

# Retrospection and Reference: The Early Spread of Marxism in Chinese Universities in the Early 20th Century

-- Taking the Teacher Group as an Example

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**Abstract.** At the beginning of the 20th century, universities were an important battlefield for the dissemination of early Marxism, and teachers, as members of intellectuals, played an important role in the early dissemination of Marxism in China. This article, from the perspective of the teacher community, traces and analyzes the background, group characteristics, channels, content, and effects of the early dissemination of Marxism by the teacher community. Taking history as a lesson, it explores the benefits of expanding dissemination channels and methods in combination with the characteristics of the times, strengthening the construction of ideological and political theory courses in universities, and promoting the popularization of Marxism.

**Keywords:** Teacher Group; Marxism; Early Dissemination; Reference Value.

## 1. Introduction

Since the birth of Marxism, its enormous theoretical and practical value has been widely disseminated and recognized on a global scale. As a scientific theory, Marxism profoundly influences the fate of the Chinese nation and the development of Chinese society. Looking back at Chinese universities at the beginning of the 20th century, early Marxism was being introduced to China, and universities were an important battlefield for the dissemination of Marxism. Reviewing and drawing on the role played by the teacher community in the early dissemination of Marxism has important reference value for expanding dissemination channels and methods in combination with the characteristics of the times, strengthening the construction of ideological and political theory courses in universities, and promoting the popularization of Marxism.

## 2. The Background of the Early Dissemination of Marxism by Chinese Teacher Groups in the Early 20th Century

The early dissemination of Marxism in Chinese universities in the early 20th century was closely related to domestic and international backgrounds. At the beginning of the 20th century, the international community experienced turbulent undercurrents and the situation was unstable, creating a boundary between the new and old worlds. In China, the fall of the Qing Dynasty marked the end of the feudal monarchy that had ruled for thousands of years. In this historical context, the teacher community has become an important force in spreading Marxism due to its unique characteristics.

### 2.1. International background

#### 2.1.1. The outbreak of World War I

With the new round of expansion of European imperialism worldwide, the economic and political development of imperialist countries was unbalanced, leading to significant changes in their power balance. As a result, the First World War broke out in order to redivide colonies and compete for world hegemony. The First World War exposed the inherent contradictions of capitalism, making Chinese advanced intellectuals have a clearer understanding of capitalism. World War I brought humanity into modern times, but at the cost of the flesh and blood of millions of young people and

the devastated European continent. This enabled Chinese people to recognize the drawbacks of capitalism and the hypocrisy of capitalist civilization. The many problems caused by this war have to some extent awakened intellectuals who advocated Western capitalist civilization and dispelled their fantasies about Western civilization. It made intellectuals doubt Western civilization, re-evaluate and reflect on Western civilization, and think about what kind of theories and paths are suitable for China.

### **2.1.2. The outbreak of the October Revolution in Russia**

In 1917, the October Revolution broke out in Russia, establishing the first socialist country in human history, transforming scientific socialism from theory to practice, and opening up a victorious path for proletarian revolution, colonial and semi-colonial national liberation movements in various countries around the world. At the same time, the national conditions of Russia before the October Revolution were very similar to those of China, both of which were severe feudal oppression and economically and culturally backward. In this situation, Russia erupted into a revolution of great significance and influence, inspiring the Chinese people and enhancing their confidence in opposing imperialist forces. “The sound of the October Revolution brought us Marxism Leninism”, which propelled advanced Chinese intellectuals from patriotic democracy to socialism and found a suitable path to save the country.

## **2.2. Domestic Background**

### **2.2.1. The Emergence of the New Culture Movement**

The New Culture Movement vigorously promoted democracy and science, criticized traditional ethics and morals represented by Confucianism, criticized authoritarian systems and culture, opposed foreign aggression and colonialism, and advocated for the independent liberation of the nation. This movement shook the dominant position of feudal thought, further liberated people's thoughts bound by feudalism, inspired people to free themselves from the ignorance caused by feudal autocracy, and triggered a trend of ideological liberation. At the same time, the New Culture Movement advocated the use of vernacular Chinese. Hu Shi published an article titled “Reflections on Literary Improvement” in “New Youth”, advocating the use of vernacular Chinese instead of classical Chinese, and proposing the idea of writing articles “not to moan without illness” and “to have something to say”. The New Culture Movement baptized the people with democracy and scientific thinking, promoted their ideological liberation, and created conditions for the introduction of Marxism into China.

### **2.2.2. Outbreak of the May Fourth Movement**

After the end of World War I, the Paris Peace Conference was held, and China, as a victorious country, requested to return the relevant rights and interests of the Shandong Peninsula, which was rejected by Western powers and instead handed over to Japan. The failure of this diplomatic mission sparked strong dissatisfaction and protests among the domestic people, resulting in great anger and disappointment towards capitalism, and the outbreak of the May Fourth Movement against imperialism and feudalism. Students went on strike, merchants went on strike, workers went on strike, and the May Fourth Movement brought the working class onto the historical stage, promoting the dissemination of Marxism in China and the organization of advanced intellectuals. Since then, the evolution of “Western learning to the east” has accelerated, and Marxism has become popular and mainstream in the Chinese intellectual community.

## **2.3. Analysis of the Characteristics of the Teacher Group**

### **2.3.1. Consistent Goals and Missions: Saving the Nation and Striving for Survival**

At the beginning of the 20th century, the teacher community faced a situation of national crisis, political chaos, and cultural backwardness. Their identity carried a natural strong sense of concern and social responsibility, which led them to actively participate in social activities to save the country. However, they did not achieve significant results and were unable to save the country from crisis,

which was very worrying about the fate of the country and the nation. Chen Duxiu said, “Under the republican system, we suffer greatly from the pain of authoritarian politics.” At the same time, emptiness and melancholy prevailed among the teachers, leaving them at a loss between old and new, unsure of how to make a choice. They were under mental pressure in the new environment, but they tried their best to overcome difficulties, as Fan Zhongyan said, “Don't forget the worries of the world with one heart's sorrow.” The teachers were either loyal to their inner ideals and beliefs, or pursued social improvement and progress, or hesitated between the old and the new. Regardless, they all converged on a common goal and mission - to save the nation and ensure its survival.

### **2.3.2. Similar Educational Background: Shared Experiences of Studying Abroad**

At the beginning of the 20th century, Chinese international students faced significant development opportunities. Given the geographical advantages and similar cultural backgrounds, studying in Japan has become a mainstream choice. Although the number of international students accounted for a small proportion of the entire student population, they played a crucial role in China's political, social, and cultural development process. Many of them brought back the ideas and concepts of Marxism to China, providing valuable theoretical support for China's revolution and construction.

Among them, many international students chose to work as teachers after returning home. For example, Li Dazhao studied political science at Waseda University in Tokyo and became a professor at Peking University after returning to China. Chen Baoyin graduated from the Imperial University of Tokyo in 1918 and was appointed as a professor at Peking University upon returning to China. During his stay in Japan, Li Hanjun was deeply influenced by Japanese socialists such as Kawakami Hajime and Sakai Toshihiko. After returning to China, he served as a sociology teacher at Wuhan Zhonghua University in 1922, and also as a professor at the Department of Historical Sociology at National Wuchang Higher Normal University. In the spring of 1926, he taught “Historical Materialism” at Shanghai University. During his study abroad in Japan, Li Da was exposed to Marxist theory. After returning to China, he taught at Hunan Public School of Law and Politics (now Hunan University Law School) and Hunan University Law School. From 1927 to 1941, he taught at various places including Wuchang Sun Yat sen University and Shanghai University of Law and Politics.

Therefore, most of these Chinese teachers who spread Marxism in the early 20th century had an educational background in studying abroad. Compared to the vast majority of the Chinese people, they were the earlier group to come into contact with Marxism. Mao Zedong also said, “At that time, except for a very small number of international students, we in China had no idea what imperialism or Marxism there was in the world. When we entered school, we only knew a few bourgeois heroes, such as Washington and Napoleon.”

## **3. An Overview of the Early Dissemination of Marxism by Chinese Teacher Groups in the Early 20th Century**

At the beginning of the 20th century, the group of teachers had diverse identities and were not limited to just teaching and lecturing. Their role cognition was not only clear and complete, but also had high expectations for their own roles. In addition to enhancing the theoretical recognition of Marxism among young students, they also used young students as intermediaries to actively spread it to the wider public and penetrate into the peasants and working class. Therefore, when the teacher group propagated Marxism in the early stage, with the help of their own identity, they adopted various channels, and the main content of their propagation was historical materialism, which had a widespread impact.

### **3.1. The Channels of Early Dissemination by the Teacher Community**

#### **3.1.1. Offering Courses**

The teacher group has expanded the influence of Marxism and enhanced students' understanding of Marxism by offering Marxist courses.

Peking University, as the earliest institution in China to establish the high ground of Marxist thought, has witnessed the groundbreaking contributions of Mr. Li Dazhao, who led the trend and spread Marxist ideas for the first time on this ancient land. Since 1920, Li Dazhao has successively offered five courses in the Department of History and Political Science at Peking University, including "Historical Materialism", "History of Historical Thought", "Modern Politics", "International Movement of Workers and the Future of Socialism", and "Socialism and Social Movement". He has also written monographs and lecture notes such as "Historical Materialism" and "History of Historical Thought", marking the beginning of teaching Marxist theory courses in Chinese universities. In the autumn of 1923, Cai Hesen served as a lecturer at Shanghai University, majoring in "The History of Social Evolution". He talked about social development and Marxist theory in a vivid and profound way, attracting a large number of young people to come and listen to the school. Li Hanjun taught at Wuhan University for nearly 6 years, using the podium as a platform to teach Marxism to young students. He was the first professor in the history of higher education in China to include the concept of historical materialism as a subject of university teaching. During his tenure at Wuchang Higher Normal College, Li Hanjun taught at least one open class per week to spread Marxism to students and the general public.

#### **3.1.2. Text Publication**

The teacher community published articles, established publications, and promoted the widespread dissemination of Marxism through cultural dissemination publications.

On September 15, 1915, Chen Duxiu founded the "Youth Magazine" in Shanghai and published an article titled "Admonitions to Youth" in the inaugural issue, which was later renamed "New Youth". After the October Revolution, it became a battlefield for promoting Marxism-Leninism and anti-imperialist and anti-feudal ideology. On December 22, 1918, Li Dazhao and Chen Duxiu founded the "Weekly Review". The "Weekly Review", with the aim of advocating justice and opposing power, and introducing new ideas and promoting new culture, was an important publication in the May Fourth period, second only to the "New Youth". In May 1919, Li Dazhao published "My Marxist View" in "New Youth", which comprehensively and systematically introduced Marxist theory, marking the entry of Marxism into a relatively systematic stage of dissemination in China. Li Dazhao published articles such as "Re-discussing Issues and Ideologies", refuting anti-Marxist ideas and demonstrating the profound truth that Marxism meets the needs of China. Li Hanjun frequently published translations and articles on Marxism in the "New Youth", "Weekly Review", and "Fiction Monthly". His article "The Necessity of Studying Marxist Theory and Our Current Methods of Starting" is a comprehensive introduction to the scientific socialist system.

#### **3.1.3. Translated Works**

The majority of teachers have had experience studying abroad, translating classic Marxist works and using books as a medium of dissemination, playing an important role in the early dissemination.

For example, the famous educator Chen Wangdao was the first Chinese translator to fully translate The Communist Manifesto. Under the influence of The Communist Manifesto, many revolutionary youths gradually established a firm belief in Marxism and grew into Marxists. After Chen Baoyin, a student studying in Japan who was educated by the famous Marxist economist Kawakami Hajime, returned to China for the second time, in March 1930, the first Chinese translation of Das Kapital, Volume 1, Division 1, was published and distributed by Shanghai Kunlun Bookstore. This was the first Chinese translation of Das Kapital.

### **3.1.4. Giving a Speech**

Teachers, who possess a high level of prestige, are endowed with stronger appeal and infectiousness. Through speeches, teachers inspired students to delve deeper into the masses of workers and peasants to widely spread Marxism.

In March 1919, inspired and influenced by Li Dazhao, students from Peking University such as Deng Zhongxia and Liao Shucang initiated the establishment of the “Peking University Civilian Education Lecture Group”. According to different locations and times, it was divided into urban speeches, rural speeches, itinerant fixed-point speeches, regular speeches, and other forms. It went deep into areas such as Haidian, Lugou Bridge, Fengtai, Changxindian, and Tongxian to give speeches on revolutionary principles to workers and peasants. In July 1919, Li Dazhao, Wang Guangqi, and others initiated the organization of the “the Young China Association”, with the aim of “serving society with the spirit of science and creating Youth China”, actively conducting lectures and academic discussions and other activities.

### **3.1.5. Establishment of Research Groups**

The teacher group established progressive research groups, gathered knowledgeable individuals, collected Marxist related materials, promoted ideological exchange and collision, and enlightened the people.

In March 1920, Li Dazhao united a group of intellectuals with preliminary communist ideas at Peking University and secretly established the Peking University Marxist Theory Research Association, with the aim of “studying writings on Marxism”. It set up a small library called “Kang Mu Yi Zhai”, also known as the Communist Room. It collected and translated various materials and books related to Marxism, and organized members to study Marxism. This was a preparation for the establishment of the Communist Party organization in terms of ideology and cadres. In May 1920, Chen Duxiu in the south organized and established the Marxist Research Association in Shanghai, translating and disseminating Marxism. It was the efforts of “Chen in the south and Li in the north” that made Marxism spread on the road of popularization, combined with the worker movement, and prepared the conditions for the establishment of the Communist Party of China.

## **3.2. The Content of Early Dissemination by the Teacher Community**

The early dissemination of Marxism in China is most well-known for its focus on historical materialism, which is also the main content of the early dissemination of Marxism by the Chinese teacher groups. In 1923, Li Hanjun offered a course on historical materialism at Wuchang Higher Normal University, and Ma Lin, the representative of the Communist International to China, praised him as the “most theoretically cultured comrade” of the Communist Party of China. Li Dazhao's first lecture at Shanghai University was “Evolution and Progress”, and the emphasis on “Marx's Economic Historical View” in his speech referred to the historical materialism based on material production. Chen Duxiu believed that the reason why Marx's socialism is scientific rather than utopian is precisely because he was able to use the perspective of historical materialism to explain that the capitalist production methods and social system were established, developed, and collapsed, all of which are natural results of economic development and can objectively explain the inevitable cause and effect. In 1926, Li Hanjun taught historical materialism at Shanghai University. In addition, outstanding educator Li Da wrote “Modern Sociology” and published it in 1926, systematically elaborating on historical materialism and scientific socialism.

## **3.3. The Effect of Early Dissemination by the Teacher Community**

Teachers not only spread Marxism to young students, but also widely spread Marxism to various social classes, paying special attention to interaction with the peasants and working class. And the same time, they also had an impact on non-Marxists. The prominent representative among them is Li Dazhao, who said, “If we want to fundamentally input modern new civilization into society, we must unite the intellectual class and the working class.” He called for the transformation of the “pen and

ink movement on paper” into the “mass movement on the street market,” which greatly promoted the popularization of Marxism and the connection between the teachers and the broad masses of workers and peasants.

### **3.3.1. Impact on Students**

Young students have transformed their original concepts, resisted the interference of other ideological trends, established a firm belief in scientific socialism, and further promoted the dissemination of Marxism with their own strength by receiving lectures and guidance from teachers. For example, the progressive students from Shaanxi who studied at Peking University founded the fortnightly “Co-progress”, introducing Marxism and the influence of the October Revolution in Russia to Shaanxi people in accordance with the minimum program of the Communist Party of China, introducing newspapers and magazines such as “New Youth”, promoting the understanding and propositions of the Communist Party of China on the current situation, and arousing the struggle consciousness of the people. The teacher community encouraged young students to step out of the campus and immerse themselves in the workers and peasants. For example, Shanghai University “does not advocate college-style learning methods, but guides students to read active books, study and master Marxist revolutionary theory seriously, and exercise in the practice of struggle.” In addition, young students also utilized the May Day commemoration activities to expose the cruel reality of capitalists exploiting the surplus value of workers and inspire the class consciousness of workers.

### **3.3.2. Impact on Workers and Peasants**

While promoting Marxism to young students, the teacher community also valued the role of the workers and peasants, insisting on conducting extensive propaganda and education to the working masses, and calling on young people to go deep into farmers and workers to carry out revolution and dissemination. Li Dazhao pointed out that “we long for the intellectual class to be the pioneer of the people, and the people to be the backing of the intellectual class.” In 1923, Chen Duxiu pointed out that “workers are powerful classes in society.” Deng Zhongxia and others responded to Li Dazhao's call and established the “Civilian Education Lecture Group” in March 1919, inspiring revolutionary consciousness against imperialism and feudalism towards the masses. Their first choice of inspiration at that time was the rickshaw puller, and then they positioned their goal as industrial workers. Starting from April 1920, members of the lecture group went to factories and rural areas. They took off their student uniforms, put on coarse cloth clothes, ate, lived, and worked together with the workers, formed a deep friendship with them, expanded the scope of Marxist dissemination, and promoted the rapid spread of Marxism in Chinese society in a subtle way. In addition, the teacher community also utilized popular language to disseminate Marxism. As Engels once pointed out in his letter to Bebel, “The correct strategy in propaganda is not to often win over individual characters and groups of members from opponents, but to influence the masses who have not yet been involved in the movement.” For example, Chen Tanqiu likes to write popular new poetry. The style is the man, and his new poetry is also filled with a lively and cheerful atmosphere. The May Day Memorial Song, written in 1924 at Anyuan Coal Mine, was widely sung among local miners and elementary school students, expanding the influence of Marxism. Shanghai University teachers and students went to civilian schools such as Yangshupu and Minzhi to carry out worker education, exposing the dark rule of imperialism and domestic reactionary warlords to workers through methods such as “drinking poetry” and “storytelling”, and promoting revolutionary ideas.

### **3.3.3. Impact on Non-Marxists**

At the beginning of the 20th century, the dissemination of Marxism by the teacher community had a complex and far-reaching impact on non-Marxists, with different groups and individuals holding different views and attitudes towards Marxism. These different views and attitudes to some extent shaped the ideological and cultural landscape of China at that time. Like the liberal Hu Shi, he was not a Marxist, but he showed some concern for the dissemination and acceptance of Marxism during a certain historical period. During the May Fourth period, Hu Shi conducted some research on Marxism and wrote articles introducing and commenting on it. Hu Shi once evaluated Marxism,

believing that it is a scientific social theory that can explain social phenomena and predict social development. However, Hu Shi also criticized some shortcomings of Marxism, such as overemphasizing class struggle and economic foundation, and neglecting individual freedom and development. Hu Shi's views on Marxism reflected the attitude of some liberals towards Marxism. They believed that Marxism was a useful doctrine, but there were also some problems. Hu Shi's views to a certain extent influenced public opinion and the ideological circle at that time, but did not change the trend of the dissemination and development of Marxism in China.

#### **4. The Referential Value of the Early Dissemination of Marxism by Chinese Teacher Groups in the Early 20th Century**

Learn from history and inspire the future. Through in-depth exploration of the historical overview of early dissemination of Marxism by the teacher community, we have a clearer understanding of the historical status and contemporary value of Marxism. This period of history not only provides us with valuable experience and lessons, but also provides important references for expanding the channels and methods of dissemination in accordance with the characteristics of the times, strengthening the construction of ideological and political theory courses in universities, and promoting the popularization of Marxism.

##### **4.1. There is Important Reference Value for Expanding Channels and Methods of Dissemination based on the Characteristics of the Times**

The dissemination of any ideology needs to be combined with the characteristics of the times, with the help of appropriate carriers, and carried out in a way that adapts to the development of the times. At the beginning of the 20th century, the teacher community mainly disseminated Marxism through courses, publication of texts, translation of works, speeches, and establishment of research groups. These traditional methods played an important role at that time, promoting the dissemination and popularization of Marxism. However, with the advent of the digital era and the new media era, it is necessary to combine new technologies to broaden the channels for disseminating Marxism. Firstly, utilizing digital platforms is key. Through online education platforms such as MOOCs (Massive Online Open Courses), high-quality courses on Marxism can be produced and published to attract more learners. Secondly, leveraging social media platforms is also crucial. Through social media platforms such as Weibo and WeChat, publish articles, videos, and other content about Marxism to expand its dissemination. Meanwhile, utilizing the interactivity of new media to strengthen interaction and communication with learners. Collect feedback and suggestions from learners through comments, private messages, and other means to continuously improve and optimize dissemination effectiveness. In terms of innovative dissemination methods, on the one hand, enhancing interactive learning by utilizing technologies such as virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR) can create an interactive learning environment, allowing learners to have a more intuitive understanding of Marxist theory. On the other hand, new media forms such as short videos and live streaming can be used to disseminate Marxism in a more vivid and interesting way.

##### **4.2. There is Important Reference Value for Strengthening the Construction of Ideological and Political Theory Courses in Universities**

Ideological and political courses are the central link and key courses in the education work of universities. General Secretary Xi Jinping emphasized at the symposium that “the key to running ideological and political courses well lies in teachers and in giving full play to their enthusiasm, initiative, and creativity.” By reviewing the relevant historical facts of the early dissemination of Marxism by teachers in the early 20th century, we can gain useful insights. One is to focus on the rationality of content. When teachers disseminated Marxism in the early days, the focus of the dissemination content changed according to the different audiences. In the face of young students, the focus of dissemination was on academic and revolutionary content such as national sovereignty, surplus values, and class struggle. When facing other groups, emphasis will be placed on theories

such as revolutionary unity and the establishment of a united front. The second is to focus on diversity of forms. When teachers disseminated Marxism in the early days, there were various ways, such as establishing newspapers, translating works, and establishing research groups.

### **4.3. There is Important Reference Value for Promoting the Popularization of Marxism**

The popularization of Marxism is a process of deepening understanding and wide application, referring to the process of Marxist theory being understood, mastered, and applied to daily life by the broad masses of the people, so that it becomes a powerful ideological weapon for them to understand and transform the world, thus promoting the construction of socialist modernization. By reviewing the history of the early dissemination of Marxism by teachers in the early 20th century, effective experiences in promoting the popularization of Marxism can be summarized. Firstly, the language is easy to understand. For example, popular publications such as “Labor Voice” and “Young Workers” used simple and understandable language, specific and vivid examples to promote Marxist theory, which raised the awareness of the workers and peasants, and promoted the development of the workers and peasants movement. This simple and honest approach is conducive to making Marxist theory deeply rooted in people's hearts, stimulating resonance, enhancing identification, and enabling the masses to truly understand and accept it. Secondly, closely connect with reality. At that time, the teacher community issued a call to “go out of the campus” and “go to the masses” to promote the integration of intellectuals and the workers and peasants movement. So a number of young intellectuals put on worker’s clothing, learned worker’s language, engaged in worker’s labor, and penetrated into the workers, effectively promoting the dissemination of Marxism. Only by combining theory with practice and delving deep into daily life can we truly apply Marxism to guide practice and solve practical problems.

## **5. Conclusion**

In the early 20th century, the teacher community played a crucial role in promoting early Marxism in universities in China. Now, standing at a new historical intersection, we look back at this special period of history and summarize their historical experience in disseminating early Marxism. This not only helps us broaden the channels of dissemination, innovate the methods of dissemination, and expand the scope of dissemination by combining the characteristics of the current era, but also has profound significance for strengthening the construction of ideological and political theory courses in universities and cultivating new-era talents who bear the responsibility of national rejuvenation. In addition, this also helps to promote the popularization of Marxism, enabling more people to understand and accept Marxism, thereby strengthening its faith and putting it into practice. More importantly, this will gather the strength of all the people and actively devote themselves to the great cause of socialism with Chinese characteristics.

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