



Ilyenkov comes to China: Bridging Philosophical Traditions

Corinna Lotz

The editors are delighted to present an interview with Huang Hongjie and Zhai Yifei who are making Ilyenkov's writings available to readers of Chinese.

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Introduction

Two young Chinese supporters of the International Friends of Ilyenkov explain why they find Ilyenkov an inspirational figure. They explore the contemporary philosophical landscape in China and aim to position Ilyenkov's work within this context. They also discuss the challenges of translation.

Huang Hongjie is an undergraduate at Nanjing University's School of Foreign Studies. He recently translated Ilyenkov's *The Biological and the Social in Man* and Corinna Lotz's *Finding Evald Ilyenkov* (Real Democracy Movement) and *Ilyenkov's cry from the heart* (Studies in East European Thought) from English to Chinese. He is currently translating *Cosmology of the Spirit* and learning Russian.

Zhai Yifei is an undergraduate at the College of Humanities and Management, Guizhou University of Traditional Chinese Medicine. He has translated the Introduction, Essay 10 and the Conclusion of Ilyenkov's book *Dialectical Logic*. He is currently studying Marx's critique of political economy, especially focusing on the issue of 'real abstraction' in Marx's texts.

CL: How would you describe the state of Chinese philosophy today? Who are the most influential Western figures? Are there any Chinese schools of philosophy to which you would like to draw attention?

Over the last few decades, philosophical works have been flooding into the book market and are being read by the two latest generations (millennials and Zoomers). Young people face multiple life challenges in this era of change, which make them consider their very own existence and the future of their homeland. Thus, they welcome "critical" and "humanistic" thinkers. This includes Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Sartre, Foucault and others. Most readers do not treat them seriously; instead, they treat them as placebos to console their troubled hearts. Meanwhile in universities overall, researchers are not as amateurish: you can basically find here in China almost anything that exist in Western universities.

Marxism is a major component of philosophical teaching. As a result, everyone is familiar with Marx's name, and all university students take a Marxist philosophy course. Secondly, German classical philosophy, especially Kant and Hegel, have been studied by many scholars. Thirdly, phenomenology, particularly Heidegger's, is welcomed by many renowned scholars. Besides them, French theory is popular both inside and outside academia. And regarding the way that philosophy is taught

in schools and universities, it would be unfair to see it as simple Stalin-Zhdanovist leftovers from the old days. On the contrary, this is down to the teachers, rather than textbooks. Some textbooks are quite high-quality. Ilyenkov is even mentioned in one of them.

And about schools of Chinese philosophy, yes, I think they do exist. Among them, in my view, that of prof. Zhang Yibin (张异宾) and his situating theory (构境论) are notable. In the 1990s, he called on Chinese scholars to return directly to Marx's texts again with the slogan "Back to Marx (回到马克思)", and he has published the second volume of *Back to Marx*. He has been introducing foreign thinkers to Chinese and both he and his beloved tutor Sun Bokui (also a master at Marx interpretation) spoke highly of Ilyenkov's contributions.

CL: How and when did you find out about Ilyenkov?

ZHAI: In December 2022, I got to read *Dialectics of the Ideal* on the Register for Social Critical Theory (社会批判理论纪事) Vol.12.

HUANG: For me, maybe it was in early 2022 when a friend of mine introduced me to Ilyenkov, and around August 2023 I read *Dialectics of the Abstract and the Concrete in Marx's Capital*.

CL: Which texts by Ilyenkov have been translated into Chinese? You have translated some texts yourself. Did you run into any challenges here?

Aside from those inapproachable ones (for they are too old), the following have been translated into Chinese:

1. *Dialectics of the Abstract and the Concrete in Marx's Capital* (two versions, published in 1986 and 1993)
2. *Dialectics of the Ideal* (published in 2021)
3. Introduction, Essay 10 and Conclusion of *Dialectical Logic* (by Zhai, unpublished)
4. *The Biological and the Social in Man* (by Huang, unpublished)
5. *Cosmology of the Soul* (by Huang, WIP)

As far as challenges in translation are concerned, of course they exist. We both consider that 'the Ideal' is a problematic term, and we still have not found an accurate corresponding word in Chinese. Instead, we choose to follow how 'das Ideelle' is translated in Marx's texts: '观念东西 (ideal stuff)'. We will keep thinking if there is a better solution to it.

CL: *How widely known is Ilyenkov in China? Why do you think this is?*

Sadly, as I have mentioned earlier, although Ilyenkov appears in a university textbook, he is still rarely noticed. On the CNKI (China National Knowledge Infrastructure) website, in the past four decades, no more than ten papers are directly about Ilyenkov, most of which are either superficial or erroneous. Inside academia, due to the limited translated texts and absence of a detailed biography, Ilyenkov appears as a simple Marx interpreter and a political economist. And outside academia, Ilyenkov is hyped as a ‘crazy philosopher’ due to his *Cosmology of the Soul*, which is considered ridiculous. The reason is that over the past few decades, in the eyes of many intellectuals, the Soviet Union was viewed as nothing but a totalitarian, ancient, failure, so they favour Continental thinkers, especially the semi-Marxist and non-Marxist ones. Secondly, most people in China are more familiar with English as their second language rather than Russian, which tends to limit their vision to the anglophone sphere.

CL: *Can you see Ilyenkov contributing to contemporary philosophical debates in China? Can you imagine Ilyenkov becoming more popular in China? What might be some barriers?*

He is completely absent, but as we can see, his French counterpart (to some extent) Althusser is popular among young philosophy lovers. However, many of them are reading Althusser through Lacan-Žižek, deviating miles away from Marxism. About the prospect of Ilyenkov being popular, to be honest, this may sound too pessimistic, but the popularisation of a thinker usually means being a best-selling author in bookstores, leading to a vulgar misreading. Given the present situation we understand “crisis” as a contradictory moment, simultaneously signifying both danger and opportunity.

All we as translators can do is to be faithful to Ilyenkov’s texts and research them humbly. This is what we strive for and we certainly need some time to improve our skills in multiple related fields. As for barriers, the greatest one is language. Confronting the Russian texts directly is undoubtedly the best way to understand Ilyenkov. And then there is the general attitude and supporting knowledge background of Chinese philosophical readers, which are usually based on their reading of Existentialism and humanistic Marxism. This makes it important to stress the continuity from Spinoza, Hegel, Marx, and Lenin to Ilyenkov, alongside Ilyenkov research.

CL: *Do you think Ilyenkov's approach to topics like learning and cognition complements or challenges the education system in China or elsewhere?*

Sorry. That's beyond our knowledge scope. But we do know that there are some psychological and pedagogical activists in Taiwan, China, who have been shedding light on Vygotsky. We have seen a couple of articles they wrote, which we find quite inspiring. They also translate Vygotsky's work. That is all we are aware of.

CL: *Do you think there are aspects of Ilyenkov's thought that could be particularly important for Chinese readers? Can Chinese readers bring a new perspective to any of the struggles or debates in which Ilyenkov was involved?*

For us his major significance to Chinese readers can be summed up as follows:

1. Thinking about Spinoza in a non-French approach. There are already several classic Spinoza interpretational works translated into Chinese, including those by Gilles Deleuze, Pierre Macherey and Antonio Negri. From our perspective, they approach Spinoza more from an anarchist rather than a Marxist standpoint. As Ilyenkov provides us with an inspiring reading of Spinoza, he can help when it comes to understanding the tradition of materialism.

2. More deeply clarifying Marxism and Leninism, especially the parts not available directly in basic texts on their own.

3. Changing the image that 'all Soviet intellectuals were servile' (in a relatively recent article on Ilyenkov an eminent Chinese professor stated that Ilyenkov became 'less creative' and committed suicide due to his 'weak will power'!), which is extremely harmful to their views on communism and its history.

Regarding possible contributions by Chinese readers, we are not the ones to answer this question in detail. However, we can in a general way, say that Chinese readers may contribute to developing Ilyenkov's thought in relation to the history of Marxism and political economy.

CL: *Could you sum up in one word, what Ilyenkov means to you?*

ZHAI: It is going to be “反拨 (confutation)”. Many versions of 'Marxism' are going backward from Marx, weakening the significance of Marx's philosophical revolution, whilst Ilyenkov stresses the urgency of going back to Marx and developing many basic issues.

HUANG: “持中 (holding/preserving the middle)” popped up in my mind first. Ilyenkov’s image can be viewed as what an ideal Marxist intellectual ought to be like, because neither did he choose to find ‘other ways’ to become a leftist, nor did he simply apostatise and go against socialism with the Western world. This is inspiring

Biography

Corinna Lotz is founder/organiser of International Friends of Ilyenkov and author of *Finding Evald Ilyenkov: How a Soviet philosopher who stood up for dialectics continues to inspire* (2019). She co-edited the special issue *100 Years of Ilyenkov* for *Studies in Eastern European Thought* (September 2024). She wrote and presented the online video course *Philosophy for Revolution*. She writes about art, culture and politics for realdemocracymovement.org.