

# Marxist Theories of Ideology in Contemporary China: The Pioneering Work of Yu Wujin

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## Abstract

Despite widespread beliefs to the contrary, Marxism is still highly significant in China. Therefore, my paper studies the contemporary usage of one of the key concepts of Marxist theory: ideology. While one can draw on numerous accounts of Western political scientists of the shifting ideology of the CCP leadership, Western scholarship has overlooked critical theories of ideology of Chinese origin that developed in the 1990s in the context of an academic re-evaluation of Karl Marx's theories. My paper analyses the work of Yu Wujin (俞吾金, 1948–2014), a key representative of this intellectual current. His monograph *On Ideology* was the first comprehensive treatment of the concept by a Chinese scholar. Clarifying the relation of Yu's theory of ideology with CCP positions, I will argue that in leaving behind dialectical materialism and in reviving ideology in its critical sense, his work provides a theoretical foundation for a limited pluralization of Marxist discourse in reform era China.

**Keywords:** Marxism in China, concepts of ideology, critique of ideology, Yu Wujin

## Marksistične teorije ideologije v sodobni Kitajski: pionirsko delo Yu Wujina

### Izvilleček

V nasprotju z razširjenim prepričanjem je marksizem na Kitajskem še vedno zelo pomemben. Zato članek obravnava sodobno rabo enega ključnih konceptov marksistične teorije: ideologijo. Čeprav se pri tem lahko opremo na številne interpretacije zahodnih političnih teoretikov, ki se nanašajo na spreminjajoče se ideologije vodstva L. R. Kitajske, je zahodni akademski svet spregledal kritične teorije ideologije, ki so se na Kitajskem razvijale v 90. letih v kontekstu akademske re-evalvacije Marxovih teorij. Članek se tako osredotoča na delo enega ključnih predstavnikov tovrstnih teoretskih tokov, Yu Wujina (俞吾金, 1948–2014). Njegova monografija z naslovom *O ideologiji* predstavlja prvo celovito obravnavo tega koncepta, ki je nastala pod peresom kitajskega teoretika. Z razjasnjevanjem odnosa med Yujevo teorijo ideologije in običajnih pozicij kitajske komunistične stranke članek nazorno prikaže, da predstavlja Yujevo delo, ki se odmika od dialektičnega materializma in hkrati ponovno oživlja kritični pomen

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ideologije, teoretsko osnovo za omejeno pluralizacijo marksističnega diskurza na Kitajskem v obdobju reform.

**Ključne besede:** marksizem na Kitajskem, koncepti ideologije, kritika ideologije, Yu Wujin

## Introduction

For roughly two decades since the 1990s, there was not much scholarly interest in critical analyses of the supposedly worn-out concept of ideology in China studies. This tendency corresponded to the general research atmosphere in the humanities and social and political sciences after the end of the Cold War that was influenced by the in part de-politicized, in part neo-conservative trend in journalism and promoted the biased view of the “end of history”<sup>1</sup> and triumphantly predicted the advent of a “post-ideological age” in the process of the worldwide victory of capitalism (Herkommer 1999, 5–6).

Thus, when faced with the Chinese reform policies, the mainstream of Western academia and media in the 1990s usually portrayed ideology as an anachronistic relict in a process of “de-ideologisation” that was supposed to be characterized by a purely pragmatic striving at economic modernization. These approaches lacked the explicit clarifications of the underlying concepts of ideology, while platitudes of Western discourses on China such as the notorious “ideological vacuum” contradicted the dominant political self-image of the CCP (Kittlaus 2002). Thus, protestations of the CCP’s ruling elite to adhere to the road of socialism and to attend to the further development of Marxist theory are dismissed by many Western observers as mere lip service to a seemingly outmoded state doctrine.

Chinese scholars of Western philosophy and Confucianism joined in the widespread celebration of the supposed prospect of the “end of ideology” in China. Among them was a tendency to look down upon Marxism as a mere study of politics that lacked any serious philosophical foundation. Their lack of understanding can be explained by the fact that they only learned about Marxism from Chinese translations of the Soviet textbooks on Marxist philosophy. These books portrayed the orthodox Stalinist version of dialectical materialism that had been the authoritative source of knowledge of Marxism in the PRC far beyond the Mao Zedong era.

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1 “The end of history” had been predicted by Francis Fukuyama (1992).

Despite increasingly outright denunciations of Marxism per se as anachronistic and dogmatic, beginning in the 1990s, China's academic sphere nevertheless witnessed what the Chinese scholar Hu Daping calls a "re-Marxization" (Hu 2010, 193). It shows an increased engagement of Chinese scholars with the esoteric parts of the work of Karl Marx and with Western Marxism. A part of this is a shift towards interpreting Marx' oeuvre primarily as a critique of capitalist modernity. How does this discourse relate to the official Marxist discourse, that is the efforts to create a theoretical foundation for "socialism with Chinese characteristics" (*Zhongguo tese shehuizhuyi* 中国特色社会主义)? Hu Daping describes the first line of research as "un-ideological, academic" and the second as "ideological." However, in his view, the peculiarity of the Chinese context is not that these two Marxist discourses exist at all, but that they usually cannot be distinguished from one another (ibid., 194). In a similar vein, Arif Dirlik stresses the necessity to differentiate between "Chinese Marxism" (*Zhongguo makesizhuyi* 中国马克思主义) and "Marxism in China" (*makesizhuyi zai Zhongguo* 马克思主义在中国). The latter is "broader in compass and more diffuse" (Dirlik 2016, 302) and has hardly been researched.

In my view, dichotomizations of "CCP Marxism" and academic Marxism are only valid to a limited degree. Therefore, my paper aims at showing the overlap of these two supposedly different Marxisms by analysing Yu Wujin's monograph *On Ideology* (*Yishixingtai lun* 意识形态论), which at the time of its publication in 1993 was the first comprehensive treatment of the topic and a milestone in the re-appropriation of Marxist theory in China (Yu 1993). I will argue that Yu Wujin departs from the former orthodoxy of dialectical materialism and the connected neutral conception of ideology, and puts forth a position in which Marx's theory of ideology is mainly viewed as a critique of ideology. In simultaneously reaffirming the validity of theories of ideology of "the Eastern socialist states," Yu's book presents a field of tension between the officially approved reevaluation of texts of the Marxist tradition that is marked by the search of a coherent theory for the Chinese reform era, on the one hand, and the critical potential that goes along with the dissemination of new interpretations of Marx's work, on the other. Thus, initial insights into Yu's theory of ideology shall serve as a window into the vibrant discourses of Marxist theory in China.

## Concepts of Ideology in the Marxist Tradition

Given that ideology is a highly ambiguous term and that a generally accepted definition does not exist,<sup>2</sup> an overview of the meanings of ideology in the Marxist tradition must suffice here in order to mark the intellectual heritage and environment of Yu Wujin's work. All of these concepts of ideology can be traced back to the writings of Marx and Engels, who developed a critical-theoretical concept that they applied differently in various contexts. Three main lines of thought have been derived from their writings: 1) a critical conception advocated by Georg Lukács and proponents of the Frankfurt School, who interpret ideology as false or reified consciousness; 2) a conception advocated by Antonio Gramsci and Louis Althusser in which the ideological is viewed as an ensemble of apparatuses and forms of practice that organizes the understanding of individuals of themselves and their world; 3) a neutral and positive conception mainly put forth by Lenin that conceives of ideology as a class-specific worldview that became dominant in Marxism-Leninism.

### (1) The Critical Conception of Ideology

For the young Karl Marx of the 1840s, ideology designates a system of ideas, beliefs and worldviews that faces men in an alien way and therefore dominates them. In *The German Ideology* Marx and Engels use the concept in order to analyse the activities and ideas of contemporary intellectuals in so far as the latter justify rule and engage in the illusionary universalization of class interests (Khatib 2010, 1–28). Accordingly, *ideologiekritik* attempts to discard heteronomy by way of revealing the subservience of patterns of understanding to bourgeois rule (Reitz 2004, 690).

In his seminal work *Capital* Marx gave up the concept of ideology in his development of the theory of “commodity fetishism and its secret.” People do not meet directly in the process of commodity exchange, but through the commodity that they exchange. The commodity obscures the social relation and makes the exchange appear as a relation between things—commodities. The idea of the

2 A comprehensive review of *all* relevant definitions of ideology is neither possible nor necessary here, since my analysis is limited to inner-Marxist debates on ideology. In his seminal work on the subject, Terry Eagleton stresses that ideology can be defined in roughly six different ways: 1) General material process of production of ideas, beliefs and values in social life. 2) Ideas and beliefs (whether true or false) which symbolize the conditions and life experiences of a specific, socially significant group or class. 3) The promotion and legitimation of the interests of such social groups in the face of opposing interests. 4) The promotion and legitimation of sectoral interests, but confined to the activities of a dominant social power. This may involve the assumption that such Ideology dominant ideologies help to unify a social formation in ways convenient for its rulers. 5) Ideology signifies ideas and beliefs which help to legitimate the interests of a ruling group or class, specifically by distortion and dissimulation. 6) False or deceptive beliefs that arise not from the interests of a dominant class but from the material structure of society as a whole. The term ideology remains pejorative, but a class-genetic account of it is avoided. The most celebrated instance of this sense of ideology, as we shall see, is Marx's theory of the fetishism of commodities. (see Eagleton 1991, 28)

autonomous interaction of commodities goes along with naturalizing the social and historical character of the commodity exchange and controls the actual social condition of human beings in capitalist societies (Eagleton 1991). Thus, in *Capital*, two factors Marx had stressed in *The German Ideology* are missing: the justifying function of the thought form in question and the systematizing activities of “ideologues” (Reitz 2004, 699).

Based on Marx’ reflections, Georg Lukács conceptualized ideology as a necessary and false consciousness that is structurally determined by commodity fetishism (Lukács 1991). In this interpretation, ideology neither evolves from intentionally fraudulent manoeuvres by “ideologues” nor from subjective misconceptions, but designates an objective social relation.

Lukács and all subsequent currents in neo-Marxism (such as the theories of the Frankfurt School) that highlighted the significance of “commodity fetishism” aim at the enlightening and liberating effect of the self-knowledge of bourgeois societies (Khatib 2010, 9). As Herbert Schnädelbach points out, ideology is a critical concept and its meaning inseparable from the impulse of enlightenment. For him and many other Critical theorists, the term is only used legitimately when the refusal to view the status quo of society as something final and unchangeable is combined with the awareness that all spontaneous expressions of opinions about society that lack a previous intellectual effort are necessarily ideological (Schnädelbach 1968, 92).

## (2) The Materiality of Ideology

In contrast to critical concepts of ideology, the French philosopher Louis Althusser rejected the dominant meaning of the term as a system of ideas and conceptualized it as living, habitual and social practice (Althusser 1971, 121–76). In his structuralist reading of Marx, Althusser suspenses the entire vulgar and neo-Marxist problem of ideology as one of false or necessarily false ideas along with all its epistemological implications, and locates ideology in the material practices and rituals of “ideological state apparatuses (ISA).” Thus, while he externalizes the ideological in an outer apparatus, the subject as the locus of the old understanding of ideology disappears and is constituted through an ideological and material effect of an ideological interpellation as a subject by the ISA. Ideology is thus viewed as performative materiality that is created through ritual practice (Rehmann 2004, 717–60).

## (3) Neutral and Positive Concepts of Ideology

Neutral concepts of ideology view it as a corpus of ideas that is characteristic for certain social groups or classes. Around the end of the 19th century, early Marxists such as Georgi Plechanow and Karl Kautsky picked up on the sense of ideology as

the mental forms within which men and women fight out their social conflicts that Marx put forward in his later writings. The revisionist Marxist Eduard Bernstein began to speak boldly of “socialist ideology,” which marked the transition of ideology from a negative to positive concept in socialist discourses (Eagleton 1991, 89–90). From then on, ideology was used neutrally in many Marxist-oriented political theories and positively when discussing the efforts to mould the political thinking of the masses in a manner consistent with socialist aims (Mahoney 2009, 135–66). In Lenin’s writings, “ideology” is identical with the scientific theory of historical materialism. Thus, in socialist states Marxism-Leninism served as the ideology of the proletariat. Here, ideology stands for a system of theories that not only claims to generate correct, scientific knowledge, but also guarantees success in achieving and maintaining political power as well as in creating a socialist social order, and further development towards a communist social order (Herkommer 1999, 5).

In “What is to be done?” Lenin referred to socialist ideology as “true consciousness” (Lenin 1961, 347–530). To him, Marxism was an ideology insofar as it was a discourse deployed to transform the “false consciousness of capitalist values.” In Lenin’s conception it was only through the formulation of the “correct” proletarian ideology of communist vanguard parties that ideology could be used as a weapon of the masses in the struggle to overcome capitalism.

As Gregory Mahoney points out, it was in Lenin’s sense of the term that ideology (*yishixingtai* 意识形态) entered the Chinese language between 1895 and 1910 via Japanese through an unknown Marxist text that was supposedly written by Lenin (Mahoney 2009, 141). Since the beginning, ideology was thus a positively framed term in China and carried with it the Leninist conceptualization of vanguardism (*ibid.*, 135). In Chinese Marxist discourse, *yishixingtai* and the much broader term *sixiang* (思想) are often used equally as concept words for ideology.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, *yishixingtai* had a fixed meaning long before Marxist intellectuals had begun to translate parts of the *The German Ideology* into Chinese little by little. For these reasons, “ideology” became a key concept in the revolutionary transformations of modern China. Mahoney stresses that “the Chinese concept of ideology remained stable as a specialized term in the CCP lexicon from Mao Zedong to the present day, even if its substance has transformed through time” (*ibid.*, 136).

3 Unsurprisingly, this frequently causes theoretical confusion. A rigorous analysis of the concept words of ideology in Chinese is unfortunately beyond the scope of this article. For a brief discussion of linguistic and translational aspects of Chinese Marxism and ideology, see Mahoney (2011, 72–76).



## The Status of “Ideology” in China Studies

Keeping in mind this brief overview of the competing concepts of ideology, the undifferentiated use of which can quickly cause misunderstandings, the status of ideology in China studies and China-related political science can be illustrated.

In contrast to mainstream scholarship on China in the 1990s, to Kalprana Misra issues of ideology and intellectual debates about policy remained extremely significant in the Deng era. In her seminal work on the development of Chinese Marxism in the 1980s and 1990s she therefore argues against the dominant, “cynical views of ideology” in China studies. Misra claims that these views deny the important role of ideology on the basis of a “power-interest” perspective that regards it as nothing more than a cover-up in power struggles or retrospective rationalizations of practical measures in service of certain interests (Misra 1998, 6). Furthermore, most Western studies of Chinese politics highlight the “authority of ideology” during the Mao era, and hold practical flexibility responsible for the reform program of the Deng era.

Exceptions to these biased dichotomizations can be seen in the work of Arif Dirlik, Bill Brugger and David Kelly, among others.<sup>4</sup> In the 1990s, they argued for a more nuanced, leftist perspective on the trajectory of Chinese socialism that also involved outright critiques of the “doyens” and opinion leaders in the field of China studies in the US after 1945, mainly Benjamin Schwartz (who was also one of the targets of Misra’s critique) and Stuart R. Schram.<sup>5</sup> Taking a generally sympathetic attitude towards the aims of the Chinese revolution (but not its brutal excesses and aberrations) Dirlik, Brugger and Kelly emphasize the continuing importance of ideology in the reform era. Without discussing the concept ideology at length, they mostly use it in its neutral sense.<sup>6</sup> To them, Schwartz and Schram represent a conservative or even reactionary Cold War approach to the study of China and “Eastern ideologies.” This approach corresponds to Sebastian Herkommer’s critical observations regarding the perspective of German scholars on the ideology of the Soviet Union. In their view “Eastern ideologies” are blind to reality, hold on to illusions about the nature of men and function as a tool of oppression, while they claim that their own position is rational and un-ideological (see Herkommer 1999, 5). Thus, a highly influential strand of scholarship on China—especially in the 1990s—denied the relevance of ideology and used the term in a pejorative sense.

4 The works of Maurice Meisner, Paul Healy, and Nick Knight also deserve mention in this respect.

5 The most direct attack on their scholarship can be found in Dirlik et al. (1997).

6 For instance, see Dirlik (1997).

Roughly over the last fifteen years, the study of ideology became mainly confined to China-related political science.<sup>7</sup> Scholars such as Heike Holbig and Kerry Brown explore the institutionalized ideology of the CCP's ruling elite (Holbig 2013, 61–81; Brown 2012, 52–68). They generally use a neutral term of ideology that differs significantly from that in the Marxist tradition. It is mostly informed by Michael Freeden's conceptualization, which defines ideology as a "political arrangement by which groups (...) attribute decontested meanings to a set of mutually defining political concepts." To him, ideologies compete over the control of political language as well as over plans for public policy in order to support the respective political actors' status, interests or agenda (Freeden 2003).

Through the study of speeches and writings of CCP leaders, Holbig and Brown evaluate the relevance of ideology within the CCP elite and analyse the function and effectiveness of "ideological work" in China (Brown 2012, 51–52). Furthermore, they examine to what degree the top-down dissemination of ideology meets the purpose of bringing about social cohesion, in Chinese society or at least among the political elite (*ibid.*). There is a general consensus that the purpose of the construction of a comprehensive party-state ideology is "to secure long-term CCP rule by creating confidence in the China path as an alternative to the Western political and economic system" (Shi-Kupfer 2017, 23), or simply "to legitimize authoritarian rule" (Holbig 2013, 61).

Drawing on Freeden's description of the operating modes of ideology and/or post-modern, Foucauldian analyses of power relations, ideology in China is depicted as "a matter (...) of playing by the rules of the official language game" (Holbig 2013, 61; Brown 2012, 65). Very often, this strand of research is implicitly governed by the apparent mystery of how the supposed "pragmatism" of the CCP in the reform era goes along with the observation that nevertheless "in the language of CCP leaders (...) there does seem to be ideology" (Brown 2012, 52). In my view, this dichotomization of "pragmatism" and "ideology" overlooks the fact that the invocation in politics of pragmatism itself is highly ideological. In the context of reform era China it seems safe to state that "pragmatism" is not the opposite of the CCP's ideology, but a crucial part of it.

Pointing to the expansion of the nationwide system of party schools since the beginning of Hu Jintao's chairmanship in 2004, Holbig highlights the CCP's quest to strengthen the institutional network for "ideological work." Scholars of

7 In cultural and literary theory, discussions on ideology tend to be overloaded with postmodern and poststructuralist theory of one kind or another and usually do not deal with the issue at hand, that is Marxist theories of ideology and their political implications. An excellent exception is Liu Kang's work, especially "What is 'Socialism with Chinese Characteristics'?" (Liu 2003, 46–77).



the CCP's propaganda apparatus such as Ann-Marie Brady and David Shambaugh stress that contrary to the widespread belief that economic reforms and the commercialization of the media have led to a decline in importance of propaganda and ideology, "propaganda and thought work are the very life blood of the party-state," and in recent years have been utterly successful (Holbig 2013, 66). Therefore, these recent studies conclude that ideology still plays a significant role in Chinese politics, thereby rejecting the idea of China as a post-ideological society that was popular in the 1990s.

It needs to be acknowledged that the aforementioned works on the ideology of the Chinese party-state give a precise definition of the term and rightly discard the idea of the declining significance of ideology in the CCP leadership. However, it is exactly this narrowing of the issue of ideology to a matter of high politics, propaganda and party training that prevents any engagement with *critical theories* of ideology in China. Indeed, although institutes of philosophy and schools of Marxism at most Chinese universities all over the country place great emphasis on the study of critical approaches to Marxism (and ideology),<sup>8</sup> to date no Western study on this topic is available. Likewise, Arif Dirlik observes that "recently published studies on Chinese Marxism read mostly as histories of policy innovations by successive generations of communist leaders that are now endowed with theoretical status in the formulation of Chinese Marxism." Furthermore, he sees "little visible concern in these texts for theoretical discussions that critically engage issues of Marxist theory with reference to Deng's and other leaders' theories" (Dirlik 2016, 340).

## Yu Wujin's "On Ideology"

Below, I will take the CCPs interpretations as a frame of reference for locating and observing Yu Wujin's work on ideology. Having served as the Director of the Institute of Modern Philosophy and leader of the Research Center of Contemporary Foreign Marxism at Fudan University, Yu Wujin (俞吾金, 1948–2014) was one of the leading scholars of Western Marxism in the reform era and was

8 One can easily illustrate the ongoing relevance of Marxist theory in China by looking at its institutional foothold: Alongside more than 100 schools of Marxism that are affiliated with almost every relevant university all over the country, there is a large system of party schools that together publish over 100 journals (Mahoney 2016). Additionally, the study of Marxist theories constitutes an integral part of research at Chinese universities, especially at institutes of philosophy many of which have established research facilities that are dedicated to the study of "Western Marxism" (*xifang makesizhuyi* 西方马克思主义).

engaged in the reevaluation of Karl Marx.<sup>9</sup> While Western scholarship has completely overlooked Yu Wujin, he enjoys high academic status in China.<sup>10</sup>

Yu's monograph *On Ideology* (*Yishixingtai lun* 意识形态论) was published in 1993. So far, it is the most comprehensive study of the topic by a Chinese scholar and can be considered a key text of the academic re-evaluation of Marxist theory in China in the 1990s. *On Ideology* traces the evolution of the concept from its origins in the writings of French enlightenment philosophers to contemporary analyses by proponents of Critical Theory, and ends with an account of the theory of ideology of China in the early 1990s. The main focus lies on the analysis of the work of Karl Marx that roughly constitutes one third of the book.

One reason why *On Ideology* deserves our attention is that it was published in a watershed period. The late 1980s and early 1990s witnessed the demise of the Soviet Union and state socialism in Eastern Europe. As a consequence, in the early 1990s the narrative of the "end of ideology" and the "end of history" became hegemonic in Western media. In China, the tragic events at Tiananmen Square in 1989 put to rest attempts to reform Chinese Marxism by a young-Marxian group of recognized Party intellectuals on the basis of humanism. At the times of the limited liberation of Marxist philosophy and political economy that took place after 1978, this group competed in stimulating discussions about the future of Chinese socialism with proponents of orthodox Marxism-Leninism and a group of "revisionists" (the "reformers" or "progressives" from a western point of view).<sup>11</sup> In the 1990s many public intellectuals became professional scholars, focusing on the rebuilding of academic standards, while many younger scholars—such as Yu Wujin—preferred to find a niche as specialists within the disciplinary structure of the academic establishment instead of engaging in public debates on the future of China.<sup>12</sup>

9 Born in Xiaoshan in Zhejiang province in 1948, Yu Wujin's family moved to Shanghai in his childhood. After his *gaozhong* graduation in 1968, at the age of 20, he became worker at a power supply factory in Shanghai where he worked for 10 years before he became a student of Philosophy at Fudan University, where he also obtained a doctoral degree and eventually became professor in 1993.

10 The "First Yu Wujin Academic Forum" (*di yi ju Yu Wujin xueshu luntan* 第一居俞吾金学术论坛) held at Fudan University in 2016 points to the importance placed on Yu by Chinese academic circles.

11 For an excellent study of the Marxist discussions in the 1980s in China with a special focus on Marxist humanism, see Brugger et al. (1990).

12 For a general overview of the intellectual field in the reform era from a liberal perspective, see Xu (2000, 169–86).

Against this background, I will now provide an overview of three themes in Yu Wujin's discussion of ideology: 1) dialectical materialism and Stalinism; 2) humanist Marxism in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe; 3) the "nature" of Marx's theory of ideology.

### *Yu Wujin's Evaluation of Dialectical Materialism and Stalinism*

Yu Wujin devoted his energies to the study of the concept of ideology because of his dissatisfaction with the dominance of dialectical materialism of the orthodox Stalinist kind in official accounts of Marxist philosophy in China. In the section titled "A Tentative Definition of Ideology," Yu stresses the necessity to distinguish between the concepts of "consciousness" (*yishi* 意识), "social consciousness" (*shehui yishi* 社会意识) and "ideology" (*yishixingtai* 意识形态). In the authoritative philosophical textbook of the Soviet Union and in its Chinese translations, the concept of ideology mainly appears in the section on dialectical materialism (*bianzheng weiwuzhuyi* 辩证唯物主义). Here, consciousness is presented as a "reflection of being" (*cunzai de fanying* 存在的反映), and social consciousness as a "reflection of social being" (*shehui cunzai de fanying* 社会存在的反映). To Yu, this division of consciousness is groundless, for it fosters the illusion of the existence of a socially unmediated consciousness. Thus, he concludes, this division contradicts the intention of Karl Marx who emphasized that consciousness is always a product of society (Yu 1993, 126–28). Furthermore, Yu perceives a lack of a clear systematic distinction in the use of the Marxian terms "ideology" (*yishixingtai*) and "form of consciousness" (*yishi xingshi* 意识形式) that limited the quality of reasoning in Chinese Marxist philosophy. The source of the confusion is partly a matter of translation: The literal meaning of *yishixingtai* is "form of consciousness." Thus, it was necessary for Yu Wujin to clarify the different meanings of the terms. In the writings of Marx and Engels, Yu explains, the concept of ideology stands for a totality or an "organic whole" (*youji zhengti* 有机整体) that consists of a multitude of different forms of consciousness such as religion, law, etc (ibid., 129).

Furthermore, Yu Wujin prepends a discussion of the contributions of the late Friedrich Engels to Marx's theory of ideology to his brief comments on Joseph Stalin's "theory of ideology" (*yishixingtai lilun* 意识形态理论). In Yu's view, Engels must be praised for his vehement refutation of the tendency within the organized Marxism of his time towards mechanistic materialism (*jixie weiwuzhuyi* 机械唯物主义). Defending Marx's and his own writings against their appropriation by proponents of "formalizing interpretations and stereotypical, narrow-minded usages of historical materialism," Engels highlighted the "relative autonomy" of ideologies. To Yu, it is

Engels' great achievement to have further demonstrated how retroactive effects of ideology on the material basis operate, how ideologies differ in respect to the degree of directness of retroactive effects on the basis, but also to have stressed the strict limits of these effects that by no means can be enforced arbitrarily (Yu 1993, 118–23).

Yu sees a further important contribution of Engels to Marx's critique of ideology in his introduction of the principle of the negation of the negation (*fouding de fouding* 否定的否定) and the concept of sublation (*yangqi* 扬弃). For Engels, the process of dialectical negation (*bianzheng fouding* 辩证否定) is at work in nature and society. Yu disagrees with Engels on this point, but avoids directly criticizing him and highlights the supposed benefits of Engels' conception for the theory and practice of society: "Dialectical negation doesn't simply say no to tradition and ideologies, but includes elements of preservation as well as elements of over-coming" (ibid., 124).

Building on the review of the late Engels' contribution to Marx's theory of ideology, Yu passes a historical judgment on Stalin. The latter was a "great Marxist," but "on the political and ideological level, his false line of broadening class struggle significantly led to disastrous and fatal results for the Soviet Union and all socialist projects in Eastern Europe" (ibid., 126). Yu criticizes the mechanistic elements in Stalin's "theory of ideology" that mistakenly saw dialectical materialism (*bianzheng weiwuzhuyi* 辩证唯物主义) as the basis of historical materialism (*lishi weiwuzhuyi*, 历史唯物主义), as to Yu it is clearly the other way around. He states that Stalin was right when he stressed—like Engels and Lenin before him—the significance of the ongoing struggle in the history of philosophy between materialism and idealism, but going beyond his intellectual predecessors in simplifying and sharpening these contradictions was a huge mistake that provided the theoretical basis for the misguided class struggle in Soviet society. In contrast, Lenin and the early Mao Zedong had made comments on the matter of ideology that were in accordance with the idea of the relative autonomy of ideology, and had dismissed the sense of ideology as just the passive product of social life. For Yu, it was especially in Mao's writings of the late 1930s that included arguments against mechanistic materialism and stressed the necessity of a dialectical handling of traditional ideologies (ibid., 12).

### *Humanist Marxism in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe*

Yu Wujin speaks favourably of the CCP's reform path after 1978 and the official positions regarding ideology, but stresses the necessity to "seek a balance between a scientific spirit and humanism" (ibid., 348). This statement obviously relates to

the open and heated discussions among Marxist establishment intellectuals in the 1980s. Facing the disastrous results of the “Cultural Revolution” and Stalinism in the Soviet Union, Wang Ruoshui (王若水, 1926–2002) and his intellectual companions sought a revitalization of Marxism on the basis of humanism and the theory of alienation, both of which were important themes of Marx’s early writings. By the end of the decade though, Marxist humanism had been silenced through several interventions of orthodox Party theoreticians who denounced it as a form of “bourgeois humanism” that harms China’s socialist system.<sup>13</sup>

Yu does not directly mention the theoretical discussions on humanism in the 1980s in *On Ideology*, but he evaluates them implicitly in a brief portrayal of the developments of socialist ideology in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe in the aftermath of Stalin’s death. Yu cites a group of Russian philosophers who in 1955 called for a new socialist ideology, “a truly humanist, deeply fraternally ideology, that is thus the peaceful ideology of the people of all countries” (Yu 1993, 7). This “new ideology,” Yu goes on to explain, builds on the philosophical doctrine of abstract humanism (*chouxiang de rendaozhuyi* 抽象的人道主义) that had developed from the French enlightenment movement. Subsequently, the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe witnessed the rise of unorthodox, “unofficial” (*minjian* 民间) theories of ideology propagated by Czech existentialism, the Yugoslavian praxis group, the Polish group of philosophical humanism and the Budapest school, which de-emphasized the class character of ideology and relied heavily on Western philosophy. For Yu, this departed from Marx’s scientific theory of ideology by abandoning historical materialism and denying the “basic truth of the clash of socialist and capitalist ideology.” However, Yu is equally critical of the official theory that highlights the unity of the class-relatedness and the scientific character of socialist ideology, but is too formalized and lacks innovative research on ideology (*ibid.*) Under the leadership of Mikhail Gorbachev, Yu observes, the “unofficial ideology” (*minjian yishixingtai* 民间意识形态) slowly turned into official ideology. The dissolution of the Soviet Union is a warning to Yu that the awareness of the confrontation of the “two big ideologies” and the conscious preservation of socialist ideology remains a crucial task of theoretical research in socialist societies (*ibid.*, 9).

Yu Wujin’s rather hasty review of theoretical currents in Eastern Europe that aimed at overcoming the dogmatism in orthodox Marxism certainly gives a hint at his perspective on the not explicitly mentioned matter of humanist Marxism in China. As is well known, the writings of Chinese humanist Marxists such as Wang Ruoshui drew heavily upon ideas from Western Marxism and unorthodox

13 For Wang Ruoshui and humanist Marxism in China, see Brugger (1990).

Marxists from Eastern Europe, especially the praxis group and the Budapest School. Yu dismisses these theories as expressions of a false abstract humanism, thereby subscribing to the official position of the CCP. Yu's line of reasoning seems to contradict his initial assertion that Chinese Marxism needs to combine a scientific spirit and humanism. Yu does not elaborate on this point, and it is very likely that this was for tactical reasons, given the repressive political atmosphere in the aftermath of the suppression of the protest movement in 1989.

In his discussion of intellectual controversies in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe,<sup>14</sup> for example about the relation between socialism and capitalism, Yu Wujin applies value-neutral and positive concepts of ideology concerning socialism, and pejorative, but not critical, concepts concerning capitalism. Yu's reasoning corresponds to organized Marxism, which, starting with Karl Kautsky, used the term ideology interchangeably with theory or spirit. The term was also used in Marxism-Leninism as a political slogan that was applied in its positive sense with respect to "scientific communism" as a system of theories that provides true knowledge. These broad definitions of ideology allowed for the distinction of class-specific ideologies, in particular bourgeois and socialist ideology. Here, socialist ideology was viewed positively and served to enhance consolidation in socialist societies in the struggle against the ideology of the perceived class enemy (Herkommer 1999, 64).

### *The "Nature" of Marx's Theory of Ideology*

As has been mentioned before, the description and analysis of Karl Marx's theory of ideology figures prominently in Yu Wujin's history of the concept. The primary purpose of *On Ideology* lies in making his new interpretation of Marx's theory of ideology accessible to a Chinese audience, which mostly knew Marx's work through the lens of its Marxist-Leninist distortions. This observation can be confirmed through a glance at the final passage of the book, in which Yu states:

Written jointly by Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology* is not only the most important document in the history of Marxist philosophy and the history of the concept of ideology, but also one of the most important documents in the history of thought of all mankind. This means that Marx is our contemporary; this means that understanding Marx is still

14 This observation holds also true for his discussion of the development of the CCP's ideology in the reform era.



the philosophical subject of our times; this means that to understand Marx we must go back into Marx's own writings. (Yu 1993, 381)<sup>15</sup>

In the introductory chapter of *On Ideology*, Yu Wujin explains that the “real significance” and value of research on ideology lies in broadening knowledge of Marx's historical materialism. To Yu, Marx' theory of ideology is “essentially” (*benzhi shang* 本质上) a theory of critique of ideology (*yishixingtai pipan lilun* 意识形态批判理论). Furthermore, the critique of ideology is the precondition for historical materialism, just as historical materialism is the starting point of critique of ideology. Yu Wujin underlines that “only through the study of the problem of ideology, we can see that historical materialism is a critical theory, or rather a critique of ideology. Thereby, we can reach a meta-critical perspective” (*ibid.*, 15). In Yu's view, without a critique of ideology historical materialism could degenerate into an unsophisticated empiricism. This would result in a merely academic form of knowledge that completely abandons the much needed critical dimension and the focus on totality (*zongti* 总体). Thus, in order “to maintain [its] revolutionary nature,” ideological critique must be considered an indispensable element of the theory of historical materialism (*ibid.*).

Yu Wujin evaluates Marx's use of the term ideology based on the categorization of Raymond Geuss, who differentiates between descriptive, pejorative and positive concepts of ideology.<sup>16</sup> Yu does so, not by way of reviewing debates of ideology in Western Marxism that he had studied intensively,<sup>17</sup> but by referring to theorists from the German Democratic Republic (GDR). In general agreement with Erich Hahn and Peter Christian Ludz, Yu arrives at the conclusion that the “true essence” (*zhendi* 真谛) of Marx's concept of ideology was pejorative, but is critical of GDR theorists who reduced ideology to a matter of “false consciousness”

15 马克思和恩格斯合著的德意志意识形态不仅是马克思主义哲学发展史和意识形态概念史上的最重要的文献，也是整个人类思想史上的最重要的文献之一。这就是说，马克思是我们的同时代人；这就是说，理解马克思仍然是我们时代的哲学主题；这就是说，理解马克思必须回到马克思本人的著作中去。

16 In Geuss' categorization the pejorative concept denotes “criticism of the beliefs, attitudes, and wants of the agents in a particular society” with the aim of freeing “the agents from a particular kind of delusion,” that is not based on a “empirical mistake.” His “pejorative concept” is therefore equivalent to what other theorists categorize as negative or critical. (Geuss 1999, 12)

17 In order to research Western ideological theory, Yu stayed at Frankfurt University from 1988 to 1990 as a visiting scholar under the supervision of the renowned German political scientist Iring Fetscher (1922–2014). Loosely associated with the second generation of the Frankfurt School, Fetscher analysed the development of Marxist theory as ideology in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. Yu also participated in academic workshops on the concept of ideology organized by the philosopher Alfred Schmidt. Schmidt was Theodor Adorno's and Max Horkheimer's student and is considered to be a pioneer of an undogmatic, emancipatory reception of Marx. Yu states that through these encounters he reached a deeper understanding of key texts of the Critical theory of the Frankfurt School and Western Marxism in general. (Yu 1993, 8–9)

(*xujia yishi* 虚假意识).<sup>18</sup> Although Marx and Engels occasionally used the term in a descriptive manner, Yu argues it would be best to view ideology “essentially as a spiritual force that fabricates illusions, obscures the real conditions and is an upside down, mystical reflection of reality” (Yu 1993, 128). Therefore, Yu defines Marx’s concept of ideology as follows:

In class societies, [ideology] takes shape in the legal and political super-structure that suits the economical basis and which is built on the latter. [It] represents the basic interests and emotions, the sum of appearances and ideas of the ruling class. Its basic feature is the conscious or unconscious use of illusionary relations in order to replace and disguise the real relations.<sup>19</sup> (ibid., 129)

Yu’s understanding of Marx’ concept of ideology,<sup>20</sup> as outlined in the above quotation, is in accordance with the Marx’s and Engels’ in *The German Ideology*, although they never explicitly defined the term.

Thus, it seems contradictory that in the passage on the development of Marx’s conception of ideology in *Capital*, Yu Wujin claims that the centre of Marx’s critique of bourgeois ideology is the critique of the commodity fetish (*shangpin baiwujiao* 商品拜物教), which conceals that the real purpose of the capitalist mode of production is the generation of value. In the fetishism of bourgeois economy the social character of things becomes a natural quality. Therefore, Yu considers the transformation of the labour theory of value of classical economy into a “theory of the value of labour power” (*laodongli de jiazhi lilun* 劳动力的价值理论) as Marx’s historical contribution to the research of political economy. Since Marx revealed that only labour power allows for the generation of value, Marx’s theory destroys the “centre of capitalist ideology,” which is the commodity fetish. Yu further emphasizes that the critique of the commodity fetish is highly important for both the analysis of capitalist societies and China’s developing commodity economy (ibid., 89–92).

Therefore, if the commodity fetish is the centre of capitalist ideology and China is developing a commodity economy, this could be read as a claim that China was

18 To Yu, this reduction causes a lot of problems and misunderstandings, i.e. is ideology completely illusionary? Is it a malicious invention or unconscious false ideas? (Yu 1993, 130)

19 在阶级社会中，适合一定经济基础以及竖立在这一基础之上的法律和政治的上层建筑而形成起来，代表统治阶级根本利益的情感，表象和观念的总和，其根本的特征是自觉地或不自觉地向幻想的联系来取代并掩蔽现实的联系。

20 Yu states that this definition is not sufficient and needs to be supplemented by the five following features of Marx’ conception: practicality/ practice-orientation (*shijianxing* 实践性), aims at totality (*zongtixing* 总体性), class-relatedness (*jiejixing* 阶级性), disguises (*yanbixing* 掩蔽性) real conditions, relative autonomy (*xiangdui dulixing* 相对独立性). (Yu 1993, 129–37)

in the process of becoming a capitalist society. It would however be misleading to interpret Yu's line of reasoning as an indication of a subversive attitude. Yu emphasizes the "general confrontation of capitalist and bourgeois ideology," while also underlining that it is necessary to distinguish between "ideologies in a socialist society" (*shehuizhuyi shehui de yishixingtai* 社会主义社会的意识形态), and "socialist ideology" (*shehuizhuyi yishixingtai* 社会主义意识形态) that denotes the most important ideology in socialist society. Given the mix of forms of ownership and the existence and development of different classes in socialist China, Yu argues, that its socialist society is full of contradictions. This finds its expression in the ideological field (*yishixingtai lingyu* 意识形态领域), which consists of contradictory ideologies (socialist, bourgeois, petit-bourgeois, etc.). Therefore, in socialist China ideology becomes an ensemble of ideas (*guannian zongti* 观念总体) with complicated structural relations. (Yu 2009, 350)

Yu's view on socialist ideology is clearly in line with the official announcement in 1987 of the entry into the "primary stage of socialism" (*shehuizhuyi chuji jieduan* 社会主义初级阶段), a formulation that served as a theoretical justification for the re-introduction of markets and was said to correspond to the economic policies of the early PRC. His ideas also echo the position of the CCP of the late 1980s that China could make use of a capitalist sociation mode without importing its perceived "bad sides." Yu likewise implies (although he does not state explicitly) that it is possible to establish a commodity economy without falling in the trap of its ideology that is the commodity fetish. Given that the commodity fetish was explained by Marx as a "real abstraction," that is, as distorted economic practice instead of a spiritual distortion of economic practice, he would have rejected the idea of controlling the fetish by disseminating knowledge of it, rather than aiming at the destruction of its basis as a socialist praxis.

Despite Yu's tendency to move away from Marx in this respect, he still provided a huge contribution to the understanding of Marx's concepts of ideology, which had been obscured by the deformed interpretations in official Soviet and Chinese discourses. Building on Marx's argument in *The German Ideology*, Yu affirms the relative autonomy of ideology. To him, a critique of ideology should not adopt a simplifying and negative attitude towards it, but must apply the method of dialectical negation, a method that Yu sees at work in Lenin's writings as well as in the early thought of Mao Zedong. By contrast, the "ideological determinism" that in Yu's view guided the politics of the Cultural Revolution and led to a general condemnation of all old Chinese and present Western ideologies, is incompatible with Marxism and Leninism. (ibid. 1993, 126).

Yu strongly emphasizes the method of dialectical negation that aims at discovering a new world through the critique of the old one, and rejects historical determinism, which in official Soviet and Chinese accounts led to the dogmatic foretelling of the future. He argues that in contemporary China it is important to engage in a critique of ideology that is “faithful to Marx’s scientific spirit,” while acknowledging that the CCP’s focus on economic development is in line with the central assumptions of the ideological theory of historical materialism. (Yu 1993, 9–11)

## Concluding Remarks

In *On Ideology*, there can be distinguished an overlap of Yu Wujin’s own re-appropriation of Marx’s theory of ideology and official positions towards socialist ideology. Yu’s work targets the petrification of Marxist theory that stemmed from the dominance of the Stalinist type of dialectical materialism as it was displayed in the Chinese translations of Soviet textbooks on philosophy. He highlights the necessity to re-engage with the original works of Marx, especially *The German Ideology*, and contemporary Western Marxism. Yu’s resolute departure from dialectical materialism does not imply the dismissal of Marxism-Leninism per se, and even less so the abandoning of dialectics. He advocates both a critical concept of ideology that he claims to be essential in Marx’s works, as well as the method of dialectical negation in the treatment of ideologies. According to Yu, ideological critique is a key component of the incontestable theory of historical materialism.

Yu’s interpretations are generally consistent with the CCP’s economic policy of the time. He expresses this, on a terminological level, through using ideology in a neutral or positive sense when discussing the “the ideology of the CCP,” and using the concept in a pejorative sense when touching upon “capitalist ideologies.” However, in emphasizing the critical character of Marx’s conception of ideology, Yu paves the way for abandoning the official use of the term in organized Marxism. Here, critique of ideology, which combines anti-authoritarianism with political intervention, was replaced by an abstract and general definition that at best understands ideology as the spiritual expression of the material circumstances and interests of a class. As Reitz argues, in the long run, this definition of ideology contributed to the official Soviet position that a tight form of sociation from above is sanctioned by Marxist theory. Consequently, the prior repression of ideological critique becomes one of the theoretical preconditions for Stalinism (Reitz 2004, 702).

Although Yu does not engage in a critique of ideology, his work indicates that Marx’s critical theory can also be applied in the Chinese context. Yu thus provides a theoretical foundation for a critical re-evaluation of Marxism in China, refuting

certain dogmatic forms of Marxism that had long become an ideology in its critical sense. Yu's work exhibits a remarkable fusion of Marxism as an ideology and Marxism as a critique of ideology.

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