in his youth, he interpreted Marx's idea of alienation in a somewhat peculiar manner. Li started to develop interest in the Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts from 1844 in the 1950s, when he wrote his famous essay *Lun meigan, mei he yishu* 論美感，美和藝術 (*On the Aesthetic Feeling, Beauty and Art*). Li wrote this essay at the age of twenty-six, which was the age Marx was when he wrote his Manuscripts. Hence, Li's first interpretation of the Marxist term alienation can be seen as a dialogue between two very young philosophers from Europe and China, and it can thus offer us an interesting insight into the nature of intercultural misunderstandings rooted in Western and Chinese thought patterns.

According to Marx (2007, 29), the estrangement of the workers from their products means not only that their labour becomes an object, something with an external existence, but that it exists outside them, independently, as something alien to them, and that it becomes a power that confronts them on its own. This means that the life they have conferred upon the object confronts them as something hostile and alien. The workers put their lives into the object and, consequently, their life no longer belongs to them but to the object. In developing his theory on estranged labour and alienation, Marx (2005, 42) described the phenomenon of the estrangement (*Entfremdung*) of human beings as a species from their human essence or their species-being (*Gattungswesen*). In Marx's view, this phenomenon is a consequence of forced, exploitative labour and of stratified social classes, because being a part of such institutions estranges people from their human nature. In his abovementioned essay on the nature of aesthetic feeling, however, Li seems to have misunderstood the concept of alienation, for he endowed it with rather positive connotations. He wrote:

Nature as such is not beautiful. Beautiful nature is a product of socialisation, and a product of the objectivisation (i.e. alienation) of the human essence.

自然本身並不是美，美的自然是社會化的結果，也就是人的本質對象化（異化）的結果。（Li 1956, 57）

He also wrote:

Humankind has created objects, which caused that nature was socialised. Simultaneously, it also created a subject, which means that people achieved the possibility to appreciate the beauty of nature. Hence, ultimately, the beauty of nature is a special form of existence of the beauty of social life (or the beauty of reality)—it is the form of existence of estrangement.

人類創造了客體對象，使自然具有了社會性，同時也創造了主體、自身，使人自己具有了欣賞自然的宙美能力。所以，歸根結蒂，自然美就只是社會生活的美（現實美）的一種特殊的存在形式，是一種“異化”的存在形式。（*ibid.*, 59）

In this passage, Li obviously equated “alienation” with a certain kind of “objectification” in the sense of the uniquely human capacity to establish mutually separated concepts of “subject” and “object.” Hence, for him, alienation was also a precondition

or even a method of the specific human ability to project subjective feelings or sensations onto external objects, and hence, to consciously separate the objects of the external world from the internal world of the human subject.

Because of space limitations, we cannot go deeper into the reasons for this misunderstanding. However, it certainly has much to do with the fact that in mid-20th century China the establishment of a clear separation between the subject and object of comprehension was still a most urgent and progressive endeavour.

As we have seen, Li claimed that Marxist ideas such as socially necessary labour time, were derived from the concept of abstract human labour. He reproached Marx with a denial of any of the complex, historically determined elements (as for instance the developmental stage of technologies in different societies and cultures). However, this critique seems to be based on a misunderstanding, for in his definition of the socially necessary labour time Marx explicitly writes about the importance of these factors. In his view, they are historically and culturally defined and represent important elements of the category of the socially necessary labour time. According to Marx, these elements can vary throughout different societies, and they profoundly influence the value of both individual and social labour. He writes:

The labour time socially necessary is that required to produce an article under the normal conditions of production, and with the average degree of skill and intensity prevalent at the time. The introduction of power-looms into England probably reduced by one-half the labour required to weave a given quantity of yarn into cloth. The hand-loom weavers, as a matter of fact, continued to require the same time as before; but for all that, the product of one hour of their labour represented after the change only half an hour's social labour, and consequently fell to one-half its former value.⁵ (Marx 1876, 43)

Li's critique which concentrates on his alleged separation of socially necessary labour time from the actual concrete conditions of the production, is therefore simply wrong, for Marx explicitly emphasises that:

5 The German original reads: "Gesellschaftlich notwendige Arbeitszeit ist Arbeitszeit, erheischt, um irgendeinen Gebrauchswert mit den vorhandenen gesellschaftlich-normalen Produktionsbedingungen und dem gesellschaftlichen Durchschnittsgrad von Geschick und Intensität der Arbeit darzustellen. Nach der Einführung des Dampfwebstuhls in England z.B. genügte vielleicht halb so viel Arbeit als vorher, um ein gegebenes Quantum Garn in Gewebe zu verwandeln. Der englische Handweber brauchte zu dieser Verwandlung in der Tat nach wie vor dieselbe Arbeitszeit, aber das Produkt seiner individuellen Arbeitsstunde stellte jetzt nur noch eine halbe gesellschaftliche Arbeitsstunde dar und fiel daher auf die Hälfte seines frühern Werts."

The value of a commodity would remain constant, if the labour time required for its production also remained constant. But the latter changes with every variation in the productiveness of labour. This productiveness is determined by various circumstances, amongst others, by the average amount of skill of the workmen, the state of science, and the degree of its practical application, the social organization of production, the extent and capabilities of the means of production, and by physical conditions.⁶ (Marx 1876, 44)

Furthermore, Marx never wrote about replacing the market-guided production of commodities with a planned economy, as such a system is a concept developed by the theoreticians of Soviet-style state socialism. On the contrary, he even criticised the germs of such theories as could be found in the works of several utopian socialists:

It may therefore be imagined that one can impose the stamp of immediate interchangeability on all commodities at the same time, as one may imagine, one could make all Catholics popes. The colouring of this Philistinopia is Proudhon's socialism, which, as I have shown elsewhere, does not even have the merit of originality, but was far better developed by Gray, Bray, and others long before him.⁷ (ibid., 67)

In this context, Marx also emphasized that no school has ever played more tricks with the word science than the utopian socialists.

On the other hand, it is also quite rewarding in this context to compare Li's critique of Marx with the ideas of some other, more widely known representatives of the Sinisation of Marxism. If we want to evaluate Li's view of Marx's philosophy against the background of so-called Chinese Marxism, it becomes very clear that his critique is completely incompatible with the views of all three of the most important Chinese leaders, who have shaped Marxist ideology as a legitimisation of the current system, namely Mao Zedong, Deng Xiaoping and Xi Jinping.

6 The German original reads: "Die Wertgröße einer Ware bliebe daher konstant, wäre die zu ihrer Produktion erheischte Arbeitszeit konstant. Letztere wechselt aber mit jedem Wechsel in der Produktivkraft der Arbeit. Die Produktivkraft der Arbeit ist durch mannigfache Umstände bestimmt, unter anderen durch den Durchschnittsgrad des Geschickes der Arbeiter, die Entwicklungsstufe der Wissenschaft und ihrer technologischen Anwendbarkeit, die gesellschaftliche Kombination des Produktionsprozesses, den Umfang und die Wirkungsfähigkeit der Produktionsmittel, und durch Naturverhältnisse."

7 The German original reads: "Man mag sich daher einbilden, man könne allen Waren zugleich den Stempel unmittelbarer Austauschbarkeit aufdrücken, wie man sich einbilden mag, man könne alle Katholiken zu Päpsten machen. ... Die Ausmalung dieser Philisterutopie bildet Proudhons Sozialismus, der, wie ich anderswo gezeigt, nicht einmal das Verdienst der Originalität besitzt, vielmehr lange vor ihm von Gray, Bray und andern weit besser entwickelt wurde."

Mao's agenda of Sinicised Marxism represented an attempt to synthesise Marxist theory with the specific characteristics of Chinese society, particularly focusing upon the concepts of permanent revolution and the crucial role of the peasantry that should, in his view, fill the gap existing due to the absence of a large urban proletariat, and replacing it in the class struggle between labour and capital (see Mao 1937).

Deng's "Marxism" was highly pragmatic, and he is often said to have saved the Chinese economy after the Cultural Revolution. He typically insisted on practice almost to the exclusion of theory, and famously said it did not matter if a cat is white or black, so long as it catches mice⁸ (Deng Xiaoping 324).

Xi Jinping has directed attention to what he calls the Chinese Dream. According to President Xi, this includes the "Four Comprehensive Strategies" ("Sige quanmian zhanlüe buzhu 四个全面" 战略布局, see Xi Jinping 2015). This theory refers to the conception of a moderately prosperous society, including deepening reform, governing according to law, and the strict governance of the party.

What all these approaches have in common is the ideational heritage of mechanistic, anti-Hegelian Soviet interpretations of Marxism, which provided the fundamental basis of autocratic state-socialism. Li's understanding of Marx is utterly different.

On the one hand, Li's critique of Marxism is focused on his emphasis upon the importance of class struggle. Especially in his later years, Li was a sharp critic of all violent and sudden social shifts; he utterly rejected the centrality of class struggle and permanent revolution. Instead, he proposed gradual, reasonable changes, and social progress based upon an evolution. In this sense, his view could be—at a first glimpse—seen as similar to that of Xi Jinping.

On the other hand, Li Zehou revealed that there is a great gap between Marx's theories and those of the so-called Marxism, which, as a system, is a product of later interpretations, beginning with Engels and continuing with Lenin, Stalin and the Soviet-type interpretations that belonged to the crucial pillars of Chinese Marxism. In this context, Li also highlights that the notion of socialism, which stands at the forefront of all three ideologies, is actually absent in Marxist theory, for Marx was primarily elaborating on the utopia of communism. Here, he exposed the fact that socialism was a product of later interpretations, the ones that provided the fundamental basis of autocratic state-socialism. In this aspect, Li's interpretation can be seen as a profound critique of all three of the aforementioned representatives of Chinese Marxism.

8 黄猫、黑猫，只要捉住老鼠就是好猫。这是说的打仗。

Conclusion

Instead of revolution, Li advocated social evolution, customised to free and autonomous personalities and taking into account the integrity of human subjects. He even argued that Marxism should not merely be seen as a doctrine of revolution; in studying Marx, readers should rather focus upon his “constructive” elements. Hence, he emphasises that Marxism is not only a philosophy of revolution, but is rather, and even more so, a constructive philosophy, a philosophy for constructing material and spiritual civilisations. This is also a core aspect of Li’s critique of Marxism through the lens of Kant’s philosophy, and his attempts to synthesise the theories of these two German philosophers.

For Li Zehou, the synthesis of Kant and Marx has much that is closely connected with the concepts of human emancipation and human dignity, an issue, which is also of great importance and actuality for the present era.

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