

# An Analysis of the Influence of the Debate on Socialism in Modern China on the Diffusion of Marxist Ideas

Yaning Fan

School of Marxism Zhejiang Normal University , Zhejiang Jinhua , 321000;

**Abstract:** In the dual variations of national salvation movement and ideological enlightenment in modern China, the socialist trend inspired by the October Revolution in Russia prompted China's intellectual community to begin exploring and disseminating various socialist doctrines. By analysing the development of the debate on socialism in China, on the one hand, it explores the constructive role of this fervour in the germination and development of Marxist thought in China, and on the other hand, it analyses the limitations brought about by the collision of pluralistic trends of thought on the dissemination of Marxist ideology , which provides new references for the study of the socialist debate and the dissemination of Marxist ideology.

**Keywords:** Marxist ideas, Socialist debate, Ideas dissemination

DOI:10.69979/3041-0843.24.2.040

## 1. Development of the socialist debate in China

### 1.1 Historical Context of the Socialist Debate

#### 1. Turbulent socio-historical backgrounds

China in the mid-to-late 19th century was in a period of great changes in the semi-colonial and semi-feudal society. The double oppression of imperialism and feudalism intensified social and class conflicts. The fruits of the Xinhai Revolution were eventually usurped by Yuan Shikai, the Beiyang warlords colluded with the great powers to rule in darkness, and the failure of the bourgeois road made people at that time realise the need for a new way out for China, and the advanced intellectuals began to look for the right way to save the country and turn their attention to socialism. At the same time, the general upsurge of the international workers' movement and the widespread dissemination of socialist doctrines also had an impact on China's intellectual circles. At the end of the 19th century, writings on socialism began to appear in China, and by the beginning of the 20th century there was a gradual increase in the number of Chinese translations and essays on socialism. Especially between 1901 and 1905, there was a boom in the study and translation of socialist doctrines among the students who stayed in Japan. During this period, a wave of socialist thinking emerged in Chinese intellectual circles. This trend reached its climax in 1932-1933, when the Soviet Union completed its "First Five-Year Plan" and the economic crisis in European and American capitalist countries was at its worst. However, as the crisis of the Chinese nation deepened, the nationalist trend gradually rose and the socialist trend began to decline, and was eventually overshadowed by the wave of the Anti-Japanese War.

#### 2. Widespread ideological campaigns

Yuan Shikai's act of restoration and restoration aroused the anger of the national bourgeois radicals as well as the intellectuals. With the founding of the Youth Magazine by Chen Duxiu in 1915 as a symbol, the bourgeois radical intellectuals set off a new round of ideological liberation climax - the New Culture Movement, and the wide spread of this movement greatly created powerful conditions for the spread of socialism. The New Culture Movement can be said to be a response to the feudalism of the country. The New Culture Movement can be said to be an unprecedented sweep of feudalism. Under the impetus of the early part of the movement, Yuan Shikai's restoration scandal ended in failure, and the feudal system and feudal ideology and culture were violently attacked in the movement, which promoted the awakening of the people, especially the young intellectuals, and also created the conditions for the spread of Marxism in the later part of the New Culture Movement.

By 1919, the May Fourth Movement gave even greater impetus to the spread of socialist thinking and opened the

door for the emergence of various new ideas. Zhang Dongsun published a current commentary "Another Lesson Learned from Travelling in the Mainland" in Current Affairs New Daily, arguing that socialism could not be practised in China. This act aroused strong dissatisfaction among Marxists led by Li Dazhao and Chen Duxiu, who opposed Zhang Dongsun's remarks and argued that China could implement socialism. During this period, new publications sprang up, and the number of articles introducing Marxism in the press increased. In the two years following the May Fourth Movement, New Youth alone published a total of 137 articles on Marxism, the socialist revolution, the study of Soviet Russia, and the Chinese workers' movement. In 1921, Pan Gongzhan wrote in his article "Modern Socialism and its Criticism": "In the past year, the socialist trend of thought in China can be considered to be in full swing. In the newspapers and magazines, Marxism is being studied in the east and Balkhivism is being discussed in the west, the theory of socialism is being expounded here and the history of the labour movement is being recounted there, and all this is being done with great vigour."

The unfolding of the ideological movement triggered different voices, and also allowed all the different voices to be heard in the stirring of ideas, and the socialist doctrines of various schools of thought aroused strong reactions in the Chinese intellectual circles. Although this kind of debate was based on the reality of salvation and survival and was highly pragmatic, it did bring a fresh breath of life to the Chinese intellectual and academic circles at that time.

## 1.2 Results of the socialist debate

### 1. Scientific socialism wins the day

According to incomplete statistics, there were as many as 50 to 60 types of self-proclaimed "socialist" ideologies at that time, and many intellectuals argued around what kind of socialism could save China. In this socialist ideological war of "a hundred flowers blossoming and a hundred schools of thought contending", Marxism was the most outstanding ideology. In this "hundred flowers blossom and a hundred schools of thought contend" war of socialist ideas, Marxism in particular stood out, and this socialist polemic of the "May Fourth" period ended in the victory of the Marxists.

The rise of socialism aroused widespread concern in the academic world and in all walks of life, and intellectuals expressed their own opinions and endeavoured to spread Marxism. For example, Li Dazhao, published around 1918, began to enthusiastically introduce the triumph of the Bolsheviks, and wrote articles such as The Triumph of the Common People, The Bolsheviks, and My View of Marxism. The efforts of the Marxists eventually led to the triumph of Marxism over socialist ideas such as Pax Romana, Minsheng Socialism, Anarchism, and Gilded Socialism. The triumph of socialism in China and a number of other countries further demonstrated the correctness of the basic theory of scientific socialism. This victory demonstrated two important points to the world: firstly, China's choice of the socialist road was inevitable. "The socialist polemics of the May Fourth period were not accidental verbal disputes between intellectuals, but rather an inevitable and violent collision between two major social trends in the context of the times.

### 2. Elimination of utopian social fantasies

Among the several socialist trends prevalent at that time, anarchism, represented by anarchism, was introduced into China from Europe at the end of the 19th century, and gradually developed into a mainstream social trend with wide influence throughout the country, and the bourgeois democratic revolutionaries and the early leaders were deeply influenced by it. However, in the process of actual salvation practice, the anarchist ideology of salvation and strength was not chosen by history. Anarchism advocates the total rejection of the state and government, which is contrary to China's historical tradition, the realities of the country, and the need for stable social development. A country needs effective governance and management mechanisms to ensure order, promote development and safeguard the well-being of its people. Ancient Chinese Confucianism and Taoism have their own unique values and connotations, but they cannot be simply grafted onto anarchist concepts in a rigid manner, and it is often difficult to adapt Western theories to the actual situation by copying them into Chinese society. In addition, although the attempts of the Kirtan socialists to improve society by gentle and gradual means had a certain degree of reasonableness, due to China's impoverished situation, capitalism was able to greatly increase the incentive to produce, to develop industry and to increase the power of the rich, which was an idea that was in line with the requirements of social development, but against the background of China's internal and external problems at that time, the road of capitalism was completely unworkable and could only be reduced

to a utopian vision in the end.

## 2 The Constructive Role of the Socialist Debate in the Spread of Marxist Ideas

### 2.1 Media Preparation: Textual Translation and the Paper Media Debate

The polemics enhanced the influence of socialism in China, bringing more Chinese people into contact with, and understanding of, socialism and then closer to Marxism, and thus making it easier to accept it, with textual translations and paper-based debates playing an important role in this process. Before the socialist polemics, the early spread of Marxism in China was mainly through the translation of Western treatises by foreign students. At that time, many periodicals and books were published overseas without domestic distribution, and their number and scope were very limited, and quite a number of them were translated into Japanese and then from Japanese into Chinese, and the accuracy of the translations could not be improved, so the influence of socialism and Marxism was still confined to a very small area. The influence of socialism and Marxism is still confined to a very small area. However, in the form of disputes between intellectuals, both sides of the debate expressed their views and introduced the theories of foreign socialist trends through articles published in influential magazines of the time. Taking *New Youth* as an example, these newspapers and magazines in which intellectuals argued were a major court of public opinion in the socialist debate, and "a hundred flowers blossomed and a hundred schools of thought contended," which made the concepts and ideas related to socialism and Marxism spread among young intellectuals through the influence of the media.

### 2.2 Theoretical preparations: conceptual clarification and discourse contestation

#### 1. Clarifying the concepts of different social trends

In addition to different judgements on the pre-Marxist orientation of socialist thought, the reason for the many disagreements among people is that the relationship between democratism and socialism is not clearly defined. Through the socialism debate, many misunderstandings that arose during the early dissemination of Marxism and the differences in the relevant concepts were clarified, and the nation's understanding of socialism and Marxism was deepened. "The more the truth is debated, the clearer it becomes," and the controversy itself is a sorting out and clarification of theoretical issues. Prior to this national intellectual debate, most modern Chinese had a vague and fragmented knowledge of socialism; they only vaguely understood, through Western or Japanese scholarly channels, that socialism was a theory that emerged in response to the problems of wealth and poverty in European and American societies, and that it was another instrumental social doctrine that could be applied, without concrete and clear concepts. When these concepts are clarified and mistakes are pointed out, the direction of the theory will move in a more correct direction, thus finding a more suitable path for China.

#### 2. Enhance the discourse power of Marxist theory

The debate on socialism eventually led to the exclusion of some inappropriate ideological views and wrong directions, while the views, claims and theories of Marxism as scientific socialism were disseminated in a more concentrated manner, enhancing the discourse of Marxism, truly finding a direction for the realisation of socialism, and preparing the ground for the popularisation of Marxist thought.

Prior to 1905, Marxism was disseminated in China through three main channels: translations of original Western writings, translations of Japanese writings, and articles written by nationals after they had understood and assimilated relevant foreign writings. Early Marxist propaganda was characterised by piecemeal distribution and fragmentation, while its content was almost entirely from paraphrases and was indirect in nature. These two aspects led to the inevitable depreciation of the true meaning of Marxism in the process of dissemination. However, in the course of the socialist debate, since Marxism, as one of the most important schools of socialism, is an inevitable part of any discussion on socialism, both supporters and opponents of socialism have from time to time cited Marxism as an argument in support of their own viewpoints, which has led to a growing debate on the views of Marxism and a clearing of their positions, the more authoritative and discursive Marxism has become. The authority and discourse of Marxism has been strengthened, making it more persuasive and convincing, and strongly promoting the further popularisation of Marxist ideas.

### 2.3 Preparing the ground: institutions of higher learning play an important role.

The debates on socialist ideas were actually dominated by intellectuals in the universities, such as Li Dazhao and Chen Duxiu, and thus the institutions of higher learning were not only the main real places for intellectuals to form their arguments, but also the main positions for the dissemination of Marxist ideas.

New Youth was one of the most influential publications during the May Fourth period, and after Chen Duxiu came to Peking University, the magazine was moved from Shanghai to Beijing for editing. In this way, a new cultural camp was formed at Peking University with the New Youth as a front, gathering a group of cultural elites with sharp ideas and extraordinary talents, and ushering in the scientific ideas of Marxism in a contest with various social trends. As a result, the institutions of higher learning led by Peking University became the cradle for nurturing and spreading Marxism. Under the presidency of President Cai Yuanpei, Peking University, from its philosophy to its conditions, provided an environment for the survival and development of Marxism, which led to the full development of Marxist ideology among colleges and universities and intellectuals.

As the librarian of Peking University at that time, Li Dazhao vigorously promoted Marxism, and during his five-year tenure, he carried out a lot of fruitful reforms in the library facilities, collections, and management, and made use of the library to study and disseminate Marxism-Leninism, in which there was a significant increase in the number of Marxist writings and books and magazines related to the revolutionary situation in the USSR. In addition, Li Dazhao organised a Marxist research group and was later employed as a professor in the Department of Political Science at Peking University, where he conducted courses on Marxist theory. As a result, curriculum and teaching gradually became Li Dazhao's main work at Peking University. Outside of Peking University, Li Dazhao also served as a professor at four other schools, including Chaoyang University and Beijing Women's Higher Teachers' Training School, where he offered courses on Marxism, participated in lectures and debates on socialism, and injected new blood into the academic world of thought and thought through China's higher education system.

## 3. The Limitations of the Socialist Controversy on the Diffusion of Marxist Ideas

### 3.1 Lagging behind the development of Marxism

The plurality of socialist ideas, while stimulating a "hundred schools of thought" in the intellectual world, has also brought about continuous intellectual upheaval and lagged behind the development of Marxism. The people of modern China have been engaged in a relentless quest to change the country's dark state for nearly eight decades, in which debates on socialist ideology have continued to rage. However, it was only after the victory of the October Revolution that the debate on socialism became clearer. Since then, Marxist socialist theories have taken root in China, spreading widely and gradually winning widespread acceptance, while non-Marxist socialist currents have gradually receded and lost their influence in the country.

Around the time of the May Fourth Movement, numerous schools of socialism emerged in China, attracting widespread attention. But people's understanding of what socialism was remained inconclusive, and the debate went on and on, as if they were "looking at the fog through a veil". In this process, anarchism also dissolved the authority of Marxism to a certain extent. "Before and after May 4, Marxists worked together with anarchists", as a new socialist trend of thought, anarchism played a role in breaking down the old constraints, but at the same time it also influenced and lagged behind to a certain extent. the degree of acceptance and understanding of Marxism among young intellectuals . In addition, the failure of the Labour Mutual Aid Corps in the 1920s had a great impact on the early Marxist believers, and the intellectuals were hesitant to choose the truth. It can be said that the debate about socialism lagged behind the development of Marxism in China to a certain extent.

### 3.2 Impact on the mentality of contemporary university students

#### 1. Leads to the misorientation of the values of some university students

Values are the thinking process of people's cognition, judgement and understanding of things. Contemporary socialist thinking, as a kind of social consciousness, contains thought content that has a subtle influence on people's thinking.

Positive and correct thought content helps form correct values, while wrong and negative thought content leads to wrong values. There are many kinds of social trends, which contain both positive and wrong thoughts. Wrong ideological content can easily lead to the misplaced values of some college students.

Stirner's anarchism, for example, advocates a return to the "state of nature" of anarchy and disorder, believing that this is the only way to achieve the absolutism of individual freedom and the right to property. The "union" he constructs is in fact a fantasy of the petty bourgeoisie, which in essence still follows the social system of capitalism and tries to go to the extreme of ethical domination of the state. This kind of thinking is likely to influence university students' view of the state and society and cause confusion in their ideological concepts. Therefore, we need to be alert to the negative impact of these erroneous ideas on the values of university students, strengthen Marxist ideological education, and guide university students to establish correct values.

## 2. weakened college students' belief in the guiding ideology of Marxism

The negative impact of the socialist controversy on the spread of Marxist ideas cannot be ignored. This influence may weaken college students' belief in the guiding ideology of Marxism. In the process of socialist construction in China, there are indeed some social contradictions and problems, such as the gap between the rich and the poor, unfair competition and corruption. The theoretical explanations for these problems are not yet adequate, making it difficult for college students to correctly understand the mainstream consciousness of our country.

There are both excellent and positive ideas and wrong and negative ideas in socialist thinking. As college students' ability to distinguish between right and wrong is yet to be improved, and their basic theoretical knowledge is not solid enough, when they come into contact with the wrong and negative contents of other socialist trends, they may mistakenly believe that these ideas are correct, thus believing in them and casting doubt on the socialist road. This has led to confusion in the ideological choices of some university students, who question whether Marxism is advanced and scientific, and even doubt the communist ideal, shaking their faith in the guiding ideology of Marxism. If this phenomenon continues, it may have an adverse effect on the three views of college students and jeopardise their physical and mental health.

## References

- [1] Zhu Asia. Research on Marx and Engels' Criticism of Erroneous Social Thought in the Founding Period of Scientific Socialism [D]. Graduate School of Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, 2018.
- [2] Gao Yuanli. Research on the Influence of Contemporary Social Trends on College Students' Cultural Self-Consciousness [D]. Yan'an University, 2017.
- [3] Zheng Dahua, Tan Qinghui. Socialist thinking in Chinese intellectual circles in the early 1930s[J]. Studies in Modern History, 2008, No. 165 (03): 44-58+2-3.
- [4] Sun Jianchang. From Xinhai to May Fourth: The Early Spread of Socialist Ideas in China[J]. Practice (Ideology and Theory Edition), 2021 (11): 54-55.
- [5] Chen Chen. Higher education in modern China and the rise of Marxism in China[J]. Journal of Hebei Normal University (Education Science Edition), 2018, 20(06): 89-94.
- [6] Liang Bingying. Stirner's anarchist view of society and its inherent dilemma--and Marx's critique[J]. Thought Theory Front, 2023 (02): 60-67.