

A Pilot Study on Li Dazhao's Exploration of Traditional Chinese Culture and its Contemporary Implications

Weiwei Li

School of Marxism, Xinjiang Normal University, Urumqi 830017, China

Abstract

Beginning with the May Fourth New Culture Movement, Marxism was widely disseminated in China, and the first batch of Marxists emerged in China, represented by Li Dazhao, who actively studied and disseminated Marxism through various channels and used his newly acquired Marxist theories to explore a series of questions for the transformation of China and to answer the question of "Where is China going?" The question of the times. As an important aspect of the issues of the times, he also seriously explored the long-debated issue of East-West culture in the intellectual world, applying Marxist cultural theory and putting forward a number of new ideas. This article takes the dilemma faced by Chinese culture after the defeat of the Xinhai Revolution as the background of the times, and describes Li Dazhao's exploration of Chinese culture by applying Marxism. Firstly, he analyses the reasons for the longevity of traditional Confucian ethics; secondly, he applies a materialist historical perspective to the relationship between the new culture they advocated at the time and the old; and finally, he indicates the path and future direction of the transformation of Chinese culture and its revelations for today. Undoubtedly, Li Dazhao was a prominent representative of his time, and his early acceptance of Marxism had a huge impact on the course of China's social development. Therefore, when we look back and reflect on the cultural path of China since the modern era, Li Dazhao's cultural ideas become an important part of the Marxist analysis of cultural phenomena. It gives profound insights into the choice of cultural path and the inheritance of old and new cultures for contemporary people.

Keywords

New Cultural Movement; Marxism; Li Dazhao; Chinese Culture.

1. Introduction

The October Revolution sent Marxism-Leninism to China with a bang, which gave Chinese intellectuals, who had experienced the confusion of Yuan Shikai's and Zhang Xun's restoration at the time, new ideas to answer the question of the times as to where China was heading, and Li Dazhao was an outstanding representative of the earliest group of Chinese Marxists. He enthusiastically glorified and propagated the Russian October Revolution, applied a proletarian worldview, grasped the historical laws of human social development, and published such glorious documents as My Marxist View, The Bolshevik Victory and The Fundamental Differences between Eastern and Western Civilisations with unique insights and profound vision, unveiling the first pages of Marxism propagated in China and becoming the earliest Marxist pioneer in China. He had the unique insight of a Marxist in answering the question of the times as to where Chinese culture should go, and applied Marxist theory to explain Chinese cultural phenomena and solve the problem of the path of Chinese culture.

2. The Context of Li Dazhao's Quest for a Cultural Way out of China

At that time, the achievements of the Xinhai Revolution were stolen by Yuan Shikai, who ordered the dissolution of the Kuomintang, the dissolution of the National Assembly, and the abandonment of the Provisional Treaty Law, which explicitly put the executive, military, legislative and diplomatic powers under the President. The power of the President was comparable to that of the Emperor, until the "Republic of China" was finally smashed and replaced by the "Chinese Empire". There can be no doubt that the restoration of the old ways and the movement to restore the imperial system after the founding of the Republic was a counter-current. However, for a certain period of time, this counter-current pervaded and even dominated the country, swallowing up the gains made by the Xinhai Revolution. The bourgeois revolutionaries, once drunk on victory, were awakened by a series of grim realities and re-engaged in the struggle against authoritarianism. Sun Yat-sen and Huang Xing launched the February Revolution against Yuan Shikai, and Zhang Taiyan and Huang Xing actively fought against antiquarianism, but the armed struggle was defeated and the struggle against antiquarianism on the cultural and ideological fronts also seemed to lack momentum and strength. History was looking forward to the emergence of new actors.

The new generation of intellectuals represented by Li Dazhao was characterised by the importance they attached to intellectual enlightenment, a characteristic that emerged in close connection with these intellectuals' awareness of the course of China's modernisation, especially the social reality of the Republic. It can be said that the future leaders of culture, Li Dazhao, Chen Duxiu, Hu Shi and Lu Xun, all went through an intellectual journey from full of hope to disappointment after the Xinhai Revolution. In this regard, Li Dazhao's realisation is very representative. He soon realised that the fruits of the revolution had been usurped by the warlords, that the people were still slaves, and that the republic existed in name only, and that "the so-called civil government is the dictatorship of a few tyrannical and cunning people, not the autonomous government of our people; the people's rights are the stolen rights of a few tyrannical and cunning people, not the rights of our people. Happiness is the happiness plundered by a few tyrannical and cunning people, not the happiness enjoyed by our people".expresses the deep disappointment of a young man.

Li Dazhao, with a sense of grief and indignation, used a sharp brush to ruthlessly expose and denounce the new authoritarianism, but at the same time, he further explored the reasons for the "decline" of civil rights. He therefore recognised the important role of ideological and cultural change in social transformation and turned his attention to ideological enlightenment. He realised that the time had come for a change in traditional Chinese culture, and he therefore began to apply Marxism to explore the way out of Chinese culture and to answer the question of the times as to where Chinese culture should go.

3. The Main Aspects of Li Dazhao's Search for a Way out of Chinese Culture

Li Dazhao's search for a way out of Chinese culture began with an analysis of the economic basis for the existence of traditional Confucian ethics, using the materialistic view of history as a tool of analysis. He argued that Confucian ethics had existed for a long time because of China's unchanged economic base for more than two thousand years, but that in today's society, the economic base had changed, so naturally the ethics of the superstructure had to change as well. In the face of the relationship between old and new cultures, he pointed out that all old cultures change with the material life of society, and argued that the Confucian ethics served the authoritarian rule, erased the individuality and independence of human beings, and thus constrained the process of modernisation in China. Finally, he pointed out the ways in which Chinese society and culture could be transformed. At that time he considered ideological enlightenment to be fundamental to the transformation of society and saw the role of the

intellectual youth and the working class in this reform. He called on the intellectual youth to go to the grassroots and carry out ideological enlightenment work with the peasants, importing the new culture from its roots into the whole of China and indicating the specific path and method of cultural transformation in China.

3.1. Analysis of the Foundations of the Existence of Confucian Ethics

Li Dazhao applied Marxism to a profound analysis of the class essence of Confucian ethics, a clear understanding of the conflict between modern culture and traditional Chinese culture, and, more importantly, they applied the basic theory of the materialist conception of history to reveal the economic basis for the existence of Confucian ethics, instead of attributing its long existence solely to the advocacy and maintenance of the ruling class and the ignorance of the common people. How did Confucius' ideas come to dominate the spiritual world of the nation for two millennia? Li Dazhao did not simply attribute it to the ignorance of the people, but analysed Confucianism in relation to the economic base and gave a more profound answer. He pointed out that it was not that Confucian thought itself had "overwhelming authority" or was "an eternal truth", but "because it was a product of adaptation to the unchanged organisation of China's agricultural economy for more than two thousand years. Because he is the superficial structure of the Chinese great family system, and because there is an economic basis for him.[1]." This, he argues, is the fundamental reason why Confucian thought has survived and ruled people's minds for so long. In modern times, under the impact of foreign capitalist economy, China's long-standing self-sufficient agricultural economy and cottage industries have been shaken, and with the shaking of the agricultural economy, the clan system has to be shattered. Which of these movements is not a movement to break the clan system? Which of them is not a movement to break up Confucianism[2]?" All sorts of things that were not allowed to happen under the majoritarian system are now happening.

Therefore, Li Ta-Chao concluded that the shaking of Confucianism, or the so-called normal religion in China, was inevitable, because the economic basis on which it arose and existed no longer existed, so much so that it could not adapt to modern life, even though there were a few people who respected Confucius, who worshipped Confucius every day and spread the gospel of "Zi Zu Shi" everywhere, "It is not possible to resist the forces of economic change to maintain the authority of his 'teacher of all ages' and 'the most holy teacher'." "We can tell those who are clamping down on new ideas that if you can break up the modern economic relations of the world and return to the ancient life of seclusion, if you can sweep away the material civilization of Europe, the civilization of movement, and return to the ancient life of stillness, new ideas will not occur. If there is nothing you can do about the forces of the new economy, then you can only let new ideas prevail freely, because new ideas occur in response to the new state of the economy and the new demands of society, not something that a few young people make up out of thin air[3]." When Li Dazhao was still an evolutionist, he was convinced that morality was changing and that "as ancient and modern societies are different, ancient and modern morality are different from each other", and now, from the fact that the economy was changing, he further revealed the objective inevitability of the change of thought in modern China. Other Marxists have expressed similar ideas.

3.2. Evaluation of Old and New Cultural Relations and Traditional Culture

In the 1920s, the question of whether the old and the new could be reconciled was hotly debated in the world of cultural thought, and Zhang Shizhao gave speeches in Shanghai and Guangzhou, promoting the theory of reconciliation between the old and the new. This theory holds that time is continuous from the past to the future, so the old and the new eras are continuous and no clear boundaries can be drawn. "The progress of the universe is like the merging of two circles, and the gradual separation is a movement rather than a transcendence. After a number of years of metamorphosis, the new society at the end, when viewed from a later

point of view, may be a different thing from the first, but when it is first occupied and first metamorphosed, it is still a mixture of the old and the new." [4]

In his view, there was no essential difference between the old and new eras, as they were merely the result of the movement of time. Thus, he claimed that "harmony is the essence of social evolution" and that "all things are in harmony". From this philosophical theory, he proposed, inter alia, that "while the material opening of the new may be more urgent than the restoration of the old, the moral restoration of the old must be more necessary than the opening of the new. This is what he should know. Anyone who wishes to move forward must first establish his own foundation. The old is also the foundation. If you do not have the old, you will never have the new; if you are not good at preserving the old, you will never welcome the new; if you do not welcome the new, you will stop at non-evolution, but if you are not good at preserving the old, you will almost commit suicide[5]." Although he is already claiming that he is not a preserver of the old, it is not difficult to see that this argument is not substantially different from the "Chinese body, western use" theory of a few decades ago. He invoked the new philosophical theory as a basis, and it was in response to the problem of the inheritance relationship between the new culture and the old culture, which the New Youth school had ignored, to the corruption of Chinese politics, and to the ills of Western civilization, which made it different from the general old guard, and won the approval of many people, and Du Yaquan and others responded with articles, so that the "compromise" The phrase "reconciliation" was heard everywhere. The advocates of the New Culture Movement pushed back against the theory of compromise and reconciliation. In the struggle against the idea of compromise and reconciliation, Li Dazhao used the materialist view of history to refute the idea that "materialism is new, morality is old". He argued that there is no such thing as old or new morality, a view that has become widespread in modern times. He highlighted the economic roots of the emergence, existence and change of ideology and culture, and argued for the inevitability of change in modern Chinese thought. After Li Dazhao embraced Marxism, the use of the principles of the materialist view of history and the exploration of East-West cultural issues were closely intertwined from the outset. From the materialist view of history, Li Dazhao refuted Zhang Shizhao's thesis that "what is holy, what is kingly, what is normal, what is famous, can be changed in accordance with the changes in life and the demands of society, and that change is inevitable. For as the state of life and the demands of society change, so the instincts of human society must naturally change. It is absolutely impossible to confront the social instincts of human beings with the scriptures of the dead.[6]." As morality changes from time to time and from place to place, there is also the question of the old and the new. "As new morality occurs in accordance with the state of life and the demands of society, that is, it changes in accordance with the life of material life, then if material things are new, morality must also be new, and if material things are old, morality must also be old. For matter and spirit are one and the same, and there is no reason why they should contradict each other or run counter to each other. But the great path of cosmic evolution is only a long and unceasing stream, which only moves forward, not backward; only opens up new things, not restores the old; sometimes the old is destroyed and the new is reborn. It is only a rebirth, only a re-creation, and it is not possible to speak of a restoration of the old, neither materially nor morally.[7]" This conclusion shows that Li Dazhao was in opposition to the eclectic conciliators and that he insisted on ideological and cultural change, but the question of the inheritance of the old moral culture was likewise ignored or not even seriously discussed. This is one of the major shortcomings of the new cultural movement, which was eager to either smash the old culture and old morality without establishing a new culture. This is still echoed in his specific analysis of traditional Chinese culture. In terms of his understanding of traditional culture, Li Dazhao, who embraced Marxism, inherited the critical consciousness of the early New Culture Movement and still directed his criticism at the "Confucian ethics", further deepening his criticism of traditional

culture. This was mainly reflected in the hints on the class essence and economic basis of Confucian ethics, as well as the understanding of the ways to change cultural concepts.

According to Li Dazhao, ancient China was an agricultural country with a particularly developed clan patriarchal system, and the Chinese clan system was the "basic structure" of Chinese society for thousands of years, "all politics, law, ethics, morality, scholarship, thought, customs and habits are built on the clan system as their superficial structure[8] ." All Chinese customs, rituals, political laws and ethics are not only based on the great clan system, but also on "Confucianism as its whole crystal". In a society formed by the great clans, the individual's personality, rights and freedom are bound and confined within the clan, with little opportunity for development. "Look at the Confucian ethics that have dominated the Chinese spirit for two millennia, the so-called rules and regulations, the so-called famous teachings, the so-called morality, the so-called rites and righteousness. Which of these is not a sacrifice of the personality of the governed in order to serve the governor? Which of these is not in the spirit of the sons and daughters of the great family system for their relatives and elders[9] ?" Confucius' cultivation of the body is entirely to make the governed "sacrifice his individuality", and in family life, the word "filial piety" makes the son completely sacrifice his father; a few "obedience" A few words like "obedience" and "chastity" make the wife sacrifice herself to the husband, and the woman to the man. In social life, the word "loyalty" makes those who are subjects completely sacrifice themselves to the king, so "the ethics of the Confucian school is an ethics that makes the sons and daughters completely sacrifice their individuality in order to serve their superior; the morality of the Confucian school is a morality of duty that makes those who rule with absolute power chastise those who are ruled with one-sidedness[10] ." In a word, the Confucian ethics served to maintain the great family system and to serve authoritarian rule, and because of this, Confucius won the appreciation of successive rulers, and throughout Chinese history, the sage and the emperor have always been inextricably linked. For the Chinese, who were devoid of individuality and power under the great family system, Li Dazhao sorrowfully pointed out that "the Chinese have a hereditary nature, the hereditary nature of taking examinations. All movements, all literature, all institutions, all causes, are of a test-taking nature, that is, they pander to the wishes of the examiners of the day and say things that are not from the heart. They even regarded the thinking of the times, social psychology and cultural movements as the main examination. What he said and wrote were just a kind of ink scroll for the examiners, with no connection to his real life. What cruel system has made my nationality so unnatural[11] !" The facts and problems that Li Dazhao sorrowfully pointed out can obviously be found in part in the authoritarian system and the thought of Confucius. The lack of independence of consciousness and personality is precisely the result of the oppression of authoritarian rule and the infestation of feudal culture, and what we call modernisation is precisely what is most needed: independence of personality and moral self-discipline. Thus, in the view of Li Dazhao, who embraced Marxism, it was the feudal dictatorship and Confucianism that greatly influenced and deeply restricted the process of modernisation in China.

3.3. The Path to Transforming Traditional Culture

Li Dazhao attached the greatest importance to and first accepted the materialist view of history and the doctrine of class struggle, which guided him in analysing the political problems of the society of his time, and the materialist view of history, which provided him with a new theoretical weapon to explore cultural issues. "The thrust of the materialist conception of history of Marx's school is to say that all the spiritual constructions of human society are superficial constructions, and that only the economic constructions of matter are the basic constructions of these superficial constructions. While physically the quantity and nature of matter do not change, economically the union and position of matter often change. As matter changes, so does the structure of the spirit. Therefore, ideas, doctrines, philosophies, religions,

morals, legal systems, etc. cannot limit economic changes to material changes, but matter and economy can determine ideas, doctrines, philosophies, religions, morals, legal systems, etc.[12] ." This is Li Dazhao's understanding of the materialistic view of history. From Li Dazhao's introduction, it is clear that his understanding of the materialistic view of history is partial to the principle that matter determines spirit, and is clearly incomplete. The revolutionary nature of Marxist philosophy compared to traditional Western philosophy lies precisely in the importance attached to the interaction between man and his environment, i.e. unlike the traditional Western philosophical worldview of conquering nature and transforming it, Marxist philosophy emphasises that while man is transforming the objective world, he is also being transformed by it, an aspect Li Dazhao's understanding of at the time was incomplete. It was on the basis of this incomplete understanding that Li Ta-Chao attempted to make some corrections to the materialist view of history, not realising that the counteraction of consciousness was originally an important element of the materialist view of history. This, which constrained his analysis of specific cultural issues, also became a mouthpiece for other schools of thought or scholars who opposed the materialist view of history.

Materiality determines spirituality and economic development causes changes in thought, which is both a natural evolutionary process and at the same time, mankind should strive to overcome inertia and advance social development. How then can Chinese society and Chinese culture be transformed? Those who attempted to answer this question not only differed in their guiding ideology, but also in their vision of the concrete steps, which were closely intertwined. When Li Dazhao was engaged in the New Culture Movement, he saw intellectual enlightenment as fundamental to the transformation of society and limited the scope of his work to the field of ideology and culture. After the May Fourth Movement, the New Culture Movement gradually became associated with social issues political issues, a trend about which there were different views within the New Culture Movement camp, with Hu Shih explicitly opposing this trend, while Li Dazhao, who embraced Marxism, gave positive He supported it and theoretically justified it, making it a direction of conscious struggle. He had his own ideal goals for the transformation of Chinese society at the time. In order to forge the goal of a youthful "Young China", Li Ta-Chao attached great importance to the power of youth in this social revolution. "Young people should follow this path, be rational, work hard, move forward without regard for the future, turn their backs on darkness and turn to the light, advance civilisation for the world, create happiness for mankind, create a youthful family, a youthful nation, a youthful people, a youthful humanity, a youthful earth, a youthful universe, and fund their endless life[13] ." It is clear that as an advanced Chinese intellectual, he was confident in his ideal of building a 'youthful China'. Li Dazhao believed that in order to build "Young China", two cultural movements were necessary, one for spiritual transformation and the other for material transformation. In particular, Li stressed that spiritual transformation must go hand in hand with material transformation, and that spiritual transformation would be difficult to achieve if the economic organisation remained unchanged. "In the former economic organisation, no one ever preached about 'fraternity' and 'mutual help', but the power of this superficial structure is not as great as the power of the basic structure. You just preach your reasoning, and he undermines your reasoning at times at the root, so that he can never achieve it[14] ."

In order to realise the ideal of "Young China", to completely transform the old China and to bring in modern civilisation from its roots, Li Dazhao, who embraced Marxism, believed that the intellectual class had to mingle with the working class. China was an agrarian country where the peasants made up the vast majority of the population. If the peasants were not liberated, the whole nation would not be liberated, so he called on the intellectual youth to go to the countryside and engage in the enlightenment of the peasants. He called out passionately, "O young friends of 'Young China'! We should not drift around in the city and be a kind of cultural wanderer outside the working society; we should go to the mountains and villages and be the

companions of the hard-working peasants, hoe by hoe, plough by plough, in the green fields and the smoke and rain. Smoking breaks, places in the fields and hedgerows, are opportunities for us to develop them and comfort them. It must be remembered that the words 'the sanctity of labour' are not worthy of those who do not do the least bit of hand and foot labour; that is the intellectual class who get something for nothing and should be ostracised in the same way as those capitalists[15] ." Li Dazhao's profound grasp of China's national conditions and the depth and far-reaching nature of his ideas can be seen. His ideas provided the ideological inspiration for Mao Zedong's later revolutionary line of encircling the cities in the countryside and seizing power with arms, and at the time pointed out a new direction for the further development of the New Culture Movement, which was echoed by other left-wing intellectuals and put into practice to a certain extent.

4. The Contemporary Value of Li Dazhao's Exploration of Cultural Paths

Due to various conditions, Li Dazhao, who accepted Marxism in the early days, did not yet have a comprehensive understanding of the materialistic view of history, ignoring the relativity of ideas in the relationship between matter and spirit, and thus neglecting the fact that ideas have their own history of development and their unique law of development. From this theory, the question of the inheritance of the old culture is not well explained, and he rushes to smash the old culture without establishing a new one. There is a tendency to simplify the evaluation of modern Western culture and traditional Chinese culture, such as sometimes equating traditional culture with feudal culture and Western culture with capitalist or even imperialist culture, which shows that Li Dazhao at that time was not yet able to fully overcome the limitations of the Westernisation school during the New Culture Movement and would undoubtedly need a process to transcend such limitations. In addition, he lacked a proper understanding of the enormity and long-term nature of the task of intellectual enlightenment, believing that "the solution to the economic problem is the fundamental solution. Once the economic problem is solved, what political problems, legal problems, problems of the family system, problems of women's emancipation, problems of workers' emancipation, can all be solved[16] ." Subsequent social practice and historical development have proved that the solution to the problem is far from being so simple. Despite the limitations and shortcomings of Li Ta-Chao's thinking in his initial acceptance of Marxism, his understanding of the materialistic view of history was not comprehensive enough, he relatively ignored the issue of succession between old and new cultures, and there was a tendency to simplify and simplify the evaluation of Chinese and Western cultures. However, his ideas laid the initial foundation for the application and development of Marxist cultural theory in China and provided a new way of thinking to answer the question of the times: "Where is China going" and "Where is the path of Chinese culture? Once the banner was raised, it also pointed out a new direction for the path of culture and a faith in the truth that could be upheld by those who followed.

References

- [1] Li Dazhao's Collected Works (below), People's Publishing House, 1984 edition, p. 179.
- [2] The Collected Writings of Li Dazhao (below), People's Publishing House, 1984 edition, p. 182.
- [3] Li Dazhao's Collected Works (below), People's Publishing House, 1984 edition, p. 184.
- [4] Zhang Shizhao, "Youth of the New Era," in Oriental Magazine, vol. 16, no. 11.
- [5] Zhang Shizhao, "Youth of the New Era," in Oriental Magazine, vol. 16, no. 11.
- [6] Li Dazhao's Collected Writings (below), People's Publishing House, 1984, p. 151.
- [7] Li Dazhao's Collected Writings (below), People's Publishing House, 1984 edition, pp. 151-152.
- [8] Li Dazhao's Collected Works (below), People's Publishing House, 1984 edition, p. 178.

- [9] The Collected Works of Li Dazhao (below), People's Publishing House, 1984 edition, p. 178.
- [10] Li Dazhao's Collected Works (below), People's Publishing House, 1984 edition, p. 179.
- [11] Li Dazhao's Collected Works (below), People's Publishing House, 1984 edition, p. 105.
- [12] Li Dazhao's Collected Works (below), People's Publishing House, 1984 edition, p. 139.
- [13] The Complete Works of Li Dazhao, Volume I, People's Publishing House, 2006 edition, p. 192.
- [14] The Collected Works of Li Dazhao (below), People's Publishing House, 1984 edition, p. 43.
- [15] The Collected Works of Li Dazhao (below), People's Publishing House, 1984 edition, pp. 43-44.
- [16] The Collected Writings of Li Dazhao (below), People's Publishing House, 1985 edition, p. 37.