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Historical materialism in medieval China: The cases of Liu Zongyuan (773-819) and Li Gou (1009-1059)

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ABSTRACT

It is commonly assumed that historical materialism was first developed by Karl Marx, whose philosophy is often equated with this idea. The following paper challenges this opinion by showing that historical materialism, understood as a general position within the philosophy of history, can be traced back to two generally unheralded Chinese thinkers: Liu Zongyuan (773–819) and Li Gou (1009–1059). Historical materialism is here understood as a standpoint built on three tenets: (1) a belief in the dependence of culture on the material fundamentals of social life; (2) the interpretation of human history through the prism of structural transformations; and (3) understanding political and economic relationships in terms of antagonism between social groups. After elaborating upon the presence of these tenets in the thought of Liu and Li, the paper analyzes the influence of their ideas and, finally, points out the main differences between the premodern and modern forms of historical materialism.

KEYWORDS

Historical materialism; Liu Zongyuan; Li Gou; Neo-Confucianism; feudalism

It is widely assumed that historical materialism was first developed by Karl Marx. In fact, the concept of historical materialism is usually treated as a byword for the Marxist view of history. The Marxist appropriation of this attractive and capacious notion is one of the greatest obstacles to recognizing the presence of materialist views of history anywhere else. The following paper challenges this dominant opinion by showing that historical materialism, understood as a general position within the philosophy of history, can be traced back to two generally little known Chinese thinkers: Liu Zongyuan (773–819) and Li Gou (1009–1059). The first part of the paper outlines the adopted understanding of historical materialism. Then, the paper shows the presence of such a position in the thought of Liu Zongyuan and Li Gou. The next section sheds a light on the limited influence of their ideas and, finally, analyzes main differences between premodern and modern form of historical materialism, as represented by Liu and Li on the one hand, and Marx on the other, which naturally overlap with the differences between its Asian and Western variant.

The matter of history: Refreshing and broadening the concept of historical materialism

One of the main reasons for identifying historical materialism with Marxism is that the term itself and the intellectual labeling behind it were invented by Marx and Engels, and

therefore their understanding of this notion merged with their own philosophy. Marx's first formulation of what he calls 'the materialist conception of history' comes from *The German Ideology* (1846) and originates from his polemics with the Hegelians. The term 'historical materialism' does not appear in any of Marx's writings, as it was coined by Friedrich Engels, in his 1880 *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*. However, in the 1892 foreword to this work Engels adopted the broader use of the term 'historical materialism', without any explicit reference to Marx (although it was clear that Marx for him was its most direct exponent):

I use, in English as well as in so many other languages, the term, "historical materialism", to designate that view of the course of history which seeks the ultimate cause and the great moving power of all important historic events in the economic development of society, in the changes in the modes of production and exchange, in the consequent division of society into distinct classes, and in the struggles of these classes against one another. (Engels, 2020, p. 21)

Of course, under this reading, the concept of the materialist view of history is still restricted to its economic variant. But even then, any thinker who successfully fulfils these general criteria in a way different from Marx, for instance, in some 'pro-capitalistic' or 'anti-revolutionary' manner, should be described as 'historical materialist', according to the definition of Engels himself.

The assumption that historical materialism could be equated with Marx's conception of history also served the Marxist narrative of the history of ideas, as well as its broader political agenda. To argue that only Marxism (and not, for instance, anarchism) provides the 'scientific' base for a future revolution, it was critical to show that historical materialism is Marxism's world-shaking discovery and the Good News announced amidst the depths of historical idealisms. While the 'scientific' interpretation of history is supposedly the only one 'correct' view (as though no thinker can explain the material determinants of historical development other than in the way Marxists do), the 'erroneous' and 'misleading' views of history have been numerous. This asymmetry meant that the variety of historical idealisms: absolute, objective, and subjective, or from a different viewpoint: theological, metaphysical, and psychological, does not translate into an equivalent diversity in the materialist philosophies of history. But this fusion of Marxism with historical materialism had yet another paradoxical consequence.

In the above-quoted *Socialism*, Engels stressed that the word 'materialism' is used in quite a peculiar manner, which might seem odd to those accustomed to the popular English associations of this term. The matter in question is social and refers to human relations of production and exchange, not to some crude substratum of nature. Yet even Engels himself, due to his genuine desire to validate the continuous transition from natural to social matter based on materialist dialectics, only deepened confusion regarding the exact meaning of this eponymic 'matter.' Not surprisingly, Plekhanov soon began to interpret historical materialism as a dialectical materialism applied to social life and its history. Symptomatically, he also upheld that 'geographical environment exercises no less decisive an influence on the fate also of larger societies' (Plekhanov, 1947, p. 151), which not only testifies to his naturalist confusion, but also proves that the historically determinant 'matter' does not have to be reduced to the economic one, as it might also (or only) cover the geographical fundamentals of social life. But the paradox of Plekhanov was not limited to this theoretical shift. By arguing that historical materialism is identical with the

dialectics of social development that operates in accordance with the universal, dialectical laws of nature, its original meaning became largely ontologized. In this way, historical materialism ceased to denote a certain philosophy of history, but started to refer to a social ontology that explains not only past, but also present and future social phenomena. Insofar as Marxism is understood as a form of social ontology, historical materialism was treated as its general byword.

This paper postulates, first of all, to return to the original and proper meaning of the term ‘historical materialism’ as equivalent to the materialist conception of history, and to treat it as a position as general and internally diversified as historical idealism. Of course, this entails thinking of historical materialism as a standpoint represented by Marx, but at the same time treating it as relatively independent from his particular formulation. Importantly, such a strategy has already been implemented by so-called ‘analytical Marxists’ who tried to reframe historical materialism as a set of discrete theses (Cohen, 1978). Consequently, ‘extracting’ historical materialism from Marx’s thought required putting aside everything that was considered of historical import, in this case mostly ‘obscurantist’ Hegelian dialectics. However, in the hands of analytical Marxists, historical materialism was only re-established as a form of social ontology. Furthermore, such cherry-picking was contingent on one’s own reading of Marx and the importance of particular aspects of his thought. It seems that some general criteria for defining historical materialism should be recognized first, and only then should they be effectively applied to concrete philosophies.

Neither Liu Zongyuan nor Li Gou called themselves ‘historical materialists,’ which means that the formulation of such criteria is crucial for recognizing them as exponents of the materialist view of history. (However, to argue on that basis that they cannot be legitimately recognized as such is no different from maintaining that there were no aestheticians before Baumgarten, or no ontology prior to the seventeenth century.) The chosen criteria need to be as precise as they are broad in order to cover various forms of historical materialism. Due to untypical nature of the thought of Liu and Li—the vast majority of historical materialisms were developed by modern Western thinkers—the criteria should not be tailored to their philosophy of history. One of the most transparent set of criteria could be based on the thought of Leszek Nowak (1943–2009), a leading figure of the Poznań School of Methodology, the theoretical postulates of which were close to Analytical Marxism. In 1983 Nowak, who, as a member of the Solidarity trade union, was already considered a ‘revisionist’, introduced the system of ‘non-Marxian historical materialism,’ which in contrast to Marx’s view interprets history not through the prism of economic changes, but in relation to transformations of political power (Brzechczyn, 2017a; Nowak, 1983). Nowak’s follower, Krzysztof Brzechczyn (2017b), identifies three fundamental ideas that are constitutive for historical materialism, which are fulfilled by both Marx and Nowak, and which could serve as a good criterion for recognizing other, non-Marxian historical materialisms (pp. 417–418). The first is the belief in the dependence of culture upon the material fundamentals of social life. Just as in Marxism, the concept of ‘social matter’ denotes here social, political or economic relations of dependence, power or ownership, and not so much a natural substratum of the world. Second, historical materialism interprets history through the prism of structural transformations, and not in relation to human intentions. Therefore, the mechanisms regulating history are essentially independent from human will. Third, social, political and economic relations

are understood in terms of antagonism between social classes, usually between those who control and those who are controlled. This point leads to the emancipatory potential of historical materialism, since an insight into the causes of the antagonistic nature of human society and history fuels social critique.

Importantly, while such a trifold criterion facilitates finding a common denominator of historical materialisms, it also allows for singling out respective differences, in accordance with Nowak's own method of idealization and concretization (Nowak, 1980). The way these general tenets are understood and the influence of accompanying, non-defining beliefs makes it possible to talk about premodern and modern versions, or Asian and Western variants of historical materialism, instead of excluding them from *definiendum*. On the other hand, Brzechczyn's criterion is still not the most general one, as it insists on understanding the central term 'matter' as relating to social relations. Should this term be substituted with climate, environment, or even the material constitution of the people, the range of possible historical materialisms would be even wider. Such philosophies of history are to be found both in the West and in China, the latter being developed for instance, by Chen Liang (1143–1194) (Rogacz, 2020, pp. 135–138). Interestingly enough, the co-founder of the Communist Party and one of the first Marxist philosophers in China, Li Dazhao (1889–1927), understood historical materialism in a broad sense that cannot be reduced to Marx's standpoint. Li defined historical materialism simply as a philosophy of history that denies the significance of any factors external to social life, and explains history in relation to changes in 'material conditions,' such as ethnic, geographical and, most importantly, economic ones (D. Li, 2005, pp. 339–340). Ironically, just as all other Marxists, Li Dazhao tends to interpret classical Chinese historical thought as unanimously idealistic and built upon the cult of the sages.

¹ In this way, the analysis of the thought of Liu Zongyuan and Li Gou also has profound implications for our understanding of the continuity of the Chinese intellectual tradition and its encounters with modernity.

The chessboard of history: Historical materialism of Liu Zongyuan

Our first protagonist, Liu Zongyuan, lived on the threshold of key ideological transformations. Chinese thought and culture at the turn of the eighth and ninth centuries was dominated by Daoism and Buddhism. Confucianism, which did not attract the prominent minds of the epoch, emerged from several centuries of political fragmentation as an integral part of the imperial ideology and a tool for the much-desired legitimacy of power. The latter was particularly connected with the idea of the Mandate of Heaven (*Tianming*), which later became enriched with a specific hermeneutics of natural omens proposed by Dong Zhongshu (179–104 BCE) (Queen, 1996). Importantly, the gradual revival of Confucian philosophy under the Tang is usually associated with the person of Han Yu (768–824), who referred primarily to Mencius, whose thought—unlike that of Xunzi or even Confucius—strongly supported the theory of the Mandate of Heaven. Liu Zongyuan (773–819), in turn, whose contribution to this revival still remains unrecognized, criticised almost all the components of the traditional concept of *Tianming*. The criticism of this vision, which is essentially parallel to the Western idea of the divine right of kings, eventually led Liu to the formulation of a materialist view of history.

Liu Zongyuan explicitly rejects Dong Zhongshu's philosophy of history, considering it responsible for the errors of successive generations of thinkers and even comparing it to the words of 'fortune-tellers and blind shamans'² (Liu, 1979, p. 30). But since Dong's view of history was nothing but a version of the classical theory of the Mandate of Heaven, Liu focuses on the criticism of the latter, putting forward three main arguments against it. First, Heaven is simply a name for the sky over our heads.³ As an inanimate material being, Tian (namely the sky) can in no way intervene in human history. Accordingly, diseases are not sent by Heaven, but come from the matter-energy (*qi*) contained in blood, for all people are simply compounds of *qi* (pp. 441–442). Second, if Heaven does not act in history, only people are responsible for order and chaos. As can be seen in history, the mandate—that is, empowerment to govern—is obtained from people, not from Heaven⁴ (p. 35). Why, then, did the ancients talk about 'Heaven'? Here Liu Zongyuan replies with the third and most revelatory argument: by doing so the ancient rulers adapted to the asininity of the people, whom they wanted to control, by means of fear⁵ (p. 91). As a matter of fact, Liu not only reproaches the ideological function of the very concept of Heaven and its Mandate, but also reveals its historical contingency. The idea of Heaven, Liu argues, appeared at a certain time, being the product of history itself: neither Yao or Shun invoked the will of Tian, and it was under the Shang dynasty that Heaven replaced Shangdi ('Lord-on-High') as a deity (p. 450). Hence, Liu's historicist and critical argumentation went much further than the purely naturalist argument of his great predecessor, Xunzi.⁶

But then the question arises as to what, if not Heaven, is responsible for events and changes that were classically attributed to Tian. In his answer, Liu Zongyuan evokes the neglected notion from early Legalism and Sunzi's *Art of War*: historical development is determined by the inner trend of nature (勢 *shi*) that grows out of the things themselves (Liu, 1979, pp. 447–448).⁷ This 'constellation' of processes is rational, it has its own pattern 理 *lǐ*. In this manner, Liu not only rejects the Daoist view that everything happens spontaneously, by itself, in a way that ultimately eludes human reason, but also reintroduces the concept of pattern (principle) that will lie at the centre of later Neo-Confucian metaphysics. The rationality of nature meant for Liu, just as for Xunzi, that nature can be used for social benefit. In this sense, it is not the trend of nature itself, but rather the cooperation (合 *hé*) of people with nature that determines the course of history. This cooperation is understood as the prolongation of the laws of nature: just as nature causes the growth of plants, so man creates laws and social institutions (p. 449).

Accordingly, Liu's philosophy of history results from the idea of prolonging the action of nature. Liu posits that at the beginning of history, humanity lived in a childlike stage of simplicity, free from war. So as to protect themselves from atmospheric phenomena, people lived in trees and caves, and began wearing clothing. With time, their numbers gradually increased; thus famine became a problem, but this was solved by hunting animals. The rise of families and clans entailed conflicts, which soon escalated to the level of chaos. The victors imposed order by force, and in order to preserve this new state of affairs and guarantee the effectiveness of their order, they established administration and sanctioned it legally (Liu, 1979, p. 31). This idea sets the framework for Liu's detailed understanding of the historical genesis of the social and political institutions of China and their ideological legitimization, as shown in his landmark *Treatise on Feudalism* 封建論 *Fēngjiàn lùn*.⁸

Explaining the beginnings of society, Liu Zongyuan once again refers to the natural weakness of people: as they did not have fur, claws or wings, they were forced to compensate for these inborn deficiencies with 'artefacts' 假物 *jiǎwù*. Artefacts satisfy human needs, but the problem is that nobody is entitled to them by nature, which, given the lack of any laws and rules at that time, led to the state of chaos.⁹ Eventually, the state of protracted war was not advantageous to anybody. The most rebellious units were first instructed and then, when the instructions ceased to be effective, punished. This had to involve the establishment of an administrator and, as a result, the consolidation of a group of people under his guidance. That is how tribes came to life, but soon thereafter conflicts moved to a higher level, becoming wars between tribes. This required the recruitment of soldiers, and commanders to lead and control them. But with time, rivalry grew between these commanders, until the barons decided to institute an emperor. This means that, as Liu Zongyuan concludes, 'feudalism was not the result of the sages' intentions, but of the tendency of reality itself' (*shi*) (Liu, 1979, p. 70). As François Jullien (1999) justifiably points out, Liu clearly treats feudalism as a result of structural and unintentional changes, an effect of an impersonal historical tendency (pp. 181–182). What is more important is that, in Liu's eyes, a society built upon the institutional strategies of coping with a conflict over artefacts is in itself artificial, which opens the space for social criticism.

Jo-Shui Chen agrees that Liu Zongyuan directly expressed the idea of the 'artificiality' of social differences, but since this was not a vision of the abolition of classes, his view may be called 'social evolutionism,' but not 'historical materialism' (Chen, 1992, pp. 97, 114, 157). This is true only if we still equate historical materialism with the Marxian view of history. Should we adopt a broader understanding, the exclusion of Liu from the circle of historical materialists does not seem so well-grounded. First, Liu sees the sources of cultural and historical development in the transformations of the material fundamentals of *social* life, namely artefacts, as well as in the relations of power that are 'overbuilt' upon artefacts. Second, all these changes are considered necessary and independent of human will: the mechanisms explaining history are structural and immanently present within history itself. To clarify how close Liu's position was to that of Marx, let me quote a fragment of the classic exposition of Marxian historical materialism:

The starting-point of human history from the materialist point of view is the struggle with nature, the sum total of the means employed by man to compel nature to serve his needs, which grow as they are satisfied. Man is distinguished from other animals by the fact that he makes tools: the brute creation may use tools in a primitive way, but only such as they find in nature itself. Once equipment is perfected to the extent that an individual can produce more goods than he consumes himself, there is a possibility of conflict as to the sharing of the excess product and of a situation in which some people appropriate the fruits of others' labour—that is to say, a class society (. . .) Historical materialism does not state that personal motives are necessarily perverse or selfish, or that they are all of a kind; it is not concerned with such motives at all, and does not attempt to predict individual behaviour. It is only concerned with mass phenomena which are not consciously willed by anyone but which obey social laws that are as regular and impersonal as the laws of physical nature. Human beings and their relations are, nevertheless, the sole reality of the historical process, which ultimately consists of the conscious behaviour of individuals. The sum total of their acts forms a pattern of diachronic historical laws, describing the transition from one social system to the next (Kołakowski, 1978, pp. 337, 341).

The main differences between this textually faithful summary of Marx's view of history and the essay of Liu Zongyuan lies in the employed terminology, and not so much in the mode of thinking. Living in the era of science and expanding capitalism, Marx writes about 'consumption' rather than 'use,' 'classes' rather than 'groups,' and finally, 'diachronic historical laws' rather than the 'tendency of reality.' Allowing for that difference, the common root encapsulated in the form of the first two criteria for historical materialism cannot be overlooked.

The third tenet of historical materialism, namely an interpretation of political and economic relationships in terms of the antagonism between social groups, is also reflected in the thought of Liu Zongyuan, with the proviso that he is most interested in the conflict between members of the same (parallel) social group, such as tribe chiefs and barons. Unlike modern PRC historians, Liu does not believe that history is 'fuelled' by the conflict between feudal lords and peasants. This notwithstanding, he does not overlook the social station of peasants or the conflict between peasants and feudal lords, which complements his social analysis. In principle, Liu does not agree with the official Confucian propaganda asserting that feudal lords treat their servants kindly, as though they were their own children. On the contrary, feudal lords are arrogant, greedy and devoted to fighting, as evidenced by the history of Zhou. Liu emphasizes, however, that this fact did not result from their temper or even particular political solutions (政 *zhèng*), but rather from the faults of the entire system (制 *zhì*). After the Han dynasty, which returned to feudalism in a form partially rooted in Qin centralism, the contemporaneous Tang rulers restored the prefectural system, which is less detrimental to the peasants (Liu, 1979, pp. 72–73).¹⁰ Nevertheless, the people are still in a bad situation, because they are encumbered with high taxes and obliged to perform military service at the borders (p. 616). A description of the oppression of peasants often appears in the literary works of Liu Zongyuan (for example, in the 'Story of the Snake Catcher', see Liu, 1979, p. 556). In a few instances, Liu openly expresses his rather critical judgment of the feudal lords, as when he writes that the aristocrats rob the people, and their titles have become empty names, for it is not virtue but only their contingent origin that stands behind them (pp. 616, 756). The awareness of this contingency and artificiality never left Liu. In one of his later writings, Liu compares the members of society to the figures on a chessboard: although they are made of the same wood, they get different statuses as a result of different chiselling and being painted different colours (pp. 648–649). Such an inconspicuous metaphor concealed a strong belief in the equality of all people and an awareness of the (historically) constructed character of social institutions and divisions.

There is no indication, however, that Liu wanted to overturn the board. His analysis of the roots of *fengjian*-feudalism extended to the times preceding the founding of this system, namely the era of legendary sages. For Liu, the history of their times has nothing to do with the actions of Heaven or any spirits (*shen*), and its course resulted solely from the sages' efforts to benefit (利 *lì*) the people. Since their (heart-)minds were focused solely on this task, there is no point in attempting to grasp their intentions¹¹ (Liu, 1979, pp. 85, 458). As Liu adds, the Dao of the ancient sages was 'a public thing', not a private entity¹² (p. 857). It is in this sense that Liu calls for examining the ways of Yao and Shun (pp. 656, 780, 850, 856), and only within this framework does Liu accept the didactic function of historiography. He firmly believes that only by returning to the pre-feudal solutions in the public sphere is it possible to regain the most stable peace (p. 872). In this

way, Liu Zongyuan was rather a moderate conservative than a revolutionary. He did not see a way of escaping the established constraints of social life, but still wanted to introduce the most equal system under these limits, which, as he believed, was once implemented in pre-feudal China.

Counting on goods: Historical materialism of Li Gou

One of the most prominent continuators of the historico-materialist line of Chinese thought under the Song was Li Gou (1009–1059). As in the case of Liu, the background of Li Gou's intellectual activity was also determined by the ideological supremacy of Daoism and Buddhism. Unlike Liu Zongyuan, however, and in a way much more similar to Liu's famous friend, Han Yu, Li Gou criticized these religions as harmful for both individual development and state welfare. As an advocate of materialist ontology and sensualist epistemology, Li Gou rejected Daoist and Buddhist beliefs as ungrounded and superstitious; this particularly concerned Daoist visions of an afterlife and the Buddhist faith in karma (G. Li, 1981, pp. 9–12).

Arguably, there would be nothing extraordinary about this criticism if it were not for its grounding in historical materialism. In Li Gou's thought, the problem of the relation between the sphere of culture and material conditions, including the economic ones, is clearly and openly formulated. The term, which in his philosophical dictionary most closely approaches the meaning of the concept of culture are 'customs' (禮li), taken in the most general sense possible. As Li Gou writes, *li* are the basis of the development of individuals and the state, and as such, *li* comprise all customs associated with nutrition, clothing, housing, burial, sacrifices, principles of kinship, marriage, parenthood, seniority and power. In addition, morality (仁義 *rèn-yì*) itself, politics, the system of punishments, and music, are also included in this concept. All customs were created by ancient kings in response to human needs, mainly related to hunger and climatic conditions (G. Li, 1981, pp. 5–6, 121). As the customs were to arise in response to physical needs, Li Gou emphasises that when these needs are not satisfied, when peasants are hungry and poor, educating the people with the help of *li* becomes almost impossible¹³ (p. 89). Like Liu Zongyuan, Li Gou thinks that the Mandate of Heaven is in fact identical with the will and support of the people¹⁴ (p. 168). This is because the destiny of the state and the world does not depend on the will of any spiritual beings, but on such matters as gathering grain¹⁵ (p. 75), and finally—the food in the possession of the peasants. Interestingly, similar idea was expressed a century earlier, in the *Book of Transformations* 化書 *Huàshū* by Tan Qiao (譚峭, tenth century), who claimed that both animal and human development is determined by one factor: food.¹⁶ Li Gou essentially agrees with Tan Qiao, but he also takes into account the role of social matter: of goods, money, and landed property, as he is well-aware that the predicament of peasants cannot be changed merely by occasionally providing them with food.

In principle, Li Gou believes that the issue of food is a derivative of property relations. Former kings, especially Shun, were aware of the fact that without regulating the question of land ownership by peasants, it is impossible to teach and spread customs. Hence, during the Zhou Dynasty, an ideal economic-well-field system was created: moving away from this system will only make the rich richer, and the poor will become poorer from day to day (G. Li, 1981, p. 183). To avoid that, ancient rulers ensured that the peasants were not

overworked (p. 245). Li observes that the abandonment of the well-field system was followed by fiscal pressure, but not by higher nutritional standards among the peasants. Over time, self-sufficient fields with 100 mu (c. 5 ha) per one farmer began to be replaced with latifundia (p. 135). At the rise of the Tang, 100 mu of unpopulated land was leased to every peasant; by paying taxes, working under coercion and serving in the army, they maintained the feudal aristocracy, which was completely exempt from taxes. With time, the peasants who were unable to pay taxes fell into debt and sold land, so that at the end of the eighth century only 5% of the peasants owned some land. The situation improved slightly in the times of Li Gou, but the rent was still 50–70% of the harvest (Rodziński, 1974, pp. 184–185, 195–197).

Li refers to this situation by saying that the aristocrats, unlike the people, can afford to eat meat, but they are not strong enough to start sowing fields themselves: ‘they eat, not working’, and their only profession is oppression of the people. And just as the poor have strength, but no land to feed, so the rich need the strength of another man, although he has a field. As a result, the only thing a lord cannot afford is to become independent from the vassal, says Li Gou (G. Li, 1981, pp. 135–136). (To some extent this recalls the intersection of Marx’s theory of class struggle with the Hegelian dialectics of master and slave.)

Li Gou responds to such a situation with a utopia of the state in which ‘there are no kings outside, and the world is one family, each foot of land is a field, and each of the people is treated like a son, the whole country is full of goods and money, like a money bag, while taxes and rentals flow equally from everyone.’ At the same time, Li Gou claims that this state does not differ from the situation of the former rulers, as they did not have private finances. His idealized vision of antiquity was based on the text called *Rites of Zhou* 周禮 *Zhōulǐ*, a description of the political organization of the Western Zhou (11th century–770 BC), the authenticity of which was doubted already under the Han and which, due to its utopianism, was not included in Confucian Canon and was largely neglected. Li Gou not only believed that this egalitarian portrayal of the distant antiquity should be considered fully credible, but also argued that its reinstatement is the only way to achieve the Supreme Peace (太平 *tàipíng*) for all people (G. Li, 1981, p. 67).¹⁷ Li Gou’s project is therefore a retro-utopia: a plan for the future mediated by the past. At the same time, as Shan-Yüan Hsieh (1979) emphasizes, this utopia is in itself a result of the materialistically understood evolution of civilization (pp. 104–109).

The description of the utopia contains the notions of goods and money that are crucial for Li Gou’s thought. Not only food and land ownership relations shape customs. The latter are determined above all by ‘usable goods’ 財用 *cáiyòng*, that is ‘commodities’ 貨 *huò*, the most important of which is ‘money’ 金 *jīn* (G. Li, 1981, p. 136). As Li Gou writes, ‘stupid Confucians’ argue that politics is impossible without morality and education, despite the fact that the *Hongfan*, i.e. the canonical fragment of the *Book of Documents*, states that the first condition of politics is food and the second is goods. The basis and ‘reality’ of statecraft are precisely usable goods. Without goods, there can be no customs relevant to living, food, clothing, army, offices, sacrifices, or the customs related to marriage and kinship and the division into civilisation and barbarism (p. 133). The most important role must be played by the principal good, namely money. Li Gou regrets that unfortunately the aristocracy banished the original function of money. For the ancients, money was primarily a means of exchange, which is why peasants used it; for the feudal

lands of the present, money is a treasure, thus the only way to multiply it is to increase the fiscal oppression of the people, the same people who are doomed to poverty without money (p. 137). The desire to go beyond this stalemate situation made Li Gou rehabilitate tradespeople, traditionally placed at the lowest level of the social ladder, even below farmers and craftsmen. Li argues against Mencius that the pursuit of profit is not evil, because it is an inseparable element of human nature, without which no work of the ancients would have taken place (p. 326). As Peter K. Bol observes, 'Li Gou recognized that behind this was a fundamental moral question: a material view implied that civilization was based on an appeal to interests, to profit and advantage (*li*)' (Bol, 2008, p. 63). Bol's opinion is generally correct, but the sequence of his argument seem somehow inverted: it was not the case that some independent ethics stood behind Li Gou's materialist view of history, but rather that since morality, as part of customs, was determined by the relations of accumulation and the exchange of goods, its basis could not have been other than the search for profit.

Hence, Li Gou's philosophy fulfils the criteria of historical materialism even more than the thought of Liu Zongyuan. First of all, Li explicitly accepts that the base (or 'root') of historical process is material in nature: it is food, which depends on the possession of land, which in turn depends on the disposal of goods, especially money. Goods are said to be the necessary condition for the implementation of *li*, that is customs, which here encompass the entire sphere of culture ('the superstructure'). Second, Li Gou reconstructs the history of China through the prism of changes in means and relations of production; historical censures are determined by changes in the systems of land and money management, and not by rise and fall of particular dynasties. Third, Li Gou sees and describes the antagonism of the class of owners and peasants. At the same time, he believes that the antagonism could be solved by a retro-utopia of 'one family' of equals if only people are given money. This implies his brave critique of aristocracy was based on the rejection of seeing money as a 'treasure' detached from the exchange of goods and human work, which comes close to Marx's critique of capitalism, with the proviso that for obvious historical reasons it was targeted at the injustice of feudalism.

The private and the public: The historical influence of Liu Zongyuan and Li Gou

The exceptionality and acuity of philosophical reflection and social criticism of Liu Zongyuan and Li Gou naturally leads to the question of the extent to which their thought influenced later generations of Chinese thinkers. Generally speaking, this impact was limited, and this constitutes one of the main differences between their philosophy of history and that of Marx. Marx was one of the most controversial philosophers within the Hegelian left, whose polemics with other Young Hegelians such as Bauer or Proudhon helped him promote and disseminate his thought. No matter how obvious that may sound, it is vital to stress that, in striking contrast to the discussed Chinese thinkers, Marx succeeded not only in attracting numerous supporters of historical materialism, but also (if not most importantly) in inspiring actual social revolutions, not to mention that in the Communist states historical materialism was or has become a part of the state ideology and intellectuals had/have to treat it as a universal key for interpreting all social phenomena.

In contrast, the impact of the historical materialism of Liu Zongyuan and Li Gou was rather episodic and exclusionary. Liu Zongyuan is still mostly recognized as a poet, and while his materialist ontology was soon taken up by his contemporary, Liu Yuxi (劉禹錫, 772–842), that did not necessarily include his materialist view of history. On the other hand, Liu's claim that the establishment of feudalism resulted from an impersonal trend of historical development rather than the intentions of any historical actors was widely acknowledged as valid amongst almost all Chinese philosophers, leading historical idealists included.¹⁸ This notwithstanding, it is noteworthy that this conclusion of Liu's *Treatise on Feudalism* was (rather purposively) extracted from his general argumentation that aimed at demonstrating the artificial and historically contingent nature of social differences. The fact that this idea was not strictly in line with the classical Chinese political thought, which, analogously to many other premodern traditions, essentialized social and political distinctions and often rooted them in a hierarchical ontology or cosmology, may have been responsible for the 'unpopularity' of Liu's historical materialism.

Li Gou's impact was more complex, but ultimately short-lasting. In terms of political influence, two of his disciples: Fan Zhongyan (范仲淹, 989–1052) and Wang Anshi (王安石, 1021–1086), left their mark on Chinese history as two of its greatest premodern reformers. It seems that the ban on religious thought in politics during the Qingli reforms (1043–1045) of Fan Zhongyan was directly suggested by Li Gou. A subsequent series of reforms, known as New Policies, conducted by Wang Anshi from 1069 to 1076, were explicitly envisioned as an implementation of the economic and political ideal from the *Rites of Zhou*. Following the earlier postulates of Li Gou, Wang Anshi increased currency circulation and promulgated the equal tax law, the balanced delivery law and the market exchange law (including the system of low-interest loans for merchant guilds). From the outset, the reforms met with strong resistance from the aristocracy and were abandoned right after Wang's death. Li Gou's ideas fell into neglect for almost a century, when they were again taken up by the thinkers associated with 'practical learning' 事功學 *shìgōngxué*, a branch of Neo-Confucianism which is often neglected even in the most comprehensive studies of Neo-Confucian thought.¹⁹ Its representatives, such as Ye Shi (葉適, 1150–1223) and other members of the Yongjia School (永嘉學派 *Yōngjiā xuépài*), advocated for free trade, privatization, tax cuts and the currency market, and generally wondered, to use Bol's words, how to 'increase the country's material welfare by facilitating the growth of the private economy' (Bol, 2008, p. 274). The failure of these postulates and the external invasion that put an end to the capitalist experiment in the late song period (Deng, 2020) turned out to have serious consequences for the thought of Li Gou, which gradually faded into oblivion.

An exception to the rule comes from Gong Zizhen (龔自珍, 1792–1841), a late imperial scholar who inspired the socialist thought of great Chinese reformer, Kang Youwei (康有為, 1858–1927). In *Essay on the Patrilineage System in Agriculture (Nongzongpian)* of 1823, Gong Zizhen envisages the beginnings of human history and assumes that after wild grains had run out, people started to till the soil and, depending upon the intelligence and strength, they become the 'masters' of a portion of earth. Establishing private property was conjoined to the rise of inequality: those whose land was extensive could afford to meet the needs of their children. When they were no longer concerned with fulfilling their basic needs, the rules of their behavior became formalized and started to be known as rituals, music and law. Confucians were wrong to believe that all the great social

distinctions proceed from above to below; referring to the *Treatise on Feudalism* of Liu Zongyuan, Gong affirms that ‘first there are [social] lows and only then do [social] heights gradually emerge’. What is more, Gong claimed that eventually social distinctions become sacralized, as coming from Heaven. The task of preserving one’s private property entailed a set of rules of conduct, which later became honored as virtues (Gong, 1975, p. 49). In this way Gong’s explanation did much more than prove that publicly recognized virtues originated from protecting private interest: he also demonstrated that morality itself is reduced to the set of rules that function to preserve the social system, which originated in particular historical circumstances.

In *Essay on Equal Distribution (Pingjunpian)*, Gong draws near the economic thought of Li Gou. He points out that while the rich live in ease and become more and more arrogant, the poor falter each day, becoming more and more envious, wrathful and miserly. As a result, economic inequality is the decisive cause of the decline of states in history (Gong, 1975, p. 78). Since with time ‘small inequalities gradually led to great inequalities,’ Gong postulates a return to the original historical situation and a redistribution of the land. He believes that such equalization could be achieved in less than ten years. Just like Li Gou, Gong Zizhen refers to the future epoch as an era of ‘supreme peace’ (*taiping*). However, being no less convinced about the natural human desire to protect private property (and due to natural differences in intelligence and strength), he also argues that the rise of inequalities in this future epoch is inevitable (pp. 78–80).

Gong’s case is an instance of the most comprehensive reference to the thought of both Liu Zongyuan and Li Gou, one that was developed on the very threshold of socialist ideas appearing in China (and the outbreak of Taiping rebellion as well). Although a detailed analysis of his philosophy exceeds the limits of this paper, the above discussion is sufficient to show that all the three tenets of historical materialism that are represented in the philosophy of Liu Zongyuan and Li Gou could be also found in Gong Zizhen’s thought.

Reclaimed paradise versus proclaimed revolution: Historical materialism East and West

As the proposed criteria for recognizing historical materialism are general, there are important differences between their particular expression in the case of modern Western thinkers, such as Marx, and premodern Chinese philosophers, such as Liu and Li. One of the most evident differences between Marx and Li Gou is that whereas the latter dreamt of the advent of a capitalist economy (within the confines of a centralized monarchy and pre-industrial society), Marx proclaimed that capitalism would be soon replaced by the socialist mode of production. But the main difference between premodern historical materialists and Marx’s thought is not limited to disparate visions of the future. In fact, in his scheme of historical development, Marx also argued that feudalism had to be replaced with capitalism so that the growing mercantile class would become the bourgeoisie. In contrast to Liu and Li, however, Marx believed that each of these transitions is necessary and stems from the laws governing economic changes. This means that, due to its internal inconsistencies, capitalism will soon destroy itself (the ‘scientific’ justification of this prophecy fueled Marx’s later thought and motivated him to write *Das Kapital*).

Neither Liu Zongyuan nor Li Gou held that feudalism was imminently or necessarily coming to an end, due to the very dynamics of its economic development. Interestingly enough, Liu Zongyuan's argument from *Fengjianlun*—that the very tendency (*shi*) of the development of primitive society, along with its internal antagonisms, had to generate the feudalist system necessarily and independently from human intentions—is not extended to the subsequent course of human history, as though the philosopher's mind was not able to make such predictions. Certainly, neither did Li Gou see the system based on the exploitation of its nurturers as being particularly stable, but again he did not diagnose this lack of stability as being sufficient to shake in its foundations. Hence, their vision of the future was essentially a pious wish, the realization of which depends upon the good will of the people and, most importantly, the rulers. The fiasco of the New Policies showed that as soon as a well-affected emperor or a competent minister pass away, there is not much hope for reforming the system. This is related to one of the central points (and for many modern Chinese intellectuals, weaknesses) of the classical Confucian political theory: namely the belief that only the sovereign is the proper political subject, and that all the reforms or general efforts at 'correcting' 正 *zhèng* social life should proceed from the decrees of an enlightened king. Even Gong Zizhen never doubted in the emperor's role in land reform and the crucial position of his minister who should 'listen to the masses' (Gong, 1975, pp. 15–18). As a witness of the Eight Trigrams uprising of 1813, Gong Zizhen pointed out that with peasants in the midst of famine and the wealthy afraid of possible riots, the Qing emperor has to follow the example of the ancient rulers and make 'adjustments according to the time' (Borei, 1977, pp. 239–243).

Given these limitations, none of the Chinese historical materialists was an advocate of revolution. Importantly, it was not only the case that it is almost impossible to conduct a truly egalitarian social revolution from within the system of centralized monarchy and the accompanying hierarchical bureaucracy, or at least leave these structures untouched. It was also the case that neither Liu Zongyuan nor Li Gou (and some of his nineteenth-century epigones) believed that an entirely new social system is actually necessary for attaining the happiness and welfare of the people. While being either unable or unwilling to conceptualize 'a brave new world,' an intellectual maneuver without which it is difficult to understand either the French or Russian Revolutions, their historical imagination was somehow closed within the confines of what had already happened. Hence, not surprisingly, instead of revolution, both Liu and Li dreamt of a restoration of the ancient social and economic system. While Liu remained rather evasive with regard to the exact 'placement' of this golden epoch, Li construed a retro-utopia based on the detailed vision of the ancient economic system as contained in apocryphal *Zhou Rituals*. Of course, the fact that such retro-utopia was for the most part constructed speaks for a more charitable reading of the progressive ideas of Li Gou, but there is nothing that would suggest that this vision was only a historical camouflage and that Li Gou, who looked up to the ancient sage-kings with the utmost admiration for their efforts in bringing about social justice, was referring to their solutions as part of some rhetorical tool.

Last but not least, one cannot omit the fact that the theoretical difference between Liu and Li, on the one hand, and Marx, on the other, with regard to their faith in there being necessary rules explaining future economic development, at least partially resulted from Marx's employment of classical political economy and Hegelian dialectics. This entailed significant disparity concerning philosophical lexicons used on both sides, and in terms of

its diversity and precision Marx clearly had an advantage. However, a comparison of Liu Zongyuan and Li Gou with their Western contemporaries sheds light on the exceptional social and historical awareness of these medieval Chinese thinkers. Just as there is nothing controversial or surprising in a historian of Western philosophy arguing that Parmenides and F.H. Bradley shared basic ideas about the nature of universe, despite significant differences in the level of their expression and explication, Liu Zongyuan and Li Gou should not be deprived of their support for ideas that are typical for historical materialism merely due to their unfamiliarity with modern economics or German idealism. Arguably, such severity may have been one of the reasons for not recognizing the unique place of Liu and Li in the history of world philosophy.

Conclusion

The paper argues that, in the face of the ambiguity and the ideological entanglement of the concept of historical materialism in the Marxist tradition, it is reasonable to return to its original and broad understanding which treated the materialist view of history as being just as internally diversified as historical idealisms were. Following Analytic Marxism and the Poznań School of Methodology, it is claimed that historical materialism is built on three tenets: (1) a belief in the dependence of culture on the material fundamentals of social life; (2) the interpretation of history through the prism of structural, impersonal transformations; and (3) understanding political and economic relationships in terms of antagonism between social groups. It is then shown that these criteria are successfully met by two medieval Chinese philosophers of history: Liu Zongyuan and Li Gou. Unlike Marx, their influence upon later thought and history was rather limited, but there are instances of political reformists that were inspired by their ideas. Based on the analysis of the views of Liu and Li, the paper concludes by pointing out the differences between the two variants of historical materialism: the modern and Western one proposed by Marx and the premodern and Asian one developed by Liu Zongyuan and Li Gou. Generally speaking, while Marx sees the transition from feudalism to capitalism as a necessary process determined by the rules governing the economic development itself, Liu and Li do not see the fall of feudalism as necessarily resulting from the historical tendency that led to its rise. Second, Marx deems the destruction of capitalism no less inevitable and proclaims the advent of the socialist mode of production, something that due to historical limitations went far beyond the imagination of Liu and Li. Furthermore, whereas Marx uses his theory of the historical process to justify the need for social revolution, Liu and Li call for a restoration of the idealized ancient economic system that in their eyes embodied all the features of the most beneficial quasi-capitalist system. Finally, Marx believed that the future revolution would be put into effect by the working masses, whereas Liu and Li still seemed to put their faith in the political initiative of emperors. This notwithstanding, as the first exponents of historical materialism as such, and as exemplary advocates of its premodern variant, both Liu Zongyuan and Li Gou should be finally given due scholarly attention and their contribution to world philosophy should be widely recognized.

Notes

1. This judgment diffused also to Western scholars of Chinese Marxism. Arif Dirlik, for instance, argues that ‘the Marxist conception of politics and, therefore, history was the diametrical opposite of the Confucian (...) The conception of history that resulted from this [Confucian] premise was individual centered and one that visualized history not as an autonomous realm but as the field upon which eternal principles guiding human behavior played,’ see Dirlik 1978, p. 7.
2. 董仲舒對三代受命之符 (...) 誠然非耶? 臣曰: 非也 (...) 其言類淫巫警史, 誑亂後代, 不足以知聖人立極之本.
3. 彼上而玄者, 世謂之天.
4. 是故受命不於天, 於其人.
5. 且古之所以言天者, 蓋以愚蚩蚩者耳.
6. Nevertheless, Liu’s indebtedness to Xunzi is unquestionable, cf. Crawford et al. 1973, p. 55.
7. 彼勢之附乎物而生 (...) 問者曰: 子之言數存而勢生, 非天也.
8. It should be noted that Liu Zongyuan uses the term *fengjian* (‘enfeoffment and establishment’) in a classically narrow sense, to describe the system of the Western Zhou dynasty type. On the other hand, it was the Zhou dynasty that was usually invoked by Chinese historians as the closest counterpart of Western feudalism, whereas the Qin and post-Han dynasties were more similar to centralized absolute monarchies. Putting these long-lasting and controversial discussions aside, it has to be noticed that Liu’s general observations regarding the relationship of the sovereign to his vassals are essentially applicable also to the Western context.
9. This idea draws near to the Hobbesian concept of the state of nature as a state of war as caused by the right of each to all *things*. Importantly, Rawls (1999) also emphasizes that we can distribute anything but natural goods, such as physical attributes or intelligence (pp. 54–55), which shows the acuity of Liu’s (newly coined) term ‘artificial things.’
10. An example of stipulating the term *fengjian* for the feudal-like relations of servitude following the institutions of enfeoffment and investiture, in this case practiced under the Zhou and Han.
11. 然而聖人之道, 不窮異以為神, 不引天以為高, 利於人, 備於事, 如斯而已矣 (...) 夫聖人之為心也, 必有道而已矣, 非於神也, 蓋於人也.
12. 道固公物, 非可私而有.
13. 然則民不富, 倉廩不實, 衣食不足, 而欲教以禮節, 使之趨榮而避辱, 學者皆知其難也.
14. 非天命之私一人, 為億萬人也。民之所歸, 天之所右也; 民之所去, 天之所左也.
15. 國家閒暇, 要在多積, 積貯之道, 天下大命.
16. On the philosophy of history in the *Huashu*, see Fang 2006, pp. 519–520. Tan Qiao is considered a Daoist, which is why the *Huashu* became a part of Daozang, although *Siku quanshu* classifies it under *zajialei*, ‘other schools.’
17. The concept of *taiping* is one of the most important utopian ideals in Chinese thought. It came to existence due to the Daoist Sect of Supreme Peace which inspired the Yellow Turban Rebellion that brought an end to the Han dynasty and was then being taken up throughout the centuries of Chinese history, up to the Taping Rebellion that took place between 1850 and 1864.
18. See Zhu Xi (1130–1200) in Zhu 1986, p. 2679 and Zhang Xuecheng (1738–1801) in Zhang 2012, p. 2.
19. Cf. In Makeham 2010 none of its representatives: Li Gou, Chen Liang, or Ye Shi is mentioned. In general, studies of Neo-Confucianism focus on the ‘learning of principle’ (*lixue*) and ‘learning of mind’ (*xinxue*), sometimes touching upon ‘learning of the matter-energy’ (*qixue*), but almost always neglecting the fourth branch, namely *shigongxue*. One of the main exceptions is Tillman 1982.

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