

# Embedding Marxist Epistemology: A Contemporary Interpretation of Shao Yong's Thought on "Observing Things"

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**Abstract:** The cognition method of "observing things" by the famous Confucian, Shao Yong from the early Song Dynasty has an extremely broad and profound meaning. It overlaps and also has similarities with Marxist epistemology. This article attempts to examine it from the perspective of Marxist epistemology; beginning with the subject and object of knowledge, the method of knowledge, and the purpose of knowledge to interpret and reflect on Shao Yong's thought of "observation."

**Keywords:** Marx; Shao Yong; Knowledge; Observation

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## 1. Introduction

Shao Yong (1011-1077), courtesy name Yao Fu, is a well-known Yi scholar, Neo-Confucian, and poet during the Northern Song Dynasty. "Observing things" has been Shao Yong's attitude toward studying all things. It is a basic standpoint and method for him to understand the laws of all things. His thoughts have many similarities with the epistemology of the great Western thinker, Marx of eight hundred years apart. This article uses the perspective of Marxist epistemology in three aspects which are the understanding of subject and object, the method of knowledge, and the purpose of understanding in interpreting Shao Yong's thought on "observation of things" in order to restore the vitality of Shao Yong's philosophy in the contemporary society.

## 2. Subject and object of observation

### 2.1. "Human" as the subject of observation

Marx believed that the subject of cognition is neither "the subject of imagination" as idealists have mentioned nor is it different from old materialists who regarded the subject as a person in a biological sense that passively reflects the objective world. "Subject is human" denotes an organic system comprising of labor, sensory, and thinking organs which is an entity that has a mind that can think and perform practical activities. In this sense, Marx and Shao Yong coincide. Shao Yong pointed out that the subject of "observing things" is human and the reason why people are human is that they are spiritual.

From a physiological point of view, a single human body is equipped with the body of heaven and earth. Shao Yong believed that "yin and yang are rigid and soft" and they are the attributes of heaven and earth as well as the basic elements that constitute all things in which the physiological organs of "human"

are formed from this interaction. Therefore, the human body possesses the attributes of heaven and earth which can be called spiritual. Hence, it can be understood that in the physiological sense, human is biological but it also transcends the biological characteristics. In terms of sensory attributes, human's ears, eyes, nose, and mouth are tools to gain objective experience of things and they can perceive the color and smell of things. From the perspective of the attribute of thinking, the human "heart" can understand the principles of heaven and earth. Shao Yong believed that it is essential to "view all minds with one mind" and "view all generations with one world." This is to conceptualize the "heart" of thinking so that it may shift from singular to universal and vice versa as well as the inclusion of "the whole world" and "all generations." The principle of "Ten Thousand Hearts" is a summary of experience. Marx believed that the thinking organ of humans is the brain while Shao Yong believed that it is the "heart." From the perspective of practical attributes, people have the ability to carry out activities and through practice, people would understand and express the natural principles of heaven and earth, that is "representing the will of heaven" and "representing the words of heaven." In addition to that, through practice, they would be able to create things that are consistent to the natural principles of heaven and earth namely, the "generation of heaven and earth" and "generation of nature."

It can be appreciated that the subject of Shao Yong's "observation" is a biological person with sensation, thinking attributes, and practical attributes. This is in contrast to Marx who believed that humans are "natural, physical, perceptual, and sensuous objective being" whereas the existence of thinking ability, possible understanding and transformation of the object have the same meaning.

## **2.2. "Things" as the object of observation**

Marx had said, "Without nature and the perceptual of the external world, workers can create nothing." That is to say that cognition is dependent on the objective reality which is the object's primary condition. The objective reality in Shao Yong's world is "things." Shao Yong believed that the object of observation or human cognition is "things."

Shao Yong's "things" had obvious materialism tendencies. One of it is tangible objects in nature which are objects without involving human behaviors in the transformation while the second is tangible and traceable objects in human and the society. "Things" are things that involve human behaviors in the transformation. There are two key points to this which are the reality of natural objects and the connection with human. Marx believed that "objects are nature" but not all nature are objects. Only those that can be related to humans are called objects. Shao Yong also believed that even if there are other "things" besides heaven and earth, they cannot be called "objects" because they are not related to people. This is in line with Marx's claim that the real object is related to the practice of the subject, that is, the part of the objective world that enters the cognitive activity.

"Man" can be both the initiator of the cognitive activity as well as the object of cognition whereby the "man" is both the subject and object. Marx indicated a clear division of objects which comprises of natural objects, social objects, and spiritual objects with material forms as the carrier. In Shao Yong's view, "man" itself is a thing that originates from heaven and earth. Therefore, "man" is naturally included as a natural object. While human beings exist in the society and have social attributes, Shao Yong's "observation" of humans also has social and moral scrutiny; hence "humans" can also exist for the society.

## **3. Way of observing**

### **3.1. Empirical knowledge of "observing"**

Marx mentioned that "science is based on experience" which marks Marx's inheritance of the empiricist concept. Not only is science like that but any in-depth theory is not discovered by pure speculation.

Therefore, theory have a certain dependence on experience. Shao Yong also started with experiences in understanding objects, and then through abstraction and generalization of the mind, he realized the principles of “things.” Hence, Shao Yong proposed the method of “observing” in which he believed that “observing” is the subject’s overlook of the object. Only by going beyond the scope of the object itself, only then a comprehensive and accurate understanding of the object can be obtained. Shao Yong believed that there are three levels of “observing” which comprise of observing things with eyes, observing things with the heart, and observing things with reason. At the level of “observing things with eyes,” subjects directly perceive sound, color, and smell of things with their own sensory organs such as ears, eyes, nose, and mouth. The perceived is the external phenomenon of things in a metaphysical view which is also called “observation.” It has objectivity whereby it relatively reflects the appearance of the entire object. Shao Yong said that “people are not good at observing flowers, they only love the appearance of flowers.” The appreciation of flowers mentioned is only a reflection of the appearance of flowers by the eyes which should be surpassed. Hence, escalating to the level of “observing things with the heart.” Shao Yong believed that the human heart does not only has the function of thinking but it also contains emotions. People can confer emotions to everything so “observing things with the heart” is a perceptual understanding. He believed that human emotions could interfere with the understanding of the truth, hence this perceptual knowledge should also be surpassed. The highest level of “observing things by reason” is the rational cognition of the laws of an object which implies the intuitive grasp of the truth of things. At the level of “observing things by reason,” people’s subjective prejudices are eliminated, hence achieving the dialectical unity of subject and object.

### **3.2. Theory of “reasoning”**

If “observing” is an empirical way of direct knowledge of an object, then “reasoning” is a theoretical way of indirect knowledge of an object. Marx proposed that theoretical knowledge is to attribute the visible and superficial motion of the internal reality where the laws of the object are hidden inside the object itself. Shao Yong’s theory of “number” and “reasoning” is a direct interpretation of Marx’s proposition. Shao Yong once said that “God creates numbers, numbers produce images, and images produce apparatus.” “God” is the body of all things, and all things are born of it. “Apparatus” indicates everything that exists objectively. He believed that the essence of the internal law of the object is the law of “number” in which there are “numbers” to everything. Therefore, to know the truth of things, “numbers” can be used to reason out principles. Shao Yong also believed that the science of all things followed a law of “numbers” for example, one is split into two, two is split into four, four is split into eight, eight is split into sixteen, sixteen is split into thirty-two, thirty-two is split into sixty-four, and so forth. Cheng Hao named Shao Yong’s theory of inference by number as the “doubling method” while Zhu Xi named it as the “one-division method.” It can be seen that this method of number “reasoning” is highly abstract. With regard to Shao Yong in advocating this method of reasoning with “numbers,” his ideas are known as “mathematics.” Marx stated that, “In order to study these forms and relationships in their pure state, they must be completely separated from their own content, and the content must be set aside as insignificant things. In this way, we would have no length, width, height, or points, lines without thickness and width, a and b and x and y, constants and variables.” From this, it can be appreciated that Marx also believed that “numbers” can express complex objective objects in order to carry out cognitive activities more clearly.

### **4. Purpose of observation**

Shao Yong believed that the purpose of observing things is to understand “li.” “Li” is the “law of things” which indicates the essential prescriptive nature of all things. It can be extended as laws and rules that all things have to follow for their existence. Therefore, “li” is objective and does not depend on the human

will. “Li” can be explored through observation, practice, research, and summary of all the phenomena of things. Shao Yong also believed that “li” is universal and is attached to all things. Therefore, this “truth” can be grasped by the subject through practice so that the subject and object can be unified in the relation of things. In “The Outline of Feuerbach,” Marx had discussed on the issue of “truth.” He believed that the old materialism regarded knowledge as a passive reflection of the object while idealism attributed “truth” to the will of God. However, none of this can be called a true view of “truth.” He believed that the process of human cognition is a process of continuous pursuit, exploration, and acquisition of truth. “Truth” is the recognition that the subject and the objective object are consistent in which the objective object is correctly reflected in the human brain and the subject also has an active effect on the object. It can be appreciated that Marx’s and Shao Yong’s understandings of “reason” or “truth” have similarities, yet they also have differences. In regard to the similarities, they believed that “reason” or “truth” has the meaning of law, “reason” or “truth” is objective, the subject can treat “reason” or “truth” through practice of cognition, and the purpose of cognition is the pursuit of “reason” or “truth.”

## **5. Reflection on the observation**

In summary, Shao Yong’s philosophical thoughts can be related to the cognitive principles of dialectical materialism which demarcate advanced and scientific thoughts in addition to having humanistic sentiments and the transcendence of realm that Marxist epistemology lacks. However, during the rule of the feudal dynasty, Shao Yong’s thoughts inevitably had certain limitations. First, Shao Yong’s philosophical thoughts were mostly fragmentary opinions and did not form complete logical systems. This is the existing problem of the entire ancient Chinese philosophy. The second is that Shao Yong’s “numerical” reasoning method is a subjective framework and is unable to withstand empirical scrutiny. However, his mathematical thinking is still a significant reference for current research. Third, although Shao Yong’s epistemology of “observing things” had materialist tendencies, it is inevitably with an idealistic color. The Marxist method in examining ancient Chinese philosophy does not only clearly discover its limitations but it also brings out its value that differs from Marxism but unique to the Chinese traditional culture.

## **Disclosure statement**

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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