

Mao Zedong's Dialectical Understanding: Critique of Economic Determinism, the Political Subject, and the Chinese Intellectual Tradition



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ABSTRACT

This study examines Mao Zedong's understanding of dialectics and its political implications. It evaluates Mao's thought through three principal dimensions: his critique of economic determinism and bureaucratic-technocratic socialism, his emphasis on the constitutive role of the masses in political struggle, and his engagement with China's traditional intellectual heritage. Mao's dialectical approach is examined comparatively in relation to Stalin's interpretation of historical materialism. The findings show that Mao's understanding of dialectics departs significantly from the classical Soviet approach centered on the economic base by emphasizing the role of culture, ideology, political struggle, and mass mobilization in social transformation. This perspective underpins his concept of the mass line, according to which socialism depends not only on the development of the productive forces but also on the active political participation of the masses. The study further argues that Mao's dialectical thought emerged through the interaction of the Chinese intellectual tradition and Marxist theory, while his effort to accelerate revolutionary transformation through social contradictions generated a tension between traditional Chinese dialectics and the modern revolutionary-progressivist worldview. Consequently, Mao Zedong Thought offers an original theoretical framework for understanding economic determinism, the political subject, and social transformation.

Keywords: dialectics, Mao Zedong, Mao Zedong Thought, mass line, political subject, traditional Chinese thought.

Introduction

MAO ZEDONG'S UNDERSTANDING OF dialectics was shaped by both classical Chinese and modern Western philosophical traditions; however, it developed fundamentally through his political practice. For this reason, it cannot be understood independently of the political and social struggles of his time. Mao did not treat dialectics merely as a method or as a guide for understanding material conditions. Rather, he continuously reformulated and reproduced his dialectical perspective through his own revolutionary experience. Although the relationship he established between theory and practice

enabled him to transcend the limits of dogmatism, it also encouraged a tendency toward excess, leading him to assume the role of a philosopher-king who claimed the capacity to direct the dialectical process itself. As a revolutionary figure forged in extraordinary historical circumstances, Mao came to regard all historical periods as potential opportunities for reproducing the conditions of revolutionary exceptionality. In this respect, one may observe a radical manifestation of the modern belief that reality can be consciously constructed—a worldly political theology that, at certain points, departed from the more restrained insights of classical dialectical wisdom.

Another important dimension of Mao's dialectical thought is the significance he attributed to the superstructure, far beyond that accorded by many Marxist-Leninist thinkers, and his related emphasis on the decisive role of the masses in political struggle. In this regard, Mao may be considered, alongside Antonio Gramsci, one of the most important Hegelian Marxist revolutionaries of the twentieth century.

Xi Jinping's call to confront political and moral decline in China not through liberal Western values but through a synthesis of Marxism and traditional Chinese virtues closely resembles Mao's own attempt to draw simultaneously upon Marxist dialectics and classical Chinese dialectical traditions.

Beginning in 1937, Mao's writings on dialectics also constituted a direct theoretical engagement with Joseph Stalin. Stalin's support for Mao's opponents during the factional struggles within the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), as well as his sharp criticisms of Mao's theoretical outlook, played a decisive role in shaping this confrontation. Through his critique of Stalin's dialectical framework, Mao simultaneously laid the intellectual foundations for ideas that would later inform his theory of the Soviet Union's "capitalist restoration."

A further target of Mao's writings on dialectics was the intellectual and party elite who, in his view, remained detached both from China's clas-

sical intellectual heritage and from the realities of material production. These ideas would later become foundational to the development of what came to be described as "socialism with Chinese characteristics," namely, a socialist model shaped by China's own historical and social conditions.

Mao's dialectical thought possesses deep roots and resonates with the practical life experiences of the Chinese people, as ancient Chinese sources profoundly nourish it. Consequently, his dialectical perspective transcends mechanical understandings-chief among them Stalin's-that focus exclusively on structure and function. Instead, it is anchored in a foundation that emphasizes the agent-structure relationship and finds its ultimate expression in the mass line. Nevertheless, because Mao embraced the progressive historical narrative of Enlightenment thought and modern political ideologies regarding the cognition and construction of truth, he fell into the illusion that he could direct the dialectical process. This misconception played a definitive role in the excesses of both the Great Leap Forward and the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution.

At first glance, revisiting Mao Zedong Thought at a time when China has become the world's leading engine of productive-force development and a dominant actor in the global economy may appear anachronistic. However, contemporary China itself has demonstrated that economic development alone is insufficient. Through Xi Jinping's anti-corruption campaign and his interventions in elite circulation within the CCP, the Chinese leadership has emphasized that the Party's vanguard role and the state's capacity to allocate resources effectively cannot be sustained without continuous political and cultural struggle against corruption and bureaucratic degeneration. As Huhe et al. (2022) have noted, cam-

paigns directed against “flies,” “tigers,” and other powerful networks within the Party apparatus reflect this concern. In this respect, Mao’s dialectical thought and political practice remain a legacy that deserves careful examination. Xi Jinping’s call to confront political and moral decline in China not through liberal Western values but through a synthesis of Marxism and traditional Chinese virtues closely resembles Mao’s own attempt to draw simultaneously upon Marxist dialectics and classical Chinese dialectical traditions (Xi, 2023). On the fiftieth anniversary of Mao’s death, the most enduring and potentially renewable aspect of Mao Zedong Thought for contemporary China lies in the possibilities its dialectical perspective offers for understanding political practice, social transformation, and ideological struggle.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research design based on historical-comparative analysis. Its primary sources consist of Mao Zedong’s writings and speeches on dialectics, philosophy, and politics, together with Stalin’s works on historical materialism. These are examined alongside relevant primary and secondary literature. Mao Zedong’s understanding of dialectics is analyzed comparatively within the contexts of Soviet Marxism and the Chinese intellectual tradition, with particular attention to conceptual continuities, divergences, and their political implications. Through this approach, the study explores how Mao Zedong reinterpreted the relationship between economic determinism, the political subject, and social transformation.



Xi Jinping, general secretary of the Communist Party of China Central Committee, Chinese president and chairman of the Central Military Commission, and other Party and State leaders pay tribute to Comrade Mao Zedong at the Chairman Mao Memorial Hall in Beijing on the 130th anniversary of the birth of Mao (Photo: China Daily, 2023).

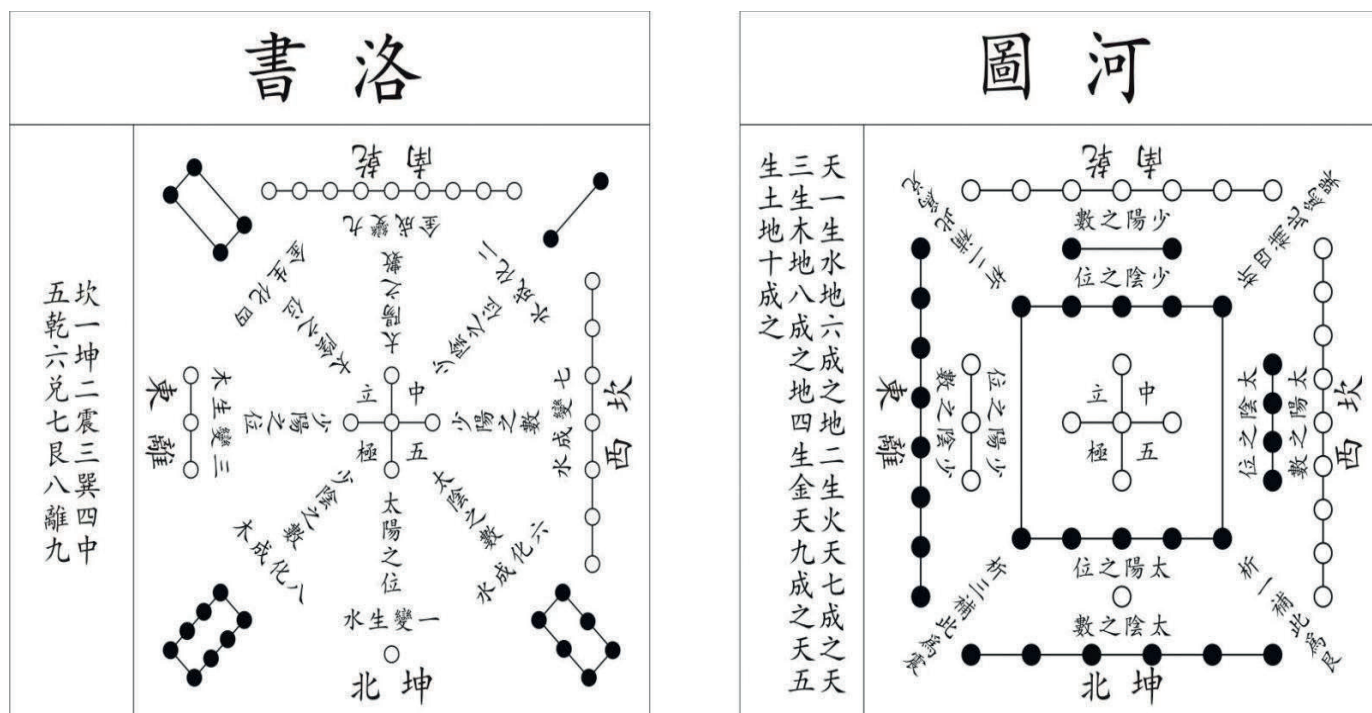
Sources of Mao's Dialectical Thought

The dialectical worldview embodied in China's ancient intellectual traditions possesses a remarkably deep and long-standing history. In this respect, it may only be compared in scope and sophistication to the *wahdat al-wujud* (unity of being) tradition of Islamic mysticism (Izutsu, 2017). According to Chenshan Tian (2019), explaining reality through "the interaction of complementary opposites in the creative process" constitutes one of the fundamental characteristics of Chinese thought and played a significant role in the reception of Marxist philosophy in China (p. 18). A concise expression of this principle can be found in Mawlana Jalal al-Din Rumi's statement that "everything subsists through its opposite" (Mevlânâ, 2017, p. 66). Laozi (Lao Tzu) illustrates this principle through examples in the second chapter of the *Tao Te Ching*, while Zhuangzi (Chuang Tzu) explains it through metaphors in numerous passages (Laozi, 2024, p. 27; Zhuangzi, 2024, p. 101).

It would not be inaccurate to describe Mao as a master of the Chinese classics. His speeches contain far more references to classical Chinese scholars and texts than to major Marxist theorists. Indeed, dialectical thought had been developed throughout Chinese history within the framework of the philosophy of *tongbian* (continuity-through-change). Dating back more than five thousand years and traceable to the *Yi Jing* (Book of Changes), one of China's earliest written texts, *tongbian* philosophy played a crucial role in the development of *bianzheng* (dialectical materialism). According to this tradition, everything changes, yet nothing disappears completely; rather, things

reproduce themselves under new conditions, and this process of transformation emerges from contradictions within and between things (Tian, 2002, p. 126). This philosophy may be understood through four key concepts: *dao* (the Way), *yi* (change), *yin-yang* (the complementary poles of existence), and *biantong* (continuity through transformation). *Bian* refers to becoming through difference or transformation, while *tong* denotes continuity or an ongoing process. Tian illustrates this relationship through the famous analogy of a door opening and closing found in the *Yi Jing*. Opening and closing constitute *bian*—the moments of change—whereas the process itself represents *tong*. Although the spatial field produced during opening and closing remains the same, the poles of the process are opposite. Many Chinese thinkers, therefore, argued that throughout *wanwu* (the ten thousand things under heaven), *bian* and *tong* coexist. Without continuity, contradiction could not be perceived; without contradiction, the door would either remain permanently open or permanently closed. In such a case, the door would effectively cease to exist as a door and become merely a wall. Contradictions within things both determine their existence and allow them to appear as enduring entities that can be recognized and named (Tian, 2019, p. 16).

Tongbian incorporates four central propositions. First, everything in the world exists in relation to something else. Second, these relations are reciprocal, meaning that things function as complementary opposites. Third, the fundamental source of movement and change in the world lies in this structure of contradiction. Fourth, everything exists within a process of transformation and presents itself through a



The Luoshu (洛書) and Hetu (河圖) diagrams.
(Image: KKNNews, 2020).

dynamic relationship between center and field (Tian, 2019, p. 17).

As will be discussed below, Zhuangzi, Sunzi (Sun Tzu), and Romance of the Three Kingdoms were among the most influential ancient sources shaping Mao's understanding of dialectics and tongbian thought.

In addition to his mastery of the foundational texts of Marxism, Mao followed the Western philosophical tradition closely from an early age (Dirlik, 1989, p. 46; Fung, 2010, pp. 202-205; Snow, 2015, p. 186; Yang, 2016, p. 60). During the formative years of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), the works of M. B. Mitin, a Soviet philosopher supported by Joseph Stalin, played a significant role in introducing dialectical materialism to Chinese communists. These texts were translated into Chinese by

Li Da and Ai Siqi. However, as discussed below, Mao would later criticize both Mitin and Stalin's interpretation of dialectics (Rockmore, 2019, p. 60).

Although Stalin and Mao shared certain assumptions regarding dialectics, their disagreements were intensified by Stalin's 1937 attempt to place Wang Ming and the so-called Twenty-Eight Bolsheviks-cadres educated under Soviet supervision-at the head of the CCP (Shen, 2020, p. 43). When Wang arrived in Yan'an in October, he conveyed Stalin's directive that Mao should undergo ideological strengthening due to what Stalin regarded as Mao's narrow empiricism and insufficient understanding of Marxism-Leninism (Benton, 1975, p. 77; Short, 2007, p.332).

The accusation of empiricism reveals how distant Stalin was from the realities of China and how little attention he paid to the social contradictions driving revolutionary struggle. Those who attempted to direct the movement from a desk or from abroad could neither correctly identify China's contradictions nor derive the requirements of revolutionary practice from abstract theoretical texts. In contrast, Mao's famous 1937 essay *On Contradiction* effectively served as a response to both Stalin and Wang Ming, clearly demonstrating the relationship between theory and revolutionary practice that constituted another major source of his dialectical thought. This practical orientation was shaped by what may be termed the "revolutionary situation," a concept that later contributed to accusations of voluntarism against Mao (Schram, 1986, pp. 773-775).

Such an approach resembles expecting birth through artificially induced labor pains rather than through a natural process. Dialectics, however, operates in its own manner: excess inevitably generates its opposite.

Revolutionary periods are rare historical moments in which the masses emerge as active agents on the stage of history. Revolutions can succeed when conscious human intervention corresponds to mature objective conditions, but they can also fail through political mistakes. Such moments occur when the old social order begins to disintegrate, and organized forces

emerge capable of clearing away the remnants of the previous system while establishing a new social division of labor. During such periods, human agency acquires an exceptional significance. Consequently, even leaders whose perspectives are fundamentally structuralist tend to emphasize the role of human will and political subjectivity in history.

Because Mao believed in the theory of continuous revolution and in the repeated renewal of revolutionary power, the revolutionary situation did not end with the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949. As will be discussed in greater detail below, one of the most problematic aspects of Mao's thought was his conviction that revolutionary situations could be recreated every five or ten years by intensifying contradictions when necessary. Instead of allowing genuine social contradictions to unfold organically, Mao increasingly attempted to generate crises through external intervention, assuming that intensified conflict would accelerate historical development. Such an approach resembles expecting birth through artificially induced labor pains rather than through a natural process. Dialectics, however, operates in its own manner: excess inevitably generates its opposite. The rapid transformation of Chinese politics in the years following Mao's death perhaps provides the clearest illustration of this dynamic.

These three sources may therefore be identified as the principal foundations of Mao's dialectical thought. Nevertheless, as Mao's conflicts with Stalin deepened and particularly after the ideological split with the Soviet Union that began to emerge after 1956, he increasingly emphasized the Chinese classical tradition. He came to discuss dialectical materialism more

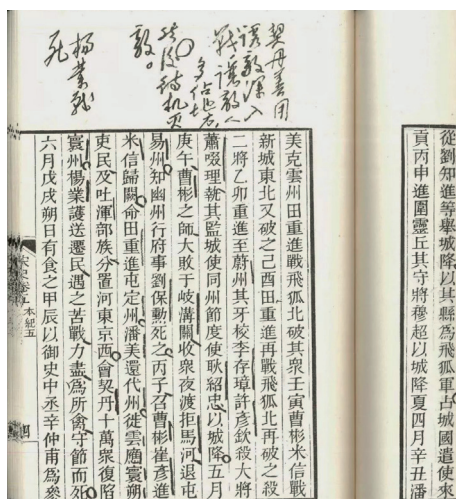
frequently through the lens of Chinese thinkers and criticized those who claimed that the Chinese intellectual tradition lacked a dialectical dimension. This tendency also spread among those around him. Two notable examples are particularly illustrative in this regard.

Speaking at the Open Session of Group Leaders of the Enlarged Meeting of the Military Affairs Committee on 28 June 1958, Mao stated:

Li Shi-min, Cao Cao, and others all knew how to wage war. China's past is immensely rich. Comrade Kai Feng said that there is no Marxism in Sun-Zu Ping-fa (The Art of War). However, when I asked him whether he had actually read the book, he could not answer. It is clearly wrong to make such definite judgments without reading it." At this point, Commander Lin Biao intervened, adding: "There is both materialism and dialectics in Sun-Zu Ping-fa (Mao, 2000, p. 95).

In a philosophical discussion held on 18 August 1964, Mao told Party intellectuals: "I am a na-

tive philosopher; you are foreign philosophers" (Mao, 2000, p. 327). During the same discussion, he argued that Lenin's ideas concerning the infinite divisibility and indestructibility of matter could already be found in Zhuangzi. A close reading of Zhuangzi's writings suggests that Mao drew extensively on them in formulating his views on matter, order, and particularly chaos (Tian, 2002, p. 23; Zhuangzi, 2024). While discussing contradictions among the people and criticizing dogmatic approaches, Mao posed the question of whether "bad things can be transformed into good things" and invoked Laozi's famous observation that "within misfortune there is fortune, and within fortune there is misfortune" as an illustration of dialectical reasoning (Mao, 1993, p. 453). Likewise, Mao referred to Mozi, the founder of Mohism and a major rival of Confucianism, as "China's Heraclitus" and praised him as "a great master of ancient dialectical materialism" (Tian, 2002, p. 23).



Mao Zedong's handwritten annotations and markings in The Twenty-Four Histories, which chronicles approximately four thousand years of Chinese history. Mao studied the work systematically for 24 years, drawing on historical experience to address contemporary political and social issues (Photo: Sohu, 2019).

Despite these appreciations, Mao did not embrace Laozi's preference for moderation and avoidance of extremes, nor did he adopt Zhuangzi's ideal of a life grounded in non-intervention. If dialectics is understood as the coexistence of opposites and the eventual transformation of things into their opposites, it can be argued that both Laozi and Zhuangzi approached the relationship between the individual and the universal with considerable subtlety and recognized that the natural world unfolds according to its own inherent order. However, neither Mao's Enlightenment-inspired faith in progress nor the historical mission he assumed allowed him to fully internalize this understanding of dialectics.

Having emerged from circumstances in which human will was forged through immense hardship and where society demanded heroic leadership, Mao refused to see himself merely as an observer of the dialectical process. Instead, he defended what may be called a secular political theology, embodied both in himself and in the masses whom he regarded as the agents of history. Consequently, he came to view history as a process that could be consciously experimented upon and directed. Within the vast scope of his revolutionary vision, the human costs of such experiments often appeared secondary.

Paradoxically, a thinker who understood dialectics well enough to recognize that no condition could represent an absolute good nevertheless came to believe that contradictions could be accelerated in order to produce something "better than the better." His conviction that the dialectic of order and chaos could be consciously manipulated helps explain the tragic dimensions of his later political trajectory. After a series of experiments that imposed immense social costs, Mao ultimately prepared the ground for a relatively

smooth transfer of power to Hua Guofeng, while undoubtedly perceiving Deng Xiaoping's rise on the horizon. In this final phase, Mao appears less as a philosopher-king seeking to direct history and more as a reflective Chinese scholar reconciled with reality, attempting to repay his intellectual debt to the classical tradition from which he had long drawn inspiration.

The Fundamental Principles of Dialectics in Mao

For Mao, the foundation of dialectics is "contradiction." He rejects the unity of opposites as formulated through the triad of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis. In Mao's understanding, the thesis is overcome by the antithesis; the antithesis then becomes a new thesis, containing within itself its own opposite and eventually transforming into it. In other words, the contradiction between two opposites does not produce a third form: "What is synthesis? You have all witnessed how the Kuomintang and the Communist Party were synthesized on the mainland. Synthesis occurred in this way: their armies came, and we devoured them, piece by piece." (Mao, 2000, p. 325)

In Hegel, the question of synthesis is primarily ontological. Being (thesis), Nothingness (antithesis), and Becoming (synthesis) constitute an explanation of reality itself. In fact, "nothingness" in Hegel is less a concrete condition than a key concept for explaining the relationship between Being and Becoming. When Being is conceived in complete abstraction, its connection to existence is severed; when it is conceived in purely immanent terms, it loses its transcendence (Hegel, 2014). In Stalin, particularly under the influence of Friedrich Engels, the thesis-antithesis-synthesis triad is employed not as an ontological issue but as a means of explain-

ing contradiction and progress in reality. Once the unity of opposites is detached from Hegel's idealist philosophy and subjected to a materialist reinterpretation, the ontological essence of the concepts is also altered (Stalin, 1989, pp. 20-21). In this respect, Mao's criticism is directed less at Hegel than at Stalin's interpretation of the unity of opposites.

In the same text, recorded as *Talk on Questions of Philosophy*, Mao makes the following assertion: "Philosophy can exist only where there is class struggle. To discuss epistemology apart from practice is a waste of time." (Mao, 2000, p. 198) This proposition immediately raises several questions. Would there be no philosophy in societies without classes? Is epistemology the sole subject matter of philosophy? The question of Being confronts individuals as soon as they attain consciousness of their own existence. For

this, not only class struggle but even the presence of another person is arguably unnecessary (İbn Tufeyl, 2021). However, in the following sentence, Mao refers specifically to epistemology, suggesting that he may not be speaking of philosophy in its entirety. His emphasis on "practice" should be understood in the context of his long-standing struggle within the Party, particularly against the group known as the Twenty-Eight Bolsheviks led by Wang Ming, whom he frequently criticized as "dogmatists" and "intellectuals." According to Mao, any idea that is not derived from practice, tested within practice, and oriented toward practical life amounts to little more than wordplay. This observation remains significant; at the very least, philosophical discussions conducted without a serious understanding of economics and history risk becoming mere sophistry.



Mao Zedong talking with peasants in Yangjialing, Yan'an, about their production and living conditions (Photo: CPC News, 2025).

Materialist dialectics holds that external causes constitute the conditions of change, while internal causes constitute its basis. External causes operate through internal causes. At an appropriate temperature, an egg turns into a chick. However, no temperature can turn a stone into a chick, because the two are fundamentally different.” (Mao, 2008, p. 89).

Mao was acutely aware of this problem and therefore attached enormous importance to ideological mobilization. At the same time, he believed that systems of material rewards risked reproducing bourgeois cultural relations and capitalist modes of thinking.

These remarks reveal the structuralist dimension of Mao’s thought and challenge interpretations that portray him as a pure voluntarist. Indeed, Andrew G. Walder objects to such readings, arguing that Mao sought to establish a balance between changes in the economic base and transformations in the superstructure. Ideological transformations, Mao believed, could become durable only when accompanied by corresponding changes in production relations (Walder, 1977). Consistent with Walder’s interpretation, Mao pursued ideological campaigns alongside collectivization and the establishment of communes. During the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (GPCR), he even allowed, albeit briefly, the experiment of the Shanghai Commune. The fundamental problem in Mao’s approach, however, was his

attempt to intensify contradictions to propel both the economic base and the superstructure toward a higher stage of development, with ideological struggle as the primary catalyst. In this manner, Mao envisioned a new dialectical process: the conscious collective action of the revolutionary vanguard would accelerate material transformation. In contrast, the resulting material changes would in turn elevate collective consciousness. Mao was likely convinced of the feasibility of this process by the practical experience of the revolutionary years between 1921 and 1949. However, transformations of such intensity are possible primarily under extraordinary circumstances—such as war—when contradictions reach their highest level and urgent needs demand radical solutions. Under normal conditions, when people require stability, work, and social order, such a strategy becomes excessive. Mao mistakenly assumed that the lessons drawn from the long revolutionary period could be reproduced indefinitely by transforming ordinary times into a permanent state of mobilization. During the revolutionary era, a single spark could ignite the dry grasslands of the countryside; however, the masses are not always ready to burn, nor are they perpetually willing to endure an overheated social environment.

It is necessary to ‘set fires’ at regular intervals. How often should this be done? Once a year? Once every three years? In my opinion, it should be done twice during every Five-Year Plan period, much like the extra day added in leap years.” (9 July 1957) (Mao, 1993, p. 498).

These remarks strongly support the above argument. From another perspective, ideological mobilization can be understood as a means of securing the masses’ voluntary support for ambitious economic development projects. Large-scale investments financed through high levels of do-



On August 18, 1966, Chairman Mao received Red Guards and representatives of revolutionary teachers and students at the Tiananmen Gate Tower (Photo: Mao Zedong Database [毛泽东博览], 1966).

mestic savings rather than external borrowing require the production of social consent. Ideological campaigns, therefore, play a crucial role in generating that consent. The central question, however, concerns sustainability. Under-consumption, high savings rates, and intensive labor utilization cannot be maintained indefinitely through ideological mobilization alone. Moreover, such campaigns often impose destructive costs on bureaucrats, technocrats, and intellectuals. Unlike Mao, Stalin largely neglected ideological mobilization during the Soviet Union's development drive, which was based on high savings and labor-intensive growth. The result was increasing alienation among producers, political apathy, and admiration for Western consumer culture. Mao

was acutely aware of this problem and therefore attached enormous importance to ideological mobilization. At the same time, he believed that systems of material rewards risked reproducing bourgeois cultural relations and capitalist modes of thinking (Mao, 2000, pp. 201-204). The deeper dilemma lay elsewhere. The persistence of socialism imposed costs in circumstances where central planning failed to generate sufficient efficiency. Deng Xiaoping later addressed this problem by allowing market mechanisms to regulate supply and demand and by making material incentives the principal source of motivation. While this solution enhanced efficiency, it also contributed to political depoliticization, widening inequalities, and the weakening of the working class.

As discussed above, efforts to promote high-savings growth and to transform culture in accordance with changing production relations can be defended to a certain extent. The more fundamental problem lies in Mao's belief that he could personally direct the dialectical process. One of the most striking examples emerged during the Great Leap Forward, a highly unrealistic campaign of accelerated development:

There is also the matter of eliminating the four pests and paying attention to hygiene. I attach great importance to eradicating rats, sparrows, flies, and mosquitoes. China must become a country without rats, sparrows, flies, or mosquitoes (9 October 1957) (Mao, 1993, p. 532).

A nationwide campaign against the Four Pests followed. Shortly thereafter, Mao declared: "For four thousand years, including Confucius, no one concerned himself with eliminating these four scourges" (28 January 1958) (Mao, 2000, p. 47). By this statement, Mao emphasized the historical significance of the campaign. However, it is hardly surprising that no traditional Chinese thinker has ever attempted such a project. Ancient societies neither objectified nature in the modern sense nor possessed the technological capacity to do so.

The consequences of interfering with the dialectics of nature in this manner proved disastrous. The mass extermination of sparrows in particular led to an explosion in insect populations and a severe decline in agricultural productivity. Even then, Mao did not abandon his role as a self-appointed manager of dialectics; he merely replaced sparrows with bedbugs in the list of pests and effectively rehabilitated the former. It may even be argued that the failure of the Great Leap Forward intensified Mao's desire for ideological revenge during the Cultural Revolution, pushing his experiments in managing contradictions to their most radical extreme.

Under Mao's leadership, the CCP achieved the 1949 Revolution with a success that exceeded most expectations. While the new regime was still attempting to consolidate the political system, China became involved in the Korean War, during which the United States was pushed back from China's borders to the 38th Parallel. During the following seven years, significant progress was made in China's economic development. It may be argued that the extraordinary willpower and strategic competence required to overcome these challenges gradually contributed to the emergence of a god-complex in Mao himself. Deng Xiaoping repeatedly alluded to this tendency in his later assessments (Deng, 1994, 1995a, 1995b; Pu, 2015).

For Mao, the relationship between ideological mobilization, the development of the productive forces, and the transformation of cultural structures could only be sustained through the intensification of contradictions. Mao describes contradictions as follows:

Within everything there exists a contradiction between its new and old aspects, and this gives rise to a series of struggles full of twists and turns. As a result of these struggles, the old aspect shifts from important to unimportant and gradually dies away, while the new aspect shifts from small and insignificant to large and dominant. Once the new aspect gains supremacy over the old, the old thing qualitatively changes into the new. Thus, the nature of a thing is determined principally by the dominant aspect of the contradiction, that is, the aspect that has gained superiority. When the dominant aspect changes, the nature of the thing changes accordingly (Mao, 2008, p. 110).

It is noteworthy that within the same passage, Mao speaks both of the death of the old and of



Mass labor mobilization during the Great Leap Forward: building a pontoon bridge to transport earth, Jingmen, Hubei, 1958 (Photo provided by Chen Feng/China Photographers Association, 2021).

its qualitative transformation into something new. Treating qualitative transformation as equivalent to death is problematic. The circulation of matter itself demonstrates that this is not the case. Social phenomena likewise do not fundamentally disappear; what appears to have died is often reproduced in new forms. Many of the central concepts of modern political thought—such as the separation of powers, democracy, or the unity of powers—can be traced to premodern political and institutional structures that have been rearticulated in modern contexts. Another difficulty in Mao's thought is his tendency, common among progressive ideologies, to attribute a metaphysical superiority to the new over the old. However, life continues, and social forms

are constantly recycled and transformed. Mao once remarked: "I approve of Zhuangzi's approach. When his wife died, he beat a drum and sang. When people die, banquets should be held to celebrate the victory of dialectics and the destruction of the old" (Mao, 2000, p. 329). What is being celebrated here, however, is not merely the replacement of the old by the new but rather the cyclical continuity of life itself. This is not a mechanical substitution of one state for another. In the ancient worldview, death is not an ending, nor birth an absolute beginning; both are moments within a continuous process of becoming. Indeed, this perspective constitutes one of the central principles of Daoist thought (Zhuangzi, 2024, pp. 59-62).

Mao further argued that without practical contradictions or ideological struggles to resolve, the Party itself would cease to live. In addressing contradictions, he distinguished between “contradictions between ourselves and the enemy” and “contradictions among the people” (Mao, 2008, pp. 98, 121-124). In political terms, this amounts to a distinction between contradiction as paradox and antagonistic contradiction as irreconcilable conflict. Mao’s long-standing united front strategy was based precisely upon this distinction. Against forces constituting the principal antagonistic contradiction, groups that possessed secondary disagreements could nevertheless form alliances based on a shared position regarding the principal contradiction. Mao’s theoretical insights were often remarkably accurate, and his practical political strategies frequently reflected this accuracy. However, whenever the united front approach was abandoned in favor of ideological campaigns directed against particular factions or tendencies, the nature of the contradictions was rapidly and inconsistently redefined. During the Hundred Flowers Campaign, for example, many intellectuals assumed that Mao’s invitation to criticism fell within the category of contradictions among the people. They subsequently paid a heavy price for this assumption. After 1978, the CCP gradually sought to restore the positions and reputations of many individuals who had suffered because their disagreements with the Party were retrospectively categorized as antagonistic contradictions. Certainly, one cannot argue that the contradiction between the national bourgeoisie and the working class during the period of New Democracy should have remained identical under socialism. Marxists must identify new relationships between changing production relations and political struggle. The arbitrariness emerged when Mao assumed the role of a dialectical deity, justifying

purge-like policies by redefining the direction and nature of contradictions. This tendency was closely linked to an alarming indifference toward human life and dignity.

Mao famously stated that “when a thing reaches its extreme, it turns into its opposite” (Mao, 1993, p. 356). Indeed, war begins to transform into peace when it reaches its ultimate limits. The longest day simultaneously marks the beginning of the movement toward the shortest day. Similar examples can easily be found throughout everyday life. Unlike Stalin, Mao did not generally regard political opponents as foreign agents.

Mao famously stated that “when a thing reaches its extreme, it turns into its opposite” (Mao, 1993, p. 356). Indeed, war begins to transform into peace when it reaches its ultimate limits. The longest day simultaneously marks the beginning of the movement toward the shortest day. Similar examples can easily be found throughout everyday life. Unlike Stalin, Mao did not generally regard political opponents as foreign agents. Rather, he believed that contradictions inherent within political and organizational structures themselves could generate counterrevolutionary tendencies from within. Consequently, he sought to combat counterrevolution through continuous revolution, thereby directing the development of contradictions themselves.



Mao Zedong and Joseph Stalin at the ceremonial meeting marking Stalin's 70th birthday, Bolshoi Theatre, Moscow, December 21, 1949 (Photo: Russian State Central Museum of Cinema and Photography [РГАСПИ], 2021).

In criticizing Stalin's conception of opposites as existing side by side without transforming into one another, Mao's dialectics arguably came closer to classical understandings of dialectical thought. Responding to Stalin's example of war and peace, Mao asked: "If war were not already fermenting during peacetime, how could it suddenly break out? If peace were not already developing during wartime, how could it suddenly become reality?" (Mao, 1993, p. 400). This understanding also helps explain Stalin's reliance upon police measures and state coercion while closing off possibilities for ideological struggle and mass mobilization. For Stalin, if someone who had once been revolutionary later opposed him, that individual was, at least objectively, an agent. At most, one might search earlier records to demonstrate that he had always been a counterrevolutionary. Had Mao confined himself to this insight and conducted political struggle in accordance with the internal move-

ment of contradictions, his position would have been considerably more coherent. A cosmological analogy may clarify the point. If the Earth were to rotate significantly faster or slower, the fundamental contradictions that sustain life would be disrupted, making life impossible. However, the very contradictions that generate movement also preserve the Earth's current equilibrium. Mao's greatest difficulty lay in his "creative-modern theological" conviction that he could consciously direct contradictions, determining both their speed and intensity through political will.

Mao's reflections on structure and agency constitute another important dimension of his dialectical outlook. In this respect, he diverges from the mechanical dialectics associated with Stalin and moves closer to a Hegelian conception of dialectics. In his comments on *Economic Problems of Socialism in the USSR*, Mao criticized Stalin as follows:

He emphasized only technology and technical cadres. He wanted nothing beyond technology and cadres; there was neither politics nor the masses. This is walking on one leg. Moreover, in industry they emphasize heavy industry rather than light industry—again walking on one leg (Mao, 2000, p. 97).

The queues outside foreign food and clothing stores after 1991 dramatically revealed the accumulated effects of suppressed consumption. Nevertheless, despite Mao's criticism, China likewise remained relatively weak in light industrial investment, allocating the bulk of its resources to heavy industry (Kubo, 2019, p. 148).

Mao's criticism of Stalin's emphasis on technical cadres can be theoretically grounded in J. H. Kautsky's distinction between revolutionary political elites and bureaucratic-political elites. One of Mao's principal concerns after 1949 was that the revolutionary elites forged through war and struggle were increasingly being replaced by bureaucratic-technocratic elites, with power becoming concentrated in their hands. Kautsky similarly observed that following revolutionary transformations, conflicts often emerge between technocratic elites, focused primarily on economic development, and revolutionary elites, who view ideological and cultural transformation as inseparable from the development of productive forces. For bureaucratic-technocratic elites, economic growth becomes the primary objective, and once conditions for growth are established, further ideological mobilization appears inefficient. Revolutionary elites, by

contrast, perceive such tendencies as a grave threat and seek to inspire new generations through revolutionary memory, romanticism, and moral idealism. Mao's attempt during the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (GPCR) to revive the Yan'an spirit of 1937-1949 is particularly revealing in this regard. At the height of the GPCR, Mao abandoned the Sun Yat-sen suit and resumed wearing the uniform of the Chinese People's Liberation Army (CPLA), a gesture soon emulated by the Red Guards (Kautsky, 1969, pp. 441-451).

Mao's Hegelian-Marxist dialectics, with its emphasis on the superstructure, also provides the philosophical foundation for his defense of the mass line. However, Mao was, above all, a man of action. Rather than deriving political practice from an abstract philosophical doctrine, he developed his theoretical views through practical struggles and articulated them philosophically only later. His critique of Stalin's understanding of politics, agency, and the masses is fully consistent with this dialectical outlook. By accusing Stalin of "walking on one leg," Mao criticized a structuralist tendency that focused almost exclusively on the development of productive forces while neglecting the dialectical relationship between base and superstructure. Such neglect contributed to the domination of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) by bureaucratic-technocratic elites and to the transformation of the Soviet Union into a vast bureaucratic apparatus. Significantly, the delegate composition of the 1956 CPSU Congress—which Mao harshly criticized—was itself a legacy of the Stalin period. Of the 1,335 delegates, 643 were party bureaucrats, accounting for nearly half of the total. Among the delegates, 758 possessed higher education, 116 had incomplete higher education, and 169 had secondary education. Given that workers and peasants in the Soviet Union commonly had secondary education, workers constituted less than 10% of the dele-

gates. The remainder largely belonged to the party and state bureaucracy (Kulski, 1956, p. 160).

One reason why Stalin and subsequent Soviet leaders neglected the light industry was their failure to follow a mass-line approach. Since the light industry primarily produces consumer goods, Soviet workers continually experienced shortages in consumption goods despite their sacrifices and the appropriation of surplus value through forced savings. The queues outside foreign food and clothing stores after 1991 dramatically revealed the accumulated effects of suppressed consumption. Nevertheless, despite Mao's criticism, China likewise remained relatively weak in light industrial investment, allocating the bulk of its resources to heavy industry (Kubo, 2019, p. 148). This circumstance may also help explain Mao's reliance on mass mobilization and political propaganda.

As Mao observed:

From beginning to end, Stalin's book says nothing about the superstructure. It does not concern itself with people; it concerns things. They believe that technology and cadres determine everything; they speak always of 'experts' and never of the 'Red,' always of 'cadres' and never of the 'masses.' They speak only of production relations and never of the superstructure or politics. One cannot arrive at communism without a communist movement. (Mao, 2000, pp. 103-104).

One of Mao's most innovative contributions to political thought is his "from the masses, to the masses" line, which occasionally opened space even for experiments in direct democracy. The mass line is inherently conflictual; at times, it may even become a matter of "masses against masses," with different sections of the people occupying opposing sides of a contradiction. For this reason, Wang Hui argues that "the mass line and mass politics are the source of political vitality and

the foundation for resisting right-wing populism" (Wang, 2015, p. 201). According to Wang, Mao's concept of democratic dictatorship is democratic because it possesses an exceptionally broad capacity for political integration and representation, yet dictatorial because this process of integration is simultaneously exclusionary and coercive (Wang, 2015, p. 50).

The mass line also exemplifies the principle that class struggle precedes class formation. During the Yan'an period, the strategy of people's war transformed participating masses into a political class (Wang, 2015, p. 161). From this perspective, Mao's assertion that "one cannot arrive at communism without a communist movement" implies that communist society itself emerges through the resolution of contradictions among the people and struggles against antagonistic enemies. In this respect, Mao's perspective shares an epistemological affinity with E. P. Thompson's preference for the concept of "making" rather than "emergence" when discussing the English working class. By emphasizing class formation through historical struggle, Thompson approaches class in a manner remarkably similar to Mao's understanding of class and class movements (Thompson, 2015, pp. 39-40). For Mao, "making" is nothing other than class struggle and the communist movement itself.

The mass line reached its peak in China during the GPCR, encompassing a wide range of radical movements and organizations. To be sure, the GPCR was not solely an attempt to promote cultural transformation or new political initiatives through mass mobilization. It also represented an effort—ultimately unsuccessful—to move politics beyond the confines of official institutional guardianship and to explore the possibility of political action emerging under chaotic conditions outside predetermined forms.

Nevertheless, Alain Badiou, who sided with Maoist groups during the events of May 1968 in France, continues to declare, borrowing from Arthur Rimbaud, “I was there, and I am still there” (Badiou, 2009, p. 87; 2020, p. 43). Badiou regards the Cultural Revolution as “the last decisive sequence still internal to the party-state” (Badiou, 2009, p. 88; 2020, p. 44). Even in its failure, he considers it the most significant “event” from which a new understanding of politics, centered on the concept of the event itself, may still draw inspiration

Conclusion

This study has examined Mao Zedong’s understanding of dialectics by considering its differences from classical Soviet Marxism, its relationship with the traditional Chinese philosophy of tongbian, and its affinity with Hegelian Marxist critiques of economic determinism.

One of the central findings of the study is that Mao’s dialectics was not based solely on a conception of history centered on productive forces and the economic base. Rather, Mao regarded politics, culture, ideology, and mass movements as constitutive elements of social transformation. In this respect, the concepts of contradiction, practice, and the mass line enabled Mao to conceptualize social change not merely as the outcome of economic development but as the product of political struggle and ideological mobilization. Consequently, Mao’s thought constituted a significant critique of the mechanistic materialist and technocratic-bureaucratic understanding of socialism institutionalized during the Stalin era.

Within this framework, Mao’s criticisms of Stalin were directed toward redefining the relationship between productive forces and the superstructure. For Mao, the continuity of socialism depended not on technical specialization and bureaucratic administration but on the active participation of the masses as subjects of class struggle. The Great Proletarian

Cultural Revolution emerged as the most radical application of this perspective. Although this experience cannot be regarded as successful in terms of its political objectives, it remains a distinctive historical experiment insofar as it challenged the limits of the party-state structure and sought to reproduce the political subject through mass participation.

The most problematic aspect of Mao’s dialectics, however, was his belief that social contradictions could be consciously intensified in order to accelerate the forward movement of history. This belief constituted the foundational element of Mao’s political theology. It may be interpreted as a radical synthesis of Enlightenment-inspired constructivist thought and the Marxist faith in historical progress. Mao’s emergence as the leader of a revolutionary struggle during one of the most turbulent periods in Chinese history undoubtedly reinforced this outlook, as he witnessed the capacity of social upheaval and chaos to generate revolutionary possibilities. However, this perspective also prevented him, at least until the later stages of the Cultural Revolution, from fully internalizing the principles of tongbian philosophy, which represented another important source of his dialectical thought.

The findings further suggest that Mao’s dialectical approach was shaped significantly by the Chinese intellectual tradition, particularly its emphasis on change, opposition, and transformation. This influence did not imply a rejection of Marxism but rather its reinterpretation in light of the historical and social realities of China. Although Mao sacrificed some of the most important principles of traditional Chinese dialectical thought to the demands of his political theology, his effort to preserve an intellectual connection with China’s historical and cultural heritage remained highly significant in an era dominated by modernist intellectual currents. In this regard, Mao’s engagement with the Chinese philosophical tradition constitutes an important theoretical legacy for the continuing development and debate surrounding the project of “socialism with Chinese characteristics.”

In conclusion, Mao's dialectics can be regarded as one of the most comprehensive theoretical and political interventions developed within Marxist thought against economic determinism. For this reason, Mao's ideas continue to serve as an important reference point not only for understanding the Chinese Revolution but also for broader debates in contemporary political theory concerning political subjectivity, social transformation, and political participation. Moreover, the renewed emphasis on ideological discipline, anti-corruption campaigns, and the relationship between Marxism and traditional Chinese values in contemporary China suggests that Mao's dialectical legacy remains a relevant subject for critical re-examination. 🌸

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