A Comparative Analysis of Two Paradigms of "Power and Reality" in Eastern and Western Traditional Cultures: A Cross-cultural Interpretation of Marx's Concept of Productive Forces

Shi Yanan

School of Marxism, Northwestern Polytechnical University, Xi'an, Shaanxi Province, China
Email: 3161164485@qq.com
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Abstract—**Based on the paradigmatic differences regarding "power and reality" in Eastern and Western cultures, this paper interprets the theoretical connotations of Marx's concept of productive forces from a cross-cultural perspective. The Western cultural tradition views "power" as an attribute of substance, emphasizing its use to conquer nature and transform the world. In contrast, the Eastern intellectual tradition (represented by China) emphasizes that power is generated from the "shi" (potential/propensity) within relational fields, advocating that the application of power should follow the course of nature. Marx's concept of productive forces inherits the core of the Western view of power—transforming nature and valuing efficiency—while simultaneously breaking through its implicit subject-object opposition logic, pursuing the unity of humanism and naturalism. This aligns with the wisdom of "the unity of heaven and humanity" (tian ren he yi) in Chinese culture. Through this dual connection, we can gain a deeper understanding of the theoretical and practical significance of Marx's concept of productive forces.**

Keywords—**power and reality, productive forces, ontology, methodology, cross-cultural communication**

I. Introduction

"Power" is a core category for humanity's understanding and transformation of the world. The different understandings of "power and reality" in Eastern and Western cultures have shaped two distinct paradigms of thinking and practical logic. The productive forces discussed by Marx are also a form of power [1], belonging to the tradition of Western theories of power [2]. Marx inherited this tradition while simultaneously revolutionizing it, thereby creating a resonance with Eastern wisdom. Existing research on Marx's concept of productive forces tends to focus more on economic, political, and social development dimensions, with little exploration of its theoretical innovation in transforming the Western tradition and resonating with Eastern wisdom from a cross-cultural perspective. Based on this, the core research objective of this paper is: using the paradigmatic differences in "power and reality" between East and West as a theoretical framework, to clarify the inheritance and transformation of the Western tradition of power theory by Marx's concept of productive forces, as well as its intrinsic connections with the traditional Eastern view of power (represented by China). Through this dual connection, we can understand the theoretical essence and practical significance of Marx's concept of productive forces more comprehensively and profoundly.

II. Ontology: Substance, Relation, and Practice

The divergence between the Eastern and Western views of power essentially stems from different ontological answers regarding reality. Mainstream Western thought, originating from ancient Greece, is dedicated to exploring the unchanging essence and eternal substance behind phenomena. Whether it is Democritus's atoms, Plato's ideas, or Aristotle's forms, they all presuppose a real realm that can exist independently and be grasped by reason. This "substantialist realism" [3], views the world as a collection of fundamental units, emphasizing the static, analyzable properties of things. Consequently, power is seen as an inherent attribute of substance, external to the observer, an objective, quantifiable object to be conquered and utilized.

The "relational-generative theory" of traditional Chinese culture offers a completely different ontological understanding [4]. Its highest principle—the "Dao" (Way)—never exists separately from the world of concrete, changing phenomena; it is precisely the idea that "the Dao and concrete things are inseparable, substance and function are mutually inherent" (dao qi bu li, ti yong xiang ji). The world is understood as an eternally flowing whole where all things are interconnected and resonate. Here, the most fundamental elements are not static substances, but dynamic relations and processes [5]. Power is not the exclusive property of an isolated substance but rather the "shi" (potential/propensity) generated from dynamic balance permeating the entire relational field. It is immanent within the system, situational, and holistic.

Marx accomplished an ontological revolution in Western traditional philosophy. Traditional ontology, always detached from human reality, inquired into abstract ultimate reality, such as material substance or spiritual ideas, with the philosophical mission limited to a static interpretation of the world's essence. Marx, however, leaped beyond this cognitive framework, proposing that all social life is essentially practical [6], establishing practice as the fundamental mode of human existence and the generative ontology of the existing world. This broke the presupposition of the subject-object split, revealing the world as a generative existence constantly transformed by human practice. The core mission of philosophy shifted from "interpreting the world" to "changing the world". This fundamental shift from "abstract substance" to "real

practice," from "static preformation" to "dynamic generation," reconstructed the way ontological questions are posed and its core categories, ultimately achieving a revolutionary transcendence of the traditional Western ontological paradigm.

Marx's concept of productive forces is based precisely on this practical ontology. Here, productive forces are not merely attributes of substance; they are essentially a practical-relational reality. Productive forces can only be exerted and realized within specific social relations. Therefore, productive forces themselves are a social, relational, and generative power. This, at the ontological level, breaks with the Western traditional notion of power as an attribute of substance, placing it within a dynamic field constituted by social relations. This resonates profoundly with the theory of "shi" generated in relational fields found in Chinese thought.

III. Methodology: Conquest, Guidance, and Practice

Based on ontological differences, East and West have formed two distinct logics for the application of power. The mainstream Western tradition follows the methodological model of "acting upon and conquering," emphasizing the power to accomplish things (li liang cheng wu) [7]. Its core logic is: humans, as subjects independent of the world, use instrumental reason to dissect, analyze, and model the objective world, revealing its constitutive laws; then, through technological tools, they precisely intervene, reorganize, and transform the object to achieve the goal of conquering nature and shaping society. The core of this methodology is control and efficiency, pursuing precise mastery of variables and predictable outcomes. From Bacon's "knowledge is power" to modern engineering technology and bureaucratic management, all are manifestations of this model. In short, power in the Western cultural tradition is more of an outward-expanding, transformative force of creation and conquest.

The Eastern tradition follows the methodological model of "resonant-awareness (gan tong) and guidance" [8], whose core logic is not obsessed with acquiring isolated, substantial power, but rather, within the dynamically flowing relational field, grasps the holistic and interconnected nature of reality, revealing the essence of power by acting in accordance with the tendency (shi). The starting point of this wisdom is the subject's inner cultivation through self-reflection, eliminating stubborn attachments, during which the subject's perception becomes more sensitive, and the mind becomes tranquil and clear. Only then can the subject transcend the subject-object opposition, "resonantly perceive" (gan) the subtle relational threads and the flow of "shi" within the situation. This "resonant-awareness" (gan tong) itself constitutes a profound grasp of reality in Chinese culture. Reality is never an isolated individual or a static object, but an interdependent, ever-flowing relational whole; and power is the insight into and conformity with this holistic relation. After gaining this holistic insight, the actor does not forcefully resist or directly create, but instead applies subtle and precise influence at key nodes of the system's operation, in a manner of using four ounces to deflect a thousand pounds" (si liang bo qian jin), guiding the entire system to develop naturally and harmoniously towards the desired direction. This methodology pursues the long-term value of harmonious coexistence, its ideal state akin to the penetrating clarity of "non-action yet nothing is left undone" (wu wei er wu bu wei), or the prudence of governing a large state is like cooking a small fish" (zhi da guo ruo peng xiao xian). Pattern differentiation and treatment in traditional Chinese medicine, conforming to popular sentiment in state governance, and subduing the enemy without fighting in military strategy are all exemplars of this model. In short, power in traditional Chinese culture is a guiding force that conforms to the nature of reality.

Marx's concept of productive forces inherits the core kernel of the Western tradition while forming a deep resonance with the traditional Chinese view of power, ultimately achieving a dialectical transcendence of both paradigms. From the perspective of its connection to the Western tradition, Marx emphasized changing the world [9], and productive forces are first and foremost a power to transform the world. This undoubtedly inherits the Western tradition of accomplishing things through power (li liang cheng wu), valuing the creative and transformative nature of power. However, Marx's inheritance is by no means a simple continuation. Unlike the conquest logic based on subject-object opposition embodied in the traditional Western view of power, Marx's productive forces completely abandon this obsessive desire for conquest, instead emphasizing the unity of conformity with laws and purposiveness, sublimating the power to accomplish things from conquering the object to a negating unity of human and world coexistence.

From the perspective of its connection to traditional Chinese culture, this adherence to laws and pursuit of harmony coincides with the Chinese understanding of power. Chinese culture never views power as an isolated force of conquest, but emphasizes its origin in the relational field of the symbiosis of all things, advocating following the tendency (shi) and the unity of heaven and humanity. This resonates deeply with Marx's pursuit of the unity of humanism and naturalism [10]. For Marx, the development of productive forces is by no means unrestrained expansion; there are insurmountable natural limits, and the fundamental prerequisite for their sustainable development is achieving harmonious coexistence between humanity and nature. This recognition shares similarities with the traditional Chinese view of power, which emphasizes taking and using with measure (qu zhi you du, yong zhi you jie). True power is never about confrontation and control, but rather the power of sustainable development achieved by conforming to laws and maintaining overall balance.

IV. Research Findings

Ontology asks what power is; methodology asks how power operates. Approaching the question from these two axes, and through a cross-cultural comparison of Eastern and Western paradigms of "power and being" this paper brings into clear view the threefold theoretical character of Marx's theory of productive forces.

First, its dimension of inheritance. Marx's theory inherits the Western tradition of power-as-world-making. He

conceives productive forces as a material power that transforms nature, and he attaches decisive weight to technological progress and the raising of efficiency. Following the line of thought running from Bacon through the Enlightenment, Marx affirms the foundational status of material production, recognizes technology and instruments as the concrete carriers of productive forces, and treats the development of material productive forces as the real basis of social-historical movement. In so doing, he preserves the rational kernel of the Western power-paradigm: practice as world-creative activity, and the active transformation of reality.

Second, its dimension of transformation. Yet Marx's transformation of the world is not the subject–object antagonism of the Western tradition—not conquest against nature. He insists that the development of productive forces must obey both natural and social laws, and that its telos is the more adequate realization of nature through humanity. Breaking free of the cage of Western substantive realism, Marx redefines the mode of being of productive forces through a practical ontology: productive force is a generative power rooted in the field of social relations. It is no longer a static capacity inhering in a bare substance; rather, it comes-into-being and grows within the real intercourse of humanity with nature and of human with human. Marx thereby discards the logic of unlimited domination over nature, installs the unity of conformity-to-law and conformity-to-ends as the immanent measure of productive-force development, and dissolves the classical Western split between subject and object.

Third, its dimension of resonance. Marx's pursuit of the harmonious coexistence of humanity and nature resonates internally with the Chinese tradition of "unity of Heaven and humanity" (tian ren he yi). Chinese thought, operating through a relational-generative ontology, understands power as shi—a tendency arising within a relational field—and advocates acting in accord with the grain of things, taking without exhaustion, using with measure. This echoes Marx's ideal of the unity of humanism and naturalism. At the same time we must note a further nuance: the Chinese conception of power carries a quietly contemplative, even quietistic, dimension—a sensitivity to resonance that Marx's theory can learn from and appropriate. Yet the boundary remains decisive. Traditional shi and the wisdom of sympathetic resonance are rooted in an agrarian civilizational horizon; they lack a systematic articulation of the power to transform the world through material production. Marx, by contrast, grounds himself in the social practice of real individuals, takes material production as the foundation, and does not rely on contemplative attunement alone to sustain holistic balance. Hence resonance is not identity. Cross-cultural interpretation must not simply equate Marx's productive forces with Chinese shi. Only by first clarifying the ontological and methodological differences can we open a genuine dialogue-space between them—and thereby offer a theoretical point of reference for the two-way integration of Marxism and fine traditional Chinese culture.

V. Conclusion

The two paradigms of "power and being" in the Eastern and Western cultural traditions are not opposed to one another; rather, each possesses its own emphasis and its own irreducible worth. The central aim of this paper is therefore to clearly delineate the dual affiliation of Marx's theory of productive forces—its double articulation with both the Eastern and the Western paradigms of "power and being"—so as to open a cross-cultural perspective for a more comprehensive and more profound understanding of that theory. This inquiry demonstrates the theoretical inclusiveness and civilizational adaptability of Marxism. Marxism is not a foreign importation stranded on Chinese soil; it is a theoretical system that bears an inner, structural consonance with China's fine traditional culture. The reason Marxism took root and bore fruit in China lies not only in its congruence with China's demands of social development, but still more in the intrinsic, logic-level affinity it shares with that tradition. This affinity is no mere conceptual analogy or surface comparison; it is an encounter and a dialogue of thought-logics at the level of ontology and methodology. And it is precisely such an affinity that furnishes the deep cultural soil for the sinicization and epoch-making renewal of Marxism.

In the contemporary world, the single-track paradigm of conquest-oriented power has produced ecological crisis and technological alienation, whereas the single-track paradigm of acquiescent, yield-to-grain power struggles to meet the demands of a rapidly transforming society. The logic of power embedded in Marx's theory of productive forces—transforming the world while conforming to law; affirming rational mastery while honoring relational harmony—likewise offers a decisive heuristic for today's complex challenges. In ecological governance: we must both unleash the transformative power of science and technology and remain obedient to natural limits. In economic development: we must both advance technological innovation and efficiency and secure social equity and common prosperity. In technological ethics: we must both encourage breakthrough and harness the subversive momentum of productive forces and guard against technological alienation, holding fast all the while to the telos of free, all-round human development.

Looking to the future, we ought consciously to let Marx's theory of productive forces play its integrative, synthesizing role, critically appropriating whatever is sound in both paradigms. On the one hand: we must sublate the Western habit of subject–object antagonism and of limitless outward expansion—retaining its world-making energy while releasing it from its logic of domination. On the other hand: we must regard Chinese power-wisdom dialectically, submitting whatever remains intuitively contemplative and lacking a grounding in material practice to a creative transformation—so that, mediated through Marx's philosophy of practice, it may be activated for the modern age. This cross-cultural theoretical scrutiny also carries a sharper lesson for us: to advance the integration of Marxism and China's fine traditional culture, we must not linger at the level of superficial point-by-point comparison. We must carry the comparison down into the foundational logics of ontology and methodology, excavate the possibilities of their genuine dialogue and mutual enrichment, and thus supply a more solid theoretical support for the practice of Chinese-style modernization.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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