

A study on the writing method of the history of socialist political economy with Chinese characteristics

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Abstract

Purpose – Expanding the research on traditional history of economic ideology into the research on the history of economics composed of three elements – history of ideology, history of policies and events – is a new idea for researching the history of socialist political economy with Chinese characteristics. The start of the history of socialist political economy with Chinese characteristics is consistent with that of the Sinicization of Marxist political economy and can be dated from at least 1917.

Design/methodology/approach – The key point of the research on the history of ideologies of the socialist political economy with Chinese characteristics is to treat the relationship between theory and people properly, i.e. we should not neglect the effect brought out by the economists on theory construction while we attach importance to the theoretical contribution of the leaders and leading group of the Communist Party of China (CPC).

Findings – For the research on the history of economic policies of socialist political economy with Chinese characteristics, on the one hand, we should clarify the relationship among ideologies, strategies and policies; on the other hand, we should not evade the summarization of lessons from history.

Originality/value – Besides presenting the development route of socialist political economy with Chinese characteristics under competition, the research on the events in the history of socialist political economy with Chinese characteristics should also help develop the socialist political economy with Chinese characteristics.

Keywords Socialist political economy with Chinese characteristics, History of economic ideology, History of economics

Paper type Research paper

In the past, the research on the history of the development of Marxist political economy in China was usually performed under the disciplines of the history of China's political economy and the history of ideologies of China's socialist economy. It has been widely regarded in the academic circle since the concept of socialist political economy with Chinese characteristics was put forward formally that the history of socialist political economy with Chinese characteristics can cover the history of China's political economy and China's socialist economic ideology as the socialist political economy with Chinese characteristics represents the latest achievements of Marxist political economy in China after long-term accumulation (Li, 2019a, b; Zhou, 2018). Therefore, to write about the history of socialist political economy with Chinese characteristics is to write about the history of Sinicization of Marxist political economy. The effect of academic



history on disciplines is self-evident, and how to write about the history of socialist political economy with Chinese characteristics? This paper tries to discuss the writing method of the history of socialist political economy with Chinese characteristics by differentiating the history of economics and the history of economic ideology.

1. From the history of economic ideology to the history of economics

The discipline on the history of the development of economics is usually called “the history of economic ideology” or “the history of economic doctrine” with the main focus on the formation and development of economic ideology or economic doctrine, which includes economic ideology, the persons promoting the development of economic ideology and the development of methods closely related to the development of economic ideology. It also studies the historical context of certain ideologies and personages. Although the theories, personages and methods are the main subjects of economics, they are not the whole economics. To research the history of economics, researchers should break through the boundary of the history of ideology or doctrine and expand the research from the history of economic ideology or economic doctrine to the history of economics.

The research on the history of economics is sorting out and analyzing the information on the emergence and development of economics as a whole or of one of its systems. The complete history of economics includes three elements: First, the development of theories, which includes the development of a theory (and the historical context), the persons contributing to the theoretical development and the development of methods closely related to the theoretical development. In other words, the scope of traditional research on the history of economic ideology or economic doctrine. Second, the history of economic policies or the history of ideologies of economic policies, which involves three levels: the economic theory or ideological trend supporting a certain kind of economic policy, the policy direction regulated by this theory or ideological trend, and the effect or result of the implementation of economic policies under this direction. Third, historical events. In short, the events of the development history of economics refer to the major events of the development history of economics, which influence the development of the discipline system, theoretical system and discourse system of economics. Unlike the historical context of the economic theory, the events in the history of economics occur in the development of economics, rather than in general history or economic history. Known events in the history of economics in the economics circle include the collapse of the Ricardian School, the Marginal Revolution, the Methodological Controversy, the Formalist Revolution and the rise of neoliberal economics. Events contain the traditional elements of the theory, figure, historical context and methodology, but they are not the direct objects of systematic event research. Event research is concerned with the contradictory movement during the process of emergence, development and end of big events and the significant effects of these events.

Traditional research mainly focuses on the first element – the history of economic ideology or economic doctrine without enough attention to the latter two elements. In recent years, [Jia \(2010\)](#) has strongly advocated the research on the history of economic policies or the history of ideology of economic policies, and the author called the third element as event research ([Zhang, 2007](#)). [Jia and Lan \(2017\)](#) borrowed Frederic Lee’s term ([Lee, 2009](#)) and called it “history of community.” Strictly speaking, the study of events is not a new element in the study of the history of economic ideology. The historical study of events in the history of economics has produced many important results, but this element has long been overshadowed by the continuity of ideological inheritance and change and has not been studied solely and systematically. This paper emphasizes events as a separate element because it has a great deal of room for expansion. Progress in economics occurs through events linking theories and personages (and methodologies) together. The purpose of

differentiating the history of economic policies and events and the history of economic ideology is to highlight the value of the history of economic policies and the study of events, the important components of the history of economics as a discipline. And, only by combining these three elements can the history of economics be presented completely and continuously.

As a complete history of economics, how should the history of socialist political economy with Chinese characteristics be written? This paper first discusses the start of and the division of stages in the history of socialist political economy with Chinese characteristics and then elaborates on the method to write the history of socialist political economy with Chinese characteristics from the perspectives of three elements: the history of ideology, the history of policies and the events, respectively.

2. The start and stages of the history of socialist political economy with Chinese characteristics

The start and the historical start of the history of socialist political economy with Chinese characteristics are not the same. There are several representative views on the historical start of the socialist political economy with Chinese characteristics, including the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949 (Zhou, 2018; Li, 2019a, b); the basic completion of China's socialist transformation in 1956 (Gu, 2019) and the beginning of reform and opening-up in 1978 (Jian, 2018). Most of these views regard the first stage of development of the socialist political economy with Chinese characteristics as the exploration period. The exploration period of any economics is the main object of study of the history of such economics. Therefore, the definition of the historical beginning of socialist political economy with Chinese characteristics inadvertently defines the beginning of the history of socialist political economy with Chinese characteristics. Obviously, this definition is questionable.

Neither the foundation of the People's Republic of China nor the establishment of China's socialist system, let alone the beginning of reform and opening-up, is the start of the history of socialist political economy with Chinese characteristics because before these points in time, the leaders of the Communist Party of China (CPC) and many scholars were already thinking about issues related to socialist political economy with Chinese characteristics today. For example, Mao Zedong's *Analysis of the Classes in Chinese Society* written in 1925, *Oppose Book Worship* written in 1930 and *Our Economic Policy* written in 1934 (Mao, 1991), among others, already discussed the methods, policies and even economic ideas contained in socialist political economy with Chinese characteristics. Another example is Wang Yanan's *The Original Theory about China's Economy* published in 1946, which advocated the creation of China's own economics and embodied the same theoretical consciousness and self-confidence as the socialist political economy with Chinese characteristics (Wang, 1998). Their thoughts and academic achievements have influenced and played a role in the birth of socialist political economy with Chinese characteristics. These achievements deserve to be the object of study on the history of socialist political economy with Chinese characteristics.

Then, when should be the start of the history of socialist political economy with Chinese characteristics? This is related to the nature of socialist political economy with Chinese characteristics. Socialist political economy with Chinese characteristics is the product of the combination of basic theories of Marxist political economy and the specific practices in China and is the latest achievements of the Sinicization of Marxist political economy. Therefore, the time when Marxist political economy began to be combined with China's practices, or say, the time when Marxist political economy began to be sinicized, is the start of the history of socialist political economy with Chinese economics – and this time should be when Marxism began to spread widely in China after the October Revolution in Russia in 1917. The research results on the Sinicization of Marxist economics show that from this time, CPC leaders such as Li Dazhao, Li Da and Mao Zedong, as well as scholars such as Chen Baoyin, Wang Ya'nan

and Sun Yefang, realized that mechanically applying Marxist principles could not solve China's practical problems. They combined the basic principles of Marxist political economy with China's practices and scientifically analyzed and argued for the nature of China's society, the direction of development, industrialization and other issues (Wang, 2013). The influence of such results, which were the exploration of socialist political economy with Chinese characteristics, on the subsequent exploration cannot be ignored.

The identification of 1917 as the start of the history of socialist political economy with Chinese characteristics greatly extends the upper time limit of the history of socialist political economy with Chinese characteristics and will enrich the research content of the history of socialist political economy with Chinese characteristics. However, this also raises a problem: as the period between this point and 1956 has no direct connection with "socialism," how to link this period with socialist political economy with Chinese characteristics? From the perspective of the history of economics, this period belongs to the "pre-history" of socialist political economy with Chinese characteristics. Thus, the history of socialist political economy with Chinese characteristics can be divided into four periods by combining the stage division according to current literature: the pre-history period (1917–1956 when the socialist system had been primarily established), the exploration period (1956–1978 when the reform and opening-up began), the formation period (1978–2015 when the concept of socialist political economy was formally introduced) and the improvement period (2015–present).

This division differs from the current literature and is made from the perspective of the history of economics, based on major events or major transitions in the development process of economics, to facilitate a complete presentation of the history of socialist political economy with Chinese characteristics. The four periods, pre-history, exploration, formation and improvement, can be divided into several smaller stages, which will not be discussed in detail herein. The study of these four periods has its own focus and work, and the focus of the research on the history of socialist political economy with Chinese characteristics is the formation period and the improvement period. The study of the formative period aims at describing the process of the rise of socialist political economy with Chinese characteristics from ideas and concepts to systematic economic doctrines against the background of the great success of the economic practice of socialism with Chinese characteristics, summarizing and refining the ideas generated in this process and improving the theoretical system of socialist political economy with Chinese characteristics. In contrast to traditional research on the history of economic ideology, which is less concerned with the "ongoing history," research on the history of economics concerns the current changes in economics, and the period of improvement of socialist political economy with Chinese characteristics also falls within the research scope of the history of socialist political economy with Chinese characteristics. More importantly, improving the theoretical system of socialist political economy with Chinese characteristics is the most significant task in the economics field in China, in which the study of the history of socialist political economy with Chinese characteristics can play an expert role in organizing and summarizing theories, refining theories in relation to new changes in reality and thus improving the theoretical system.

3. The focuses of the research on the history of ideologies of the socialist political economy with Chinese characteristics

The history of economic ideology, which is one of the elements of the history of economics, is the main body of the history of economics and is primarily concerned with the development of theories and the progress of the methods that drive the development. Theoretical development is the result of human ideological activities, and people and theory are affected by the then epoch; therefore, the history of economic ideology is composed of four aspects: theory, method, personage and historical context.

The study of the history of ideologies of the socialist political economy with Chinese characteristics focuses on the relationship between theories and personages regarding the above four aspects. Unlike other economics systematized by economists, the socialist political economy with Chinese characteristics is the product of combining the basic theory of Marxist political economy with China's specific practices in the process of Chinese people's exploration of the "Chinese way" under the leadership of the CPC, and the contributions of successive generations of CPC leaders to this kind of economics are greater than those of economists. Therefore, the fruits of collective wisdom of CPC leaders in economic theory and methodology are the main body of the theory of socialist political economy with Chinese characteristics, and they are presented in the literature written by the leaders of CPC as well as the documents of Central Committee of CPC, which present the collective wisdom. The selected works of successive CPC leaders and such documents like *The Decision of the CPC Central Committee on Economic System Reform* (1984), *The Decision of the CPC Central Committee on Several Issues Concerning the Establishment of a Socialist Market Economy System* (1993), *The Decision of the CPC Central Committee on Several Major Issues of Comprehensively Deepening Reform* (2013) and the reports of successive CPC congresses representatives are main materials for the research on the history of ideologies of the socialist political economy with Chinese characteristics.

However, this does not mean that the contribution of economists to the emergence and development of socialist political economy with Chinese characteristics can be neglected. It is just that the study of the contributions made by economists to socialist political economy with Chinese characteristics is slightly different from the study of economists' contributions to the economics of which development is mainly driven by economists. The study of the history of ideology in economics, in which economists are the main driving force behind theoretical development, focuses on the inspirational and inherited relationship between individual ideas. The difference between the study of the history of economists' thoughts and that of the history of ideologies of the socialist political economy with Chinese characteristics is that although there is an obvious inherited relationship between the thoughts of successive generations of CPC leaders and leading groups, and the thoughts of the previous generations of economists also have an obvious influence on the later generations, it is difficult and unnecessary to prove that there is a connection between the thoughts of CPC leaders and leading groups and the thoughts of economists, and it is also impossible and unnecessary to prove that a certain theory of the Party is the result of inspiration by economists.

The research on the history of ideologies of the socialist political economy with Chinese characteristics mainly focuses on two categories of economists and their achievements. The first category refers to the economists who performed theoretical exploration on relevant issues before the theories of CPC arose and the achievements of these economists. For example, the discussion on the basic socialist economic system and basic economic laws during the exploration period, the "rectification to restore order" and "the major debate on what constitutes truth" on the theory of political economy at the early stage of reform and opening up (Gu, 2019), and the later discussion of the socialist market economy system, all of them provided rich theoretical resources for the formation and development of the socialist political economy with Chinese characteristics.

The second category can be divided into two cases: the first is the pre-history stage and the study focuses on attempts to combine Marxist economics with China's practices to form a systematic economic doctrine; the second is the stages of exploration, formation and improvement, with the focus on then economists that dedicated to developing the CPC's theory into a systematic economic doctrine after the theory arose and their achievements. The first case was initially manifested by works of Chinese economists who translated and introduced Soviet works on the socialist political economy. For example, Shen Zhiyuan's *Outline of New Economics* first published in 1935 (Shen, 1940). The second was mainly

reflected in the textbooks and economists' related works on socialist political economy at various periods, including the economists who are currently systematically elaborating socialist political economy with Chinese characteristics and their works.

Thus, the research on the history of ideologies of the socialist political economy with Chinese characteristics should be carried out along two lines: one is the theoretical contribution of CPC leaders and leading groups and the other is the theoretical contribution of economists. The two lines are not independent of each other: the former is the study of how CPC leaders and leading groups adhered to the basic principles and methods of Marxist political economy and continuously produced new theoretical achievements, combining with the actual development of China; the latter is the study of the theoretical interpretations made by economists before and after the emergence of these achievements. Take the socialist market economy system as an example, the CPC leaders and leading groups experienced the exploration from "planned economy as the mainstay and market economy as a supplement" to "planned commodity economy" and finally put forward the theory of socialist market economy and established the socialist market economy system in China. On the one hand, this great pioneering work helped achieve the miracle of economic development in China; on the other hand, it also demonstrates that socialism can be combined with the market economy. In this process, the contribution of economists was discussion of why socialism and market economy could be combined and theoretical explanations for the combination, developing the theory of socialist market economy into a systematic economic doctrine. By following these two clues to sort out the history of ideology, the two focuses of research on the history of socialist political economy with Chinese characteristics, i.e. theories and personages, can be presented in full.

4. Exploring the history of economic policies of socialist political economy with Chinese characteristics

The history of economic policies is an important element of the history of socialist political economy with Chinese characteristics because socialist political economy with Chinese characteristics is problem-oriented economics that guides practices, and the economic policies are an important component of socialist political economy with Chinese characteristics, belonging to the economic operation level of socialist political economy with Chinese characteristics. However, the research on the history of economic policies of socialist political economy with Chinese characteristics has its own features.

The research on the economic policies in other systems of economics mainly focuses on two aspects – the economic ideology supporting economic policies and the effects of economic policies. For example, Jia Genliang's research on "American School" shows that a series of national economic doctrines developed by early American economists, including the emphasis on productivity, protective tariff and domestic market, strongly supported the protectionist and inward-looking industrialization policies adopted at the early stage of US development, and such policies made the USA realize catch-up within a few decades after the Civil War (Jia, 2011). The research on the history of economic policies of socialist political economy with Chinese characteristics also includes these two aspects, and it contains a new aspect: the philosophy, strategic guidelines and working principles guiding economic policies, which may be collectively referred to as "strategies." Thus, the research on the history of economic policies of socialist political economy with Chinese characteristics includes three layers of content: economic ideology, economic strategy and economic policy. For example, to study the policies on developing socialist economy with Chinese characteristics, one should study the people-centered development ideology at the level of economic ideology, the new development concept at the level of economic strategy and policies such as macroeconomic policies, industrial policies and income policies at the level of economic policy.

The purpose of the research on the history of economic policies of socialist political economy with Chinese characteristics is to summarize the fundamental cause of China's great economic achievements, i.e. adhering to the guidance of Marxist political economy and socialist political economy with Chinese characteristics, by sorting out the gains and losses of China's economic practices and the relationship among China's practices, economic strategies and economic ideology, which highlights the practical significance of socialist political economy with Chinese characteristics. The following two areas of research need to be focused on for achieving this goal.

First, clarify the interactions among economic ideologies, economic strategies and economic policies. On the one hand, during the various historical periods of China's socialist economic construction, i.e. the periods of exploration, formation and development of the socialist political economy with Chinese characteristics, the CPC combined the basic principles of Marxism and China's practices and continuously formed new economic ideologies to guide the adjustment of economic strategies and policies, which ensured that China's economy developed in the correct direction and achieved remarkable achievements in the world. On the other hand, practice is the source of theory. China's economic construction practices have given birth to new ideologies in various historical periods, making the theoretical system of socialist political economy with Chinese characteristics enriched and improved constantly.

Second, focus on the study of lessons in the history of economic policies. There is no lack of profound lessons in the history of China's economic construction. Exploring the causes of why economic strategies and policies failed, studying how they violated economic laws and clarifying how erroneous strategies and policies were corrected are essential elements in the study of the history of economic policies of socialist political economy with Chinese characteristics. This is a respect for history and, more important, a way to show that the CPC is a party that is brave enough to admit mistakes and good at rectifying them.

In a word, the aim of the research on the history of economic policies of socialist political economy with Chinese characteristics is to show that the successes of China's economy in various historical periods were the results of adhering to Marxist political economy and socialist political economy with Chinese characteristics as guidance, and the main cause of the twists and turns experienced and the problems that emerged in various historical periods was violating the basic principles of Marxist political economy and socialist political economy with Chinese characteristics.

In the research on the history of economic policies of socialist political economy with Chinese characteristics, two relationships should be dealt with properly. The first is the relationship between the study of the history of economic policies and the materials of economic history. The study of this field needs the support of a large amount of historical materials about the economy, both positive and negative. Since we take the lessons in the history of economic policies as one of the research focuses, we can treat such materials objectively and avoid whitewashing the history. The second is the relationship between policy evaluation and the history of economic policies. When we study the effect of policies during the research on the history of economic policies, we cannot avoid policy evaluation. However, the policy evaluation from the perspective of the history of policies focuses more on long-term effects, and the effects of economic policies cannot be judged simply from the effect of a certain policy on a place for a period.

5. Performing the research on the events in the history of socialist political economy with Chinese characteristics

As the development process of socialist political economy with Chinese characteristics is connected by various events in the history of economics, we can only realize the expansion

from the history of economic ideology to the history of economics by setting such events as objects of research. The study of the events in the history of socialist political economy with Chinese characteristics focuses on events that significantly impacted the development of the socialist political economy with Chinese characteristics, i.e. events promoting or hindering the development of this economics. Since the beginning of the formation period of socialist political economy with Chinese characteristics (after the reform and opening-up), the socialist political economy with Chinese characteristics has been facing competition with mainstream Western economics [1], where mainstream Western economics gradually became predominant and political economy was gradually marginalized. Although the causes of the marginalization of political economy include factors of political economy itself, the impact of many competitive events is also an important cause.

Actor-network analysis (ANA) in the sociology of scientific knowledge is an appropriate method to study the events in the competition of different academic traditions. During the construction of a kind of scientific knowledge or academic tradition, besides the thoughts, theories and methods of the academic tradition, the “actors” – the human and non-human factors are also involved, such as scientist, disciplinary practitioners, as well as research expense, academic organization and channels for publishing research results. Such actors, as the elements, have constructed the “network” of an academic tradition, and the various elements of the network support each other. The competition among different academic traditions is the competition of their “networks.” The stronger the “network” and the more prominent the competitive advantage of the academic tradition, the more likely the academic tradition is to defeat its competitors and become the dominant scholarly tradition (Latour, 2005).

When this method is used in the study of events in the history of socialist political economy with Chinese characteristics, it can be found that in the competition between socialist political economy with Chinese characteristics and mainstream Western economics, the power of the “network” of the former has gradually declined, while that of the latter has gradually increased, which has been clearly reflected in various events. For example, the fourth-round discipline evaluation of China’s colleges and universities launched in 2016 was a typical event. In this evaluation, a list of “Class A” journals on the economics discipline was initially publicized as a criterion to evaluate the academic papers published by scholars at colleges and universities. Among the journals listed in this list, all foreign journals were core journals on mainstream Western economics, and most domestic journals only published papers written according to the mode of mainstream Western economics [2]. If such evaluation criteria are followed, the discipline of political economy will be further marginalized. In the “network” of political economy disciplines, the politically orthodox position is an important element. However, mainstream Western economics has been striving for this element, or say, diminishing the influence of politically orthodox position, which political economy relies on. Although since 2012, General Secretary Xi Jinping has repeatedly and publicly stated on various occasions that Marxist political economy should be valued and has made it clear that socialist political economy with Chinese characteristics is the Marxist political economy of contemporary China, guiding the Chinese economics community to build a theoretical system of socialist political economy with Chinese characteristics in its efforts, professional journals embodying the knowledge system of political economy were still not listed in the “Class A” journals in the fourth-round discipline evaluation. This shows that mainstream Western economics has successfully diminished the influence of politically orthodox position, an element relied on by political economy (Zhang and Xu, 2019).

Presenting the complete history of the development of the socialist political economy with Chinese characteristics is only one of the purposes of event research, and the more important purpose is to promote the development of socialist political economy through event research. For this purpose, event research can bring out its effects in two aspects. First, to learn from the competitors on methods of reinforcing the “network.” The key elements for the

development history of mainstream Western economics in China to strengthen the power of “network” include the teaching system, academic resources and public opinions. The socialist political economy with Chinese characteristics should also reinforce its network from these three aspects, weakening the competitors at the same time. Second, to summarize the main measures to consolidate and reinforce the power of “network.” Since the concept of “socialist political economy with Chinese characteristics” was introduced, there have been many promising developments in political economy, including the emergence of academic organizations, the increasing frequency of academic activities and the continuous progress of theoretical research – these “actors” continually strengthen the power of the “network” of political economy. The purpose of research on events is to explore how the events have contributed to the development of the socialist political economy with Chinese characteristics and to summarize more effective measures for events to promote development.

6. Conclusion

The history of socialist political economy with Chinese characteristics can be entirely presented by combining these three elements: the history of ideology, the history of policies and events, which support and intersect each other and have their own focuses. Although the writing method proposed in this paper is different from traditional writing methods in this field, the aim of the author is to start a further discussion on properly writing the history of socialist political economy with Chinese characteristics innovatively with the profession.

The combination of history and theory has always been the research and narrative method of Marxist political economy. The study of socialist political economy with Chinese characteristics is also an important part of the development of socialist political economy with Chinese characteristics. Currently, the theoretical system of socialist political economy with Chinese characteristics needs to be improved, and it is a great pleasure for a historian to write history as a witness. The researchers on socialist political economy with Chinese characteristics should spare no effort to seek the roots of socialist political economy with Chinese characteristics, to correct it radically and make contributions to its development.

Notes

1. Here, the author does not discuss whether the mainstream Western economics is worth learning from and has played a positive role in China's economic development, but only objectively describe the relationship between Marxist political economy and mainstream Western economics in the development process of Chinese economics after the reform and opening-up.
2. Though the list of “Class A” journals was canceled finally, its guiding effect has been become an established fact.

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