

## MARXIST-TAOIST SYNCRETISM: ON THE REASONS FOR THE IDEOLOGICAL SUCCESS OF MARXISM IN CHINA AND ITS FUTURE AS A PARADIGM FOR INNOVATIVE THINKING

<...> For that some should rule, and others be ruled, is a thing not only necessary but expedient <...> and there are many kinds of both rulers and subjects. And that rule is the better which is exercised over better subjects, for example, to rule over men is better than to rule over wild beasts. For wherever there is a governor and a governed, there certainly is some work produced, and the work is better which is executed by better workmen. Aristotle, "On Politics"

*Chu Shenming, a Chinese scholar, liked to translate articles published in foreign philosophical journals. He also researched the addresses of the famous foreign philosophers and wrote letters to them, telling them that he liked to read their books. Some of these philosophers replied to him, and some even sent him their books. With some thirty or forty of such replies, Chu Shenming scared innumerable people 靠着三四十份这类回信, 吓到了无数的人. From then on, Chu bitterly hated Intuitivism and studied mathematical logic.*

**Qian Zhongshu "Fortress Beseiged"**

钱钟书《围城》

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### Abstract

Western mind perceives time in a linear way. We imagine that life is a vector line with one direction called progress and the opposite direction called regress. It has been argued that social and scientific progress was boosted by the invention of time-count from a point in the past, such as the founding of the city of Rome or the creation of the world or the birth of Jesus Christ, to a goal in the future. As individuals, we are so used to setting progress goals in our lifeline that we tend to get disappointed if we fail to achieve our plans, or confused and depressed if our plans and values change at all. However, whether linear perception of time is a key to progress is by no means clear: the Chinese arguably discovered philosophically in the «Book of Changes» what would be expressed in contemporary mathematics in terms of Calculus and Theory of Relativity.

**Key words:** ancient Chinese philosophy, scientific progress, innovation, political environment

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### Introduction

For modern emerging economies, such as Russia or China, scientific innovation is a key priority. The opinions of scientists converge that the success of their development will depend on

their ability to produce innovative ideas but diverges in the analysis of the factors of the cultural environment necessary for innovation.

Therefore, the key question I would like to answer is: what are the factors

that create the environment for scientific knowledge acquisition or, on the contrary, lead to dogmatism and hinder intellectual development? To answer this question, it is interesting to investigate how the cultures influenced by various Eastern and Western religions and ideologies differently approach the methods of knowledge acquisition.

The main thesis of this article is that to be able to overcome the modernization dilemma expressed in terms of “learning from the West” versus “loyalty to traditional culture” (the same dilemma is also relevant for Russia, as well as many other developing countries), and to advance indigenous innovative thinking, China should strive for scientific materialism that encourages intellectual curiosity while at the same time preserving space for spiritual search.

According to my observations, hereby open to questions, it is the traditional Chinese religion of Taoism that may help address the contradiction between materialism and idealism that agitated Western philosophical and political spectrum for several thousand years, including but not limited to the epic Western Cold War fight against Marxism.

### **1. “Verifiability” as the difference between scientific logic and metaphysics**

It turns out that, as the saying goes “everything new is well-forgotten old”, that the discussion on why the natural sciences were unable to develop in China, existed throughout the late Qing dynasty and the Min republic.

For example, the American sinologist and expert on the Imperial examination system Benjamin A. Elman, based on his readings of the examination archives, points out that, after encountering the Western scholars, the Qing dynasty mandarins did attempt to incorporate “aspects of Western astronomy and mathematics into their scholarship”, despite the traditional system of Chinese education

discouragement of empirical search of “verifiable knowledge” at the expense of moral cultivation, which is usually deemed to be a reason to China (as well as Korea, Vietnam’s) failure to develop appropriate training in science. Along the same lines, the Tsinghua University professor Bao Ou, in her dissertation published by the Russian Academy of Sciences, refers to the “discussion on the science and metaphysics” (科学与玄学论战) in China in the 1920s.

So, what is, if put very simply, the difference between verifiable and non-verifiable knowledge?

In social, cultural, political, literary sciences verifiability vis-à-vis the natural world is not necessarily required. For example, let us suppose that we agree, among the members of our group, to refer to one of our friends, whose true name is Irina, as “Diogenes”, or “荀子”, or by any other nickname. Then as long as we notify the members of our group of this convention, and provided everyone sticks to it, the members of the group will still be able to know whom we are referring to, whereas our conversations will remain obscure to those whom we did not notify, or outsiders. Metaphysical speculation, or, for those who have a familiarity with the recently boosted by the developments in computer sciences field of cryptography, the so-called “linguistic cryptography”, is based on this principle.

In the natural sciences, of which architecture probably was the earliest, but also navigation, and eventually physics, chemistry, and some parts of mathematics, verifiability vis-à-vis the natural world is a must. For example, if the car travels at a speed of 100 km / h, then it is either true or false.

### **2. Admitting gaps in knowledge and focusing on the methods of discovery**

Even modern science, let alone the ancient one, is far from being able to explain all the mysteries that puzzle human beings. Most significantly, science is unable to answer to the question that is probably

the most puzzling of all: the question of life and death.

People, however, possess imagination. It includes art, dreams, illusions, perhaps even, according to some philosophers, mental illness (see, for example, Michel Foucault, "Madness and Civilization", where he views madness as a way that humans use to express their socially unacceptable or unconventional ideas and thoughts), as well as, of course, various rites and religious ceremonies.

The theory of knowledge is at the junction of these three worlds: the world of social sciences, the world of natural sciences, and the world of imagination. Moreover, it has always been so through history, and it stands counter to Qian Zhongshu's fictional character Chu Shenming's acquired aversion to Intuitivism, that many discoveries were preceded by intuition and only later, sometimes much later, verified scientifically. For example, it took the mathematicians three centuries to find proofs for the famous Fermat Theorem. Also, Dmitry Mendeleev, the Russian chemist who is credited in Russia and China, though not in the West, for the discovery of the Table of Chemical Elements, was known for claiming that the idea occurred to him "in a dream".

The textbooks on philosophy of science, or "dialectics of nature", often boil down this discipline to a descriptive or comparative description of the correct versus erroneous scientific discoveries: for example, such textbooks would state that ancient people believed that the Earth was flat, or that Sun was turning around the Earth, but then someone like Nicholas Copernicus discovered that in fact, it was the other way around, and so on and so forth.

The subject of the philosophy of science, in fact, is the method of intellectual discovery, denoted by the general term "epistemology". It will have great consequences if we accept that the method, and not the truth or the falseness of the conclusions, should be at the core of our inquiry into nature. First, it will prompt us

to accept that mistakes, sometimes, are inevitable. Second, it will save us from the fallacy of elevating some ancient texts, including but not limited to the Bible, to the level of absolute truth.

On the contrary, it will seem obvious to anyone who focuses on the method rather than on the wording, that in different historical epochs, people used different methods to learn about themselves and the world around them. For example, ancient people used mythology for this purpose, whereas we modern people, may use, for example, satellite photography and supercomputer calculations.

We will then be able to read the ancient, including religious texts, with a refreshed anthropological rather than dogmatic attitude. For example, what might the ancient Greeks designate by the symbols of "gods" and "heroes"? The gods, it seems, meant different abstract concepts, such as wisdom, love, war, etc. Heroes, most likely, designated mythologized images of historical figures.

We will also be amazed at the abundance of debates and controversies in ancient scholarship. Thus, counter-intuitively to our perception of the early centuries of Christianity that corresponded to the centralization of Mediterranean lands by the Roman empire, philosopher Sextus Empiricus clearly articulated, in 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD, the origins of gods vis-à-vis the political authority: "It is told", goes his Treatise "Against Physicists", "that Hercules, the son of Zeus and Alcmene, was in reality called Alkeus, but he took up the name Hercules, whom the people of that time revered as a deity. It is also said that in Thebes they found a private statue of Hercules with the inscription "To Alkeus, son of Amphitryon, our grateful offering "敬提"to Hercules".

### **3. Edges of knowledge: limited or unlimited?**

The philosophy of science does not give a clearly-cut answer to the question

of why a breakthrough in physical sciences occurred within the Western civilization.

What we can deduce through a reading of texts is that the Western process of intellectual development was not a no-failure linear progression either. After Aristotle and Sextus's writings on Logic and Physics, the Christian thought developed for at least a thousand of years along the lines of metaphysics (such as in the case of Thomas Aquinas) and of theology.

We can also notice that other civilizations were sometimes close to scientific discoveries in certain areas but did not or could not pursue them for some reasons. The Arabs, for example, are believed to have made important advances in abstract mathematics. The Micronesian aborigines, through their shamanic rituals encouraged the development of the illusory world, which would eventually exercise an influence on modern Western psychology but were unable to relate their tradition to science.

Even if it can be argued that the breakthrough of the Western world in the field of physics was largely an accident, we can make a few suggestions on what could prompt it. First, assuming that, as an old Russian song goes, "those who keep searching are likelier to find than those who give up", the Western scientific breakthrough was possibly stimulated by those people who struggled for their belief in the "attainability of knowledge", sooner or later and including most difficult questions, by the humans. For example, during Christian theological centuries, and even, arguably, nowadays, the ultimate point of knowledge in Western philosophy is set at finding the evidence of the existence of God.

Comparatively, the mainstream Eastern philosophy seems to take a more resigned attitude and suggested to accept the incompleteness of human knowledge of the world philosophically. One symbol of it is the Stone Gardens in Japan. No matter from which point we look, we can see maximum four out of five stones.

The belief in the possibility of scientific knowledge is known as "agnostic" philosophy, whereas the absence of such belief is known as "scepticism".

The difference between these two approaches is well described by Bertrand Russell: "It should be observed that Scepticism as a philosophy is not just a doubt, but what may be called a dogmatic doubt. The man of science says, "I think it's so-and-so, but I am not sure". The man of intellectual curiosity says, "I do not know how it is, but I hope to find out". The philosophical Sceptic says, "Nobody knows, and nobody ever can know". While sceptics, of course, deny that they assert the impossibility of knowledge dogmatically, it is ***this element of dogmatism*** (sic! italics are mine — LS) that makes the system vulnerable" (Source: Bertrand Russel, "History of Western Philosophy").

#### 4. Method of inquiry: idealism or materialism?

It is very important to define the concepts of materialism and idealism. For example, some people confuse the notion of idealism in the sense of "perfectionism" as an antonym to the concept of "pragmatism", with the term "idealism" as it is known in the philosophical theory of knowledge. In philosophy, idealism means upholding belief in the existence of an intangible spiritual principle in the world and / or human, such as the existence of God, soul etc., whereas materialism assumes the absence of such a belief.

Specifically, in the theory of knowledge the dispute between idealists and materialists turns around (围绕) the question whether human thought, the most mysterious of the occurrences of the human personality, is of spiritual or material nature.

Going back to the differences between Western and Eastern philosophy, it seems that they once diverged in their attitude to "animism". Thus, the ancient Greeks much like the Japanese shintoists and, ar-

guably, the Chinese Taoists, accepted the possibility of spiritual root in both natural objects and human beings. The Buddhists, it seems, in their theory of reincarnation, still extend the spiritual root, besides human beings, at least to animals if not plants and non-living creatures.

On the contrary, at some point around the time shortly preceding the triumph of Christianity, Western philosophers convened that "animism" for anything in nature besides humans was absurd. Spiritual root, if existent, was therefore limited to humans and, possibly, an abstract notion of "Cosmos", belonging to which potentially promised immortality to humans, but only to them.

Thus, Aristotle writes in his treatise "On the Soul": "Certain thinkers say that soul is intermingled in the whole universe, and it is perhaps for that reason that Thales came to the opinion that all things are full of gods. The opinion that ***the elements <such as air or fire> have soul in them*** (sic!) <...> presents some difficulties".

Even more resolutely, Sextus Empiricus, in the above-mentioned treatise "Against Physicists", 40–41, recalls that "then again, those who say that ancient humans supposed that all the things that benefit life are gods (like the sun and moon, rivers and pools and so on), in addition to promoting an implausible opinion are also finding the ancients guilty of the height of silliness. <...> Perhaps some things are within reason, like considering the earth as a god — not the stuff that is cut into furrows and dug up, but ***the power that extends through it*** (sic! italics are mine — LS). But to think that pools and rivers and whatever else is of a nature to benefit us are gods is nothing short of extreme craziness. For in that case we would have to think of human beings, especially philosophers, as gods (for they benefit

our life), and most of the non-rational animals (for they work alongside us), and household utensils and everything more trivial still, if any. But this is completely laughable".

Although the origins of human thought and consciousness remain a mystery to date, it seems that modern cutting edge social sciences research in the areas such as cognitive sciences, psychology, quantum physics, is in fact a certain reversal of the conviction that animism should necessarily be an absurdity, and that human beings should be different from the surrounding universe as opposed to their being a physical part of it. Just imagine that, when modern cognitive psychology, through an amalgam of social and natural sciences and through a combination of idealist and materialist approaches, attempts to study human brain at quantum level, it might eventually lead to a scientific materialist revolution in religion and theology, similarly to the way in which the development of anatomy and surgery once led to the revolution in Western medicine?!

Indeed, if one-day science, such as quantum physics, can bring material evidence of the existence of a person's soul or of its absence, will it mean no less than the resolution of the main dilemma that Western philosophy struggled with for centuries, as well as of the realization of Bertrand Russel's mid-20<sup>th</sup> century prophecy for the handshake between Western and Eastern modes of thought?

**Model of optimal conditions for innovative thinking:**

- 1 Admit gaps in knowledge;**
  - 2 focus on verification methodology;**
  - 3 accept that knowledge is unlimited**
- &**
- 4 that there is not necessarily only one truth**