From Translation House to Think Tank: the changing role of the Chinese Communist Party’s Central Compilation and Translation Bureau

NGEOW CHOW BING*

The Central Compilation and Translation Bureau (CCTB), a key research organ of the Chinese Communist Party, has received little attention from scholars inside or outside of China. Originally an authoritative translation house for classical Marxist works, in recent years CCTB has gained more prominence as a policy think tank. Among its leaders are well-known advocates for political reforms and democracy. This article examines the institutional evolution of CCTB. It will discuss what factors are involved in how CCTB has evolved, including the role of its leadership and the changing political context in China; and it will examine how CCTB reconciles its seemingly contradictory roles of being a Marxist translation house and a pro-reform think tank.

A 2010 New York Times article that profiled Dr Yu Keping, the Chinese scholar who in 2006 penned the essay ‘Democracy is a good thing’, described the institution in which Yu works, the Central Compilation and Translation Bureau (CCTB hereafter), as an ‘obscure agency dedicated to translating works by Chinese leaders and Marxist tracts’. In December 2012, CCTB was put in the media spotlight for an unfortunate reason: its director was engulfed in a sex scandal. This episode raised strong criticisms of CCTB among critics of the Chinese Communist Party (the Party hereafter), who see it as a parasite wasting public resources, ‘a workshop for the party’s ideological production’.

* Dr Ngeow Chow Bing is a Senior Lecturer at the Institute of China Studies, University of Malaya. He would like to acknowledge that partial funding of this article comes from the University of Malaya’s HIR grant (UM.C/625/1/HIR/MOHE/ASH/03). He also would like to thank Professor Suzanne Ogden and the anonymous reviewers of this article for their detailed and constructive criticisms and suggestions. Special thanks go to Mr Zhang Qiang in Shanghai for his assistance in collecting some materials. Finally, he is especially grateful to all the staff and interviewees at CCTB. The author can be reached by email at ngeow.c@um.edu.my

2. 何清涟 [He Qinglian], “‘Bianyiju yaqinglu’ cuihui Beijing de ilunzixin” [“‘CCTB’s love story” destroys Beijing’s theoretical self-confidence”], (2012), available at: http://heqinglian.net/2012/12/14/china-sex-scandal/ (accessed 28 August 2013).

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But there is another image of CCTB, one of being a reformist think tank and research organization in China. Being one of the premier institutions devoted to the research of Marxism in China, it is however not particularly conservative ideologically. It has advocated for new and innovative ideas for political and economic reforms. Many foreign scholars and organizations, including the Ford Foundation, the Friedrich Ebert Foundation, and the Carter Center, have worked with it. In the words of an appreciative Western observer, CCTB is ‘part university, part think tank, part “McKinsey” for government reform’. Another one calls it ‘a hothouse of innovation for the ruling party’.

In recent years, there has been increased attention to the role of research institutes and think tanks in China. Margaret Sleeboom-Faulkner’s studies of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences show how the Party reinvented the Academy into a compliant think tank after heavy involvement by its personnel in the Tiananmen demonstrations through regulations, project funding and organizational steering from above. The Central Party School is also examined by a number of scholars. While Frank Pieke, Alan Liu, Ignatius Wibowo and Lye Liang Fock stress the elite training and networking aspects of the party school system, Joseph Fensmith and David Shambaugh note that the Central Party School has also been an important think tank, especially in ideological matters. In the foreign policy arena, it is noted that the policy environment has become much more pluralistic and competitive, with a greater role to be played by the international relations think tanks in Beijing and Shanghai. In terms of domestic policy, Barry Naughton observes that in the economic policy area there is the emergence of not influential think tanks per se, but a kind of ‘policy community’, in which experts are scattered in think tanks, universities and bureaucracy, and which can be tapped and assembled by top leaders such as Zhu Rongji to act as a highly influential kind of personal ‘brain trust’. This analysis of the ‘policy community’ is partly echoed in Murray Scot Tanner’s description of a ‘third generation’ of think tanks, characterized by ambiguous patronage with the leadership, significant foreign

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engagement and open outlook. Although the public security sector that he looks at still remains ‘old generation’, he detects a similar trend toward ‘third generation’ as well.10 Finally, Xufeng Zhu’s work on developing influence indicators of the think tanks in China’s policy process expands our understanding of what kind of influence think tanks have and through what channels they exercise such influence.11

Despite this growing literature, not much is studied about CCTB, even if it has been one of the more prominent think tanks in recent years. This article aims to rectify this. The central question this article asks is: why and how does a Marxist translation bureau become a significant organization for transmitting, introducing and developing Western and reformist ideas, and how does it reconcile the two roles? This article argues that as the Party’s central organ devoted to the translation of Marxist works, CCTB is institutionally bound to play a significant research role when the Party has to enter into serious ideological debates with fellow Marxist parties, make drastic policy changes, or justify introducing seemingly un-Marxist economic or political ideas. To play such a role, CCTB has to be well-immersed in the original Marxist writings as well as the writings of various schools of Marxism, including the so-called revisionists. This necessarily exposes them to the various Marxist criticisms of the Stalinist model that the People’s Republic was modeled after, and allows them to appreciate the meaning of ‘going back to the original Marx’. A much less dogmatic understanding of Marxism that prevailed in CCTB permitted its key leaders to transform CCTB by arguing that absorbing from the West and combining theory and empirical research would be the kind of Marxism befitting to the original Marx, and from here, it has become a key institution to introduce fresh ideas in the political and ideological scene in China.

Background of the Translation Bureau

Three places can be said to share CCTB’s origins: the Translation Department of the Marx–Lenin College at Yan’an in the early 1940s; the Russian Translation Group in Harbin during the Civil War (1946–1949) period; and the Russian Compilation and Translation Bureau in Beijing in 1949.

Translation Department at Yan’an

CCBT’s lineage can be traced back to the Translation Department of the Marx–Lenin College in Yan’an, established in 1938 and headed by Zhang Wentian. The staff included Wang Shiwei and Chen Boda.12 It was Yan’an’s first specialized agency

devoted to translating the works of Marx, Engels and Lenin. The department translated and published numerous Marxist works through the Liberation Press in Yan’an. Not all translations of these books came from the translation department. Some of them were translated in the 1920s and early 1930s, and now only went through an editing process to be republished, while some others came from the foreign publishing house in Moscow. On the other hand, the translation of the military writings of Marx and Engels appeared to be exclusively performed by another agency, a translation section of the Party’s military committee (junwei bianyichu).

The Marx–Lenin College was reorganized into the Marx–Lenin Institute in May 1941, and two months later, was renamed the Central Research Institute, which preceded the 1942 Rectification Movement. The Rectification Movement was, to a large degree, a movement that began with the purge of ‘dogmatism’ at the Institute. Apparently, Mao and other party leaders were not quite satisfied with the performance of the translation department. In a directive issued on 27 May 1943, the Party center decided to create a new Committee on Translation and Editing. Nevertheless, the Committee never materialized, while the translation department seemed to end its operation after Rectification. Translation of Marxist works continued, but was done by individual translators working in other organs of the Party.

Russian Translation Small Group

The Russian Translation Small Group was an agency established in 1947 and attached to the Northeast Bureau of the Party. It was headed by Li Lisan and his Russian wife Lisha. The group was established to translate and publicize important party policies in the Northeast region, where interactions with Russia were extensive in the post-war years. Some important party documents, such as the Basic Land Law of China and Mao’s ‘The Present Situation and Our Tasks’ were first translated into Russian by this agency. The first Russian edition of the Selected Works of Mao Zedong was also produced by this small group. This small group later served as a basis for the formation of the Russian Compilation and Translation Bureau (RCTB). Li Lisan and Lisha, though not members of RCTB/CCTB, continued to have a close relationship with the latter, acting at times as its advisors.

14. One of the people working in the foreign language publishing house in Moscow at that time was Chen Changhao, who later became CCTB’s leader. See CCTB, The Diffusion of the Works of Marx and Engels in China, p. 325.
16. This was the earlier edition of Mao’s Selected Works, not the authoritative editions compiled in the post-1949 period.
17. 中共中央关于一九三六年翻译工作的决定 [‘Party center’s decision on translation work in 1943’], in 中央文献研究室 [Central Documents Research Office], eds., 建党以来重要文献选编 (一九二一年—一九四九年), 第二十册 [Compilation of Important Documents Since the Founding of the Party (1921–1949), Vol. 20] (Beijing: Zhongyang wenxian chubanshe, 2011), p. 328. This was the earlier edition of Mao’s Selected Works, not the authoritative editions compiled in the post-1949 period.
Russian Compilation and Translation Bureau

On 21 May 1949, the Party center issued the ‘Decision to establish translation organs’.20 This long directive stressed the importance of recruiting and organizing Chinese Russian speakers into an organ under the supervision of the Central Committee and the Military Committee. Such recruitment efforts were to take place in the whole country, but especially in the Northeast. Particularly noteworthy was a group of journalists who used to work for the Honesty Press (Shihuabao), a newspaper sponsored by the Soviet Army in Dalian that mainly circulated between 1946 and 1951.21 The Central Propaganda Department was also asked to create a translation house that focused on multiple major foreign languages. In addition, specialized Russian schools were to open up in major cities. The stress on Russian language, of course, reflected the ‘lean toward the Soviet Union’ strategy of the early years of the People’s Republic. The problem of the lack of Russian-speaking Chinese was especially acute in light of the large number of Soviet experts dispatched to help China in the coming years.22

RCTB henceforth was established to tackle the necessity of centralizing and organizing the efforts to translate Russian writings and to train capable translators.23 RCTB was later to merge with the Translation Office for the Collected Works of Stalin, which was established under the Central Propaganda Department and devoted exclusively to translating Stalin’s Collected Works. This translation office was headed by Jiang Chunfang. On 29 January 1953, the central leadership decided to combine the two units, into a new Compilation and Translation Bureau for the Works of Marx, Engels, Lenin, Stalin (or the Central Compilation and Translation Bureau, CCTB). Shi Zhe was the director, but as a personal interpreter for many central leaders (including Mao), he was not at CCTB most of the time and was aided by three deputies: Chen Changhao, Jiang Chunfang and Zhang Zhongshi (who joined in 1955), who assumed greater responsibilities for daily administration.

Central Compilation and Translation Bureau

After the merger, the chief mission of CCTB was the translation of the Collected Works of Marx and Engels, Collected Works of Lenin and Collected Works of Stalin. The three sets constituted what were considered the most important Marxist works in China at that time. Due to the political implications of the writings of Marx, Engels, Lenin and Stalin, CCTB became (and remains today) the exclusive organ that is authorized to translate their writings. The only non-CCTB translations allowed are

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either those who have been especially authorized to do so, or those that were translated by an earlier generation of Marxist scholars and translators. Their editions may be concurrently published with the CCTB’s editions.24 Otherwise, non-authorized translations are seldom published. For instance, the famed sociologist Pan Guangdan translated Engels’ *Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* in 1948–1951, but could not have it published until 2000, in his posthumous collections.25 Reportedly more than 300 people had worked on the ‘three sets’.26

In the beginning years, many of CCTB’s translators were not necessarily well-immersed in Marxist theory. Russian (or other foreign languages, such as German and English) may have been their strength, but Marxism was not. Annotations of Marxist works also required the translators to have an understanding of the political and economic contexts of these works. Hence, various courses on Marxism and other subjects had to be organized for the translators. Hence, from the very beginning CCTB fostered an intellectual atmosphere that stressed learning and research, in addition to translation.27 As early as 1955, a separate research office was established. Of course, the ‘research’ here meant only basic learning of Marxism and other subjects, the purpose of which was to elevate the quality of the translation. But CCTB had the additional goal of nurturing theoretical researchers, given that it had a significant corpus of Marxist works and that its mission—the spread of Marxism in China—could well be an important research subject as well. The research office hence was divided into two sections: a section that focused on the international communist movement, and the other on Chinese revolutionary history.28 In the later years, the foundation laid in this little-noticed research office would play a much more unexpected and significant role.

CCTB was the counterpart organization to similar Marxist institutes within the Soviet bloc. CCTB developed a close relationship with the Soviet Union’s Institute of Marxism–Leninism, from which it collected a large number of precious primary materials, including entire sets of *Iskra* and *Pravda*.29 In the years of the Sino–Soviet

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26. CCTB, *The Diffusion of the Works of Marx and Engels in China*, p. 188.


friendship, CCTB hosted many Russian experts. From 1953 to 1955, CCTB inherited several Russian expatriates from RCTB. Most of them were previously journalists at the *Honesty Press*. They were not academicians per se, but were fluent in both Russian and Chinese languages. The first Russian academician CCTB hosted came from the Institute of Marxism–Leninism, S. I. Smirnov. Beginning in 1955, other major Soviet scholars working at CCTB included historian A. M. Pankratova, Lenin specialist N. I. Krutikova, economist J. Turcins and philosopher E. P. Kandel.

In April 1962, CCTB took over from the Central Liaison Department, an office that translated works of Chinese leaders and Chinese documents into foreign languages. The office was originally designated as Mao’s Works Translation Office, established in 1960. The translation of Mao’s writings into Russian, and Stalin’s writings into Chinese, was based on an agreement reached during Mao’s visit to Russia in 1949–1950. Shi Zhe was given the task to translate Mao’s writings, and he was aided by Sinologist N. T. Fedorenko. The first two volumes of *Selected Works of Mao* were translated and published in Russia in the 1950s by Shi and Fedorenko, whereas the third volume was translated by Soviet sinologists but proofread by Shi and Fedorenko. Soviet philosopher Pavel F. Yudin also took part; he came to China in 1950 to take a special look at Mao’s *On Practice*. In 1960, Volume 4 of Mao’s *Selected Works* appeared. The Party center decided that it should be translated and published in foreign languages as soon as possible. Mao’s Works Translation Office was therefore established in May 1960, first as an ad hoc group, later to be housed under the Central Liaison Department, and then, in 1962, to be transferred to CCTB. From 1960 to 1964, English, Russian, Spanish and French editions of Volume 4 of Mao’s *Selected Works* were published. By 1960, however, China’s relationship with Russia had deteriorated and Russian experts at CCTB had been recalled. Hence, CCTB worked on the Russian edition without Soviet experts. The office later came to assume a more permanent role, and later also took up the task of translating works by other leaders such as Liu Shaoqi and Zhou Enlai.

**Sino–Soviet split and the origin of Central Compilation and Translation Bureau as a think tank**

The Sino–Soviet dispute reflected profound ideological differences over the interpretation of Marxism and had a major impact on China’s foreign and domestic policies. The dispute profoundly influenced the nature and functions of CCTB.

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was the organ that translated many of the Chinese ‘commentaries’ into foreign languages during the ideological feud between the Chinese communists and the Soviets. All staff members of Mao’s Works Translation Office were mobilized and stationed in a special office at the Party center for translating the documents of the dispute. But perhaps more important, by virtue of its accessibility to numerous foreign language materials, dedication to accurate translation of the Marxist canons, and close interaction with Marxist academics and academic institutions in the Soviet camp, CCTB became one of the most useful ideological resource bases for the Party center during the dispute.

International Communist Movement Historical Materials Office

In December 1960, CCTB established an International Communist Movement Historical Materials Office. This office was originally one of the two sections of the 1955 research office that dealt with materials relating to the international communist movement. The main mission of this office was to collect, organize and provide materials about all ‘old and new revisionists and opportunists’ of the First, Second and Third Internationals that would be useful for the Party center in their ideological debates with the ‘revisionist’ Russians and their allies. Because CCTB had earlier obtained a full set of Pravda, in addition to the most complete collection of Marxist works in China, the Party center relied on it to trace and translate important theoretical writings in the current Soviet periodicals or particular piece of writings of speeches. It was also in this context that the staff members at this office translated and published large numbers of so-called ‘grey books’. The grey books were compilations of Trotsky, Bukharin, Kautsky, Bernstein, Lassalle, Bauer and other so-called ‘old revisionists’ (notwithstanding the wide differences between them, all of them were lumped together as revisionists). Due to the closely-followed Stalinist orthodoxy in China at the time, these writers had long been banished. But now, their writings for the first time were systematically collected, translated and published, primarily for the purpose of criticizing the Soviet Union. Due to the lack of available materials, CCTB staff members had to flip through pages of Pravda to dig out the articles written by these ‘old revisionists’. They hence ironically became the true experts on these writers in China, and the ‘grey books’ became essential materials for anyone in China wishing to study the international communist movement. During the Sino–Soviet feud, Beijing’s central writing team relied greatly on the ‘grey books’ for writing their ‘commentaries’ (especially the fifth and the ninth) against the Soviets. In fact, the original title of the ninth commentary was ‘From Bernstein, Kautsky to Khrushchev’.

The origin of CCTB as a think tank could be traced to this particular episode. On the other hand, when staff members of the research office were compiling the

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37. Ibid., pp. 4, 13–14.
38. Ibid., pp. 4, 13–14.
‘revisionist’ writings, they were exposed to these writers who were also Marxist, yet critical of the Leninist–Stalinist (especially Stalinist) orthodoxy. During that time, these staff members of course were critical and dismissive of these ‘revisionist’ writers as well, but their work indeed laid the groundwork for more objective studies of these writers, especially after the end of the Cultural Revolution. By then, the staff members had become authoritative scholars in this area of research. For example, it was from within CCTB that Marxist writers such as Luxemburg, Bukharin and even Trotsky were first reassessed.\(^4\)

When there was a post-Mao ‘renaissance’ in the Western Marxist tradition and in ‘the original texts of Marx and Engels’,\(^4\) CCTB contributed significantly to making the ‘revisionist’ writings available in Chinese. A kind of Marxism that was much more open-ended and that would allow for a variety of ways of interpreting the original Marx or Lenin was thus instigated from within CCTB.

**The post-Mao transformation of the Central Compilation and Translation Bureau**

Like other organs of the Party, CCTB went through turmoil during the Cultural Revolution. Many suffered various kinds of attack, imprisonment or public disgrace.\(^4\) By the time the Cultural Revolution was over, the leadership composition of CCTB had undergone significant change. In 1978 Wang Huide was appointed as CCTB’s new director. Under Wang, there was a new, capable and dynamic deputy director by the name of Lin Jizhou. Lin was described by some of his colleagues as an academic entrepreneur\(^4\) who was held in high regard for his role in transforming CCTB into a much more research-based, think-tank-like organization.

**Lin Jizhou and the transformation of the Central Compilation and Translation Bureau**

Lin was born in 1929 in Dalian. He studied and excelled in a high school in Dalian (‘liberated’ as early as 1946) but could not finish formal education due to poverty.

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40. When the first workshop on Bukharin was held at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, participating CCTB scholars became the experts lecturing others. See 郑异凡 [Zheng Yifan], 《史海探索》 [Explorations in the Sea of History] (Hefei: Anhui daxue chubanshe, 2005), p. 9; CCTB, *Spread the Truth, Work Hard Incessantly*, p. 369. However, Su Shaozhi, China’s most well-known scholar on Bukharin in the 1980s, although mentioning CCTB’s participation in the workshop, did not particularly emphasize the important role contributed by CCTB to the reassessment of Bukharin in China. See 苏绍智 [Su Shaozhi], 十年风雨: 文革后的大陆理论界 [Eventful Ten Years: The Theory World after the Cultural Revolution] (Taipei: Shibao wenhua chuban qiye, 1996), pp. 129–131.


42. Shi Zhe left CCTB as early as 1957, and the directorship was filled by Xu Liqun, an official from the Central Propaganda Department, in 1961, but Xu spent little time at CCTB. CCTB was run by the three deputies. However, Jiang Chunfeng was thrown into prison in 1968, Chen Changhao died in the same year after suffering an attack by Red Guards, while Zhang Zhongshi fared a bit better, though he did lose his leadership position. See Yang and Song, *Founder of the Modern Encyclopedia of China*, pp. 216–251; 范青 [Fan Qing], 陈昌浩传 [A Biography of Chen Changhao] (Beijing: Zhongguo dangdai chubanshe, 1993), pp. 316–317; Zhang and Wang, *Marxist Theoretician and Translator Zhang Zhongshi*, pp. 59–60.

In school he showed signs of being a ‘progressive student’, active in student political activities such as denouncing the National Assembly of the Guomindang government. The school’s principal, Han Suying (who later became vice president of the Central Party School), helped him get a job at the education bureau in Dalian. He also took lessons in the Russian language through a course from the Sino–Soviet Friendship Association. He joined the Party in 1950 and started his career as a translator at the aforementioned Honesty Press. In 1951 he was transferred to the Translation Office for the Collected Works of Stalin. He moved to CCTB when this office was combined into CCTB in 1953.44

Lin made two significant contributions to CCTB. First, he was the de facto editor-in-chief of the second edition of the Collected Works of Lenin. The 39-volume, first edition Collected Works of Lenin was completed in 1953 and was based on the fourth edition of the Russian Collected Works of Lenin, a deeply flawed version influenced by the Stalinist cult. The subsequent publication of many other writings and tracts by Lenin, including a fifth edition of the Russian Collected Works of Lenin, showed that the fourth Russian edition was far from a complete collected works of Lenin. In 1982, the Party center approved of the plan to publish a second edition. In addition, all annotations were completely rewritten to purge Stalin’s and Khrushchev’s influence. By 1990, all 60 volumes of this second Chinese edition were published. It is said that this edition contains the most complete collection of Lenin’s writings in the world.45

Second, perhaps even more important in making CCTB what it is today, was Lin Jizhou’s leadership in the expansion of research activities. Lin showed his foresight by organizing and participating in many conferences and meetings with private entrepreneurs, and his subordinates were strongly encouraged by him to do so as well. Such meetings and fieldwork were initially questioned by others, who could not see how these activities were related to the ‘translation’ task of CCTB. However, Lin justified the CCTB’s expanding role by arguing that Marxism was a developing field that had to keep up with reality; so these meetings and fieldwork would furnish CCTB researchers with first-hand experience of the reality of China’s economic and social situation. Furthermore, he argued that Marxism is an open system. There were two implications. First, as an open system, Marxism continues to absorb all kinds of knowledge produced by humanity, hence this led to CCTB’s heavy involvement in the introduction of Western scholarship and thought and in comparative studies. Second, the development of ‘open’ Marxism had to be based on practice by the masses, so empirical research is a necessity for the development of Marxism itself. CCTB, therefore, also had to be an open system.46 This opened up fieldwork, comparison and empirical research in CCTB. Two of CCTB’s most well-known academic journals, Marxism and Reality, and Comparative Economic and Social Systems, were established under Lin’s leadership. The latter journal for a time was edited by the famous liberal economist Wu Jinglian, even though Wu was not a member of the CCTB staff. This pro-reform journal came under criticism during the

44. Ibid., pp. 1–3.
46. Ibid., p. 141.
conservative ascendance in the early 1990s, but Lin Jizhou’s leadership resisted such pressure. Yu Keping was also recruited under Lin’s watch. Lin died in 1993, and this caused a temporary slowing down of research activities at CCTB; but the subsequent promotion of Yu Keping to the leadership level reinvigorated CCTB’s research activities.47

World Socialism Institute/Marxism Division and Institute of Contemporary Marxism/Global Strategy Development Division

Henceforth, two research traditions were formed in CCTB: one inherited from the International Communist Movement Historical Materials Office, which focused primarily on historical and theoretical issues within Marxism, and the other one, started under Lin Jizhou, which was more empirical and comparative. The Historical Materials Office was first renamed as the International Communist History Institute in 1985 and as the World Socialism Institute in 1994. It comprised most of the ‘old hands’ at CCTB, some of whom were professional translators. For example, Zheng Yifan, an eminent historian of Soviet Russia at CCTB, undertook the reassessment of the relationship between Bukharin, Lenin, Stalin and Trotsky concurrently with his participation in the second edition of Collected Works of Lenin.48 It also recruited new people; most of them graduates of the discipline of the ‘history of the international communist movement’ in Chinese universities.49

The more China-focused, empirical and comparative approach found a home in 1984 in the newly created second research institute of CCTB, the Institute of Contemporary Marxism; 1984 was also the year in which the Party center approved of the plan to reform thoroughly the economic system, and it was due to Lin’s foresight that this Institute was structured in a way that echoed the reform.50 It recruited mostly graduates of proper social science disciplines such as economics and political science. It was initially structured into three sections: philosophy, economics and scientific socialism (corresponding roughly to the three components of Marxism). The philosophy section focused on Western Marxism and Neo-Marxism (in contrast to the World Socialism Institute’s focus on the ‘old revisionists’). The economics section was headed by Rong Jingben, another dynamic, pro-reform academic. The scientific socialism section was to become an important place for empirical research on Chinese politics. It was this section that Yu Keping joined and developed. International academic collaborations also began under this institute. Most notable was the project on the ‘pressurized system’ that was supported by Ford Foundation.51

In 2011 there was a significant reshuffling of the organizational structure of the two research institutes. The new Marxism Division inherited much of the old World Socialism Institute, but also absorbed theory researchers and the journal Marxism and

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47. Interview with a senior scholar at the Global Development Strategy Division, 15 August 2012.
49. Interview with a senior scholar at the Marxism Division, 15 August 2012.
Reality from the Institute of Contemporary Marxism, while the new Global Development Strategy Division inherited the policy-oriented, comparative and empirical research from the Institute of Contemporary Marxism. Hence it could be said that now there is a clearer research specialization between the two—one theoretical and one empirical.\textsuperscript{52}

\textit{Academic debates, introducing Western ideas, empirical research}

CCTB researchers played an instrumental role in opening up Chinese academia to numerous foreign ideas and trends. They also at times entered into fierce debates with others. In the early 1980s, the big debate on Marxist humanism and alienation pitted the ‘orthodox’ Marxists, such as Hu Qiaomu and Deng Liqun, against the more liberal reformist Marxists such as Wang Ruoshui.\textsuperscript{53} The CCTB scholar who participated in this debate (Lu Meilin, a Marxist aesthetician) took a position against Wang Ruoshui.\textsuperscript{54} In the late 1980s, CCTB scholars also participated in the debate in Chinese academia over the meaning and significance of Western Marxism (Lukacs, Althusser and Gramsci) in relation to the traditional, ‘orthodox’ Marxism. CCTB’s Du Zhangzhi disagreed with the view held by Xu Chongwen,\textsuperscript{55} who saw Western Marxism as simply reflecting the radical views of the petty-bourgeoisie and incompatible with scientific Marxism. Du instead affirmed the status of Western Marxism as a form of Marxism.\textsuperscript{56}

Since the 1990s, CCTB scholars have cast a wider net to include Japanese Marxism, East European Marxism and Western theories of globalization, civil society, deliberative democracy, social capital, good governance, risk society, etc. Since the 1990s, CCTB researchers have compiled several influential book series, including the seven-volume \textit{Globalization Studies Series}, the over-30-volume \textit{Globalization Translation Series}, the five-volume \textit{Ecological Civilization Series} and the nine-volume \textit{Deliberative Democracy Series}. CCTB researchers have put together translated writings of foreign theorists with critical introductions and discussions from Chinese scholars. Hence, in introducing Western thought, the CCTB researchers believed that not only had they to grasp what was going on in the world, but they had to engage these ideas in the Chinese context.\textsuperscript{57}

On the other hand, in conjunction with engagement with Western ideas was the turn to more research on China’s own issues. In the early 1990s, Rong Jingben, and the economics section of the Institute of Contemporary Marxism that he led,

\textsuperscript{52} Interview with a CCTB scholar at the Marxism Division, 13 August 2012. However, this division should not be seen as absolute. Some scholars at the Marxism Division also work on contemporary political issues, especially political party research and Russian politics.
\textsuperscript{53} At that time Hu Qiaomu and Deng Liqun were, respectively, president of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences and Minister of Propaganda; Wang Ruoshui was a theoretician at the \textit{People’s Press}.
\textsuperscript{54} 陆梅林 [Lu Meilin], \textit{马克思和人道主义 [Marxism and Humanism]} (Beijing: Wenhua yishu chubanshe, 1987).
\textsuperscript{55} 马晨 [Ma Chen], ‘中国国外马克思主义的历史发展’ [‘Historical development of studies of Marxism abroad in China’], \textit{科学社会主义 [Scientific Socialism]} 4, (2010), pp. 133–136.
\textsuperscript{57} Interview with a senior scholar at CCTB, 15 August 2012.
translated and introduced theories such as rent-seeking and path-dependence, which were particularly useful for examining China’s transition from planned to market economy during that period of reform. In the 2000s, when the publication of the above-mentioned series hit the academic market, CCTB researchers also put forth other series such as *Report on Frontier Research on China’s Realities* and *Research on China’s Democratic Governance Series*. Again, these series feature articles from both Western China specialists and China’s own scholars.

As mentioned earlier, the scientific socialism section of the Institute of Contemporary Marxism became a significant place for empirical research on Chinese politics, and where the reputation of political scientists such as Yu Keping, and later He Zengke, was forged. Yu is most well-known for his consistent advocacy for more democracy and his faith in China’s incremental steps to eventually realize a Chinese model of democracy. His incrementalist perspective on China’s democracy brings him to pay particular attention to the local governmental innovations that would otherwise go unnoticed. He is instrumental in the setting up of a comprehensive database on local government innovations, the publication of a book series on these innovations, the annual award to the best innovative practice, and the establishment of several research ‘bases’ in China’s universities that monitor and study such innovations. The importance of these local government innovations is underlined in Yu’s own words:

Government innovations are the innovative reforms conducted by public authorities to increase administrative efficiency and promote public interest. The process of government innovation is a continuous process of reforming and perfecting the public sector, it is a form of governance reform. ... The Chinese Communist Party and the Chinese government has always emphasized political reforms, but the political reforms in China are not reforms of the basic political institutional framework, but the reform of its national governance system, which is manifested in government innovations.59

[From the research on local government innovations], we can clearly see that the governance innovations basically follow five universal trends in political modernization, namely from managerial government to service-oriented government, from totalistic government to limited government, from rule-by-men to rule-of-law, from centralization-of-power to decentralization-of-power, and from ruling to governance. The less ‘ruling’ in government’s activities, and the more ‘governance’ there is, reflect the trends of democratic development and the increase of the governing ability of the government. If there is less ‘ruling’ and more ‘governance’ in public administration’s activities, there will be more cooperation between citizens and government, which implies more public participation in governmental affairs, and more democracy.60

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58. This biannual competition started in 2001 in which local governmental innovative practices to improve governance and administration were evaluated by specialists and awarded accordingly. Other co-organizers include the Central Party School and Peking University.


60.  Ibid., p. 17.
As can be seen here, Yu is not a radical kind of democrat, and is working within the framework of the one-party system to make it more democratic, but this should not work against his reputation as a serious democratic theorist. As Cheng Li notes, what Yu has done is to chart a safe ‘road map’ toward democracy for everyone, a way to reduce ‘political and social price in order to obtain the maximum democratic effects’.61 Yu’s work on the national governance system seems to receive endorsement from the present leadership as well, as the Third Plenum of the 18th Party Congress in 2013 has concluded with the goal of building up the national governance system that Yu has been advocating for years.

On the other hand, He Zengke is a noted scholar on corruption. In his work on corruption he has consistently held the view that political power has a natural tendency to expand and corrupt, and supervising and checking power is a necessity to protect public interests. Therefore, anti-corruption strategies, such as diffusion and differentiation of power into different bodies, separation of government and business, rule of law, openness in governmental affairs, the use of media, Internet and public opinion, the protection of civil rights as a check against officialdom, and the increased role to be played by civil society, are necessary. He recognizes that despite some achievements, weaknesses abound in China’s anti-corruption system, and, not unlike Yu, he conceives a way of differentiating and checking power within the overall one-party system, in which different kinds of power (personnel nomination, approval, policy execution, audit, etc.) are held by different bodies (party committees, people’s congresses, government, political consultative conferences). In addition, he has also suggested legislation on sunshine law, press law, whistleblower protection law, and even a law on supervision between CCP and the so-called democratic parties within the united front.62

Hence, the caricature of CCTB as an ‘orthodox ideological production house’ is not correct.63 Its research far extends beyond the realm of Marxist ideology only. Even in the Marxist ideological realm, its ethos of ‘going back to Marx’ makes CCTB’s Marxism much less dogmatic. However, in concentrating their attention on mostly Western thought, CCTB scholars have mostly neglected ideas in developing countries, such as Fanon or the ‘subaltern studies’ school in South Asia. This is not unlike the Central Party School, which ‘places much emphasis on subjects oriented to the West’ in addition to traditional Marxist subjects in its curricula, in the hope that the cadres it trains will have a deep understanding of the West and be able to ‘position China in the global scheme of things’.64 This focus on Western thought at the expense of socialist thinkers elsewhere perhaps reflected the Party’s priority in integrating China’s ideas, and policies, with ‘modernity’.

Marx–Engels–Lenin–Stalin Division and Central Documents Translation Division

At the same time, the translation work at CCTB continues. Among the 300 staff that CCTB employs, about half are translators, housed in two divisions: the Marx–Engels–Lenin–Stalin Division and the Central Documents Translation Division. Despite its name, the ‘Marx–Engels–Lenin–Stalin Division’ mostly works on the second edition of the Collected Works of Marx and Engels today (the 50-volume first edition was completed in 1985). This edition follows the international authoritative MEGA2.65 It has completed about 20 volumes in the projected 70 volumes. After the second edition of the Collected Works of Lenin, the work on Lenin is considered more or less done, while Stalin (the 13-volume Collected Works of Stalin was completed in 1958) is mostly banished today.

CCTB is the only authorized organ to translate works of central leaders into foreign languages. In addition to Mao, Zhou Enlai and Liu Shaoqi, the Central Documents Translation Division has also translated Selected Works of Zhu De, Deng Xiaoping, Chen Yun and Jiang Zemin. The main work that this division conducts today is the translation of state and party documents into various foreign languages, including the general secretary’s political report to the party congress and the premier’s report to the National People’s Congress. It also translates into English articles selected from the Qiushi magazine. This division is currently translating the authoritative party history issued by the Central Party History Institute since 2010.66

Central Compilation and Translation Bureau in the twenty-first century

From 1983 to 2003 (1983 being the first year of the seventh ‘five-year’ plan for social sciences), CCTB undertook seven main projects assigned by the Party center, five contracted projects from the individual departments of the Party or the State council, 30 projects from the State Social Science Research Foundation, and 45 projects from within.67 There are three sources of research projects: projects mandated from the authorities (Party center, governmental departments, provincial and local governments), projects initiated by contract with the authorities or other academic organizations, and projects undertaken by the staff on their own. The funding of CCTB hence came from both central budget and from projects.

Project on Marxist Theoretical Research and Development

In 2004, the Party approved the ‘Opinion on the Further Flourishing and Development of Philosophy and Social Sciences’, which launched the massive

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65. MEGA2 stands for Marx–Engels–Gesamtausgabe 2, the most complete collection of works by Marx and Engels in the German language. See 王锡君 [Wang Xijun], ‘跨世纪的翻译工程，不朽的理论宝库’ [‘A cross-century translation project, an immortal theoretical treasure’], in 北京大学马克思主义文献研究中心 [Center for Marxist Literature at Peking University], eds, 共产党宣言与全球化 [Communist Manifesto and Globalization] (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 2001), pp. 3–8.

66. Interview with a CCTB translator, 21 August 2012.

‘Project on Marxist Theoretical Research and Development’. The project is billed as the new platform to build Marxist-based theoretical self-consciousness and self-confidence in the face of the onslaught of Western thought. From this perspective, it definitely has a conservative outlook and tone and serves to consolidate the ideological control of the regime rather than to liberate scholarship from politics. Since its launch, it has been under the direct guidance and supervision of several political heavyweights including Li Changchun, Liu Yunshan and Liu Yandong, most of them considered the ‘tuanpai’ faction aligned with Hu Jintao.

Yi Junqing, the scandal-hit ex-director of CCTB, reportedly has a close relationship with Liu Yunshan, and under his leadership CCTB undertook two sub-projects of this project—‘Review and Refinement of Major Works of Classical Marxist Writers’ and ‘Research on Basic Viewpoints of Classical Marxist Writers’. The former involves new compilations of the works of Marx, Engels and Lenin. The translation division of CCTB took charge of this sub-project and compiled a ten-volume Selections from Marx and Engels and a five-volume Collections of Lenin’s Writings on Special Topics. The latter is arguably more ambitious, involving more than 200 scholars from the Central Party School, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, Academy of Military Sciences, Ministry of Education and other units, but CCTB assumes the overall leadership. CCTB’s Yu Keping and Yang Jinhai are two of the ‘chief experts’ (shouxi zhuanjia) for this sub-project. The fundamental mission of this sub-project is summarized in the so-called ‘four distinguishes’ (sige fenqing): to distinguish which viewpoints are the basic Marxist principles that have to be upheld all the time, which ones are theoretical views that have to be further developed and revised in light of changes in reality, which ones are dogmatic interpretations that have to be done away with, and which ones are erroneous viewpoints wrongly attributed to Marxism that have to be clarified. Eighteen theoretical and policy-related topics are covered under this sub-project, including religion, nationality, war and peace, class and class struggle, proletarian dictatorship, Marxist political party building, developmental path of traditionally backward societies, political civilization, ideology, relationship between socialism and communism, ownership, peasant and agriculture, and other issues. Scholars then use the ‘four distinguishes’ as the basis to identify the ‘correct’ research done on these issues. Reports and collected articles for each of these topics are published in a book series named ‘Forum on Marxism Research’. Yu Keping is the general co-editor of this series, together with a well-known conservative scholar from the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences and a moderately conservative scholar from the Central Party School. According to one interviewee, this is a deliberate arrangement to achieve a balance between


70. 杨金海, 鲁克俭, 李百玲 [Yang Jinhai, Lu Kejian and Li Bailing], ‘马克思主义经典著作研究60年’ [‘60 years of research of classical Marxist works’], in Yu et al., eds, 60 Years of Marxism in China, p. 20.
different ideological perspectives and between three of the most important think tanks of the party-state.\(^71\)

**Marxism and reformism at the Central Compilation and Translation Bureau**

With participation in such a heavily Marxism-loaded project (or even without such participation, by virtue of it being the source of Marxist canons in a communist state), CCTB could be suspected of being a bastion of leftist-conservative thought. On the contrary, CCTB has built up its reputation as one of the more reformist think tanks, although we should be aware that in any organization there are conservatives and liberals. Nevertheless, CCTB researchers are noticeably cosmopolitan and well-grounded in both Marxist and Western scholarship. For some, this contradiction shows that Marxism has only become an empty shield that protects an ideologically bankrupt regime. However, it could be the other way around: CCTB’s status and acknowledged authority on Marxist theory could shield its staff members from leftist critiques when controversial topics are introduced.\(^72\)

Furthermore, CCTB scholars may not see a necessary contradiction between advocating reforms, embracing liberal ideas, globalization and Marxism. They view Marx’s ideas to be far more liberating than the Stalinist (and even Leninist, according to some) deviations. One interviewee, who is a senior scholar recruited by CCTB in the 1980s, opined to the author that ‘Kautsky is correct, Lenin is more wrong. Mao has a lot of utopian thinking. And Marx is a liberal and democrat, and even a bit postmodern’.\(^73\) Even going back to Lenin could be liberating as well, as the ‘late Lenin’ is increasingly becoming the source of ideas for political reforms. CCTB scholars very early on recognized the value of the thought of the ‘late Lenin’ in countering the Stalinist model.\(^74\) A case in point is the aforementioned Lin Jizhou. As the chief editor of the second Chinese edition of the *Collected Works of Lenin*, he could be easily caricatured as a dogmatic Leninist, but as we have seen, this was far from the true picture. Lin’s reformism actually was partly inspired by his reading of how Lenin dealt with economic construction in the post-revolution years. In the immediate post-Mao period, he mobilized CCTB’s resources to produce short pamphlets discussing Lenin’s viewpoints on economic construction, and such materials were picked up and published by *Theoretical Trends*, the theory journal of the Central Party School under the then pro-reform leader Hu Yaobang. An editor of *Theoretical Trends* reckoned that Lin was effectively the advisor to the journal in those days.\(^75\)

Today the ethos of CCTB is the ditching of Stalin, stronger but not full acceptance of Lenin, and going back to Marx and Engels. Going back to Marx serves an important legitimization function for the Party’s present economic agenda, and in this sense CCTB’s Marxism coincides with official Marxism. Maurice Meisner critiqued the draining of utopian elements and the return to a crude form of Marxist economic

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\(^71\) Interview with a CCTB senior scholar at the Marxism Division, 13 August 2012.
\(^72\) Interview with a CCTB senior scholar at the Global Development Strategy Division, 14 August 2012.
\(^73\) Interview with a CCTB senior scholar at the Marxism Division, 13 August 2012.
\(^74\) Zheng, *Explorations in the Sea of History*.
determinism in official Marxism in the post-Mao era, which was supportive of the market-oriented reform. However, returning to Marx’s ‘determinism’ could also be liberating. While Marx is critical of capitalism, he also recognizes that industrial capitalism is the foundation of socialism. Marx is deterministic in insisting that the full development of capitalism had to precede socialism, which makes Lenin, Stalin and Mao seemingly more ‘voluntarist’ by breaking away from the confines of Marx’s historical materialist scheme. But the political and economic structures instituted by Lenin and subsequently Stalin had become confining structures themselves, to the extent that going back to Marx could mean a liberation from Leninism–Stalinism, and justification for introducing a variety of reforms. In this sense, CCTB’s Marxism is far more open-ended than official Marxism. Therefore, the ‘four distinguishes’ sub-project that CCTB undertook may not sound as conservative as it seems. This tradition of open-mindedly interpreting Marxism, again, derives from its nature as the key institution devoted to translating and researching not just the writings of Marx, Engels, Lenin and Stalin, but also, crucially, of the critics within the Marxist tradition such as the ‘old revisionists’.

Conclusion

The above analytical history shows how CCTB, originally designated to translate communist texts and provide the ideological materials for the Party’s agenda and policies, has evolved from an authoritative translation house to a research organization and a think tank. CCTB belongs to one of the research bureaucracies/think tanks within the Party. Other similar organs include the Central Documents Research Office, Central Party History Institute, Central Party School and Central Policy Research Office. Apart from the Central Party School, all of them are still shrouded in mystery and not well-studied. Like CCTB, all of them are not pure think tanks but have other functions. This study of CCTB thus fills a gap in the literature on China’s think tanks, which has so far not paid much attention to these unique research organizations attached to the Party center.

Questions remain as to how influential politically CCTB really is. CCTB, like other important think tanks, regularly sends its own internal reports to the top leadership. Some scholars are regular participants in the ad hoc conferences assembled by the General Office of the Central Committee. Beyond that, however, the influence is hard to measure. Nevertheless, beyond making direct policy impact, another way a think tank can exert influence is to influence from a macro, strategic sense. Over the years, CCTB has been at the forefront in introducing many ideas, and some of these ideas may have permeated the thinking of officials in formulating and planning policy, which can be seen in the official documents of the Party, with its discourse increasingly infused with academic terms and concepts. In this sense,

CCTB’s influence is not just confined to direct policy input; it is also shaping the general currents of thought as well.

Furthermore, the institutional transformation of the CCTB, after all an organ attached to the Party center, into a pro-reform think tank that advocates for political reforms and introduces advanced foreign scholarship and Western ideas, is also consistent with the hypothesis made by Gunter Schubert that China’s political system is capable of generating enough political legitimacy to sustain the one-party rule, and the one-party system ‘can indeed become more democratic, and consequently, more stable in the future’.\(^78\) As can be seen, the research conducted by scholars such as Rong Jingben, Yu Keping and He Zengke have implications in terms of making the one-party system more efficient, accountable, accessible, and indeed more democratic, but not necessarily in terms of overhauling it. When David Lampton noted that China could pursue a reformist path that does not necessarily mean transitioning to democracy but ‘adopting its features: local political participation, official transparency, more independent judicial and anticorruption bodies, an engaged civil society, institutional checks on executive power, and legislative and civil institutions to channel the country’s diverse interests’,\(^79\) this is exactly the kind of agenda of the policy-oriented empirical research that CCTB is known to engage in.

In addition, the research on Marxism is also ideologically important to the Party. As Fewsmith contends, ideology remained crucial. Policies may develop independent of ideology, but ‘attention to ideological justification remains an important part of the decision-making process’.\(^80\) If political and economic reforms could be couched in terms that Marx would have approved of, these reforms could face weaker resistance. As the Party is unlikely to advocate Western-style democratization, ideas of reform to be found in the writings of Marx and Engels, and even Lenin, this CCTB’s combination of Marxism and reformism could very well be significant. In this sense, ‘going back to Marx’ enables a self-proclaimed Marxist system to be ideologically more innovative in pursuing reforms without losing grounding in Marxism.

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\(^78\) Gunter Schubert, ‘One-party rule and the question of legitimacy in contemporary China: preliminary thoughts of setting up a new research agenda’, *Journal of Contemporary China* 17(54), (2008), p. 193, original italicization.

\(^79\) David P. Lampton, ‘How China is ruled: why it’s getting harder for Beijing to govern’, *Foreign Affairs* 93(1), (2014), p. 84.

\(^80\) Fewsmith, ‘Where do correct ideas come from?’, p. 154.