

British Marxism Studies in China: Retrospect and Prospect

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The studies of British Marxism can be divided into two periods: the upsurge period (1980s-1990s) and the deepening development period (the beginning of 21st century to now). The studies mainly feature expansions of research scopes, disputes in its definition and boundaries, and transformations from case studies to comprehensive research. There are reasons to expect its future prosperity, if research work can fulfill the following three tasks: strengthening basic studies with literature collections and material analyses, changing logical perspectives by adhering to a holistically structured system, and with an orientation to the practical issues in China, conducting British Marxism studies under the context of the socialism with Chinese characteristics.

Keywords: British Marxism, literature studies, holistic perspective, practical issues in China

Introduction

Ever since the reform and opening-up campaign in 1978, the modern development strategy which centers on economic development has guided China to create a miracle of economic dynamism. At the same time, a variety of social conflicts as derivatives of economic development have forced China to face up to challenges as well as opportunities in a period of critical development with prominent contradictions. Confronted with the theoretical and realistic problems posed by social practices, researchers have to lead in ideology and scientific theorization, starting from the realities of the socialism with Chinese characteristics, and keeping pace with the times, the people, and their practices. It is therefore not only necessary, but also essential to borrow from those countries who have achieved industrialization and modernization their valuable experience and theoretical accomplishments, especially the critical theoretical fruits from those Marxists in developed countries, so as to enrich and perfect the theoretical development in China.

Why British Marxism

In the 1980s, with the transition of China's economic system and adjustment of its industrial structure, there were fundamental changes in people's ideologies, values, and behaviors. After an experience of historical transformation from the laissez-faire freedom in economic life to effective intervention of government macro-policy, there had to be a philosophically comprehensive and independent review on social development in the theoretical realm. It is against this background that British Marxism was introduced as a theory that could be employed to guide practice and that gradually became a hot spot in the research among Chinese academia. To put it simply, British Marxism refers to

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The academic tendency and research trend of localizing Marxism after the rise of New Left in 1956, in which the two generations of British Marxist intellectuals in the humanities and social sciences endeavored to solve local problems with introspection and inheritance of the Marxist resources both in the Great Britain and the European continent as well. (Zhang, 2018)

Its representatives, among others, are Edward Thompson, Maurice Dobb, Eric Hobsbawm, Perry Anderson, and Terry Eagleton. Early research on British Marxism in China was mainly focused on fields of cultural criticisms and historical studies, mainly presented as expository academic articles and translations of New Left thinkers' works. It is not until the early 21st century that research on British Marxism entered an in-depth development stage, and that theoretical consciousness in the real sense started to develop. China's research on British Marxism in this period featured growth of researcher numbers, wide expansion of research areas, and integrity of case studies and general research work.

The vigorous rise of research on British Marxism in China is the result of concerted actions of manifold factors. Firstly, there is always a historical tradition of "opening the eyes to see the world" among the Chinese academia. After the Opium War in 1840, a group of enlightened intellectuals in the late Qing Dynasty were awakened from the dream of "the big country in the heavenly dynasty", and became aware that for China to step on a development route of independence and autonomy, it was necessary to deepen the understanding and learning scientific technology and achievements in philosophy and social science of foreign countries. When the October Revolution in Russia sent Marxism-Leninism to China, Chen Duxiu, Li Dazhao, and others advocated reforming the Chinese society through Marxism. It should be pointed out that early Chinese scholars paid much close attention to the study and introduction of the outside world, and compiled a great number of works which introduced the civilization development in other countries as well as their political and economic systems. These works opened a window for the people dwelt in the long-term closure of the country to look far into the modern society outside. The formation of new outlooks has not only broken through the traditional understanding of world geography, but also to some extent pounded the traditional culture system of China. Till today, the theoretical work of extracting its essence and removing its dregs is still in progress.

Secondly, early in the 21st century, international academic exchanges entered into a new developmental phase, with different kinds of contemporary left-wing academic trend of thoughts being introduced one after another into China. Along with the vertical development of history, an obviously observed fact is presented in front of the Chinese people, that is, Marxism in Germany and in France was gradually weakening, while the new trends, the new schools, and the new figures of Marxism in the Great Britain and in the United States of America were becoming the hot-spot and tide of academic research in China, especially the British Marxism, which increasingly gained great attention of Chinese scholars because of its significant theoretical values, and also witnessed continuous increase in its academic reputation, influence, and appeal. Although there exist drastic differences of historical contexts, different theoretical forms, and value orientations between China and western countries, British Marxism, with its displays of strong humanitarianism, cultural materialism, and the theory of technological practice, still provides important reference values to the construction of the socialist society with Chinese characteristics. At the same time, as a key observation object when Karl Marx composed his *Das Kapital*, the British society has been a place where Marxism commenced to get mature and enriched, and then headed to the world arena, transformed into a material force that changed the world and made history. That naturally

constitutes the reason for which the locally-grown British Marxism received keen interest of Chinese scholars.

Thirdly, British Marxism adheres to its profound civilian tradition of socialism, promoting a bottom-up historical research approach, highlighting analysis and research on common people and their everyday lives, and regards Marxism as a relatively open conception of historical materialism. British Marxists substantially explore the fundamental motives of historical development and stick to the people's view of history. By restoring the historical truth, they get ordinary people to walk out of the dust-covered history to the front stage, believing "the root of a just and humane future society can be found in the mass democratic struggles in Britain's past". Edward Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class* (1980) is rightly a representative work of this research concept. The British New Left thinkers combined Marxism and the realities of the Great Britain, produced a great number of quality theoretical achievements, and left a rich ideological legacy for the contemporary British society. It is just this ideological paradigm with socialist humanitarian characteristics that coincides with that of China's development notion which is people-oriented and is much concerned about the living conditions of its ordinary people. In the process of studying British Marxism, Chinese scholars come to develop a clear consciousness that their research should be based on the problems in China, positively take in the excellent research achievements, summarize and assess the gains and losses in the localization work of British Marxist theorists. In the dual dialogue between theory and practice, they may thereby promote the solution to China's realistic problems.

Presently China is positioned in a period of economic and social transformation, with the new system yet to be further established and perfected and the old system still playing a significant role in many aspects. The alternating situation of "breaking" and "building" leads to a certain degree of double-track operation and social anomie. It is therefore a vital issue of the epoch how to consistently adhere to the guiding role of Marxism, utilizing it to lead the current political, economic, and cultural development in China, and to construct a Marxist theoretical form with Chinese characteristics. Marxism in China, similar to British Marxism, is also faced with the problem of localization. A clarification of the historical significance, theoretical logic, and practical value of British Marxism, combined with a summary and assessment of the gains and losses of the New Left theorists in their work of localization, can provide useful references for the innovation and development of Marxism in China, and for the contemporary socialist practices in China as well.

Theoretical Development of British Marxism in China

Through the search platform of China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI), we searched with the key word of "British Marxism", and within the time range from 1980 to 2019, got the literature that totals 395 dissertations, journal papers, and newspaper articles. A general trend of increase in the research of British Marxism in China can be witnessed there.

Research on British Marxism in China can be broadly divided into two historical periods: the upsurge period from 1980s to the end of the 20th century and the period of deepening development from the onset of the 21st century till now. During the first period, along with the upheaval in Eastern Europe and the collapse of the Soviet Union, the socialist economic system in the domestic market was initially established and the political environment tended to get loosened, both of which gradually diminished the influence of Soviet orthodox Marxism that had dominated the research and teaching of Marxism in China ever since the establishment of

People's Republic of China. An open and wide academic space for the Chinese theoretical realm was therefore created.

With the establishment of the theoretical value and its legitimate status of western Marxism came the deconstruction of the dogmatism paradigm and the traditional thought structure of binary opposition (i.e., the opposition between Marxism and anti-Marxism in the Soviet Union and Eastern European countries. At this time, western Marxism was still bracketed as the criticized "bourgeois ideology"). British Marxism, as a theory with an exotic hue, first came to be known along the tide of research on western Marxism. In the early 1990s, it was introduced into China as a theoretical application in literature and history research. At that time, research on British Marxism in China was not presented as a holistically systematic Marxist perspective, but just scattered in the research paradigm of culture and history. At the beginning of the 21st century, however, introductions and translations of British Marxism works began to take shape, case studies, and studies on thoughts history advanced side by side, and all of these marked the ever deepening development of research on British Marxism in China.

After nearly 40 years' academic tracking and researching, there has been substantial development of China's research in British Marxism, with great expansions in researchers and research objects, and a considerable batch of quality research findings. Generally, related research is presented with the following trend and features:

Firstly, there appear many researchers and research findings.

1. British Marxism appeals to a batch of young and active Marxism researchers. These young researchers almost invariably received systematic and standard academic training, established solid theoretical foundations, attained fairly high research levels, and cultivated wide academic visions, with which they can recognize and interpret British Marxism with ever more open mentalities and standpoints, and exert functions of pioneers and bellwethers. Meanwhile, the older generations of scholars are continuously pushing the development of research work in British Marxism, sustaining their backbone status in the research trend.

2. There appear in the British Marxism domain many influential research institutes and researchers, among which there are distinguished leading figures such as Zhang Liang at Nanjing University, Qiao Ruijin at Shanxi University, Duan Zhongqiao at Renmin University of China, Wang Xingfu at Fudan University. Under their leadership, relevant institutes have also become significantly influential.

3. Judging from the quantity and quality of research output, an abundant number of professional research papers and works have been published and hence accumulated impressive academic impact, and some related research projects are set up with the sponsorship from Humanities and Social Sciences Fund of the Ministry of Education as well as the National Social Science Fund. As a result of these supports and endeavors, the research scopes, domains, figures, and thoughts are ever more enriched, and the recent decades have witnessed an obvious increase of Master and Doctoral dissertations with their research subjects as related to British Marxism, which to some extent becomes a signpost of the heated study of British Marxism in China.

Secondly, the research scope is substantially expanded, with ever more figures and thoughts involved. On the one hand, there has developed a "point-to-area" trend, i.e., from case studies to general macroscopic research. In the 1980s, when British Marxism first entered the vision of Chinese scholars, a large collection of British Marxism works were translated and published, thus providing a rather abundant and accurate literature basis for its research and study in China. Research at that time is dominantly translations and introductions, autonomous studies were yet to be developed comprehensively, and little was seen in the clarification and analysis of the logic

of British Marxist theories. There are quite a large number of British New Left figures, and the research field can include political, economic, and cultural aspects, with profound thoughts and complicated theoretical connections among different thinkers, all of which result in a multitude of the research capacity. That partly explains why its preliminary studies in China has given priority to the specific studies into the stands and viewpoints of individual figures, but the British Marxism as a comprehensive whole was not systematically explored.

With the deepening of research, it gradually gained Chinese scholars' awareness that case studies had reached a bottleneck stage, and there needed a holistic and overall sketch of the general characteristics of British Marxism, elevating case studies to a dimension of comprehensive research. Literature in Chinese, such as *New Marxism in Britain*, *Contemporary Overseas Marxist Philosophy Thoughts (Vol. 2)*, *The Cultural Turn: Studies on the Totality Conceptions of Western Marxism*, and *New Left Thinkers in Britain*, came in succession to public attention. Of course, the research on British Marxist cases and figures is a gradual process of accumulation, and it is also an inevitable trend as well as a requirement for the research to evolve from case studies to holistic ones.

On the other hand, Chinese scholars' research scope shifted and expanded from culture, history, and aesthetics to philosophy and Marxism. And their research focus also turned to related theories in philosophy and Marxism. Formerly much neglected philosophical and Marxist content in the theoretical thinking of British Marxists began to acquire attention and there came along a more accurate understanding and positioning of their thoughts. Quite a few scholars that had been regarded as litterateurs or literary critics or historians gained new recognition and their works were given new definition, and their identity of Marxists and related theories were confirmed and acknowledged. That proved to be a qualitative shift in the research domain and research paradigm.

Thirdly, there are disputes with regard to the boundaries of the definition of British Marxism. Unlike "western Marxism" and other contemporary foreign Marxism thoughts, British Marxism is not an entirely viewpoint system constructed through speculative deduction, but implied in specific academic studies, scattered in subject fields like history, literature, or politics. It is just a major and original path for British Marxism, by applying Marxism in respective academic areas, to test, modify, and develop it and then get its theoretical innovation realized. Without an abstract process of theorization, the core connotations of British Marxism are difficult to get systematically recognized and mastered. It is then no surprise that a clear-cut definition of British Marxism has yet not unanimously agreed upon among Chinese academia.

Qiao Ruijin of Shanxi University, in his *New Discourse in the Studies of Marxist Thoughts: Technology and the Culturally Critical New Marxism*, defines technology- and cultural critics-related British Marxism as British New Marxism. As he puts it, "in general, British Marxism has come through three development stages, i.e. early scientific rationalism, intermediate historicism and new Marxism in the second half of the 20th century" (Qiao, 2007, p. 145). In other related studies, Qiao and Shi (2005) also point out that "in the latter half of 20th century, there was an upsurge of studies in socialism and Marxism and there appeared a large number of New Marxists and many new Marxist schools" (Qiao & Shi, 2005, p. 33), among which there were most prominent scholars such as Maurice Dobb, Eric Hobsbawm, Christopher Hill, Rodney Hilton, Edward Thompson, Perry Anderson, Tom Nairn.

Zhang Liang of Nanjing University, however, believes British Marxism is gradually formed and developed in the process of the New Left's appearance, development, and finality. As a new Marxist theoretical mode,

British Marxism roughly went through four developmental stages: The period of 1930s-1940s was its rising stage, 1950s-1960s was its stage of establishment stage, the 1970s was its finalizing stage, and the 1980s to now has been its stage of international spread (Zhang, 2006). A group of New Left thinkers, such as Eric Hobsbawm, Edward Thompson, Perry Anderson, have contributed their outstanding theoretical practices and created a variety of internationally influential theoretical works with which they “fundamentally changed the situation of theoretical poverty in Britain, and at the same time forged Britain into an export country of new Marxist theories that can be comparable with Germany and France” (Zhang, 2010, p. 1).

Wang Xingfu of Fudan University states that under the influence of empiricism, the tradition of Marxism was once weak in Britain, but since the middle 20th century, it became a most active area of Marxism. “In the process of reviving and prospering British Marxism, the New Left has exerted great impact” (Wang, 2007, p. 28). Duan Zhongqiao of Renming University of China, on the other hand, points out that with the decline of western Marxism, Britain and America have gradually replaced Western European continent and become the central area of Marxism studies in contemporary western capitalist countries. “After the 1970s, it was already the British and American Marxism that occupied the dominant position of Marxism studies in the whole western capitalist world” (Duan, 2005, p. 47). And therefore he emphasized that it is necessary to promote overseas Marxism studies in China through focused attention to and research on British and American Marxism.

It is not hard to see that in fact there are obvious discrepancies in terms of research subjects and topics of Chinese Marxism scholars, and there are disagreements among researchers with regard to its definition. But there is one thing that should be clarified, that is, they all recognize and acknowledge that as an academic tendency differentiated from the European continental Marxism and Soviet Marxism tradition, British Marxism has important research significance and practical value, and deserves panoramic academic exploration to a deeper extent.

A Look Into the Future of British Marxism Studies in China

What will be the future of British Marxism studies in China like? The author believes it will sustain and even expand the present momentum of prosperity and development. The reason for such a judgment lies with the current academic situation in China under which the construction of philosophy as a social science with Chinese characteristics is implemented vigorously. It requires adherence to the original incentive, absorption of foreign resources, and a vision into the future. Only with a substantial intake of overseas philosophical achievements, British Marxism findings included, can the great historical mission be accomplished. Xi Jinping points out that

to strengthen our cultural soft power, we should intensify our international right of speech, enhance our capability of international communication and spare no efforts in establishing a system for international speech to tell, in the right way, the true story of our country and make our voices heard through giving full play to the emerging media and enhancing our creativity, influence and public trust. (Xi, 2014, p. 149)

While expanding to a world vision, it is necessary to emphasize the importance of Chinese value. The Chinese studies on British Marxism are essentially serving the purpose of socialist modernization; so when introducing the various overseas academic resources, we must strengthen the research purport with a Chinese-value orientation, adjust the existing research notions and approaches with the times, introduce into China those schools or theories that can help solve theoretical and practical problems in China, and confidently construct a

new and equal dialogue relationship with British Marxism.

Firstly, the work of literature collection and data analysis should continue. The classic literature of British Marxist thinkers is always an important foundation and subject of our studies. The reliability and significance of the literature itself is therefore of primary importance. Translations and introductions of original documents like works and representative papers of British New Left thinkers can be conscious efforts in conducting holistic studies of British Marxism and also necessary steps toward a clear grasp of the historical logic and inherent clues of its theoretical development and evolution.

Problems and challenges exist, though. To begin with, at present, there are only limited British Marxism-related books and papers and their qualities greatly vary, so it is hardly expected that the literature foundation can be solid. In future studies, the author recommends, the works in the original or their English translations should be used directly in research, thereby to ensure improvements at the research level. Furthermore, since there is not a rounded viewpoint system of British Marxism, whose theories are intertwined within the process of specific problem-solving, there needs certain refining and extracting work. When evaluating its contemporary values and meanings, speculations and interpretations should be adhered to the original texts and conform to the common argumentation process and logic, and when applying it to the major current issues, illustrations and demonstrations should be produced with reference to the actual context. It is always a guiding principle for the researchers to start from the literature itself and then outline and interpret problems and standpoints. A profound literature study should not be a mere interpretation of a ready-made work compiled by others, but rather involve an examination of the original background and the writing process of that literature. Still, after some periods of accumulation, the research results of British Marxism studies have achieved a certain scale, but literature study work should still be strengthened. Put specifically, we have previously focused our attention more on subjects and figures like Raymond Williams, Eric Hobsbawm, David Harvey, Edward Thompson, Terry Eagleton, but other equally important scholars such as Maurice Dobb, Richard Hoggart, Stuart Hall, Tom Nairn fail to receive due attention, and there are few related translations, introductions, and reviews of their works. This situation can hardly match with their due academic status and practical significance, and thus requires us to strengthen the accumulation of literature resources in the future.

Secondly, we must stick to a holistic framework in understanding British Marxism. Apparently, the academic studies of British Marxist thinkers seem to be separate and there lacks internal connection. Since its appearance, the research perspectives and subjects have also been constantly changing, and there are various discrepancies in their thoughts. If, however, these research perspectives are interpreted from an angle of historical materialism, their development backgrounds, guiding ideologies, research paradigms, and objectives share certain internal consistency, and there are obviously changeable historical inheritance and shared internal characteristics, and most of their research contents are related to forms of society, classes, and national or cultural issues. Presently in the academic domain, most studies on British Marxism are confined to their own professional fields. Studies of Williams, for example, concentrate on his culture and communication theories, and studies on ideas of Hobsbawm and Thompson are focused in the field of historical science. And these have resulted in an overlook of achievements of Marxism in respective fields, and clearly show an inaccuracy in terms of the academic identities and theoretical positions of British Marxist thinkers. In fact, British Marxists have often brought in historical materialism to achieve theoretical innovation. The renowned "British Communist Historian

Group” has just organically integrated historical materialism with British history, created a new paradigm of social history, and at the same time realized the diffusion, deepening, enrichment, and improvement of the basic principles of Marxism. Since studies of British Marxism were established in the intersections of literature, history, sociology, and other disciplines, it must be interpreted under a framework of integrity.

Thirdly, as a manifestation of the guiding principle of “remaining true to our original aspiration and keeping our mission firmly in mind”, we have to conduct the studies of British Marxism in a context of the Chinese-characteristic socialism, orienting to problem-solving. In the past 40 years of reform and opening up, many Chinese scholars have been striving for British Marxism, whose ultimate purpose is, after all, to identify and resolve Chinese problems and to construct a system of philosophical science with Chinese characteristics. In future research, on the one hand, we should strengthen the internal dialogue and communication with British Marxism, and pay close attention to the latest progress of British Marxism and study it as always. It is true that there are significant differences between Chinese Marxism and British Marxism in their basic research paradigms and standpoints, but with regard to their respective issues and concerns, such as current social problems and development, important human welfare like equality, justice, and harmony, and interpersonal social bond as well, the two of them share many common themes. Thus, only with constant comparison and reference can we discover and break through the limitations of our thinking framework, and then push the enrichment and development of research on Marxism in China.

On the other hand, we should adhere to the orientation of solving China’s problems and maintain the basis of China’s social reality, develop a realistic appeal with Chinese value as the ultimate goal, and promote the innovative application and creative transformation of British Marxism. Due to differences in the contexts, it is unrealistic to simply transplant British Marxism to China. A ready reminder is just a past experience when we used to construct Chinese Marxism based on a textbook-like mode of the Soviet Union, and pursued a binary-opposition thinking of “Marxism vs. Anti-Marxism” in methodology, which proved to have a very adverse impact on the study of Marxism in China at that time. The studies of British Marxism can only move forward within the context of China itself and thereby explore and cultivate a theoretical form which can substantially help solve China’s problems and adapt to China’s development.

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