

# Rosa Luxemburg in China: Ninety Years of Ups and Downs

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In recent years, Rosa Luxemburg's name has gradually become more prominent in Chinese academia. A number of influential academic journals have even opened up research columns paying tribute to the revolutionary theorist, nearly a century after the first discussion of her work in China. This should be regarded as a second revival of the research on her in China. Compared with the other leading figures in the history of the international communist movement, whether worldwide or just in China, the present "Rediscover Luxemburg" phenomenon is unique. Regarding other leading figures, there have not been so many ups and downs.



What is the cause of this phenomenon? And does it also have some significance? Understanding and reflecting on the unique ups and downs of "Luxemburg in China" may help give us a more in-depth and comprehensive grasp of the trajectory of Luxemburg studies, and of the whole history of Marxism in terms of the history of ideas.

## The State of Research on Rosa Luxemburg in China

Luxemburg was already known as a martyr and heroine in China in the early 1920s. For example, in a parade by the nationalist revolutionary movement in Guangzhou, her portrait was held aloft in this period. However, due to the former Soviet Union having taking a negative attitude toward her, for a long time she was not recognized in China as an original Marxist theorist. However, by the late 1950s, with the death of Stalin, the view of Luxemburg began to be reversed, and part of her works and letters started to be gradually translated and published. Among these were *Accumulation of Capital*, *Social Reform or Revolution?*, and *Letters from Prison*. However, in most Chinese textbooks on the history of Marxism, Luxemburg was still seldom mentioned, and when she was mentioned, she was referred to as a revolutionary who had drawn close to Lenin.

During the upsurge of international research on Luxemburg in the 1960s and 1970s, China was suffering the Cultural Revolution, and the presentation and translation of Luxemburg ground to a halt, as did studies of her.

Research on Luxemburg in China really began after the end of this decade-long calamity. As theoretical research became active again in China in the late 1970s, the upsurge of research on Luxemburg abroad had reached its peak. At this point, Luxemburg, who had made a profound exposition of socialist democracy, was undoubtedly popular among Chinese scholars, for they just experienced catastrophe due to the fanatical cult of personality. Therefore, it was with a bit of a lag in terms of the international discussion of Luxemburg that, in the 1980s, the Chinese journal, *Research on the History of the International Communist Movement*, commissioned an issue entitled "Luxemburg Dossier," with a detailed presentation of relevant research overseas. In 1984, volume

one of the *Selected Works of Luxemburg* was published. However, the second volume in this series only appeared after a lapse of seven years, with an extremely limited print run. These lags of in the publication of her original documents clearly affected the domestic research on Luxemburg. Generally speaking, research on Luxemburg during this period remained in the introduction and presentation phase. It was not until 1994 that Chen Renqian, a professor at Shanxi University, published the first comprehensive and objective Chinese language introduction in his *Rosa Luxemburg's Life and Thought*.

Entering the new century, with the acceleration of capitalist globalization, China's "socialist construction" was faced with severe challenges. At this point, domestic scholars focused their attention on Luxemburg once again, because the theory of capital accumulation she had developed nearly a century before now helped people to truly recognize capital as the driving force behind globalization. At the same time, her perspectives on socialist democracy appeared even more valuable for enhancing the vitality of socialism today.

This current round of discussion has expanded in both breadth and depth. Some have focused on specific aspects of her perspectives, some have emphasized that she had achieved a theoretical paradigm shift, some have stressed the importance of an overall grasp of her theory from a methodological standpoint, and some have tried to explore the importance of her thought in terms of theories closely connected with hers. In addition, progress in the research on Luxemburg during this period was also reflected in a further enrichment of the literature, such as the translation and publication of different versions of her letters, which enabled researchers to gain a more comprehensive understanding of Luxemburg's thought and a stronger appreciation of her charisma. Increasing interest was also illustrated by frequent interactions with Luxemburg scholars from abroad, as in the international conference on Rosa Luxemburg held in Guangzhou in 2004; the international conference on Rosa Luxemburg's Theory and Its Contemporary Significance held in Wuhan in 2006; and in the Seminar on Rosa Luxemburg and the World held in Wuhan in 2015. All of these laid the foundation for further and deeper exchanges.

### **Significance of the "Rediscover Luxemburg" Phenomenon**

As the outline above shows, in the more than ninety years since her death, Chinese scholars have sometimes belittled Luxemburg and sometimes praised her. She has been passed over again and again, and then revived and rethought again and again as well. In this connection, the pattern of research on Luxemburg appears a bit hard to discern. Let me try to interpret this pattern of research up to now.

First, it should be noted that ups and downs in the research on Luxemburg are due to a constant change in the criteria used to judge Luxemburg. At a general level, Luxemburg exhibited an individualized, creative Marxism fraught with struggles and frictions, while her economic theory, her political theory, and her overall understanding of Marxism all illustrated her openness. As a Marxist with a strong critical spirit, she dared to question what she saw as contradictions in Marx's *Capital*. She also carried out decades of debate with Lenin on forms of revolutionary organization, nationalism and ethnicity, and revolutionary democracy. In addition, she angrily rebuked Karl Kautsky and Eduard Bernstein for their treachery against Marxist principles. Therefore, the criteria employed to judge, measure, and grasp this most open and critical of thinkers was bound to affect one's position on Luxemburg and her intellectual contributions, thereby affecting the rise and fall of Luxemburg research.

What criteria did Chinese scholars use with regard to Luxemburg? Generally speaking, they can be divided into roughly two categories. One group of scholars has evaluated her from a rigid, conservative dogmatism. In terms of this criterion, Luxemburg was usually seen as deviant and

anachronistic, she constituted a threat to the authority of Marx and Lenin, and her failure in the real political struggle simply proved that she aimed too high.

Fortunately, there is another standard of measure, which Georg Lukács called that of “orthodox Marxism” in terms of dialectical method ([1923] 1971, p. 1), and which can be deduced from Luxemburg herself (Lukács [1923] 1971, p. 1). It always put issues in historical and comprehensive perspective. In terms of this criterion, Luxemburg is clearly among the staunchest defenders of the spirit of Marxism and a most faithful practitioner of the Marxist method, someone who really developed Marxism both in scope and in spirit. Therefore, to the “Western Marxism” represented by Lukács and others, Luxemburg meant a return to the original, not to a distorted Marxism. Moreover, this return is not aimed at getting back to the specific conclusions and opinions of the founders of Marxism, but at getting back to their methods and the spirit embodied in them, and at using them to explore the issues of one’s own time. For those researchers who intend to place Luxemburg and Marx on the same plane in order to compare them, exploring the contemporary importance of the differences between them is more important than merely looking for evidence of their identity.

Second, the ups and downs of Luxemburg research were also related to the high sensitivity of the topics she discussed. From the present standpoint, Luxemburg is regarded not only a radical leftist and Marxist, but also as a prophet foreseeing the nature of the contemporary world, both as logical inference concerning the relentless drive of capital accumulation and as an intelligent pioneer giving a forceful warning of the grave consequences of a lack of socialist democracy. However, it is precisely these two basic issues in Luxemburg that have caused huge controversies, determining the fluctuations of Luxemburg’s ideas in specific eras.

Finally, from the perspective of the whole historical development of Marxism in China, we can begin to find an answer to the ups and downs of the “Rediscover Luxemburg” phenomenon. As Raya Dunayevskaya once pointed out, “Indeed, she comes alive every time we are in a deep new crisis” (1991, p. 76). Nowadays, when we reflect on the historical process of research on Luxemburg, we find that this is indeed a fact. And what caused this fact? A major reason is that in her era, Luxemburg created some problems at the margins of the standpoint of the founders of Marxism, and she was concerned with these so-called “marginal issues.” In this way, she expanded the field of vision of Marxism by restoring the way of thinking of real “orthodox Marxism.” On the one hand, this gave her thought deep historical insight that the dominant Marxist thinkers of her time could not match; on the other hand, it meant that a theoretical perspective with such features was destined to face a fluctuating fate in the long river of history. When a perspective ahead of the times is originally proposed, it faces most people’s indifference, misunderstanding, or even strangling; but when the predictions come true, such perspectives might bear upon burning issues linking ordinary people with the focus of academic excavations. In fact, history seems always to go on this way: when the river of history is slowly flowing along its bed in a pattern of inertia, beneath its placid surface precious theories with sharp edges are gradually buried by the sands of time; but when the river of history takes a sharp turn and flows fast, the billowing waves will raise up the sands, highlighting the thought of those like Rosa Luxemburg.

Therefore, the ups and downs of Luxemburg at several junctures in modern China are partly due to the inherent value of her thought, and partly due to the deeper social and historical background. This means that “reversions to Luxemburg” reflect the development of contemporary capitalism and the postwar evolution of the international communist movement, and also the changes in the perspectives and the thought processes of researchers. In short, research on Luxemburg has followed a similar trajectory to that of her bumpy life, and the ups and downs of the research and evaluation on her reflect the unique features of her theoretical heritage and the rich possibilities for its development. In a certain sense, the ups and downs of Luxemburg research are a reflection of twists and turns of the development of Marxism itself. In the process of rediscovering and

reinterpreting the Marxism of Rosa Luxemburg, “to grasp the essence of Marxism” is no longer a blurry slogan, but something truly experienced yet seldom practiced. Here and now, the last utterance of Luxemburg seems so resounding: “I was, I am, I shall be!” (2004, p. 378).

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