

Philosophy and Historical Problematics in Soviet and Chinese Marxism: a Comparative Analysis

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Turenko, Vitalii (2022) Philosophy and Historical Problematics in Soviet and Chinese Marxism: a Comparative Analysis. *Ukrainian Policymaker*, Volume 10, 43-53. <https://doi.org/10.29202/up/10/6>

The article provides a comparative analysis of the philosophical and historical issues within the framework of Soviet and Chinese Marxism in the context of the origins of the formation and methodology of research, the features of the interpretation of the historical process and its patterns, as well as the role of the individual in history. It was revealed that although the works of Karl Marx became the key basis for both types of Marxism, but if the works of Grigoriy Plekhanov and Vladimir Lenin became important for Soviet thinkers, then for Chinese thinkers, the legacy of Michel Foucault became important. It is proved that their difference of understanding of the features and patterns of the historical process lies in the fact that Soviet thinkers, especially those of the post-war period, began to see the basis of the historical process not only in material, and economic relations. At the same time, Chinese Marxist philosophers emphasized the importance in philosophical and historical research to consider not only general moments, external, but also private, internal factors of the historical process. It is analyzed that both Chinese and Soviet Marxism claimed that within the limits of one specific historical society, people are included, regardless of their will and desire, in a certain system of material relations, which constituted their social existence. Soviet and modern Chinese thinkers emphasized the interconnectedness of outstanding personalities in history and the socio-political conditions in which they found themselves.

Keywords: Marxism, philosophy of history, historical materialism, Chinese Marxism, Soviet Marxism, historical process, personality in history.

Received: 25 March 2022 / Accepted: 29 April 2022 / Published: 20 June 2022

Introduction

Understanding history, the specifics and features of the historical process, and the role of man have always been the focus of attention of philosophers of different eras, trends, and schools. This was no exception and Marxism, paid special attention to the philosophy of history. In the framework of Marxism, unlike other philosophical schools of the nineteenth century, its own specific area of philosophical studies of history was created, which was called historical materialism. The essence of this direction lies in the materialistic understanding of the dialectical development of the history of human societies, which is a particular case of the general natural historical process. This direction inherits a philosophy of history of Hegel. Therefore, its striking feature is the unity of the theory of development and the methodology of cognition of society. So Marxist philosophy of history as historical materialism influenced its various types in the history of philosophy; in particular, we are talking about Chinese and Soviet Marxism.

It can be emphasized that there are a number of fundamental studies of understanding the philosophical and historical issues in Soviet and Chinese Marxism – Flora Gu and Kineta Hung (Gu & Hung, 2009), Jianwu Guo, (Guo, 1997), Dawid Rogacz (Rogacz, 2022), Chengbing Wang and Michael Peters (Wang & Peters, 2021) and Gustav Wetter (Wetter, 1958). The methodological basis of the study was research conducted in the framework of reception studies, as well as comparative philosophy. This was facilitated by the scientific works of Sergii Rudenko and Yaroslav Sobolievskiy (Rudenko & Sobolievskiy, 2021; Rudenko et al., 2021). At the same time, we cannot find a comparative analysis of the topic under study. Therefore, for a comprehensive and systematic consideration of the philosophy of history in these areas of Marxism, it would be conceptual, in our opinion, to single out three of the following aspects:

- 1) Specifics of formation and sources of development.
- 2) Features of understanding the historical process.
- 3) The role and significance of persons in history.

Let us consider each of them further in more detail.

Specifics of formation and sources of development of the philosophy of history

If we talk about the philosophy of history in Soviet Marxism, then its beginnings can be traced even before the arrival of the Bolsheviks. So, after it had become possible, around 1895, for Marxist writings to be legally published in Russia, Grygoriy Plekhanov issued, under the penname of Beltov, his well-known *On the Question of the Development of the Monist View of History* (1895), in which he set forth the principles of historical materialism and subjected the Narodnik doctrines, and more especially those of their chief exponent, Nikolay Mikhailovskiy, to severe criticism. In the field of historical materialism, Plekhanov is acknowledged to have rendered a major service in his theory of the role of the individual and the popular masses in history. He is also given full credit for having had a just appreciation, during his early days, of the great importance of revolutionary theory for the revolutionary movement. In his later menshevik period, however (after 1903), he showed himself strongly opposed to Lenin's doctrine of the importance of "consciousness" (rus. soznatelnost). In the article *The Working*

Class and the Social-Democratic Intelligentsia, he criticized Lenin's book *What is to be Done?* He thought that having once reached a certain stage of social development, the workers would themselves arrive at socialism, whereas Lenin (and Stalin) maintained that the working-class was incapable of advancing in its spontaneous development beyond a trade-union state of consciousness and that, on the contrary, socialist theory arises independently of the spontaneous workers' movement and must be imported into the latter (Plekhanov, 1910: 682). Plekhanov's conception of historical materialism has also been objected to on the ground that he presents it as abstract sociology, too far divorced from concrete historical circumstances; he thinks of sociology as the "algebra" and of history merely as the "arithmetic" of social development (Mitin & Razumovskiy, 1933: 33).

Plekhanov's writings served as the basis for the further development of the Soviet understanding of philosophical and historical problems, then we should name a number of popular works by Soviet authors long forgotten today, in which, as he writes, a systematic exposition of historical materialism was given. In particular, we are talking about the following works: Vladimir Sarabyanov "Historical Materialism" (1922), Semen Semkovskiy "Fundamentals of Teaching Historical Materialism" (1922), Anatoliy Raevskiy "Introduction to Historical Materialism" (1928), Solomon Gonikman "Historical Materialism" (1931), Boris Mitin and Isaac Razumovskiy "Historical Materialism" (1933).

The Chinese scholar Li Shangde notes that despite the shortcomings inherent in these popular works, they played a positive role in shaping the system of foundations of Marxist philosophy. A serious flaw in Soviet textbooks and scientific works on Marxist philosophy after 1938, the eastern researcher considers the lack of exposition of such a law of materialist dialectics as the law of the negation of negation, which was explained by the influence of Stalin's work *On Dialectical and Historical Materialism* (Burov, 2012: 185).

However, in addition to purely ideological works on historical materialism, one can also find among them studies that have a certain degree of originality. It is about the book "Historical Materialism" by Solomon Gonikman. It was one of the most fruitful attempts to present this section of philosophy on the basis of the relevant logical categories (general and singular, quality and quantity, etc.). After all, it is known that it is precisely historical materialism that is most "politicized" in Soviet philosophy. The philosophy of history is often reduced to an exposition of the role of classes and the struggle between them, to a sum of examples about the decisive role of the "economic factor," and so on. S. Gonikman's attempt to take a philosophical approach to the philosophy of history was promising. For example, he tried to comprehend the problem of the unity of subject and object in the process of historical development, and the role of practice as the basis for the knowledge of historical processes. Apparently, such an in-depth approach to the study of the problems of historical materialism was alien in that he came out with a sharp and unfair criticism of his concept (Gonikman, 1931).

As a result, it is quite logical that after the Second World War, or rather already in the 60-70s. 20th-century understanding of historical materialism has clearly changed. This is especially evident from the works of one of the most famous Ukrainian Soviet thinkers Pavel Kopnin. Considering the relationship between dialectical and historical materialism, the philosopher wrote about the latter that "it retains its methodological significance and for knowledge in general, nature itself cannot be understood outside of relation to society" (Kopnin, 1969: 69). Therefore, being the director of the Kyiv Institute of Philosophy, Pavel Kopnin was one of the initiators of the development in Ukraine of what was then called "concrete social research."

It is curious now to read such a definition of it: "...Sociological research is a kind of social research conducted to develop the problems of historical materialism, which is the sociology of Marxism-Leninism" (Kopnin, 1973: 400).

If we talk about the formation of philosophical and historical problems in Chinese Marxism, then "before the October Revolution, China's ideological field was dominated by the democratic and scientific thoughts of the Western bourgeoisie. Nevertheless, translated works introducing and discussing the ideas of Marx and Engels were already sporadically presented to the public. After the victory of the October Revolution, some advanced Chinese scholars began to systematically study Marxist theory, which led to the widespread dissemination of Marx's thought. After the May 4th Movement, significant changes occurred in the Chinese ideological field, which led to the spread and development of Marxism in China. As one result, historical materialism provided a new logical and theoretical perspective for philosophical research, thus creating a new system of academic discourse for understanding social phenomena, linking history and logic" (Li, 2009: 10).

Therefore, Jianwu Guo says that for Chinese Marxism, there are such key ideas of the materialist conception of history:

1. Base and superstructure

Society can be viewed in two aspects: its economic structure and its ideological superstructure. The totality of production relations corresponding to a certain stage in the development of material productive forces constitutes the economic "base." *Superculture* includes the legal and political system and forms of social consciousness. Marx states that "in the social production of their lives, people enter into certain relations (relations of production) that are necessary and independent of their will. The mode of production of material life determines the process of social, political and spiritual life in general. The economic structure of society is the real foundation on which the legal and political superstructure rises and to which certain forms of social consciousness correspond. Marx concludes that it is not the consciousness of people that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being, which determines their consciousness. This is fundamental to the relationship between the two aspects of society.

2. Laws of social development.

Marx further expresses the relationship between the economic structure and the ideological superstructure, exploring the driving force behind the development of society. He points out that the economic structure is the engine of social changes resulting from the conflict between material productive forces and production relations.

3. Driving force of history

To what extent does this conflict cause changes in the social order? Marx argues that: "No social system ever perishes before the productive forces develop, for which there is a place in it, and new, higher production relations will never appear before the material conditions for their existence ripen in the bowels of the old society itself" (Guo, 1997: 128-129).

Thus, Modern Chinese philosophers claim that the materialistic understanding of Marx's history is an important part of Marxist philosophy. The CCP claims that historical materialism is the theoretical cornerstone of its social practice and claims that its policy of economic and political transformation is guided by this theory. They treated the materialist concept of history as a theoretical tool for arguing their policies, but not as a fundamental approach to the study of historical events.

Along with the Marxist doctrine of understanding history, what is particularly interesting is the fact that Chinese thinkers, unlike Soviet thinkers, have involved another important aspect of Western philosophy of the twentieth century. We are talking about the legacy of Michel Foucault. It is he who is considered by Chinese philosophers to be one of the post-Marxists (along with Giorgio Agamben, Louis Althusser, Alain Badiou, Jean Baudrillard, Gilles Deleuze, Jacques Derrida, Slavoj Žižek).

“Foucault has been influenced by various Marxist concepts, which reveal a hidden view into Marx’s own theoretical edifice. His unique notions of discourse practice and power-knowledge criticizes the social system, supplements and augments Marxism. In these ways, we can see a deep connection between Foucault’s theory of power and Marx’s historical materialism, which is confirmed by the mutual penetration and confirmation of the issues of Marx’s critique of political economy with the various themes in Foucault’s theory of power. Foucault’s concept of *biopower* retains in a deeper sense the mark of its own awareness of historical materialism, showing that his theory of power rests on a materialist foundation by re-declaring the naturalness of power, and reinterpreting it in contextual relationships to Marx’s concept of the relations of production. Precisely through the perspective of historical materialism, Foucault has not only identified the repressive nature of power, but he also discovered its positive and productive effects. From the perspective of the productiveness of power, this allows a new standpoint from which to reinterpret Marx’s surplus-value theory of production” (Wang & Peters, 2021).

Understanding the features and laws of the historical process.

The dialectical-materialist doctrine of society opened up an entirely new approach to the study of historical process. Pre-Marxist historians believed that since people consciously participate in events, in order to explain historical events, it is necessary to reveal those ideological motives that were inherent in people of the corresponding era and, first of all, outstanding figures. Against, Marx showed that the incentive motives themselves should be explained on the basis of their material basis, that is, from the social being of which they are a reflection. This is the meaning of his statement that ideas do not have an independent history.

Therefore, Soviet philosophers believed that ideas do not have their own history, because their history is a reflection in the public consciousness of the development and change of social life. Hence, the analysis of the past and present, as well as the prospects for the future, must begin not with finding out what this or that era thought or thinks about itself, but with the discovery of material relations that have developed in this era, independent of public consciousness (Wetter, 1958: 76). It should be noted that this position has been criticized by Eduard Bernstein, who objects to the excessive emphasis on necessity in historical development, insisting that non-economic factors also have their influence: “No amount of historical materialism can get around the fact that history is made by men, that men have minds, and that mental dispositions are by no means so mechanical as to be entirely governed by the economic situation. He admits not only ‘the history of a country’s political development, but also ethical codes and religious communities as factors influencing historical development, and even proposes to replace the term ‘materialist conception of history’ with ‘economic conception of history’” (Bernshtine, 1898: 749).

It should be noted that either Marx or Engels was invariably ready to push historical materialism to this length, and was criticized and rejected in Bolshevik doctrine as “economic materialism.” The theorists of Soviet historical materialism were opposed to rigorous

economism, on the ground that it conceives the economic factor to be the sole determining force in social development and attaches no significance to the ideological superstructure, as though this was merely a question of “reflexes” pure and simple. They rejected it because of the fundamentally fatalistic attitude involved, which implies a policy of passive endurance, awaiting the automatic effects of economic development, and therefore leaves no room for revolutionary action (Wetter, 1958: 76).

The study of the contradictions and patterns of social life provides the key to understanding political, legal, philosophical, moral, religious, aesthetic views and theories, that is, the totality of forms of social consciousness. The materialistic understanding of history gives an explanation of the basis of the foundations of human history – the activities of people. There is no history outside and apart from the people acting in society. The history of a society can therefore be defined as the history of human activities in the past and present. And this means that it can be explained only if the regularities, causes, and tendencies of the socially transforming activity of the masses are revealed.

In a certain sense, we find similar reflections on the historical process in modern Eastern philosophers, representatives of Chinese Marxism. In particular, we are talking about the most famous thinker who laid the foundation for the development of philosophical and historical problems in modern China – Jian Bozan. He stresses that in contradistinction to the metaphysical equating of the laws of history with absolute, immutable principles, historical materialism understands them as “abstracted, synthesized, and examined practice” (*bei chouxianglede, bei zonghelede, bei sikaolede shijian* 被抽象了的、被综合了的、被思考了的实践). On the contrary, Jian claims no less firmly that:

- a) first, all these laws are necessary and only brought into effect in a contingent way (the point frequently stressed by Lenin, to whom Jian refers, and with regards to their necessity, even more by Stalin);
- b) second, all these laws are general (*yibande* 一般的), which means that they have to be applicable to all the stages of historical development (Rogacz, 2022).

Accordingly, Chinese Marxism is characterized by the fact that the initial, deepest nomological characteristic of the historical process is a necessity because all historical reality is considered here, after all, not as chaotic, but as such that its nature is determined by a comprehensive network of objective, essential and universal relationships and interdependencies. However, besides this, philosophical and historical research seeks not only general patterns but also investigates particular circumstances, that is, it not only abstracts the general from a multifaceted and particular history but goes towards understanding these particulars from the inside of their general nature. At the same time, he must dialectically take into account the specific laws of the given times and areas of history. And although such specificity is often subject to a general law, it really constitutes a decisive moment in the structure of the specific content of the history of individual peoples.

A dialectical rethinking of the basic categories of historical materialism also extended to Jian’s reflection on the nature of historical movements, which brought a significant novelty in relation to the previous Sino-Marxist philosophy. According to Jian Bozan, each historical movement consists dialectically of two moments: the progressive and the conservative one. The former is stronger at the beginning, whereas the latter is incremental towards the end. To put it simply, every progressive movement has to eventually slow down. “Any reaction in history does not manifest its reactivity in the beginning, but reversely, it is often hidden behind the posture of a revolution and exposes its reactionary character only with getting close to its

(complete) denouement.” Peasant uprisings in imperial China, for instance, were historically permissible precisely because all of them ended in the same way: in spite of the progressive (and from the economic viewpoint, also necessary) anti-feudalist reasons, the closer to the end of a rebellion, the more reactionary attitudes were coming to the fore, so that in the end the peasants, deluded with a promise of a better future, supported their leader in the founding of a new (supposedly unprecedented) dynasty, whereas, in fact, such a leader merely gave his name to nothing but a “crew change” within the stratum of landlords. At the end of the day, however, each transformation of the modes of production, along with the subsequent changes in the domain of politics and culture, further the historical objectives. Hence, Jian Bozan openly accedes to the spiral scheme of historical development: the cycles initiated by temporary retrogressions that are ultimately inscribed into the line of progress. Importantly, Jian justifies this model with reference to Chinese history, but then notes that “it has to be pointed out that historical development as such does not adopt the cyclical trajectory (...), but eternally follows the spiral pattern that never returns to its point of departure.” Surprisingly, Jian does not refer to Lenin’s idea of “a development, so to speak, that proceeds in spirals, not in a straight line; a development by leaps, catastrophes, and revolutions” (Rogacz, 2022).

In general, it must be said that the idea of a spiral form of the development of history arose within the framework of dialectics. Of course, not all elements of dialectics are equally significant for the image and metapattern of the spiral. This image is directly connected only with the synthesizing law of the negation. It fixes the direction, that is, the form and a certain result of development. The spiral represents this form. In light of this law, the development of history is divided into separate, relatively independent stages. Moreover, each subsequent stage is connected with the previous negation – a necessary, essential element of development. This model synthesizes cyclic and linear. It indicates the existence of certain historical cycles, but at the same time, does not imply a complete return to the past – each new turn of the spiral does not repeat the previous one. Spiral development can be either progressive or regressive. With a spiral form of development, the point of departure and the point of return do not coincide, the repetition is not absolute, but relative, partial, and, naturally, there is no predestination or mystical return to the past. Any position on a given turn of the spiral is above the corresponding position of the previous turn.

In the context of the topic under study, it should also be said that Jian holds that it is only after exceeding some degree of the progressive potential that a qualitative “leap” (feiyue 飞跃) is possible. From the viewpoint of dialectics, such a leap can be explained as the negation of negation that unfolds the contradictions (maodun 矛盾) of a thing. In terms of social reality, the unveiling of inner contradictions eventually takes on the shape of revolution. Importantly, this passage was independent from Mao, whom Jian never quotes in the entire 1938 edition of *A Course in the Philosophy of History*. Naturally, he referred to Mao’s *On Contradiction in a similar discussion* from his essay *On how to investigate Chinese history of 1950*, but even then, that went against the fact that Mao never agreed with the law of double negation. Interestingly, the relative absence of the quotes from Chairman Mao in Jian’s later works also applies to the points and ideas they shared, such as the spiral scheme of history (Rogacz, 2022).

Therefore, we can see that Marxist thinkers in China, in thinking about the laws and peculiarities of the historical process, did not always adhere to the guidelines expressed by Mao Zedong. Although, at the same time, one can clearly see the Marxist vision of the spiral image of the historical process, and also, what is important is the study of both general, external, but internal, specific factors in the development of history.

A view of the meaning of a person in history

In both types of Marxism, we can also see attempts to comprehend the role of the individual in history. First of all, it must be emphasized that each individual living in society pursues his own specific values, and, guided by them, acts in such a way as to achieve their implementation. And although these goals and actions are so diverse, different, and contradictory that it is not possible to take them all into account, nevertheless, behind this mass of individual goals and actions lies some common essence.

Hence, both Chinese and Soviet Marxism claimed that within the limits of one specific historical society, people are included, regardless of their will and desire, in a certain system of material relations, which constituted their social existence. As a result, they are connected in a certain way for each formation with each other and with the means of production. The relations of production, as it were, organize people, stimulate their activity, and give rise to certain connections and dependencies between social groups. It is the common interests reflected in the consciousness, more or less conscious, that unite people, stimulate them to fight for the implementation of certain social goals.

At the same time, if we proceed specifically to the consideration of this issue in the context of Chinese Marxism, then thinking of Jian Bozan on the reciprocal relation between the general and the particular was different from the attitude of Mao, who in *Problems of Strategy in China's Revolutionary War* (1936) claimed that since "each historical stage has its special characteristics, the laws of war also have their own characteristics, and they cannot be mechanically applied to another stage." As a result, for Mao, the laws describing the Soviet revolutionary war could not be freely applied to the unique Chinese historical experience, and this point was certainly ancillary to his political agenda during the Sino-Soviet split. Jian's dialectical approach implies, in turn, that various particularities do not challenge the very application of general laws. Jian does not explain, however, how it is possible for a necessary and strictly general law to be induced from a finite set of instances. The statement that historical specificities are "quite often" subordinated to general laws also suggests that there are some particularities that are beyond the reach of laws, which seriously questions the generality of the latter. This key inconsistency, already visible in Jian's view on the task of the philosophy of history, will also influence other parts of his thought, including his later answer to the challenge of historicism" (Rogacz, 2022).

Historical materialism, therefore, does not deny the role of either consciousness or interests in the historical process, where "nothing is done without a conscious intention, without the desired goal." He just rejects, as Lenin emphasized, the stupid idea of the absolute freedom of man to make history at his own discretion and arbitrariness. Nothing happens in history without the active activity of people, guided by interests, regulated by consciousness and will. But the interests themselves have an objective basis: they are determined by social beings.

Hence, the problem is logically the relationship between the necessity of historical laws and the freedom of individuals acting in history. As Bozan admits, historical materialism cannot mechanistically impose some impersonal laws on the people, but instead has to "dialectically" acknowledge "the creative role of the subjective factor" in history. No "scientific socialist" can deny that history has been created by the people, namely by the oppressed masses and their leaders. However, the latter led the people due to the efficient recognition of the objective conditions of a given time. In other words, prominent individuals always function within the given limits of their class, the level of the development of productive forces, and so forth, so

that none of them can possibly counteract historical laws. Following Plekhanov's solution to this problem, Jian Bozan states that although these laws and stages are necessary, the emergence of certain individuals is basically contingent. If it were not for, say, Napoleon or Lenin (or Mao), some other leader would have appeared, and the same inexorable processes would have happened. On the contrary, it cannot be ruled out that without these men, all the changes would not have occurred just as quickly, just as all prominent individuals are capable of stunting them. Such a solution to the problem of the historical agency was in line with the arguments of Qu Qiubai, but was later ignored by Mao, whose radically anti-individualistic approach culminated during the Cultural Revolution (Rogacz, 2022).

We see relatively similar maxims in the framework of the Soviet philosophy of history. So, the materialistic understanding of the masses and the individual in history developed in the struggle against the voluntarism and fatalism that dominated bourgeois philosophy. If we talk about the first, then this is a subjective-idealistic trend that denies objective laws and claims that the development of society depends on the will of the "heroes" leading the "crowd," while fatalism in explaining social phenomena, on the contrary, proceeds from the recognition of the inevitable, predetermined from above the course of history. The theoretical inconsistency of these concepts is expressed in the inability to understand the dialectics of the objective and the subjective, necessity and chance in history.

What is the role of the individual in history?

Firstly, an outstanding personality leaves an imprint on the course of the historical process, can speed it up or slow it down, but is not able to do it at all.

Secondly, the activity of an outstanding personality is of greater historical significance if it is based on advanced forces interested in the progressive development of society.

Thirdly, depending on its social nature, each class puts forward and forms its own type of leader. This also shows a historical pattern. A person can become truly great if he expresses the interests of the advanced class, acts in the direction of historical necessity, and accelerates social progress (Myslivshenko & Sheptylin, 1988: 306-307).

Conclusions

Thus, having made a brief comparative analysis of the philosophical and historical issues within the framework of Soviet and Chinese Marxism in the context of the sources of formation and research methodology, the features of the interpretation of the historical process and its laws, as well as the role of the individual in history, we can draw the following conclusions:

- 1) The key basis for philosophical and historical studies of both Chinese and Soviet Marxism was the work of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. But, besides this, if the works of Grigoriy Plekhanov and Vladimir Lenin became important for Soviet thinkers, then for Chinese thinkers, the legacy of Michel Foucault became important. It is also interesting that within the framework of the Soviet philosophy of history, we can see not only purely ideological works, but also those in which one can see original concepts and ideas. In Chinese Marxism, one can see that philosophical and historical research is focused not only on understanding the past, but to solve today's problems and tasks for the future.
- 2) It is proved that the understanding of the features and patterns of the historical process is similar in Soviet and Chinese Marxism, especially with regard to socio-economic formations, as well as the unity of the cyclicity and linearity of the

historical process. However, their difference lies in the fact that Soviet thinkers, especially those of the post-war period, began to see the basis of the historical process not only in material, economic relations. At the same time, Chinese Marxist philosophers emphasized the importance in philosophical and historical research to consider not only general moments, external, but also private, internal factors of the historical process.

- 3) It is analyzed that both Chinese and Soviet Marxism claimed that within the limits of one specific historical society, people are included, regardless of their will and desire, in a certain system of material relations, which constituted their social existence. Modern Chinese and Soviet thinkers emphasized the interconnectedness of outstanding personalities in history and the socio-political conditions in which they found themselves. Based on this, transformations in history are possible if there are necessary conditions for this and individuals who are able to change this or that situation in society.

Acknowledgments

This research is done in the framework of the project “Chinese Marxism and its socio-cultural implications” (scientific supervisor – Prof. Dr. Sergii Rudenko, reference number 0122U001967).

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