

Mao Zedong's Dialectics in the Comparative Perspective of Chinese and Western Modes of Thinking

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毛泽东辩证法是中西两种不同文化和思维方式碰撞的产物，其中包含着十分丰厚的中国传统辩证法元素。这主要体现在毛泽东不仅主张主要矛盾与次要矛盾、主要矛盾方面与次要矛盾方面的区分，而且更强调主要矛盾与次要矛盾、主要矛盾方面与次要矛盾方面在一定条件下的互相转化，以及关于矛盾的精髓问题这些西方传统辩证法所不能容纳的内容。这使得毛泽东的辩证法独树一帜，构成了中西思维方式内含张力的融合的一种典范。对此典范的深入理解，当能对当代中国哲学的复兴与发展有莫大的益助。

关键词：中西思维方式 毛泽东辩证法 西方传统辩证法 矛盾

As the outcome of the encounter of Chinese and Western cultures and modes of thinking, Mao Zedong's dialectics contains considerable elements of traditional Chinese dialectics. Mao advocated differentiation between principal and secondary contradictions and between the principal and secondary aspects of a contradiction; but more importantly, he also emphasized that each can transform into its opposite under certain conditions and attached considerable importance to the "quintessence" of a contradiction, ideas which are alien to traditional Western dialectics. This makes Mao's dialectics distinctive, so that it constitutes a model of the integration (not without tension) of Chinese and Western patterns of thinking. A deeper understanding of this model will be of great benefit to the revival and development of contemporary Chinese philosophy.

Keywords: Chinese and Western modes of thinking, Mao Zedong's dialectics, traditional Western dialectics, contradiction

Hegel once said that the methodology of a philosophy is its soul. Mao Zedong's philosophy exemplifies the adaptation of Marxist philosophy to Chinese conditions and the reconstruction of Chinese culture in its collision with Western culture; an in-depth study of Mao's dialectics

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as the soul of his philosophy is therefore of critical significance for the reconstruction and revival of Chinese culture. However, in past studies, the role of the elements of traditional Chinese philosophy in the composition of Mao's dialectics has been seriously underestimated. This has resulted in an inappropriate understanding of the mode of construction of Sinicized Marxist philosophy and has also affected our understanding of how to achieve the revival of national culture. In view of this, this article stresses studying Mao's dialectics from the comparative perspective of Chinese and Western modes of thinking in order to spur further in-depth thinking on this issue.

I. Distinctive Features of Mao Zedong's Dialectics

Mao Zedong's dialectical thinking is reflected in many of his works, but "On Contradiction" is undoubtedly its most concentrated expression. We therefore start with "On Contradiction" so that we can more readily understand how Mao tailored Marxist philosophy to Chinese conditions at the level of mode of thinking or, to put it another way, to what degree Mao's dialectics reflect traditional Chinese elements.

A notable feature of "On Contradiction" is its stress on the particularity of a contradiction, and especially on the principal contradiction and the principal aspect of a contradiction. This point has been affirmed by many scholars at home and abroad.¹

Of course, Mao was not the first to put forward the concept of "principal contradiction;" it had already appeared in Soviet textbooks. However, in the Soviet Union the principal contradiction and the internal contradiction were generally treated as two concepts belonging to the same series, i.e., the relationship between an internal and an external contradiction was regarded as being a relationship between a principal and a secondary contradiction. If we understand the concepts of "principal contradiction" and "secondary contradiction" and their relationship in this way, their relationship can only be one of essence and phenomenon and cannot be changed. But we can see that this is not what Mao Zedong meant here. He made the following notes on the exposition of contradiction in *A Course in Dialectics and Materialism* by Shirokov, Aizenberg *et al.* (third Chinese-language edition): "A complex process has many contradictions, one of which is the principal contradiction while the remaining are secondary contradictions. As the development of the principal contradiction determines the development of all the secondary contradictions, we cannot find out the most essential thing if we are not able to distinguish between principal and the secondary contradiction and the determining and the determined contradictions (for example...)." ² This view is more precisely defined and elucidated in his "On Contradiction." In particular, he puts forward in this essay the idea of the transformation of the positions of the principal and secondary contradictions and of the principal contradiction determining the stage in the development of things; that is, "at every

1 Tian Zhenshan, *Chinese Dialectics: From The Book of Changes to Marxism*, pp. 140-141.

2 Mao Zedong, *Collected Philosophical Annotations by Mao Zedong*, pp. 87-88.

stage in the development of a process, there is only one principal contradiction which plays the leading role.”³

In the annotations alluded to above, Mao goes on to raise the principal aspect of a contradiction, remarking that he subsequently elaborated in “On Contradiction.” If the difference between Mao’s understanding of the principal contradiction and that of the Soviet textbooks is not very obvious, the difference in their understanding of the principal aspect of a contradiction is very striking. Mao wrote, “In any contradiction the development of the contradictory aspects is uneven. Sometimes they seem to be in equilibrium, which is however only temporary and relative, while unevenness is basic. Of the two contradictory aspects one must be principal and the other secondary. The principal aspect is the one playing the leading role in the contradiction. The nature of a thing is determined mainly by the principle aspect of a contradiction, the aspect which has gained the dominant position.”⁴ The Soviet textbook also discusses the different positions of the two aspects of a contradiction, but argues as follows: “After defining the contradictions in a process and the inseparable interconnection of opposing aspects of the process, we must try to find out the leading aspect of this contradiction. In *Capital*, Marx pointed out that in the inseparable interconnection of the two opposing aspects of the value and use value of a commodity, value has a leading role; in the contradiction between productive forces and relations of production, the productive forces have a leading role.” The textbook goes on, “With regard to the relationship between theory and practice, dialectical materialism probes into the contradiction between the two and takes practice being the leading aspect of this contradiction as a starting point.”⁵ Unlike the Soviet textbook, Mao Zedong pointed out, “But this situation is not static; the principal and the non-principal aspects of a contradiction transform themselves into each other and the nature of the thing changes accordingly.”⁶ He also raised the specific criticism, “Some people think that this is not true of certain contradictions. For instance, in the contradiction between the productive forces and the relations of production, the productive forces are the principal aspect; in the contradiction between theory and practice, practice is the principal aspect; in the contradiction between the economic base and the superstructure, the economic base is the principal aspect; and there is no change in their respective position. This is the mechanical materialist conception, not the dialectical materialist conception. True, the productive forces, practice and the economic base generally play the principal and decisive role; whoever denies this is not a materialist. But it is must also be admitted that in certain conditions, such aspects as the relations of production, theory and superstructure in turn manifest themselves in the principal and decisive role.”⁷ This criticism can be seen as directed at the relevant discussion in the Soviet textbook. On the

3 Mao Zedong, “On Contradiction,” pp. 320-322.

4 *Ibid.*, p. 322.

5 Mao Zedong, *Collected Philosophical Annotations by Mao Zedong*, pp. 85-86.

6 Mao Zedong, “On Contradiction,” p. 322.

7 *Ibid.*, pp. 325-326.

issue of the mutual transformation of the two contradictory aspects, Mao Zedong later directly criticized Stalin: “There are a lot of things in Stalin’s world outlook and methodology that are opposed to dialectic materialism and he taught many people to follow his suit.... The entry on ‘identity’ in the fourth edition of the *Concise Dictionary of Philosophy* compiled in the Soviet Union reflects the views of Stalin. The dictionary says, ‘Phenomena like war and peace, bourgeoisie and proletariat, life and death, cannot be identical because they are fundamentally opposite and mutually exclusive.’ That is to say, these fundamentally opposite phenomena do not have the Marxist identity and they are only mutually exclusive, they do not interconnect with each other and cannot be transformed into each other under certain conditions. This argument is utterly wrong.”⁸

Obviously, advocating a distinction between the principal and the secondary contradiction and between the principal and secondary aspects of a contradiction is in itself insufficient to differentiate Mao’s views from those of Soviet textbooks; it is advocacy of the mutual transformation of the principal and the secondary contradiction and of the principal and secondary aspects of a contradiction under certain conditions that is the nub of the particularity of contradictions. So Mao insisted on this point repeatedly and even went so far as to aim his criticism directly at Stalin.

Clearly, Mao’s views in this regard are incompatible with the theoretical system of the Soviet textbooks. For instance, his advocacy that “in certain conditions, such aspects as the relations of production, theory and superstructure in turn manifest themselves in the principal and decisive role” is difficult to harmonize logically with the commonly accepted proposition that the productive forces are decisive for the relations of production in the same way as the economic base is decisive for the superstructure. As a result, criticisms of Mao’s ideas have appeared along with attempts to “amend” them. For example, one scholar has pointed out that the specific forms of contradictions differ in thousands of ways; some contradictions have a distinction between principal and secondary while others do not, simply revealing themselves in the opposition of the same source or the same movement. Some are expressed as opposites that are also complements; others become their opposites when they reach their limits. In some contradictions, the positions of the two sides cannot change. For instance, the opposition between matter and spirit has an absolute sense: the position and role of matter as primary and spirit as secondary in the contradiction cannot be transformed. The belief that all contradictions, without exception, have principal and secondary aspects is a metaphysical point of view contrary to dialectics. Going a step further, he provides a detailed analysis of some often cited examples, i.e., the contradiction between politics and the economy and between the productive forces and the relations of production. He believes that applying the proposition that any contradiction has its principal and secondary aspects to these contradictions and drawing the conclusion that the two contradictory aspects are bound to be transformed into each other provides the theoretical basis for superstructure determinism and

8 Quoted from Chen Jin, *Analyses of Mao Zedong’s Reading Notes*, p. 865.

spiritual omnipotence.⁹ Other scholars believe that “distinguishing between the principal and the secondary aspects of a contradiction represents a development of materialist dialectics, but it is not a universal principle.”¹⁰ In addition, some have tried to “patch up” the relevant expositions by Mao Zedong. For instance, in an attempt to make Mao’s view consistent with the statements in Soviet textbooks, one scholar has suggested that not only do things have a principal contradiction and the principal aspect of a contradiction, they also have a basic contradiction and the basic aspect of a contradiction.¹¹

These criticisms and amendments doubtless provide a reverse proof of the fact that Mao’s exposition of the mutual transformation of the principal and the secondary contradiction and the principal and secondary aspects of a contradiction under certain conditions is incompatible with the theoretical system of Soviet textbooks. Moreover, from the perspective of the latter, these criticisms and amendments are fully justified. However, in the light of Mao’s long-term adherence to his own point of view, it is equally indubitable that his advocacy of the mutual transformation of contradictions under certain conditions can by no means be understood as a theoretical oversight. Rather, it has a profound meaning. In addition to the annotations on his reading at Yan’an and the exposition in “On Contradiction,” Mao touched on this subject at least on two occasions after the founding of New China.¹² Contrary to these critiques and amendments, he did not distinguish between the “basic contradiction” and the “principal contradiction.” This is clear from his annotations on *Selected Philosophical Writings* by Ai Siqu: “The main meaning of the two words basic (*jiben*) and leading (*zhudao*) is the same. It is wrong to differentiate between the two.”¹³ As one scholar has pointed out, “Mao Zedong did not distinguish between the basic and the principal contradiction in his speeches and articles in this period. For example, for the contradiction between imperialism and the Chinese nation he used ‘basic contradiction’ in ‘The Tasks of the Chinese Communist Party in the Period of Resistance to Japan’ written in May 1937 (*Selected Works of Mao Zedong*, second edition, p. 252), while he used ‘principal contradiction’ in ‘The Chinese Revolution and the Chinese Communist Party’ written in December 1939 (*Selected Works of Mao Zedong*, second edition, p. 631).”¹⁴

The difference between Mao’s dialectics and Western dialectics can also be seen from his opposition to the three basic laws of dialectics. The idea that dialectics contains three basic laws was consistently maintained from Hegel down to Soviet philosophical textbooks but was

9 Zhang Fei, “An Outline of the Exploration of Several Problems Related to the Principal and Secondary Aspects of a Contradiction.”

10 Lin Qingshan, “Must There Be a Principal and a Secondary Aspect in Any Contradiction and Must They Necessarily Transform into One Another?”

11 Shu Weiguang, “On Basic Contradictions and the Basic Aspects of a Contradiction.”

12 Liu Linyuan and Shang Qingfei, “The Important Philosophical Thinking in Mao Zedong’s Reading Notes.”

13 Mao Zedong, *Collected Philosophical Annotations by Mao Zedong*, p. 376.

14 Chen Jin, *Analyses of Mao Zedong’s Reading Notes*, p. 853.

criticized by Mao. He wrote in his later years: “The kernel of dialectics is the law of unity of opposites and the other categories such as the transformation of quality and quantity into each other, negation of negation, interconnection, development and so on can all be explained in the law of the kernel.”¹⁵ In a conversation in 1964, he also directly criticized Engels’ theory of the three laws. He said: “Engels talked about the three categories, but as for me I don’t believe in two of them. (The unity of opposites is the most basic law, the transformation of quality and quantity into each other is the unity of the opposites between quality and quantity, and the negation of the negation does not exist at all.) The juxtaposition, on the same level, of the transformation of quality and quantity into each other, the negation of the negation, and the law of the unity of opposites is ‘triplism’, not monism...Affirmation, negation, affirmation, negation...in the development of things, every link in the chain of events is both affirmation and negation.” At the Hangzhou Meeting in December 1965, Mao Zedong reiterated: “It used to be said that there were three great laws of dialectics, then Stalin said there were four. In my view there is only one basic law and that is the law of contradiction. Quality and quantity, positive and negative...content and form, necessity and freedom, possibility and reality, etc., are all cases of the unity of opposites.”¹⁶

We cannot turn a blind eye to these profound differences between Mao Zedong’s dialectics and the Western dialectical tradition. Still less should we consider them errors in Mao’s theoretical thinking. Instead, we should study them carefully and provide a rational explanation.

II. Understanding Mao Zedong’s Dialectics in the Light of Differences between Chinese and Western Modes of Thinking

The above differences between Mao Zedong’s dialectics and that of the West can be adequately understood only in the light of the different modes of thinking of China and the West. Differences between the two are a matter of fact, but in modern times, under the pressure of dominant Western culture, people have tended to observe this issue from a Western perspective; they look at differences between cultures as temporal differences and turn the comparison between China and the West into one between antiquity and today. However, some scholars have recognized this issue and offered stimulating commentaries on it. Of these, the expositions by Zhang Dongsun and by Hao Dawei and An Lezhe are the most pertinent.

Zhang’s discussion of the subject focuses on the following two points. First, differences between Chinese and Western modes of thinking are based on language differences. “As a result of the influence of language, not only does traditional Chinese thought have no ontology, but it inclines to phenomenalism”; “strictly speaking, China has only a

15 Mao Zedong, *Collected Philosophical Annotations by Mao Zedong*, pp. 505-507.

16 Quoted from Stuart R. Schram, *The Thought of Mao Zedong*, pp. 140-141.

‘philosophy of praxis’ and no pure philosophy; in other words, we can say that China has no metaphysics.” Second, the resultant fundamental difference between Chinese and Western modes of thinking is that “Western philosophy always asks directly what lies behind a thing, whereas the Chinese look only at the interconnections between one image and another, for example, between *yin* and *yang* or closed and open. In short, Westerners try to pierce through things directly while the Chinese try to put them together horizontally... the Chinese mode of thinking finds it enough to have images and the relevant changes among different images.”¹⁷ Hao Dawei and An Lezhe, on the other hand, believe that the difference between Chinese and Western modes of thinking lies in whether “the first problem framework” or “the second problem framework” takes precedence in people’s minds. “The first problem framework,” or “analogic and relational thinking,” “gives a higher precedence to change or process than to stasis and changelessness; it does not rashly conclude that there exists an ultimate cause that constructs the general order of all things but seeks to explain the state of things through interconnecting processes rather than an omnipotent ultimate cause or principle.” On the other hand, “the second problem framework, or causal thinking, is the mode of thinking that is dominant in classical Western society. It makes the following assumptions: (1) the nothingness, separation and disorder of chaos theory are used to explain the origin of the world; (2) the ‘universe’ is understood as a world with a single order; (3) stasis is asserted to take precedence over motion (in other words, it prizes ‘existence’ rather than ‘change’); (4) the order of the universe is believed to have been brought about by some interpretative actor, such as the soul, the Creator, the first mover or the will of God; and (5) all changes in the ‘world’ are asserted, explicitly or implicitly, to be controlled by these things interpreted as agents.”¹⁸

Summing up ideas from various scholars, we reach the initial conclusion that the difference between Chinese and Western modes of thinking lies primarily in their different mental units: the basic unit of Western thinking is the “concept” while the basic unit of traditional Chinese thinking is the “image.” On this matter, I agree with Wang Shuren’s terminology: he calls these two ways of thinking “conceptual thinking” and “imagistic thinking.”¹⁹

Mode of thinking is something that provides a general summing up; it is reflected in all aspects of thinking, but finds its most concentrated expression in methodology. As the most fundamental method, dialectics best embodies the philosophical mode of thought. An understanding of the fundamental differences between Chinese and Western dialectics will give us a better understanding of the uniqueness of Mao Zedong’s dialectics and its root causes.

First, let us look at the dialectics in the Western mode of thinking. “Conceptual thinking”

17 Zhang Dongsun, *Knowledge and Culture*, pp. 100-101, 161-164, 184, 185, 189 and 190.

18 Hao Dawei and An Lezhe, *Expectations of China: Philosophical Reflections on Chinese and Western Cultures*, pp. 1, 6 and 7.

19 Wang Shuren, “‘Imagistic Thinking’ through the Lens of a Comparison of China and the West.”

is the dominant way of thinking in the West. The fundamental difference between the concept, the basic unit of “conceptual thinking,” and the image of “imagistic thinking” lies in the abstract universality of “concept” and its transcendence of the perceptual. Abstract universality is applicable to everything and is above all concrete things, constituting a transcendent realm in itself. Starting from Parmenides and Plato, the transcendent concept has been seen as constituting an unchanging eternal world that differs from the ever-changing perceptual world whose essence or *noumenon* it is. The status of these two worlds is fixed and unchangeable. In the mainstream Western way of thinking, everything in the perceptual world is reduced to “the many,” “phenomena,” etc. in contrast to the transcendent “one,” “essence,” “*noumenon*,” etc.

The problem this way of thinking faces is how the eternal world of *noumena* is connected with the ever-changing perceptual world. Plato’s approach to this tricky issue is to say, as Mr. Chen Kang points out, “the existence of things consists in the clustering of ‘ideas.’”²⁰ It could be said that the approach of understanding “things” as the clustering of “ideas” lays bare the essence of Western dialectics. If we set out to explain things in the real world through abstract concepts, we have no choice but to understand concrete things as particular ways of combining various abstract definitions. Therefore, we can say that the influence of this notion on Western philosophy can never be overestimated. It gives Western dialectics a series of characteristics.

First, its most fundamental characteristic is the absolute inequality between the two parts in the pair of “ideas” and things, “concepts” and phenomenon, “the one” and “the many,” form and matter, the universal and the particular, and reason and perception, with the former enjoying an absolute dominance over the latter, what we call an “exclusive dichotomy.” If, guided by this approach, we try to grasp the real world using concepts, we can only abstract “the many,” phenomena, etc. in the perceptual world into combinations of “the one,” the essence and so on in the world of reason without acknowledging the direct comprehensibility of the perceptual world. As a result, the perceptual world is an abstract mirror image in the world of reason and not the perceptual world itself.

Next, in this way of thinking, the rational world and the perceptual world are always separate; what we call the opposition of contradictions refers to the opposition between these two worlds, and what we call resolution of contradictions refers to absorbing perceptual things into the rational world and turning or reducing them into combinations of a series of concepts. There can be no contradictions between these combinations, or at least the unity or identity of different concepts must be achieved in the end. This means that the understanding of things in this dialectics is always characterized by the dominance and control of “the one” over “the many,” universality over particularity, and *noumenon* over phenomenon.

The traditional Chinese way of thinking and the resulting philosophical methods and dialectics are quite different. If we take *The Book of Changes* as a dialectical model of

20 Chen Kang, “On Plato’s *Parmenides*,” p. 410.

traditional Chinese philosophy, then the *yin* and the *yang* that constitute the way of changes are at the same level; the hierarchical relation of “the one” and “the many,” *noumenon* and phenomenon in the dialectics of Western philosophy does not exist. As a result, the lines and images in *The Book of Changes* that are used to understand things and the things to be understood likewise exist at the same level, or at least are closely connected. In this way, the lines and images signifying changes remain the “simple” image of things, the dynamic temporal picture or image in direct (intuitive) perception. These features of the traditional Chinese way of thinking give rise to fundamental differences between traditional Chinese dialectics and Western dialectics.

Firstly, in principle, the items in various pairs in traditional Chinese dialectics belong to the same level and there is no hierarchical difference between them; that is, the two opposing sides are things or “images” belonging to the same world. Even “‘an image so great that it seems to be formless’ is not a separate category but still an image,”²¹ so it does not by any means constitute another world transcending the “image.” Given that they are all at the same level, it is impossible to reduce all items in pairs belonging to the perceptual world into “the many” or “phenomena” in opposition to the transcendent “one,” “essence” or “noumenon.” Thus, in Chinese dialectics, what we call contradiction is not expressed as opposition between “the one” and “the many,” *noumenon* and phenomenon, or reason and perception, i.e., opposition between things at two different levels, but as opposition between two tendencies and positions at the same level. Moreover, since “nothing in the world is completely cut off from other things,” a variety of relationships are bound to exist between things at the same level and everything contains many contradictory relationships; and since it is impossible to put these contradictory relationships into the single framework of the relationship of “the one” and “the many” of Western dialectics, from the perspective of traditional Chinese dialectics, the multifaceted relationships of every real thing inevitably contain multiple contradictions that make up a group of contradictions.

Secondly, as the two opposed sides are things at the same level and neither belongs to the transcendental eternal world of *noumena*, then, unlike in the West, the movement and resolution of contradictions unfold through the lens of traditional Chinese dialectics in a temporal sequence. When the world is seen over the course of time, what the changing images reveal is the ever-changing state of things rather than combinations of abstract concepts.

Thirdly, consequently, the interaction of two contradictory aspects elaborated in imagistic dialectics is a direct interaction instead of an interaction between an abstract “*noumenon*” or “essence” and concrete things. The result of this interaction is that “In it are included the forms and the scope of everything in the heavens and on earth, so that nothing escapes it;”²² “The eight trigrams succeed one another by turns as the firm and the yielding displace each other;” and “as the firm and the yielding lines displace one another, change and transformation

21 Zhang Xianglong, “Observing ‘Images’.”

22 Book Three (II) of *The Book of Changes*.

arise.”²³ Given that this interaction occurs at the same level, the position of the two sides in a contradiction may change over time, unlike Western dialectics in which the relationship of controlling and being controlled between the world of *noumenon* and the perceptual world, between essence and phenomenon or between “the one” and “the many” never changes.

In the light of the differences between Chinese and Western dialectics described above, it is obvious that Mao Zedong’s exposition of the principal and the secondary contradictions and the principal and secondary aspects of a contradiction transforming into one other under certain conditions could not exist in the “conceptual thinking” of Western dialectics; it could only occur in the “imagistic thinking” of Chinese dialectics. Just as Mr. Wang Shubai points out, “This view inherits to some degree the tendency of the ancient Chinese dialecticians to generalize the transformation of the position of the two sides of a contradiction.”²⁴ In conceptual dialectics, since everything is understood as a contradiction between “the one” and “the many” and between essence and phenomenon, with the former exercising absolute control over the latter, the dominant side can only be the *noumenon*, the essence or “the one” instead of the phenomenal or “the many,” and the relationship between the two sides of the contradiction is fixed. What the Soviet textbooks upheld was this Western concept. Things are quite different with the dialectics of “imagistic thinking:” first, all the pairs in a contradiction are in principle on the same level, and even those understood in the Western way as belonging to different levels are treated as being on the same level. There is therefore, in principle, no hierarchical relationship between them; the principal and secondary sides of all contradictions may be transformed into one another. Second, since interaction takes place at the same level, the positions of the the two sides of the contradiction may change as time passes, unlike Western dialectics in which the relationship of controlling and being controlled never changes. Third, since the two opposing sides are both real things belonging to the same level and not eternal and abstract, the movement and resolution of contradictions as understood in traditional Chinese dialectics will inevitably unfold with the passage of time; as a result, the transformation of the position of the principal and secondary contradiction and of the principal and secondary aspects of a contradiction will necessarily lead to changes in the nature of things.

Likewise, Mao Zedong’s opposition to the negation of negation as a basic law of dialectics can only be understood in terms of the differences between traditional Chinese and Western modes of thinking. Engels pointed out that the “law of the negation of negation” is the “basic law of Hegel’s whole system.” It may be said that the negation of negation most profoundly reflects the quintessence of the Hegelian dialectics that synthesized Western dialectics and brought it to the highest level of development. For Hegel, the crucial point of the double negation lay in the absorption by the side in a dominant position of the other side

23 Book Three (I) of *The Book of Changes*.

24 Wang Shubai, “A Tentative Discussion of the Relationship between Mao Zedong’s Philosophical Thinking and the Handing Down of Traditional Chinese Philosophy.”

in pairs composed of two absolutely unequal sides based on an “exclusive dichotomy,” e.g. universality and particularity; through this absorption, the latter is upgraded to the level of the former, that is, a concrete universality is achieved through the opposition of an abstract universality to an equally abstract particularity. This is reflected in history, which is to be understood as an upward spiral rather than a cycle. Traditional Chinese thought has no historical consciousness of development via an upward spiral based on relations between two unequal levels. The traditional Chinese idea of history is a cyclical one, or the “concept of a circular way,” in Mr. Liu Changlin’s words.²⁵ From this perspective, in the kaleidoscopic universe there are only the opposition and interaction of *yin* and *yang* and corresponding phenomena evolving from this opposition and interaction, only the duality of affirmation and negation and the cyclical movement along the “circular way;” no such process exists as the upward spiral of the double negation of Hegelian dialectics in which a concrete universality is achieved through the interaction of an abstract universality and an abstract particularity. It is therefore very clear that Mao’s critique of the law of double negation can be considered as an understanding that reconstructs Western conceptual dialectics on the basis of imagistic dialectics.

Due to space limitations, our discussion here is confined to Mao’s differences from the Western way of thinking expressed in Soviet textbooks on the principal contradiction, the principal aspect of a contradiction and the law of double negation, but this is sufficient to show that Mao’s dialectics was rooted to a large extent in the traditional Chinese dialectics of “imagistic thinking,” or, to put it another way, his dialectics contains rich elements of the traditional Chinese way of thinking. As a model of the Sinicization of Marxist philosophy, Mao’s dialectics inevitably involved the application of the traditional Chinese way of thinking in its acceptance and transformation of the Marxist philosophy.

III. The Relationship between Chinese and Western Elements in Mao Zedong’s Dialectics

If we affirm that Mao’s dialectics contains rich elements of the traditional Chinese way of thinking, the following question will inevitably arise: how should we see the relationship between Mao’s dialectics and that of the founders of Marxism?

In order to elucidate this problem, we must start with the evolution of Western dialectics. This has gone through a series of changes, from the natural philosophers’ intuitive dialectics to the reflective dialectics initiated by Parmenides and Zeno, and thence to the historicist dialectics of Hegel who synthesized Western dialectics and brought it to a new level. But with Hegel, the subject of dialectical movement is the illusory absolute spirit and therefore the historical process can be nothing but the process of movement of the abstract transcendent *noumenon*. Dissatisfied with this abstraction, Marx was the first in the history of Western

25 Liu Changlin, “The Idea of the Circular Way and Chinese Thinking.”

philosophy to provide a subversive critique of the Western metaphysical or theoretical philosophical tradition, with its reverence for theory and contempt for practice. He established a modern practical philosophy.²⁶ Traditional Chinese philosophy, as Chang Dongsun has said, is precisely a practical rather than a theoretical philosophy. Thus, there is naturally a degree of affinity between Marxist philosophy and traditional Chinese philosophy, since both are practical philosophies. To go a step further, on the basis of practical philosophy Marx carried out a materialist transformation of Hegelian dialectics and endowed this abstract dialectics with a practical nature, changing it from an abstract conceptual movement into the conceptual grasp of real historical process. With regard to the differences between his dialectics and Hegel's, Marx wrote, "For Hegel, the process of thinking, which he even transforms into an independent subject, under the name of 'the Idea,' is the creator of the world, and the real world is only the external appearance of the idea. With me the reverse is true: the ideal is nothing but the material world reflected in the mind of man, and transformed into forms of thought."²⁷ This is consistent with his criticism of Hegel in "Economic Manuscripts of 1857-1858": "Hegel fell into the illusion of conceiving the real as the product of thought concentrating itself, probing its own depths, and unfolding itself out of itself, by itself, whereas the method of rising from the abstract to the concrete is only the way in which thought appropriates the concrete, reproduces it as the concrete in the mind. But this is by no means the process by which the concrete itself comes into being."²⁸ This shows clearly that, for Marx, what the concept expresses is by no means something like *noumenon* that transcends the real, but only a way by which the concrete reproduces itself in the mind. Moreover, this dialectical process of rising from the abstract to the concrete is simply a process that takes place in thought, a process by which thought grasps the real by means of concepts; it does not indicate in any way that the real itself has an abstract existence like a concept. In so doing, Marx made a clean break with the previous way of reducing the real to the definition of transcendent abstract thought, i.e. metaphysical or idealist dialectics. In other words, unlike traditional Western transcendent metaphysics, Marxist philosophy does not believe there is any existence that transcends the real. In this regard, within the Western philosophical tradition Marxist dialectics offers the way of thinking that is closest to traditional Chinese philosophy. It is this closeness that made it easier for the Chinese to accept Marxist philosophy.

However, the Marxist dialectics that finds its main embodiment in *Capital* remains a conceptual dialectics that adopting the method of conceptual thinking in which the "concept" is the mental unit. Conceptual thinking is dominated by abstract analysis, which is fundamentally different from the intuitive and analogic holistic approach of "imagistic thinking" that takes the "image" as its mental unit. Thus, in his efforts to adapt Marxist

26 Wang Nanshi, "The Triple Meaning of the Contemporary Relevance of Marxist Philosophy."

27 Karl Marx, "Postface to the Second Edition of *Capital*," p. 24.

28 Marx, "Economic Manuscripts of 1857-58," pp. 18-19.

philosophy to conditions in China, Mao inevitably encountered the question of how to handle the relationship between these two ways of thinking. This also means that we can not simplistically reduce Mao's dialectics to a continuation of either traditional Chinese or traditional Western dialectics. As an exemplary product of the Sinicization of Marxist philosophy, Mao's dialectics cannot contain components from one source alone, whether Chinese or Western; it is inevitably an integration of components from the two sources. This integration is conspicuously reflected in his exposition of the relationship between the universality and particularity of contradictions in "On Contradiction."

In "On Contradiction," Mao affirmed that the law of contradiction was "the essence of dialectics" or "the kernel of dialectics" and at the same time emphatically pointed out that "This truth concerning general and individual character, concerning absoluteness and relativity, is the quintessence of the problem of contradiction in things; failure to understand it is tantamount to abandoning dialectics."²⁹ This raises a question about the meaning of "kernel" and "quintessence" and their relationship. The issue has stimulated a variety of explanations. Some think "kernel" and "quintessence" are the same thing, while others believe that contradiction is the "kernel" of dialectics and the relationship between general and individual character is the "quintessence" of this kernel. None of these explanations withstands close scrutiny, because they all fail to see that this relationship has a background that involves the traditions of both Chinese and Western dialectics and that Mao Zedong endeavored to explore and integrate the two.

As mentioned earlier, the essence of conceptual dialectics is a set of methods for reducing a phenomenon to a combination of concepts in order to grasp that phenomenon. In this approach, the perceptual world or phenomenon is not left intact, but reduced to a manifestation of *noumenon* or essence, a combination of concepts. That is, the concrete reached by this dialectics through starting from abstract universality is still "concrete universality," i.e., still the unity of diversity in theory rather than the mastery of immediate and real particular things in practice. This dialectics stops at a purely theoretical philosophy that takes explaining the world as its goal. However, Marxism is a philosophy of praxis that looks to changing the world and cannot stop here; it must go a step further and apply theory to practice. In order to do so, we must turn theory into concrete practical concepts and ideas in line with specific practical conditions. This is still an issue of the relationship between the universal and the particular, but this issue does not arise between the universal and the particular in theoretical dialectics but between the universality of theory and the particularity of practice. Thus, in Marx's dialectics, two kinds of relationship between universality and particularity arise in the course of turning theoretical ideas into practical ideas or wisdom; the first is the relationship between the universal and the particular within conceptual theory and the second the relationship between theoretical universality and practical particularity. Traditional Chinese dialectics is an "imagistic dialectics" belonging to the philosophy of praxis. Since the object

29 Mao Zedong, "On Contradiction," p. 320.

of practical philosophy is the specific situation of practice and the “image” is vivid and intuitive, i.e. not abstract, the two opposite sides in a contradiction in “imagistic dialectics” remain at the same level without entailing the relationship between the universal and the particular that arises in abstract conceptual thinking. However, since Marxism is a universal theory, when it is used to guide the practice of the Chinese revolution the issue of the relationship between the universality of theory and the particularity of Chinese conditions will inevitably occur; as there is no such relationship in traditional Chinese imagistic dialectics, a Sinicized Marxist philosophy must introduce methodological tools to deal with it in order to integrate Chinese and Western dialectics. This is done by introducing the Western analytical approach of distinguishing between the universal and the particular into the holistic approach of traditional Chinese dialectics. Of course, the introduction of this dialectics of universality and particularity involves the universal as grasped by theory and the particular as faced in practice, not the universality and particularity of conceptual theory. Since the law of contradiction has already been defined as the essence or kernel of dialectics, to distinguish it, we must call the relationship between the dichotomy of the universal and the particular the “quintessence.” This is because, in a general sense, imagistic and conceptual dialectics both treat the relationship of the unity of opposites as the kernel; but, as mentioned earlier, contradiction has quite a different meaning in the two dialectics. Therefore, the proposition that contradiction is the kernel of dialectics refers to very different things in the two dialectics. As a result, with regard to universality and particularity being the quintessence of contradictions, since Western dialectics always takes the unity of the opposition between universality and particularity as its kernel and since there are two kinds of relationship between universality and particularity, it is not appropriate, in terms of linguistic expression, to once again propose the relationship between universality and particularity as the “quintessence,” so this meaning is usually conveyed by emphasizing “concrete analysis of concrete conditions” and similar expressions. On the other hand, as traditional Chinese dialectics does not make a strict distinction between the universal and the particular, it needs to be supplemented with a definition of the relationship between the two. Moreover, as the relationship of the unity of opposites in traditional Chinese dialectics does not refer to the relationship between the universal and the particular, so for traditional Chinese dialectics alone, it is meaningful to define this relationship as the “quintessence” of contradictions and this linguistic expression is appropriate. Here, the “theory of the quintessence” serves as a supplement to the “theory of the kernel” and a further definition of the law of contradiction in dialectics. The “kernel” is what traditional Chinese dialectics already had, while the “quintessence” is newly introduced. The proposition of “quintessence” is the key to Mao’s integration of Chinese and Western dialectics.

Due to limitations of space, we have simply used the issue of “quintessence” to give an example of the interpretation of Mao’s integration of Chinese and Western dialectics and cannot conduct a more comprehensive discussion here. On the other hand, just because we say the “theory of quintessence” is a result of Mao’s efforts to integrate Chinese and Western dialectics does not mean that his research on Chinese and Western dialectical theory resulted

in a comprehensive new theoretical system. In fact, the various unconvincing explanations put forward all point to the existence of a logical tension between the “theory of the quintessence” and the “theory of the kernel.” This is not a simple theoretical and logical issue but one that reflects the tension between two different modes of thinking and two different dialectics, the Chinese and the Western. Against the background of the tumultuous confrontation of Chinese and Western culture, this tension will not be easily eliminated in the near future; rather, it may accompany us for a long time to come.

The fundamental task of Marxist philosophical studies in contemporary China is to further adapt Marxist philosophy to conditions in China and at the same time to reconstruct Chinese philosophy on the basis of Marxist philosophy. The in-depth adaptation of Marxist philosophy to Chinese conditions means, on the one hand, solving the actual problems faced by China at the practical level and on the other, at a more profound cultural and ideological level, merging Marxist philosophy into the traditional Chinese mode of thinking, re-elaborating it and making it an organic component of China’s philosophical spirit. The significance of Mao’s dialectics in modern Chinese intellectual history lies in the fact that it offers a model that absorbs Western ideas on the basis of Chinese tradition.

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