

# View on Ancient Philosophy and its Legacy: between Soviet and Chinese Marxism

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Turenko, Vitalii (2022) View on Ancient Philosophy and its Legacy: between Soviet and Chinese Marxism, *Future Human Image*, Volume 17, 67-74. <https://doi.org/10.29202/fhi/17/9>

*The article reveals the peculiarities of the interpretation of ancient philosophy in two directions of Marxism – Soviet and Chinese. The author emphasizes the common and distinctive features of understanding philosophy in Soviet and Chinese philosophy. Proved that Soviet Marxism saw the most important stage in the formation and development of philosophy as a phenomenon of world culture in ancient philosophy. At the same time, Soviet thinkers tried to find the key points of ancient philosophy that would correlate with the main Marxist ideas. Also, based on the principles of Marxism, Soviet historians of philosophy analyzed and identified both common and commonplace moments in ancient Greek and ancient Chinese philosophy. It was revealed that Soviet and Chinese thinkers, first of all, try to find those moments in ancient philosophy that are directly or indirectly connected with Marxist philosophy – its principles, values, and ideas. At the same time, as part of the study of ancient philosophy, a whole corpus of translations from ancient Greek was carried out, although ancient Roman thinkers were less in demand for Soviet Marxism. Whereas, within the framework of Chinese Marxism, there is still a lot to be done in the context of the philosophical translation of the ancient heritage. However, argued thesis that to some extent, Chinese Marxism developed more intensively in the context of research of ancient philosophy. After all, in addition to purely ideological works devoted to the understanding of ancient philosophy, research began to develop actively in terms of comparative philosophy and classical reception studies.*

**Keywords:** Chinese Marxism, Soviet Marxism, ancient philosophy, history of philosophy, comparative philosophy, Chinese philosophy, classical reception studies.

Received: 17 February 2022 / Accepted: 18 March 2022 / Published: 29 May 2022

## Introduction

Ancient philosophy – the basis of European philosophizing. It was she who laid the foundation for philosophical reflections from the beginning to the present day. Accordingly, understanding its phenomenon, significance, and role in culture, society, and history, in general, has always attracted the attention of researchers from different schools, trends, countries, and eras. Marxist philosophy is no exception in its various variations, including Soviet and Chinese. Usually, there is an established opinion that these two directions of Marxism are very similar as if the difference is only in the geographical location and key figures who developed this philosophy in a particular state. However, we will try to rethink this view in the context of understanding the phenomenon of ancient philosophy as a fundamental stage of Western historical and philosophical discourse.

Scientific research by Chinese, Soviet and Western historians of philosophy – *Valentin Asmus, Alexander Beecroft, Xin Fan, Qihan Long, Zhang Longxi, Aleksei Losev, Gérard Naddaf, Almut-Barbara Renger, Wang Shiqi, Vasilij Sokolov, Gan Yang* – became the basis of our research. However, we cannot see in their comparative analysis of the understanding of ancient philosophy in Soviet and Chinese Marxism. Therefore, the purpose of this article is to analyze the peculiarities of the vision of the phenomenon of ancient philosophy in such areas of Marxism as Chinese and Soviet.

## Explication of ancient philosophy in Soviet Marxism

According to the Marxist doctrine, the process of historical development is a change of socio-economic formations, and a formation is a “society” at a certain stage of historical development, a society with a particularly distinctive character. Hence, famous soviet philosopher *Aleksei Losev* writes that a socio-economic formation is a “set of given production relations, and “the development of such formations is a natural-historical process” to study the life functioning of thinking in the era of ancient culture; it is necessary to be aware of what a community-clan formation is and what a slave-owning formation is. If the main method and main ideology of the communal-tribal formation was mythology, then the slave-owning formation, which arose on the basis of the division of mental and physical labor in the ideological field, could no longer be satisfied with myths and had to replace them with rational constructions. All these categories in a hidden form, of course, were in mythology itself, but they functioned there in a fused and undivided form” (Losev, 1998: 17).

Therefore, ancient philosophy, according to the Soviet thinker, should have appeared as a response to a new socio-political reality. To some extent, this can be agreed upon. *Gérard Naddaf* emphasizes that “the first Greek thinkers, replacing the mythological story with a rational theory of the universe while maintaining a triple scheme that structured the mythological cosmogony. They put forward the theory of the origin of the world, man, and state. This theory is rational because it seeks to explain the world not through the confrontation of elements, but through the struggle of “physical” realities, one of which subordinates the other. This decisive turn was reflected in the ambiguous Greek word “*physis*,” which in its original use signified the beginning, unfolding, and the end result of the process by which something new is formed. The object of intellectual activity of early Greek thinkers, which they called the study of “*historia*,” is directly the general *physis*” (Naddaf, 1992: 19).

At the same time, it is necessary to mention the idea of another well-known Soviet scientist *Valentin Asmus* emphasizes: “An extremely important condition for the subsequent development and subsequent success of ancient philosophy was that the beginning and starting point of this

development was philosophical materialism” (Asmus, 1976: 6). Confirmation of this can be found in *Friedrich Engels*, who wrote that “here (*in ancient philosophy – V.T.*) before us, the original elemental materialism is already fully looming, which, at the first stage of its development, quite naturally takes unity in the infinite diversity of natural phenomena for granted and looks for it in something definitely bodily, in something special” (Engels, 1955: 502).

However, this idea is not entirely correct. If we look attention, we can also see idealistic constructions of the world in the same period. In particular, we can note that in Plato’s *Sophist* we can find a very interesting point about the controversy between the Ionian (Asia Minor philosophical tradition) and the Sicilian (Western Greek philosophical tradition) Muses (see: *Soph.* 243a), thus emphasizing that not everything is so clear with the phenomenon of early Greek philosophy. This controversy, about which the ancient Greek philosopher wrote, took place between the early ancient philosophical schools as to what is the beginning of the universe – material (water, air, or fire), or ideal (Love, Enmity, number and etc.). Thus, we can conclude that it was already happening at that time discussion between materialists and idealists. In early Antiquity, philosophy is inappropriate to say that materialist concepts were the main; they went in parallel with the idealistic.

Therefore, *Valentin Asmus* clarifies: The history of ancient Greek philosophy is a classic example not only in terms of the clarity with which the opposition of two main philosophical trends appears in it. No less instructive is the classical clarity with which the opposition of the two methods of thought, the dialectical and the metaphysical, appears in it. Already the early materialistic hypotheses of the Milesian thinkers, who were looking for a material origin, had as a premise the idea of the universal variability of all things and the ability of one to become another, to pass into another (Asmus, 1976: 8).

In our opinion, one more point in the study should be pointed out. Namely, that Soviet thinkers were rather critical of ancient Chinese philosophy, in contrast to the ancient one. And this criticism was based on the principles and ideas of Marx.

For example, the well-known Soviet historian of philosophy *Vasily Sokolov* emphasizes: “Not as coercive as in the countries of the Ancient East, the power of tradition in ancient Greek society was associated with a different role than in the Ancient East, the role of the individual in socio-historical life. The noted conditions of the socio-economic life of ancient Greece opened up more scope for personal initiative here (of course, primarily for representatives of the ruling classes). The central socio-philosophical problem “personality – society” was posed in Ancient Greece much more sharply and dramatically than in those countries. The individual-personal principle in the spiritual culture of the ancient Greek policies, which opened up a vast field for those times for both economic and political activity, is represented much brighter and deeper than in the ancient Eastern states” (Sokolov, 1969: 17-18).

Therefore, we see that the key difference between Greek philosophy from Chinese philosophy incl. is to rethink the role of the individual in society. Therefore, it is no coincidence that a specific understanding of philosophy and the personality of a philosopher in Antiquity in general.

Philosophy in Antiquity, contrary to modern ideas about it, was not only and not so much a theoretical discipline, and even more so an exegesis of a certain kind of texts, but, first of all, a way of life-based on one or another existential preference. And it is in this existential preference for a certain style or way of living that we must seek the beginning and foundation of a philosophical discourse that justifies, explains, and conditions this way of life. In Antiquity, a person is recognized as a philosopher not because of the originality or abundance of philosophical discourse, but because he leads a special life. In turn, discourse is recognized as

philosophical only if it is translated into a certain way of life. The essence and task of philosophy in Antiquity were not limited solely to writing treatises, creating certain academic institutions (Academy, Lyceum, Epicurus Garden), and developing new concepts and theories that would relate exclusively to this part of the culture of a given historical period. Of great importance was the fact that philosophy, both in general and any of the schools of ancient philosophy, influenced various other areas of the then society – politics, literature, art, religion, etc.

However, Soviet philosophers also tried to find common points in ancient and Chinese philosophy based on Marxist ideas and developments. So, *Vasily Sokolov* highlights the following common points of ancient and Chinese philosophy (Sokolov, 1969: 21, 28, 30):

1. Mythological images-representations are maximally polysemantic, vague, and indefinite. Philosophy strives to transform these images into concepts, but at the beginning of its journey, it is still not able to get rid of this vague polysemy for a long time, although it significantly reduces it. Such a process characterizes the development of ancient Chinese and ancient Greek philosophical thought. According to Marx, “philosophy is first worked out within the religious form of consciousness and thereby, on the one hand, destroys religion as such, and on the other hand, in its positive content, it itself moves only in this idealized religious sphere translated into the language of thoughts.”
2. The first philosophers developed a naturalistic attitude towards man, bringing it to the view of naive materialism. According to this view, which continued the traditions of primitive animism, the psychic is inherent in everything physical, and therefore, in essence, there is no dead nature. Since all of it moves, it means that all of it lives, since the movement was then attributed to the psychic principle. This fundamental view, which we find among ancient Greek and ancient Chinese thinkers, is usually defined by the term *hylozoism* (translated from Greek – living matter, living substance). Living and non-living, mental and physical are not yet perceived as opposites, they act as something unified.
3. We usually define the views of the early Greek philosophers not only as naive materialistic but also as naive dialectical. This characterization should be extended to many representatives of ancient Chinese philosophical thought. The naive dialectical view was expressed in the striving of all these philosophers for a holistic comprehension of nature, the particulars, and even more so the details of which were then essentially unknown. These thinkers took for granted the continuous movement and change of nature. The title of the ancient Chinese “Book of Changes” (“I Ching” 易經) mentioned above, which served as the starting point for many subsequent philosophical ideas and teachings in Ancient China, is quite characteristic.

Summing up, we can say that Soviet Marxism saw in ancient philosophy the most important stage in the formation and development of philosophy as a phenomenon of world culture. At the same time, Soviet thinkers tried to find the key points of ancient philosophy that would correlate with the main Marxist ideas. Also, based on the principles of Marxism, Soviet historians of philosophy analyzed and identified both common and commonplace moments in ancient and ancient Chinese philosophy.

## Understanding of ancient philosophy in Chinese Marxism

After the foundation of the People's Republic of China, Classical studies became part of the university curriculum, but the field has been separated into the disciplines of history, philosophy, and literature. It should be noted that Mao's criticism was not directed specifically at Greek learning but against a tendency of doctrinism in the application of Marxism within the Communist party (Zedong, 1969: 761). In the meantime, the history of the Classical world provided a test case for the orthodox Marxist idea of a slave society. Beginning in the 1980s, as Marxist ideology began to fade, industry and trade in the Classical world were stressed in order to highlight the different characters of ancient China and the Classical world. Today, as Huang argues, interest in Classical studies is shoring up in the new century, as such studies are found to be relevant to Chinese society in one way or another

In China, Marxism philosophy is the official philosophy and it represents the development of advanced philosophy and the basic code of thought. But, before thinking of analysis of the understanding of ancient philosophy in Chinese Marxism, it should be noted that the "concept of *philosophy* is so deeply connected with the Greek way of thinking (and European habits were gradually adopted by the Greeks) that this term is more misleading than helpful in analyzing the intellectual traditions of other parts of the world. The only native Chinese term is known to be equivalent to the word *philosophy*. The term in use today is "zhexue" (哲學), an interpretation of the European term *philosophy*, adopted in Japan in the late nineteenth century and then imported into China. As in the era of self-criticism, the "elliptical" question arose: "Does China have a philosophy?" definitely took on the character of a value judgment, and as we shall see, the early histories of Chinese philosophy have the express purpose of affirming the value of traditional Chinese thought in relation to Western, incl., ancient philosophy" (Beecroft, 2017).

Nevertheless, it was the Marxist understanding of history, and the history of philosophy that gave the transformation of understanding of the history of China, incl. and philosophy. "Detaching antiquity from modern Chinese society, an increasing number of Chinese historians adopted a Western conception of the term 'antiquity' in the periodization of Chinese history. The most influential case was the publication of Guo Moruo's *Gudai shehui yanjiu* (Study of ancient societies) in 1930. In this book Guo followed a Marxist materialist view of history and argued that the key to defining the era of Antiquity was the economic mode of production: slavery. Reinterpreting ancient Chinese sources, he claimed that a slave society also existed in early China and dated the period of Antiquity in China up to the Eastern Zhou Dynasty. Guo's introduction of Marxist materialistic history would become highly influential in later years. Yet, it was still less dominant in the Republican period. At any rate, these scholars who embraced Western periodization in history were unaware of the Eurocentric slant in dividing history. At the same time, a small number of historians realized the problem" (Receptions, 2018: 207).

Based on these points, in our opinion, key studies of ancient philosophy in Chinese Marxism are carried out in three directions:

- a) purely ideological, as it was in the Soviet Union;
- b) within the framework of comparative philosophy;
- c) classical reception in China.

If we talk about the first, then we can look at the example of the studies of Plato.

Thus, a modern Chinese scholar *Shiqi Wang* pays special attention to understanding the Platonic philosophy of language in China. In particular, the researcher writes: "Plato's language

philosophy should coincide with the basic principles of Marxism and learn from its strengths of it, only in this way can the official support Plato's language philosophy to develop in China, Chinese people accept it and help develop the advanced culture in China. For example, Plato's theory of the origin of language was resaid, which meant language should be in the ideal world and only outstanding soul could see it, and this point was mysticism and agnosticism. However, Marx thought the emergence of language resulted from communications with others, and that language was the relationship between people and the environment" (Shiqi, 2021).

In this case, Plato's language point does not have a social and practical view and cannot develop China's society in a real and practical way. Therefore, it can absorb some points of Marxism language conceptions, encouraging people to socialize and form an interrelated philosophical culture. Moreover, agnosticism is thought wrong in China and does not coincide with the Chinese basic philosophy view. Another example is, as mentioned above, Plato's language philosophy aimed to understand the world's truth. However, Marx thought the language was realistic, practical, scientific, and revolutionary, and the goal was to reconstruct the world. So, the main aim of the language philosophy of Plato is not to make numerous contributions to society, and also can learn about the opinion of practical and revolutionary Marxism. In this way, it can benefit China's society by constantly redeveloping and reconstructing the society.

Therefore, we can see two things in this study:

- a) a special understanding of the creative heritage of the outstanding ancient Greek philosopher, which is expressed in the fact that his ideas could "work" for the key tasks of the functioning of Chinese Marxism;
- b) a specific vision of such a branch of philosophical knowledge as the philosophy of language, which is strikingly different from Western European, which focuses on the idea of language as the key to understanding thinking and knowledge.

If we talk about comparative philosophy, then in the studies of Chinese scientists, one can see certain comparative studies of the most famous ancient Chinese and ancient thinkers. For example, *Qihan Long* wrote that "the philosopher in Plato's *Republic* is similar to the sage depicted in the *Tao Te Ching*. Both Greek and Chinese philosophers emphasized the importance of harmony, virtue, and music in politics. In addition, with regard to the differences between the ancient Greek and ancient Chinese philosophies of politics, it is interesting to note that Aristotle described democracy as the most tolerant of the three perverted forms of government. However, Chinese philosophers never took this approach. They mainly focused on a perfect form of political education. Unlike the Mediterranean region, ancient China never had an aristocracy or a constitutional This may be one of the reasons why Chinese philosophers only talk about the rule of a virtuous monarch, but despite the fact that ancient China never formed an aristocracy or a constitutional political entity, the ideas of Western and Eastern philosophers overlapped with each other and formed with the brightest light in human history" (Long, 2018).

The third direction of ancient philosophy in Chinese Marxism is classical reception studies. "This area manifests itself as a reconceptualization of Antic Studies and therefore is an interdisciplinary field, which focuses on the study of the receptions of Antiquity. This area is specific in its sphere of interest – not only the philosophical heritage of a certain period but also literary, historical, and other sources (...) Classical reception studies can be a specific historical and philosophical method of the research of ancient philosophical heritage, along with other methods such as doxography, rational and historical reconstruction, etc. Its peculiarity lies in the fact that it can incorporate elements of doxography, as well as rational reconstruction or



other historical and philosophical methods alone or together. In the context of classical reception studies, ancient philosophical texts can become a basis for solving contemporary global or local problems and issues of humanity (political, social, cultural, etc.). The potential of ancient texts and fragments (including philosophical ones) is important not only for understanding the past but also in relation to the developments of society in the present” (Turenko, 2020: 44-45).

Based on this, Zhang Longxi notes that this method of studying ancient philosophy: “This is a new way to read Greek and Roman classics in China at a time when China is gaining in economic and political power with increasingly greater influence in international affairs, when traditional culture, particularly Confucianism, is being revived to boost a sense of national pride under the dubious name of “guo xue” (國學) or «national learning», and when the relationships between scholarship and politics become somewhat tangled and complicated, with some scholars eager to offer ideas that might be useful in legitimizing the power to be with “unique” Chinese characteristics” (Longxi, 2015: 11). Also Gan Yang, famous Chinese historian of ancient philosophy, proposed that the idea that reading classics is a way to strengthen the “cultural subjectivity” of the Chinese in his argument about the Chinese cultural tradition, which, he claims, runs all the way from Confucianism to Maoism and Deng Xiaoping’s thought as a consistent legacy that lays the foundation for such a Chinese “cultural subjectivity (Yang, 2008).

## Conclusions

Thus, after analyzing the features and specifics of understanding the role and significance of ancient philosophy in Soviet and Chinese Marxism, we can draw the following conclusions:

1. Both Soviet and Chinese Marxism look at the emergence and development of ancient philosophy based on the Marxist understanding of human history and the stages of its development. Soviet and Chinese thinkers, first of all, try to find those moments in ancient philosophy that are directly or indirectly connected with Marxist philosophy – its principles, values and ideas.
2. At the same time, as part of the study of ancient philosophy, a whole corpus of translations from ancient Greek was carried out, although ancient Roman thinkers were less in demand for Soviet Marxism. Whereas, within the framework of Chinese Marxism, there is still a lot to be done in the context of the philosophical translation of the ancient heritage.
3. However, to some extent, Chinese Marxism developed more in the context of ancient philosophy. After all, in addition to purely ideological works devoted to the understanding of ancient philosophy, research began to develop actively in terms of comparative philosophy and classical reception studies.

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