

Modern China

<http://mcx.sagepub.com>

On Mao's Self-Image as a Marxist Thinker

John Bryan Starr

Modern China 1977; 3; 435

DOI: 10.1177/009770047700300408

The online version of this article can be found at:

<http://mcx.sagepub.com>

Published by:



<http://www.sagepublications.com>

Additional services and information for *Modern China* can be found at:

Email Alerts: <http://mcx.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts>

Subscriptions: <http://mcx.sagepub.com/subscriptions>

Reprints: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav>

Permissions: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav>

Citations <http://mcx.sagepub.com/cgi/content/refs/3/4/435>

On Mao's Self-Image as a Marxist Thinker

JOHN BRYAN STARR
University of California, Berkeley

One important facet of the question of the relationship of Mao's thought to that of Marx which has been somewhat obscured by the pyrotechnics employed in the symposium to date is Mao's own perception of that relationship. Considering that perception, one finds that both Pfeffer and Walder appear to be advancing claims on behalf of Mao which he himself would not have made, or would have made in a different way. This fact does not, of course, invalidate the claims of Pfeffer and Walder, but it does at least cast them in a somewhat different light.

It is certainly true that, in reading the corpus of Mao's writings as a whole, one cannot escape the impression that he regarded himself not merely as a Leninist, or even simply as a Marxist-Leninist, but rather, in some fundamental sense, as a Marxist as well. In writing recently on this topic (Starr, 1976-1977), I noted two occasions on which, it seems to me, Mao paid particular attention to the Marxist origins of his own thought. The first of these occasions was during the rectification campaign of 1941-1942, when he spoke of the need to "Sinify" Marxism. The second was in the late 1950s, when Mao and his colleagues turned away from the Soviet model on which they had been relying. On the first of these occasions Mao used the analogy of an arrow and a

MODERN CHINA, Vol. 3 No. 4, October 1977
© 1977 Sage Publications, Inc.

[435]

target to convey his sense of the relationship between Marxist-Leninist theory and the practical experience of the Chinese revolution (Mao, 1942: 777/42). He was equally critical on that occasion of those who merely “fondled the arrow” and those who ignored its existence by concentrating exclusively on the particularities of Chinese revolutionary praxis. Mao’s analogy gave rise to the distinction advanced by Schurmann (1968: 23-57) between “pure” and “practical” ideology—a distinction which, as Wakeman (1975) has pointed out, incorrectly suggested that the Chinese saw themselves in the position of being inevitably obliged to import theory or “pure” ideology, being incapable of creating it themselves. It is surprising that, influential as that mistaken formulation has been in the understanding of the relationship of Mao’s thought to its Marxist roots among the company of that uncomfortable collectivity unfortunately referred to by both Pfeffer and Walder as “the China field,” neither it nor Schurmann’s work on Chinese ideology generally are mentioned in their arguments.

On both of these occasions on which Mao turned to reexamine the Marxist roots of his own thought, he did so in order to dissociate himself, at least to some extent, from the directions in which the Marxist heritage was being carried by his colleagues in the Soviet Union, notably by Stalin. In the late 1930s and early 1940s, Mao was in the process of mastering Marxist texts with which he had previously had only a passing familiarity and, on the basis of that mastery, was establishing his own credentials as a Marxist-Leninist theorist. Twenty years later, in the late 1950s and early 1960s, a number of his works can be seen (as Walder has shown) as a critique—using the principles of Marx and Lenin—of Soviet and particularly of Stalin’s implementation of these principles in Soviet economic, political, and social practice.¹ In this latter period, once again, one important purpose in advancing his argument was to reinforce the legitimacy of his own revolutionary practice and the theoretical conclusions to which it had led him. This secondary purpose—that of reinforcing his own legitimacy as a Marxist-Leninist theorist—colored the results of the first—that of basing his critique on a reinvestigation of the ideas of Marx and Lenin. That is, the effect of his argument is to emphasize the distance traveled by the

Marxist-Leninist arrow in its journey toward the target of the Chinese revolution rather than to show the consonance of his conclusions with those of Marx and Lenin.

Mao never denied, to be sure, the origin or nature of the arrow, but, Schurmann to the contrary notwithstanding, he did strongly imply that the theoretical conclusions of Chinese revolutionary practice were significantly different from those reached by Marx a century earlier in the industrializing West and were of theoretical value in their own light. "We are not obliged," he told his colleagues in 1956, "to cook our mutton in the Marxist way" (Mao 1956a: 33/98). Rather, what was required, he argued two years later, was an "audacious style" in studying Marxism: "One must respect the [Marxist] classics but not become superstitious about them. Marxism was produced through creativity, not through imitation" (Mao, 1958b: 172f/46f). Criticizing Stalin's *Economic Problems of Socialism in the Soviet Union*, he observed that *Das Kapital* was inevitably of limited relevance to the problems confronting China because of the nature of the empirical cases on which it was based. "Chinese economists are Marxists," he said, "but in economic practice, Marxism falls short" (Mao, 1959: 251/199). As Lenin had done before them, he pointed out to the delegates at the Second Session of the Eighth Party Congress in 1958, the Chinese had surpassed Marx by virtue of their revolutionary praxis (Mao, 1958a: 186/91).²

Although he does not cite these comments by Mao, Pfeffer takes his clues consciously or unconsciously from them when he argues that the answer to the question of Mao's relationship to the Marxist roots of his thoughts is found in imagining "what would a revolutionary Marxist—say Marx himself—have thought or done in china" in 1935, 1949, or 1956. He further suggests that there would have been two alternatives for Marx in this hypothetical situation: to do something or to do nothing. What Pfeffer's formulation of the problem ignores is that there were a number of "revolutionary Marxists" in China in 1935, 1949, and 1956 who chose to do "something," but whose analysis of what that action should be differed substantially from Mao's. One individual's "creativity" and "audacious style" in the application of Marxist principles becomes, in the view of others, dangerous revisionism. We thus find ourselves back at the

beginning of our quest, having encountered the obstacle of sorting out and retrospectively evaluating from our own perspectives conflicting goals and methods, each claiming Marxist legitimacy.

Walder confronts the problem more directly. Nonetheless, his argument, like Pfeffer's, ignores the thrust of Mao's own tendency to emphasize the discontinuities rather than the consonance of his theoretical conclusions with those of Marx.

There is little to quarrel with in Walder's emphasis on the unity of subject and object, base and superstructure in Marx's thought, except perhaps to underscore Wakeman's objection that it runs the risk of incorrectly deemphasizing the *dialectical* nature of the "inneraction"—a risk underscored in turn by the Chinese press in the 1964 debate regarding Yang Xian-zhen and his interpretation of the dialectic as a process of "two combining into one." One should also note a tendency on Walder's part to equate rather too facilely the relationship between base and superstructure with that between determinism and voluntarism. Although the two sets of relationships are interconnected, they cannot be taken as synonymous or identical. Determinism and voluntarism are a pair of opposed statements *about the nature of the relationship* between base and superstructure. One can, indeed should, see each of these two sets of relationships as dialectically interacting entities, but they are not directly equatable in quite the way in which Walder would appear to believe.

A more important problem with Walder's argument is the way in which he relates the problem of alienation to the relationship between voluntarism and determinism. He argues, quite correctly in my view, that there is a basic consonance between "early Marx" (as found in the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* of 1844, for example) and "late Marx" (as found in the *Grundrisse* and *Das Kapital*, for example). Nonetheless, rather than making his case for Marx's voluntarism by turning at the outset to the early writings, he chooses instead to document that case with excerpts from much later correspondence in which Marx and Engels are attempting to correct for misinterpretations of their work as exclusively determinist. Walder takes up the essence of that early work only toward the end of the second part

of his article, in which he provides an excellent summary of Marx's concept of alienation. Inexplicably, however, he concludes this summary with a one-sided definition of voluntarism which not only undermines his earlier argument for the dialectical unity between voluntarism and determinism, but also, and more importantly, obscures the way in which Marx's perception and understanding of the alienated condition of the industrial worker led directly to his contention that that condition was not inevitable and permanent but could be changed—working men and women could liberate themselves—by revolutionary praxis interacting with revolutionary thought.

The more explicitly this argument is made on the basis of Marx's concept of alienation, however, the more difficult it is to demonstrate the identity between Mao's and Marx's approach. Walder attempts to make the connection by taking up Mao's concept of revolutionary praxis and, in so doing, further muddies the conceptual waters by adding the relationship praxis: theory to his already questionable equation, base:superstructure::determinism:voluntarism. The fundamental problem here is that, although Mao was, in fact, vitally interested in revolutionary praxis as a means by which the economic base could be transformed, he nevertheless steadfastly ignored the question of alienation.³ Walder, citing Munro (1974), attempts to find the reason for this lack of interest in Mao's belief that "early Marx" was a creature of bourgeois scholarship and East European revisionism and, thus, not to be taken seriously even when the relevant works were belatedly translated into Chinese. He further suggests that it is only a matter of time before Chinese Marxists will take up this theme in their analysis of contemporary problems. This explanation glosses over—for purposes of emphasizing the connections between Marx and Mao—the fundamentally different way in which Mao arrived at his own conception of the "inneraction" between voluntarism and determinism. A case could be made, I think, to support the hypothesis that, even had the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* been translated into Chinese in 1937 instead of twenty years later, and thus, had arrived in China untainted by revisionism, Mao might very well still have ignored the concept of alienation—a concept which was foreign both to Chinese

experience at the time and to Chinese modes of conceptualizing that experience.

The problem which lies at the heart of Marx's thought is the alienation of the industrial worker under a capitalist system, and his thought is correctly seen as an attempt to find a solution to this central problem by means of which the industrial worker as a member of a class, but also as an individual, can overcome this alienation and realize his or her species being. It seems to me that there is no way in which one could apply this explanation with equal accuracy to Mao's thought. For Mao, the central problem was the dual one of the oppression and exploitation of the poor and lower middle peasants by feudal forces in the countryside and the oppression and exploitation of China as a colony and semicolony by the forces of foreign imperialism. He saw Marxism as an appealing mode of thought for resolving this dual problem not because the problem itself was identical to that which had confronted Marx, but rather because the class-based dialectical method of historical analysis which Marx employed to resolve his own central problem could be used under manifestly different circumstances to resolve the central problem which Mao saw in his own society.

This is not to argue that Mao did not regard the experience of the industrial worker under a capitalist system and that of the poor peasant under a feudal system as in some sense analogous. Indeed, Mao made significant and crucial use of this analogy in constructing his own argument concerning the "proletarianizing" effect on peasants of engaging in revolutionary praxis within the ranks of the party and army (Mao, 1928: 62/81; see also Starr, forthcoming: ch. 4; and White, 1976). However, implicitly to equate Mao's argument by analogy with Marx's treatment of the problem as Walder has done in the latter section of his article is either to misconstrue the relationship between the ideas of Marx and Mao or (more likely, given the erudition of the article as a whole) to truncate the logical steps in a complex argument in such a way as to leave the impression of having misconstrued it.

Mao was, indeed, a Marxist, and there is substantial value in Pfeffer's and Walder's reminder that members of the "China field" have either ignored the Marxist roots of his thought or

have misunderstood it as a result of their own failure to read Marx carefully. He was, however, a Marxist whose "audacious style" and whose revolutionary praxis in modern China posed problems and led him to conclusions substantially different from those reached by Marx himself. We must be cautious, therefore, in constructing the "complex, rather than . . . caricatured appreciation of the positions of Marx and Mao within the Marxist tradition" for which Walder has called, lest, focusing on the Marxist-Leninist "arrow" of which Mao spoke, we ignore its unique trajectory toward the target of the Chinese revolution. Mao's own perception of his position within the Marxist tradition provides us at least some assistance in avoiding this pitfall.

NOTES

1. The period of which I am speaking began with Mao's speech "On Ten Great Relationships" (Mao, 1956b) but is perhaps best epitomized by his reading notes on the Soviet textbook on political economics (Mao, 1961) and on Stalin's *Economic Problems of Socialism* (Mao, 1959).

2. The preceding paragraph is adapted from Starr (1976-1977: 152).

3. The only allusion I have found in Mao's writings to the problem of alienation is an indirect one. In his notes on the Soviet textbook on political economics he said, "Marx started from commodities to lay bare the relationship between individuals which lay behind this relationship between commodities" (Mao, 1961: 384/301). His omission of the alienated relationship between individuals and their product and the alienation of the individual from him- or herself is representative, I think, of his lack of interest in this central concern in Marx's own work (Starr, 1976-1977: 134).

REFERENCES

- MAO ZE-DONG (1961) "Guanyu 'Zhengzhi jingji xue' dushu biji" (Reading notes on Political Economy), pp. 319-399 in *Mao Ze-dong sixiang wansui* (Long live the thought of Mao Ze-dong; hereafter MZDSXWS), 1969. [Translated in Joint Publications Research Service (hereafter JPRS) 61269-2 (February 20, 1974): 247-313.]
- (1959) "Guanyu 'Shehui zhuyi jingji wenti' yi shu de jianghua" (Speech on the book, *Economic Problems of Socialism*), pp. 247-251 in MZDSXWS. [Translated in JPRS 61269-1 (February 20, 1974): 191-199.]

- (1958a) "Zai ba da erci huiyi shang de jiangua" (Speech at the Second Session of the Eighth Party Congress), pp. 186-219 in MZDSXWS. [Translated in JPRS 61269-1 (February 20, 1974): 91-99.]
- (1958b) "Zai Chengdu huiyi shang de jianghua" (Speech at the Chengdu conference), pp. 159-179 in MZDSXWS. [Translated in JPRS 49826 (February 12, 1970): 46-52.]
- (1956a) "Zai zhonggong zhaokai de guanyu zhishi fenzi wenti huiyi shang de jianghua" (Speech at a meeting on the question of intellectuals convened by the Central Committee), pp. 28-34 in MZDSXWS. [Translated in Issues and Studies 10 (May 1974): 95-99.]
- (1956b) "Lun shi da guanxi" (On ten great relationships), pp. 40-58 in MZDSXWS. [Translated pp. 61-83 in S. R. Schram (ed.) *Chairman Mao Talks to the People*. New York: Pantheon, 1974. A somewhat amended version was officially published in Renmin Ribao (People's Daily), December 26, 1976, and is translated in Peking Review 20: 1.]
- (1942) "Zhengdun dang de zuofeng" (Rectify the Party's style of work), pp. 769-786 in Mao Ze-dong xuanji (single volume edition; hereafter MZDXJ). Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 1969. [Translated in Selected Works of Mao Ze-dong (hereafter SW), III: 35-51. Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1966.]
- (1928) "Jinggangshan de douzheng" (Struggle in the Jinggang Mountains), pp. 56-82 in MZDXJ. [Translated in SW, I: 73-104.]
- MUNRO, D. (1974) "The Chinese view of alienation." *China Q.* 59 (July-September): 580-582.
- SCHURMANN, H. FRANZ (1968) *Ideology and Organization in Communist China*. Berkeley: Univ. of California Press.
- STARR, JOHN BRYAN (forthcoming) *Continuing the Revolution: Studies in the Political Philosophy of Mao*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press.
- (1976-1977) "Marxism and the political legacy of Mao Tse-tung [Mao Ze-dong]." *International J.* 23 (Winter): 128-155.
- WAKEMAN, F. (1975) "The use and abuse of ideology in the study of contemporary China." *China Q.* 61 (March): 127-152.
- WHITE, GORDON (1976) *The Politics of Class and Class Origin: The Case of the Cultural Revolution*. Canberra: Australian National University.

John Bryan Starr is Assistant Professor of Political Science and Chairman of the Group in Asian Studies at the University of California, Berkeley. He is cocompiler (with Nancy Anne Dyer) of Post-Liberation Works of Mao Zedong: A Bibliography and Index, and author of Ideology and Culture: An Introduction to the Dialectic of Contemporary Chinese Politics (Harper and Row, 1973) and Continuing the Revolution: Studies in the Political Philosophy of Mao (Princeton University Press, forthcoming).