Gramsci’s Presence in China

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As a founding member and one-time leader of the Communist Party of Italy, Antonio Gramsci is widely regarded as a highly original and influential thinker within the Marxist tradition. Surprisingly, for quite a long period in the twentieth century, Gramsci and his theoretical contributions to Communist movements were unknown or overlooked by Marxist scholars in China, the largest existing socialist country in the world. In this paper, I analyze Gramsci’s reception in China, which, generally, can be divided chronologically into three phases: the period before the 1980s, the twenty years from 1980 to the end of the century, and the twenty-first century. To understand the precise progression, it is necessary to keep in mind certain underlying historical complexities.

With the humiliating defeat in the Opium War in 1840 and the expanding treaty ports system that followed, the last Chinese dynasty collapsed in 1911. The whole country was left under the control of several major and lesser warlords, each supported by different Western countries. In the 1920s, the Communist Party of China (CPC) began organizing a growing popular resistance to both foreign domination and exploitation and to the dictatorship of the Nationalist Party (Kuomintang) Government led by Chiang Kai-shek. After the end of the War of Resistance against Japan in 1945 and the end of the Chinese Civil War...
in 1949, the Communist-party led revolution finally triumphed and the party led by Mao Zedong gained control of the Chinese Mainland and established the People’s Republic of China on October 1, 1949.

Eight years after the establishment of New China the first book about Antonio Gramsci was published by the World Knowledge Press in Beijing. In this book entitled *Life of Antonio Gramsci*, Gramsci was depicted as a loyal Marxist combatant who led the Italian Communist movement at the beginning of the twentieth century with great fortitude. This biography was published during the Hundred Flowers Campaign which promoted the introduction of Western thought in order to promote progress in the arts and sciences. Launched under the slogan, “Letting hundreds of flowers blossom and hundreds of schools of thought contend,” the Hundred Flowers Campaign was initially engineered by Mao Zedong as a means of introducing and considering the varying views of intellectuals from different ideologies. By early July 1957, however, the campaign had become too difficult to control and criticism began to shift toward the ruling party. Mao, therefore, chose to suppress the movement and solidify Communist orthodoxy in the public expression.

During the 1960s and 1970s introduction of foreign thought in China was suspended and the reasons were twofold. Firstly, the CPC had experienced a significant ideological break with the Communist Party of the Soviet Union led by Nikita Khrushchev in the early 1960s. Soon after, the CPC broke off all cultural communication with the Soviet Union, eliminating what had previously been a major channel for Chinese intellectuals to learn about Western thought. Secondly, the ideological crackdown following the failure of the Hundred Flowers Campaign, from the end of the 1950s to the early 1960s, was carried out by the Anti-Rightist Movement with a series of campaigns to purge alleged rightists, a term that officially referred to intellectuals favoring capitalism over collectivization. The expansion of the Anti-rightist Movement, which became synonymous with the persecution of intellectuals and dissidents labeled “rightist,” contributed to the end of the cultural pluralism of the government. Furthermore, with the goal of solidifying socialist ideals, the Cultural Revolution from 1966 to 1976 employed more violent techniques and intensified social turmoil, political persecution, and cultural destruction of the People’s Republic of China.

Due to the aforementioned reasons, the widespread diffusion of Gramsci’s thought in China is only a relatively recent phenomenon. After the end of the Cultural Revolution, the central government of China, led
by Deng Xiaoping, permitted contact with the outside world and gradually loosened the strict censorship built up during the 1970s. This new policy encouraged cultural communication between China and Western countries and drastically broadened the prospective of Chinese Marxist scholars.

Until the Chinese translation of Perry Anderson’s Considerations on Western Marxism became available in 1981, Gramsci had remained a virtually unknown figure in China. Anderson’s book had a significant impact in China for the following reasons. Most importantly, Anderson reintroduced Chinese intellectuals to this leading figure of the Western Communist movement who had been forgotten for almost twenty years. According to Anderson, Antonio Gramsci, Georg Lukacs, and Karl Korsch were the first three important theoreticians of the Western Marxism of the post-1920s generation. Although all of these three figures were organizers of revolutionary mass upheavals, Gramsci played a far more significant role than the other two in the mass struggles after World War I. Not only was Gramsci the central organizer of the Turin Factory Councils and the editor of L’Ordine Nuovo from 1919–20, but he was also one of the founding members of the Communist Party of Italy (PCI) in 1921 and gradually rose to become the dominant leader and theorist of the party in 1924. Anderson also notes that the posthumous canonization carried out by the PCI converted the figure of Gramsci into an official ideological icon, eliminating the vitality of Gramsci’s theoretical bequest to Italian Marxism. Based on this statement, the suspicion that descriptions in the Life of Antonio Gramsci published previously in 1957 had been embellished by PCI developed and, in turn, the biography was neglected and rarely mentioned by the Chinese intellectuals in the following years.

Translating Anderson’s book not only revived Chinese interest in Gramsci, but also introduced the term Western Marxism to Chinese intellectuals. From Anderson’s point of view, Western Marxism was born from the failed proletarian revolutions in the developed zones of European capitalism after WWI, and developed within the expanding gulf between socialist theory and working-class practice. Anderson claims:

Gramsci’s solitude and death in Italy, Korsch’s and Lukacs’s isolation and exile in the USA and USSR, marked the end of the phase in which Western Marxism was still at home among the masses. Henceforward, it was to speak its own enciphered
language, at an increasingly remote distance from the class whose fortunes it formally sought to serve or articulate.\(^5\)

Based on his analysis of the development of Communist movements from 1924 to 1968, Anderson concluded that Marxism in the West advanced via an endless detour from any revolutionary political practice. He asserts that “the reduction of space for theoretical work to the constricted alternatives of institutional obedience or individual isolation crippled any possibility of a dynamic relationship between historical materialism and socialist struggle, and precluded any direct development of the main themes of classical Marxism.”\(^6\) In addition, “in the absence of the magnetic pole of a revolutionary class movement, the needle of the whole tradition tended to swing increasingly away towards contemporary bourgeois culture. The original relationship between Marxist theory and proletarian practice was subtly but steadily substituted by a new relationship between Marxist theory and bourgeois theory.”\(^7\) In this sense, the term Western Marxism is used by Anderson to indicate a Marxism that sharply deviates from orthodox Marxism-Leninism based on the strong influence of Western traditional philosophy.

For Chinese readers in the 1980s, Perry Anderson’s claims seemed so clear and true that they hardly needed to be expounded upon. Anderson’s views were also introduced to the Chinese public in the book *Western Marxism*, edited by Chongwen Xu, a distinguished scholar of Marxist theory studies in China.\(^8\) Departing from Anderson’s definition of Western Marxism, Gramsci was labeled by Chongwen Xu as a significant Western Marxist who created the notion of Monism of Praxis, blurring the borders between materialism and idealism. In China, Marxism, Leninism, and materialism were considered the orthodoxy of Communist thought. This explains why Chinese Marxist scholars’ responses towards the first version of *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci* were initially either lukewarm or totally indifferent.\(^9\)

In the early 1990s, CPC leader Deng Xiaoping carried out a series of economic reforms in China to lead the country towards a market economy and to open local market to foreign investment and limited private competition. During this same period, characterized by a declaration of independence by a number of republics of the Soviet Union, a series of events gradually weakened the Soviet government, and eventually led to the dissolution of the Soviet Union.\(^10\) The disintegration of the Soviet Union alarmed the central communist leadership in China,
increasing fear that losing control of the ideology would pose a great threat to the legitimacy of the government. Rationalizing new reforms within the framework of Marxism while consolidating the Communist ideological formation became a significant issue for Chinese Marxist scholars. This new brand of socialist thinking launched by Deng, Socialism with Chinese Characteristics, required Chinese theoreticians to search for a new approach to Marxism in order to displace the previous one that adhered to a mechanical or deterministic understanding of Marxism. Because of this new exploration, Chinese intellectuals started to pay closer attention to Gramsci’s theoretical bequest. The growing awareness of the importance of Gramsci’s thought is evidenced by the translation and publication of Philosophy of Praxis in 1990, Selection of Gramsci’s Writings from 1916 to 1935 in 1992, and Ideology in 1993. Philosophy of Praxis, from Selections from the Prison Notebooks, was translated into Chinese by Chongwen Xu, author of Western Marxism previously mentioned. Philosophy of Praxis contains Gramsci’s article, The Revolution against ‘Capital’ published on December 24, 1917, and sixty other notes discussing the “Philosophy of Praxis.” Used without being clearly defined, the term ‘Philosophy of Praxis’ in Gramsci’s Prison Notebooks has led to a great deal of controversy among contemporary scholars. Christian Riechers, in Antonio Gramsci: Marxismus in Italien, states that the phrase Philosophy of Praxis is specific to the terminology of the Prison Notebooks, while Derek Boothman writes that “for ‘Marxism,’ Gramsci normally uses the term ‘Philosophy of Praxis’.” Chongwen Xu tended to agree with the latter viewpoint that Gramsci used the term as a substitute for Marxism. In the preface to Philosophy of Praxis, and in his later article The Philosophy of Praxis of Gramsci and the Philosophical World View of Marx, Chongwen Xu questioned the validity of Gramsci’s interpretations of Marxism, claiming that there are several defects in Gramsci’s comprehension of Marx’s fundamental concepts.

First of all, Chongwen Xu believed that Gramsci groundlessly stated that “the originator of the philosophy of praxis never called his own conception materialist,” since Karl Marx actually kept using terms like new materialism and practical materialism to refer to his philosophical worldview. For example, Marx clearly explained the materialist base of his methodology in the preface to A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy published in 1859, and later in his letter to Engels on December 12, 1868, Marx suggested that “as long as we actually observe and think, we cannot possibly get away from materialism.”
According to Chongwen Xu, the second defect lies in Gramsci’s ambiguous definitions of materialism and idealism. For instance, in the note *The Philosophy of Praxis and Modern Culture*, Gramsci claims, “Popular religion is crassly materialistic,”\(^\text{18}\) however, in *Questions of Nomenclature and Content* he states that, “materialism is the opposite of spiritualism in the strict sense, i.e. religious spiritualism.”\(^\text{19}\) In addition, from Chongwen Xu’s point of view, Gramsci mistakenly included German idealist philosopher Hegel in the materialistic group, saying, “one can include under the heading materialism the whole of Hegelianism and classical German philosophy in general, as well as sensationalism and the philosophy of the French Enlightenment,”\(^\text{20}\) while wrongly supporting Friedrich Albert Lange’s definition of materialism which has excluded Ludwig Feuerbach, a famous German materialist philosopher.

When faced with challenges to his claims in *Western Marxism*, Chongwen Xu conceded that Gramsci never directly used the term Monism of Praxis to mark his ontological viewpoint. He still insisted, however, that Gramsci made the implication in his works. In ‘Creative’ *Philosophy* Gramsci argues:

> To escape simultaneously from solipsism and from mechanist conceptions implicit in the concept of thought as a receptive and ordering activity, it is necessary to put the question in an ‘historicist’ fashion, and at the same time to put the ‘will’ (which in the last analysis equals practical or political activity) at the base of philosophy.\(^\text{21}\)

Additionally, Chongwen Xu also cites Gramsci’s definition of matter:

> For the philosophy of praxis, ‘matter’ should be understood neither in the meaning that it has acquired in natural science […], nor in any of the meanings that one finds in the various materialistic metaphysics. […] Matter as such therefore is not our subject but how it is socially and historically organized for production, and natural science should be seen correspondingly as essentially an historical category, a human relation.\(^\text{22}\)

For Chongwen Xu, these statements revealed that Monism of Praxis was actually the ontological basis for Gramsci’s thought, which led to
Gramsci’s misinterpretation of the fundamentals of Marxism, which is instead based on materialism.

Strongly influenced by the stereotyped image created by Perry Anderson, Chongwen Xu’s book is a confirmation of Anderson’s previous viewpoints. By looking back at *Philosophy of Praxis*, we easily find that the editor committed several mistakes in his analysis of Gramsci’s thought, including misinterpreting Gramsci’s statements and taking them out of context. Nonetheless, Chongwen Xu’s conclusion still had a great impact among Marxist scholars in China given that most Chinese intellectuals were not familiar with Western trends at the time. When Gramsci’s original texts became widely distributed in China and more profoundly understood, Xu’s assertions became a controversial issue and were questioned by the new generation of Gramscian scholars. While Chongwen Xu continuously endeavored to reveal the ontological defects in Gramsci’s philosophical thoughts, other Chinese scholars in Gramsci studies have turned to researching Gramsci’s ideological theories, and studying his influence on the connection between Marxism and history, society and the culture of a specific country. Wujin Yu’s book *Ideology*, published in 1993, clearly demonstrates the Chinese Marxist theoreticians’ concentration on ideology and superstructure. Thanks to the publication of this book, Gramscian terms such as cultural hegemony, civil society, and organic intellectual entered the common vernacular of Chinese intellectuals who were seeking a theoretical foundation capable of lending support to China’s economic reforms.

In *Ideology*, there is an institutional analysis of Gramsci’s adoption and transformation of the cultural hegemony, which derived from Russian revolutionaries and Marxist theoreticians Georgi Valentinovich Plekhanov and Pavel Borisovich Axelrod. Gramsci attributed the failure of the Communist movement of the working-class in developed Western countries to the cultural hegemony set up by the bourgeois. Gramsci believed that through a series of ideologies woven into the network of cultural institutions (schools, churches, newspapers, political parties and associations) and transmitted by intellectual groups auxiliary to the dominant class, Western bourgeois established a hegemonic system and obtained consent from the popular masses to reduce the amount of coercion needed to repress the masses and prevent any repetition of the October Revolution in Russia from occurring.

Wujin Yu also examined Gramsci’s profound and original investigations of the mechanisms of control for securing this consent, including
the historical formation and division of intellectuals, the social nature of education, and the role of civil society, in cementing blocks between classes. As we know, Gramsci questioned the traditional viewpoint that the economic base determines the operations of an ideological and cultural superstructure. He was instead interested in the relationship between the base and superstructure as reflexive and dynamic. As a result, he isolated civil society as a key intermediary role and proposed that both conservative and revolutionary projects attempted to gain consent through civil society. By recognizing Gramsci’s important contribution in searching for a theoretical explanation of the historical impasse of the Western communist movements, Wujin Yu also highlighted the confusing antilogy in Gramsci’s definition of relationship between civil society and state, which differs in Gramsci’s various notes. For Wujin Yu, Gramsci was a thinker who broached central issues of integral revolution in his writing, and claimed that revolution is not merely related to armed struggles but also based on social consensus. Therefore, Gramsci recognized the efficacy of cultural superstructures as a political problem and emphasized the significant role played by ideology in the class struggle.

Entering the twenty first century, the publication of a more complete Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci in 2000 evoked serious and encouraging responses from Chinese Marxist scholars. At the time, Gramscian studies in China were divided into two major groups. One particular group, comprised of a new generation of Chinese Marxist scholars, attempted to reexamine Gramsci’s comprehension of Marxist fundamentals and his contribution to the Western Communist movement, rectifying the errors in previous studies. In “Gramsci’s Comprehension of Marxism” and “Is Gramsci a ‘Western Marxist’?” the Marxist researcher Shigang Tian from the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences suggested that Chongwen Xu distorted Gramsci’s original meaning by quoting his statements out of context. In the article “Gramsci’s Critique and Transformation of Croce’s Philosophy” and the book The Philosophy of Praxis and Hegemony, Philosophy professor Haifeng Yang from Peking University agreed with Shigang Tian’s view and suggested that Gramsci should not be classified as Western Marxist. Both scholars agreed that Gramsci did not make a clear enough distinction between materialism, vulgar materialism and mechanical materialism, which led to confusion in his discussion about Marxism. They believed, however, that Gramsci clearly comprehended Marx’s emphasis on the subjective human initiative’s capacity to change
the world. Therefore, Gramsci intended to distinguish Marxism from both traditional materialism and idealism, not in order to establish a new ontology, but because he realized that Marxism was undergoing a double revision: on the one hand, some of its elements had been absorbed and incorporated by a number of idealist currents (like Benedetto Croce, Giovanni Gentile and so forth), and on the other hand, the so-called orthodox Marxists believed themselves capable of “identifying this philosophy fundamentally with traditional materialism.”

From Shigang Tian and Haifeng Yang’s point of view, Chongwen Xu’s conclusion of Gramsci’s attempt to set up his own monism of praxis was an assumption without solid evidence. Instead, by insisting on fighting against dogmatism and economic determinism, Gramsci undoubtedly made a significant contribution to the development of modern Marxist thought.

A similar reevaluation of Gramsci can also be found in *Twentieth-Century Neo-Marxism* and *Critique of Culture in the Twentieth Century: A Deep Interpretation of Western Marxism* published by the Central Compilation & Translation Bureau Press, an official press of China specializing in translating and publishing the latest authoritative works on politics, economics, philosophy, and culture. Obviously, the attitude of mainstream Chinese intellectuals toward Gramsci has become more positive than in the preceding years.

Another group of Gramscian scholars in China is trying to apply Gramsci’s theories to newly existing problems in the global community, assuming that cultural conflict is supplanting ideological conflicts as the dominant form of international conflicts. In his statement explaining his refusal of the Nobel Prize in 1964, French existentialist and Marxist philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre predicted the predominant role of cultural conflicts between the East and West in the modern world. A public awareness of the growing significance of such conflicts was later strengthened by Samuel Phillips Huntington, an American political scientist, who believed that the dominate source of conflict after the Cold War would be a clash of cultures instead of ideological or economic conflicts. The foresight of these two famous figures has been somewhat verified by growing conflicts in the twenty first century: the rapid development of globalization throughout the world, coupled with the entry of foreign multinationals in China’s public life, and the growing control of media over the consciousness of China’s masses called for a serious and profound reconsideration of the cultural policy. This complex historical situation necessitated a shift away from disputes over philosophical issues to the exploration of feasible
solutions for current social and cultural challenges. Therefore, in his speech at the 16th Congress of the Communist Party of China held in November 2002, Chairman Jiang Zemin emphasized the importance of creating cultural hegemony controlled by the proletariat by saying “the Party must always represent the requirements of the development of China’s advanced productive forces, the orientation of the development of China’s advanced culture, and the fundamental interests of the overwhelming majority of the people in China.”

Today, Gramsci’s concepts of intellectual and cultural hegemony are becoming increasingly relevant. As a result, the discourse of Chairman Jiang Zemin has been followed by numerous articles published in different journals discussing the connection between Gramsci’s thoughts and the contemporary cultural formation in China. There is little doubt that the major interests Gramsci pursued in his Prison Notebooks are the notions of intellectual, political and cultural hegemony, of civil and political society, and of coercion and consent. Linked with the study of the intellectual as a sociological category, and with reflections on the intellectual as a cultural producer, these thoughts represent some of Gramsci’s major theoretical contributions.

What interests Chinese scholars currently is whether the sphere Gramsci ascribed to intellectual activities and the way he understood cultural hegemony sociologically are still relevant to the intellectual functions and cultural formation in our era. Today, social and cultural organizations of China are increasingly influenced by processes of informatization, which radically affect the production and dissemination of knowledge. Chinese theoreticians believe that the cultural hegemony proposed by Gramsci still remains useful for China, and the production of socialist culture would not succeed unless it had its own intellectuals working on its behalf. They especially emphasize the ideologically educative functions of intellectuals and cultural organizations in identifying already existing cultural, moral, philosophical, and artistic trends of the masses, and in mobilizing the latent power of less economically advantaged groups.

In conclusion, Gramsci’s works have received a positive response from scholars of the twenty-first century. Currently, studies on Gramsci tend to fall into one of two camps. The first one focuses on correcting the misinterpretations of prior studies and reevaluating Gramsci’s theoretical and historical contributions. The second trend is to reconsider Gramsci’s cultural hegemony concept with the hope of finding feasible solutions to the contemporary challenges of cultural conflict sprawling in the information
The evolution of Gramsci’s acceptance in China demonstrates the changing approaches to censorship, and the promotion of the humanities in the country after 1949. After the central government loosened the political suppression and restriction of intellectuals, Chinese theoreticians have become better informed and more capable of evaluating foreign thought with a broader prospective. Such changes are in turn enhancing the development of the study of arts and sciences in China.

Notes


2. The treaty ports was the name given to the port cities in China that were opened to foreign trade by the unequal treaties. The first treaty ports in China were British and were established at the conclusion of the First Opium War by the Treaty of Nanking in 1842. The treaty port system in China lasted one hundred years. Frances Wood, *No dogs and not many Chinese: treaty port life in China 1843-1943* (London: John Murry, 1998).


6. Ibid., 45.

7. Ibid., 55.


19. Ibid., 454.

20. Ibid.

21. Ibid., 345.

22. Ibid., 465–466.


