

Chapter Two: Contradiction Analysis

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Why is it necessary to study dialectics to achieve the objective of changing China and the world? It is because dialectics is made up of the most general laws of development of nature and society; when we comprehend dialectics, we have gained a scientific weapon, and in the revolutionary practice of changing nature and society possess a theory and method suited to this practice ... Consequently, all revolutionary comrades, and above all cadres, should diligently study dialectics (Mao 1937c, 238–39).¹

In the previous chapter on Deng Xiaoping, contradiction analysis (*maodun fenxi*) was mentioned on a few occasions. This chapter deals with contradiction analysis directly, since it provides another key to understanding socialism with Chinese characteristics, as well as the Reform and Opening-Up as a whole. In order to understand this approach we need to take a step back, all the way to Lenin, the development of dialectical materialism in the Soviet Union of the 1930s, and then Mao Zedong's creative engagement with this material in the 1930s. Here we find the seeds of an approach that has become government policy, but at the same time determines Chinese cultural assumptions concerning everyday life. For example, we find it in the careful identification of the primary contradiction that directs all government projects, in framing five-year plans, in the nature of Traditional Chinese Medicine and in cultural assumptions concerning food. Why? Contradiction analysis is not merely a contribution from Marxist philosophy, for it is also found in the long Chinese cultural tradition that was thoroughly transformed in light of Marxist dialectics. It was Mao Zedong's distinct contribution to make the creative connection between Marxist analysis and the Chinese tradition: the touchstone is contradiction analysis. Even more, through this contribution, we will find the philosophical roots of

¹ Here I follow Knight's translation (1990a, 126–27).

socialism with Chinese characteristics, which was to be so assiduously promoted by Deng Xiaoping and those who followed.

Explaining and analysing contradiction analysis may take three possible paths. One path would be to follow the specifically Chinese cultural and philosophical assumptions concerning the role of contradictions, all the way from the *Yijing* to Mao Zedong (Tian Chenshan 2005). Another historical path would trace how contradictions were understood in the Marxist tradition, running from Hegel, through Marx and Engels's materialist inversion (Marx 1859b, 101; 1859a, 263–64; Engels 1880b, 579–80; 1880a, 324–25) to Lenin's awareness that contradictions also appear under socialism, albeit in a non-antagonistic form (Lenin 1914b; 1914a). I will take neither path, not merely because I have done so in earlier work (Boer 2017b; 2017a), but also because I have found the labour seems quite unnecessary in a Chinese context. To explain; a few years ago, I ran a couple of seminar series on contradiction analysis at Renmin University of China. The focus of the seminar series was Mao Zedong's 'On Contradiction' (see more below), but we began with a belaboured presentation of the historical development Marxist dialectics and the growing realisation of the reality of (non-antagonistic) contradictions in construction of socialism. The response from participants was: this is obvious! Contradictions exist under socialism, indeed they must, so why go over the history of the idea? I realised it was more about my own slow process of discovery. Having been imbued with the Western philosophical tradition's emphasis on either-or,² it took assiduous study and the further washing of my brain to understand the logic and reality of contradictions in socialist construction. But the seminar participants did not need to hear about this path of self-discovery. Instead, for them it was a given that contradictions are universal in life, that dialectical analysis entails the unity and struggle of opposites, and that even in communism contradictions

² This is not to say that the Western Marxist tradition is unable to break free from this underlying either-or assumption, for contradiction analysis actually arises from the development of dialectical analysis in the work of Marx and Engels (Haug 2017).

would not be entirely abolished but would continue to exist in non-antagonistic form.

Thus, I will follow a third path that is less historical and more logical. Its focus is dialectical materialism, the philosophical method of Marxism that finds its prime application in historical materialism.³ For our purposes, the approach begins with Lenin's concise and insightful 'On the Question of Dialectics', which was informed by his in-depth return to Hegel through the Marxist lens provided above all by Engels's *Anti-Dühring* and *Dialectics of Nature*. Lenin and Engels – supplemented by pertinent examples from Marx and Stalin – subsequently provided the pillars for the sophisticated elaboration of dialectical materialism in the Soviet Union of the 1930s. As the most mature and thoroughly developed form of Marxist philosophy at the time, it was to this material that Mao Zedong and his comrades turned for a period of intense study in Yan'an in 1936-1937. This window of time, after the Long March and as the next phase of the Anti-Japanese War was about to begin, provided the core materials that would set in train a consistent concern with philosophical matters in the CPC, the revolutionary path to Liberation in 1949, and the subsequently long and arduous task of constructing socialism. In particular, contradiction analysis – forged from Lenin in 1915 to Mao in 1937 – became and remains a centrepiece for the many stages of the Chinese socialist project. Finally, as the analysis unfolds I

³ The curious aberration known as 'Western' Marxism has attempted to dismiss dialectical materialism and focus on historical materialism. Marx's focus – it is hypothesised – was on socioeconomic processes, for which the shorthand 'historical materialism' is used; by contrast, Engels was responsible for the extension of dialectical analysis to science and nature, for which the term 'dialectical materialism' is used. If one assumes this distinction, then proposals for their relation range from a later 'reading back' of the dialectics of science into Marx to an 'illegitimate' move by Engels, due to Engels's supposed philosophical 'incompetence' (Levine 2006; Carver 1989, 241–52). The catch is that it is not only Engels who coined the actual term 'historical materialism' (Engels 1892, 111, 116), but that we also find that Marx was fully aware of Engels's research into the dialectics of nature. For instance, Marx himself provided extensive notes on the work of Dühring (see volume I.27 of MEGA), but also wrote a foreword to the first French edition of *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*. Here, Marx observes that Engels's *Anti-Dühring* had already been immensely popular in Germany, and that the current pamphlet – drawn from the longer work – may be seen as a concise 'introduction to scientific socialism' (Marx 1880, 542).

will draw increasing attention to the way dialectical materialism provides the philosophical basis in Mao's hands for socialism with Chinese characteristics.

Lenin

Believe me, the philosopher Hegel was right: life proceeds by contradictions, and living contradictions are so much richer, more varied and deeper in content than they may seem at first sight to a man's mind (Lenin 1909a, 219; 1909b, 403).

Let us begin with a famous text by Lenin, which was quoted subsequently on many, many occasions. In a marginal note to his reading of Bukharin's book, *The Economics of the Transition Period* (1920a; 1920b). Lenin writes: 'Antagonism and contradiction are not at all the same thing. Under socialism, the first will disappear, the second will remain' (Lenin 1920, 391). In other words, contradictions are not always antagonistic, for they are two different categories. While antagonism – between classes, between the forces and relations of production – will disappear in socialism, contradictions will clearly be part of the process. This comment would come into its own in the 1930s and beyond in the Soviet Union, when the category of non-antagonistic contradictions began to be elaborated. But is Lenin's observation an isolated occurrence, as some have asserted (Weston 2008, 433–34), perhaps due to the relatively brief years Lenin had left – under very difficult circumstances – after the October Revolution. Not at all, for he had already made a clear statement on the ubiquity of contradictions some years earlier, especially in the energetically condensed text, 'On the Question of Dialectics'.

The following observations by Lenin are key:

The identity of opposites (it would be more correct, perhaps, to say their 'unity', – although the difference between the terms identity and unity is not particularly important here. In a certain sense both are correct) is the recognition (discovery) of the contradictory, *mutually exclusive*, opposite tendencies in *all* phenomena and processes of nature (*including* mind and society). The condition for the knowledge of all processes of the world in their '*self-movement*', in their spontaneous

development, in their real life, is the knowledge of them as a unity of opposites. Development is the 'struggle' of opposites (Lenin 1915a, 316–17; 1915b, 357–58).

Let us exegete this energetically condensed passage for a few moments. To begin with, Lenin emphasises the universality and ubiquity of contradictions in 'all phenomena and processes of nature', which includes within its orbit society and mind. No distinction here between nature and socioeconomic matters, between dialectical materialism and historical materialism. Lenin's more immediate inspiration may have been his re-engagement with Hegel's dialectics, but we should note that Marx had developed already in his doctoral thesis an argument that may justifiably be called an earlier version of a 'dialectics of nature' in the thought of Epicurus (Marx 1841; Stanley 1989). Even more, in the first volume of *Capital* Marx observed that Hegel's law of the transformation of a merely quantitative change into a qualitative one is 'attested by history and natural science alike' (Marx 1867a, 246; see also 1867b, 306).⁴ It would of course be Engels in *Dialectics of Nature* who elaborated on the processes in natural science, with the most extensive texts concerned with motion, mathematics and physics. Indeed, it was from this material that Lenin came to assume Engels's point that it is from 'the history of nature and human society that the laws of dialectics are abstracted' (Engels 1882b, 355; 1882a, 356).

Further, Lenin emphasises that qualitative change happens in the process of self-movement, in the internal dynamics of a situation. Elsewhere in the same piece, he stresses that self-movement is the driving force, source and motive of motion. The reason: the 'splitting of a single whole and the cognition of its contradictory parts ... is the *essence* ... of dialectics' (Lenin 1915a, 316; 1915b, 357). If the contradiction in question arises from an initial split from one into two, it follows that the process is internal, that the driving force of contradictions is internal. Lenin contrasts this self-movement with the alternative: motion and thus change happens by means external forces

⁴ See also some of the correspondence between Engels and Marx as the former was developing his thoughts concerning the dialectics of nature, as early as 1858 (Engels 1858; 1873; 1882c; Marx 1876).

(whether God, the subject, and so on) and entails quantitative changes in terms of increase or decrease. This is not real change, for if one has merely quantitative change, mere addition or subtraction, the item in question remains the same.⁵ In contrast to this 'lifeless, pale and dry' approach, Lenin advocates the dynamic of self-movement, internal to an object. This point leads him to elaborate – via the example of Marx's approach in *Capital* – a dialectic of individual and universal, in which a single instance provides a microcosm of the dialectical contradictions of the whole. As it is with commodities (Marx's example), so it is with all aspects of life.⁶

Finally, Lenin emphasises the simultaneous unity and struggle of opposites, so much so that in his notes on Hegel's *The Science of Logic* he observed that 'dialectics can be defined as doctrine of the unity of opposites'. This doctrine 'embodies the essence of dialectics' (Lenin 1914b, 203; 1914a, 222). This emphasis by Lenin is quite intriguing, for it entails a variation in the ordering of Engels's three laws of dialectics: the transformation of quantity into quality and vice versa; the interpenetration of opposites; and the negation of the negation (Engels 1882b, 355; 1882a, 356). Lenin elevates the second into the prime position, a move that would be followed by all of the Soviet-era material on dialectical materialism, as also Mao Zedong and his comrades (see below). At the same time, there is an extraordinary section of Engels's *Dialectics of Nature* (1882a, 492–501) where undertakes a complete revolt against the Western tradition's focus on either-or, or zero-sum. At one point, he exclaims that for dialectics there is 'no unconditional, universally valid "either -or"'. Indeed, this approach 'bridges the fixed metaphysical differences', which is to say that "either -or" recognises also in the right place "both this -and that" (Engels 1882a, 493). This realisation entails considerable

⁵ A good example concerns the assumptions of neoclassical economics concerning the eternity of bourgeois capitalist economic relations, which change only in terms of quantity. Thus, 'capitalism' is 'found' even in the earliest forms of human society and economic activity (Shirokov and Iankovskii 1932b, 139; 1937, 153–54; see also Boer 2015, 11–18).

⁶ On this matter, Lenin goes beyond Engels, for the latter was keen to emphasise the dialectical inter-connection between quality and quantity, whether in his polemic against Dühring (Engels 1878b, 321–25; 1878a, 115–19) or in his treatment of physics and chemistry in *Dialectics of Nature* (Engels 1882b, 356–60; 1882a, 357–61).

effort given the Western philosophical tradition's deep assumption of either-or: instead, Engels stresses the interpenetration of opposites, which comes to the fore in a glorious treatment of mathematics (Engels 1882a, 110–13, 536–50).

For Lenin, the importance of what he calls the unity and struggle of opposites seems to be less of a struggle compared to Engels. He stresses that the two sides of the contradiction between unity and struggle must be seen together. But what happens when we distinguish between the two sides? Lenin implicitly identifies primary and secondary sides: 'The unity (coincidence, identity, equal action) of opposites is conditional, temporary, transitory, relative. The struggle of mutually exclusive opposites is absolute, just as development and motion are absolute' (Lenin 1915a, 317; 1915b, 358). The full unity of opposites may happen for a time, in light of circumstances, but it never lasts. By contrast, the struggle of opposites is absolute and eternal, even though it takes place in a situation of contested unity. Here again we have the universal nature of contradiction, but even more so the eternity of the struggle of opposites. When I first read this text and then the subsequent elaborations by Mao Zedong some years ago, I understood this point in terms of the absoluteness and eternity of antagonistic struggle, so much so that such struggle may overturn all the gains of a proletarian revolution and the construction of socialism. Perhaps I was subconsciously influenced by the events of 1989 in Eastern Europe, but the greater influence was a residue of the Western philosophical tradition's emphasis on either-or, against which Engels struggled so mightily. I feared that Lenin was stressing this side of contradictions and I preferred the unity of opposites as the primary feature. Of course, I was wrong, for struggle-in-unity may take an antagonistic form, as is characteristic of capitalist systems, or it may take predominantly non-antagonistic forms, as with the construction of socialism. In fact, Lenin's observation should be seen as the obvious point that the absolute and eternal struggle of opposites also continues under socialism, albeit within a qualitatively different framework.

To sum up: these concise and forceful observations by Lenin indicate that if contradictions are to be found in all phenomena, if self-movement is the mode of qualitative change, and if development is the struggle of opposites in unity, then one cannot escape the conclusion that the internal dynamics of the construction of socialism entail precisely such a struggle-in-unity. And if we include the observation by Lenin with which I began this discussion, then those contradictions are not, as a rule, antagonistic.

In this section, I have analysed two texts by Lenin, one a comment on Bakunin and the other a brief exposition of a dialectical materialist method. However, they were not published at the times of writing, but rather at important moments in the 1920s. Thus, ‘On the Question of Dialectics’ may have been written in the excitement of philosophical rediscovery in 1915, but it was not published until 1925. Further, the marginal notes on Bukharin were first published only a few years later, in 1929. The timing was not pure happenstance. On a historical level, they became of interest for understanding the profoundly dialectical New Economic Policy of the 1920s, but they were even more important for understanding the theoretical implications of the extraordinary socialist offensive of the 1930s, with its dual process of industrialisation and collectivisation of agriculture. These insights by Lenin provided – in that context – a distinct philosophical framework for analysing and understanding what was happening. This philosophical framework would come to be known as dialectical materialism in the 1930s.

Dialectical Materialism

To this dialectical materialist project I now turn. Arising after the philosophical struggles of the 1920,⁷ Soviet works on dialectical materialism began to be produced in earnest in the immensely creative 1930s.⁸ They tend

⁷ It is beyond my remit to delve into these struggles between the ‘Deborinites’ and the ‘mechanists’, out of which dialectical materialism arose as a philosophical method.

⁸ In our time, few in the ‘West’ study such works, since they are dismissed as a form of Marxist ‘scholasticism’ that is given to ‘historical determinism’. This erroneous attitude is a real shame, since these works are well-researched, philosophically insightful and – for me at least – have enabled a number of insights embodied in this chapter.

to follow a similar structure, beginning with a detailed history of the philosophical precursors of the tradition, running all the way back to the pre-Socratic philosophers in ancient Greece and guided throughout by the observations of Marx, Engels and Lenin. After dealing with key moments in the development of European philosophy, the accounts turn – not unexpectedly – to the breakthroughs by Marx and Engels. However, for the systematic explanation of dialectical materialism itself, a primary point of reference is Lenin, especially the text I discussed earlier, along with other material from the *Philosophical Notebooks* of 1914-1916. Engels is the other major reference, along with specific examples from Marx and Stalin. After distinguishing two lines of philosophy (following Engels) between idealism and materialism, these studies point out that a dialectical materialist method focuses on self-movement, on internal dynamics, from which perspective one may then understand the effect of external forces. As for the ‘laws’ of dialectics, these follow – as noted above – the revision by Lenin of Engels’s initial articulation: the main law of unity and struggle of opposites, the transition from quantity into quality and vice versa, and the negation of the negation. From here a number of subsidiary positions follow, in relation to essence and phenomenon, foundation and condition, form and content, necessity and chance, law and causality, and opportunity and reality. The texts often include a section on epistemology, but a question is left begging: what has happened to historical materialism? The answer: dialectical materialism is the philosophical and scientific method, while historical materialism is its application to historical development, specifically in terms of factors that lead up to a proletarian revolution and what is entailed in the tasks of socialist construction.

I have drawn this outline from a major multi-authored entry in the first edition of the *Great Soviet Encyclopaedia*, which was overseen by M. B. Mitin (1935) and translated in China as *Xin zhexue dagang – Outline of New Philosophy* (Mitin 1936b). Many are the texts to which one can turn for further

study,⁹ but I would like to focus on two other works on dialectical materialism, one entitled *Materialist Dialectics* (Shirokov and Iankovskii 1932b; 1937),¹⁰ and the other a two-volume work called *Dialectical and Historical Materialism* (Mitin 1931). Why these texts out of many others? These two works were also translated into Chinese and studied by Mao Zedong and his comrades in Yan'an (Shirokov and Iankovskii 1932a; Mitin 1936a). Since these works cover similar territory, I deal with them together.

To begin with, they emphasise the party nature or partisanship of philosophy, that it should be part and parcel of the Communist Party's project. While 'Western' observers – including not a few 'Western' Marxists – have become used to the subterfuge in which philosophy pretends to be an exercise of liberal inquiry, unfettered by party and ideological frameworks,¹¹ the reality is quite different. The advantage of the Soviet philosophical studies is that they were explicit about dialectical materialism's agenda (Mitin 1941). It is not so much that philosophy is class struggle in theory, but that the path to a genuine and rooted universal in philosophy is – analogous to Lenin's argument for the partisanship of freedom and democracy as the path to true freedom – precisely through an explicit awareness of, and indeed promotion of, its partisan nature.

As for the three laws of dialectics, they draw from Lenin and argue that the 'materialist dialectic of Marx-Engels-Lenin-Stalin sees in the unity and

9 After a flurry of publications in the 1930s and 1940s, works on dialectical materialism continued to be published until the late 1980s (for example, Pichugun 1933; Mitin 1941; Myslivchenko and Sheptulin 1988). Some were translated into English and others were written in English (Guest 1939; Somerville 1946, 149–228; Yakhot 1965; Boguslavsky et al. 1978).

10 A little confusion has arisen over the editors' names and book title. The Russian text has I. Shirokov and R. Iankovskii as the editors, and then includes a list of names of collaborators, of which the first is A. Aizenberg. The Chinese translation by Li Da simply lists the surnames of Shirokov and Aizenberg, adding 'et cetera [*deng*]' and 'co-authors [*hezhu*]'. The English translation, which replaces the first part on the history of philosophy with a rewritten text, lists only 'M. Shirokov' as overseeing the project at the Leningrad Institute of Philosophy. It seems that the English translation's mistake has influenced the use of M. Shirokov instead of I. Shirokov in citations of this text. I have standardised my references based on the Russian source. As for the title, the Russian has *Materialist Dialectics*, with a later note, 'A Manual for Colleges and Socioeconomic Universities' – hence the Chinese title, *Bianzhengfa weiwulun jiaocheng*, *A Course on Dialectical Materialism*.

11 For example, this assumption bedevils the otherwise useful survey by Wetter (1958a; 1958b), and even Knight's (2005) otherwise excellent study is nervous about such matters.

struggle of opposites the fundamental law of dialectical development' (Mitin et al. 1935, 150–51; see also Mitin 1931, 198–221; Shirokov and Iankovskii 1932b, 129–68; 1937, 133–76).¹² These works elaborate on Lenin's brief exposition at some length, stressing the split of a unitary item into contradictory parts and thus the primacy of self-movement, or the primacy of change as an internal process through contradictions in all relations of nature and society. Drawing from these lengthy discussions, I would like to focus on three points: the interpenetration of opposites, especially in terms of the conditional nature of unity and absoluteness of struggle; the differences between contradiction and antagonism; and dialectic of quality and quantity. In regard to interpenetration, we find a range of examples, such as the contradictions of the New Economic Policy, the 'affirmative action' policies of the Soviet Union in relation to minority nationalities, and strengthening the state (understood in terms of the dictatorship of the proletariat) as the condition for the state's withering away. Concerning minority nationalities, the reference point is Stalin, who observed that, during the long 'transition period' of the construction of socialism, national cultures would flourish – and indeed did so with the world's first 'preferential policies' – in terms of economic well-being, language, culture, education and literature. In other words, national identity would become even stronger. Why? At this point he argues that such a process was necessary for developing socialist culture as a preparation for the eventual withering away of nationalities. A comparable point is made in the very same text concerning the enhancement of state power (proletarian dictatorship) for the sake of preparing – in the context of a future global socialism – for the eventual withering away of the state (Stalin 1930d, 368–70; 1930c, 379–81; see also Mitin et al. 1935, 123–24; Boer 2017c, 47–57).

Regarding the absoluteness of struggle and the temporary nature of unity, the preferred example concerns the relations between bourgeoisie and proletariat under capitalism (Mitin et al. 1935, 152). While the bourgeoisie and

¹² These laws would be reframed as four 'principal features' in the section on 'Dialectical and Historical Materialism' in the *Short Course* (Stalin 1938b, 101–4; 1938a, 106–9), with the unity and struggle of opposites culminating the list.

proletariat are inextricably linked through the structures of capitalism, so much so that the existence of one entails the existence of the other, the struggle between them is absolute and can be resolved only through revolution. At this point, the distinction between contradiction and antagonism comes into play, now in terms of a dialectic between the two (thus moving somewhat beyond Lenin). Thus, in the early stages of the struggle against feudal lords and serfdom, the nascent bourgeoisie and workers, along with the peasants, focused their struggle against the old system. Class contradictions were undeveloped and the bourgeoisie and workers were yet to become antagonistic. With the bourgeois revolutions in Europe and elsewhere, the alignments shifted: workers and the bourgeoisie became increasingly antagonistic, while the remnants of the old nobility aligned themselves with their former enemy, the bourgeoisie, and the growing proletariat began to draw non-proletarian workers into their common cause. By this time, the long process of exacerbating antagonisms sets the stage for an eventual proletarian revolution (Mitin et al. 1935, 153).

This argument is insightful, but it runs into a potential problem when we focus on the construction of socialism. In this case, the favoured example concerns the relations between workers and peasants, or, more strictly speaking, between the working class and the peasantry (since rural workers were not necessarily class conscious). Again and again, we find an emphasis on the ‘commonality of the fundamental interests of the vast mass of the peasantry with the interests of the proletariat’ (Mitin et al. 1935, 152), on ‘two friendly classes’ that are no longer antagonistic’ (Stalin 1936a, 128; 1936b, 167), on ‘contradictions *within the bond* [*vnutri smychki*]’ of the working class and the main mass of the working people, especially the main mass of the working peasantry (Stalin 1930b, 20; 1930a, 21).

It seems as though the unity of opposites has come to the fore and is no longer conditional, while the universality and absoluteness of struggle has fallen into the background. In short, does this mean that in the construction of socialism the struggle of opposites is now conditional and that their unity

is absolute? The answer has two levels. The first concerns the need to deal with the remnants of capitalist and even landlord elements, which may indeed form the major contradiction of the early phase of the construction of socialism.¹³ This contradiction appeared most clearly in the contrast between the rich or 'big' peasants and the development of large-scale socialist industry, and its solution was enacted through the collectivisation of agriculture and the elimination of the kulaks as a class.¹⁴ More generally, as Stalin put it in orthodox Marxist terms: in the immediate aftermath of a proletarian revolution, the new state – as the dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry – would deploy all means available for suppressing and crushing the bourgeoisie and landlords, as well as defending the new socialist project from efforts at foreign intervention. Thus, it is not enough to remove the former ruling class from power and expropriate the former owners of the means of production; a further step is needed, and for this the new form of governance must use persuasion and force to deal with potential counter-revolution (Stalin 1939a, 333–36; 1939b, 418–22). Obviously, in this situation class conflict continues until the bourgeoisie and landlord remnants are completely destroyed or absorbed.

To put it in terms of contradiction and antagonism, the struggle during at least the early period of socialist construction is indeed sharp, focused on dealing with the counter-revolution in its many aspects. But is it

¹³ Here they echo Lenin's observations, made in regard to the role of trade unions during the transition period. Lenin identifies a number of contradictions: between persuasion-education and coercion; protecting the interests of workers and wielding state power – in terms of the dictatorship of proletariat – for the construction of socialism; adapting to the masses and seeking to lift the masses out of prejudice and backwardness. Are these contradictions a passing phase, especially in the context of the New Economic Policy? They are no accident, observes Lenin, for they 'will persist for several decades ... as long as survivals of capitalism and small production remain, contradictions between them and the young shoots of socialism are inevitable throughout the social system' (Lenin 1921b, 349–50; 1921a, 382–83). This assumption was of course due to Marx's brief reflections concerning what he called an initial stage of communism, in which 'bourgeois right' would continue for some time, and Lenin's detailed exegesis of this text in terms of the stages of socialism and communism (Marx 1875b, 13–15; 1875a, 85–87; Lenin 1917a, 86–102; 1917b, 464–79).

¹⁴ The example may be specific to the Soviet Union, but the theoretical point is obvious, for the transition period can indeed last a long time indeed, so much so that a new mode of production will not completely abolish those that have gone before but continue to embody some elements in a transformed manner within the new (Losurdo 2017; Boer 2017b).

antagonistic? At this point, the second level kicks in and we need to turn to the treatments of quality and quantity. All of the texts stress – drawing heavily on Engels's *Dialectics of Nature* – the dialectical relation between quality and quantity, while at the same time pointing out that qualitative difference is determinative. While quantitative change may provide the conditions for a qualitative shift, the qualitative context determines the limits of how much can be achieved in terms of quantitative development.¹⁵ For example, socialist forms of production are ultimately impossible under the conditions of feudalism or capitalism, given the qualitative differences between them (Mitin et al. 1935, 156–57). The same point applies to contradictions: those internal to a process are qualitatively different to contradictions within another self-moving process. Thus, the primary contradiction of capitalism (see above) is ever more antagonistic, moving through periodic crises that function as landmarks of further intensification toward a revolutionary confrontation as the way to solve such a contradiction. In fact, a proletarian revolution entails an 'abolition of the formerly dominant opposite and to the establishment of a new contradiction' that is qualitatively different (Shirokov and Iankovskii 1932b, 150; 1937, 174; see also Mitin 1931, 212). How so? Invoking Lenin, the texts point out that the new contradictions are primarily non-antagonistic,¹⁶ in the sense that they do not lead to a revolutionary confrontation. But this does not mean they are without struggle. Let us return to the example of the proletariat and the peasantry, now in terms of the middle and small peasants and not the big

¹⁵ Each of the texts discusses the question of the 'leap' in quality, stressed by Lenin in his notes on Hegel. But they point out that such a leap – as Lenin recognised elsewhere – is rarely sudden and is more often long and drawn out. I leave aside the third law of dialectics, the negation of negation, although it is worth noting that the texts use the NEP as a key example, as well as the following insight: 'Primitive communism is negated by class society, and the subsequent communist formation negates class society. But modern communism is not a simple return to primitive communism. It represents the highest step in social development, incomparably superior to primitive communism in terms of productive forces, the organisation of labour, ideology, etc' (Mitin et al. 1935, 163).

¹⁶ Usually, they are content to quote Lenin and elaborate, but Mitin elsewhere offers the following gloss: 'Ulianov pointed out to Bukarin that it was wrong to treat contradiction and antagonism as the same thing. In socialism, for instance, the conflict between classes will be eliminated, yet the contradictions between nature and society, between the forces of production and the means of production, will remain' (Mitin 1931, 211).

peasants (kulaks).¹⁷ While there is an underlying common ground – in which the peasant is a rural worker – the struggle itself moves forward in steps, but now each stage in the contradiction entails a further step towards its resolution.

Shirikov and Aizenberg sum up this approach as follows:

If in developed socialism there were *no* contradictions – contradictions between productive forces and relations in production, between production and demand, no contradictions in the development of technique, etc. – then the development of socialism would be impossible, then instead of movement we would have stagnation. Only in virtue of the internal contradictions of the socialist order can there be development from one phase to another and higher order (Shirokov and Iankovskii 1932b, 150; 1937, 175).¹⁸

Mao Zedong

It was precisely the material discussed in the previous section that Mao Zedong and his comrades came to study in the second half of the 1930s. But let us step back for a moment and set the scene. In October, 1935, the Long March came to an end, with the various depleted sections of the Red Army meeting up in the Red Area based in Yan'an, Shaanxi Province. What was to follow was an immensely creative period of socialist construction and theoretical development.¹⁹ True, the Chinese communists had already gained significant experience in Jinggangshan in the late 1920s and with the Jiangsu-

¹⁷ This is where the Trotskyite misunderstanding arises (all these texts often contrast dialectical materialism with Trotskyism). Not only does a Trotskyite approach take the elimination of kulaks as a class as the primary form of struggle (which is seen as being of the same form as worker-bourgeois struggle under capitalism), but it also sees all contradictions as antagonistic, thereby not recognising the qualitative difference entailed with socialist construction (Weston 2008). Further, such an approach is monolithic rather than dialectical, for it sees a capitalist system as monolithic and determinative of socialism on a global level. This approach is curiously 'Western', in the sense of assuming all-or-nothing, either-or: either you have global capitalism or global socialism.

¹⁸ Or as Stalin observed already in 1927: 'After all, our development does not proceed in the form of a smooth, all-round ascent. No, comrades, we have classes, we have contradictions within the country ... Our advance takes place in the process of struggle, in the process of the development of contradictions, in the process of overcoming these contradictions, in the process of bringing these contradictions to light and eliminating them' (Stalin 1927b, 330–31; 1927a, 339).

¹⁹ For a broader context, see Liu (1971, 72–75).

Fujian Soviet in the early 1930s,²⁰ but now they could set out to provide the real foundations for the New China. In the relatively brief period before the Anti-Japanese War resumed in earnest, they engaged in avid study, lectures, translation and publication. Mao Zedong – freed for a time from too many other pressures – immersed himself in study, ushering in one of the ‘most significant chapters in his development as a Marxist theorist’ (Knight 2005, 147). His focus was Marxist philosophy and the most mature and fully developed form of this philosophy was to be found in Soviet works (see above). As Edgar Snow observes: ‘Once when I was having nightly interviews with him on Communist history, a visitor brought him several new books on philosophy, and Mao asked me to postpone our engagements. He consumed those books in three or four nights of intensive reading, during which he seemed oblivious to everything else’ (Snow 1968, 88). Of course, Mao was not alone and he did not step into a vacuum. He was part of a study circle that met three nights a week and included Ai Siqu, Zhou Yang, He Sijing, Ren Beige, He Peiyuan, and Chen Boda, and he was actively involved in the many educational activities and lectures at the time (giving no more than 110 lectures at the Anti-Japanese Military and Political University). Further, the ground had been laid for an intense engagement with Marxist philosophy by the pioneering works of Qu Qiubai in the 1920s, and then the extensive writings of Ai Siqu and the uncompromising rigour of Li Da in the late 1920s and especially the 1930s.²¹ As Knight observes (2005, 7), these precursors were persuaded *philosophically* by Soviet developments in dialectical materialism (the ‘New Philosophy’) and sought to explain and analyse this material in light of Chinese conditions.

Yet it did fall to Mao Zedong, whose inclination was seek understanding of the world intellectually and philosophically, to think through and write some of the most important philosophical works on

20 As Mao writes in 1957, ‘Our People’s Republic was not built overnight, but developed step by step out of the revolutionary base areas’ (Mao 1957a, 217; 1957b, 396).

21 Ai Siqu’s knowledge of Russian, German, Japanese and English also placed him in a unique position as translator of key works, while Li Da’s translations relied on Japanese versions.

Chinese Marxism, with their essence expressed in two essays, 'On Contradiction' and 'On Practice'. However, I will not begin with these texts, preferring to go back to the initial marginal notes made by Mao in his study of Soviet material and key Chinese works,²² which I will supplement with points from the extensive lecture notes on dialectical materialism, from July-August 1937, and 'On Contradiction' itself. Why begin with the marginal notes?²³ Here one can see a creative engagement, identifying and immediately sharpening core principles, as well as providing specific Chinese examples from philosophy, history and the immediate revolutionary tasks at hand.²⁴ Through the thousands of characters he wrote in the margins, one can almost see Mao's thoughts leaping out from the pages he was studying. At the same time, there is an intriguing familiarity with the material, not so much because he had studied it before, but because it seems to resonate in many ways with Chinese cultural assumptions. Mao studied carefully the material concerning the history of Western philosophy from ancient Greece onward and the emergence of a dialectical materialist outlook,²⁵ he saw as obvious the universality of contradictions in nature and society, and he was

22 From late 1936 to the middle of 1937, Mao made often extensive notes on Chinese translations of the works by Shirokov and Iankovskii (1932a), and Mitin (1936a). Or at least these notes survive, unlike the ones he made on the Chinese translation of the major entry in the *Great Soviet Encyclopaedia* overseen by Mitin (1936b). Soon after writing the lecture notes on dialectical materialism in July-August 1937, he also made notes on works by Li Da and Ai Siqi, especially the former's *Elements of Sociology* (Li Da 1937) and the latter's *Philosophy and Life* (1937). These notes and annotations are gathered in the core Chinese source, *Mao Zedong zhexue pizhuji* (1937b), which includes notes made through to the 1960s. Mao also studied, among other works, Ai Siqi's *Philosophy for the Masses* (1936a), but Mao's copy of the book has not survived, so we are unable to determine any notes he may have made. For a full list of the works on Marxist philosophy studied by Mao, see Li Ji (1987), as well as the insightful study by Li Yongtai (1985).

23 By far the best study in English of Mao's engagement with these texts and others is by Nick Knight (2005, 149–96; see also Gong, Pang, and Shi 1986; Tian Songnian 1986; Wang Jionghua 1998). For the complex relations between the reading notes, the lectures on dialectical materialism, and the essays 'On Contradiction' and 'On Practice', see Knight's other work (1990a). To be avoided is the culturally and colonially arrogant dismissal by Meissner (1990). The same can be said of a spate of other non-Chinese works (Glaberman 1968; Gray 1973, 32–69; Wakeman 1973; Meissner 1990; Schram 1969; 1989; Lee 2002).

24 'Mao's annotations indicate that he was an active reader, one who interrogated the texts in a critical manner, seeking to understand the general principles of dialectical materialism, their appropriate formulation, and how these might be applied to an understanding of China's particular problems' (Knight 2005, 100).

25 This is particularly the case with his notes on Li Da's *Elements of Sociology* (Mao 1937d, 205–31; 1937b, 808–26). See further Knight's detailed study of Li Da (1996).

instinctively drawn to the sections on the unity and struggle of opposites, as well as the interpenetration of opposites and the relations between quality and quantity. In what follows, I draw out three pertinent topics: the main topic of the unity-in-struggle of opposites; the way he goes beyond the texts he is studying on the question of primary and secondary contradictions; and how he emphasises – in the context of the dialectic of quality and quantity – the material concerning the qualitatively distinct nature of the self-movement of genuine change, since this emphasis provides the philosophical background to socialism with Chinese characteristics.²⁶

Contradiction and Antagonism

Mao was particularly drawn to the material on the unity and struggle of contradictions, as well as the closely related interpenetration of opposites.²⁷ He begins with a principle: ‘The so-called unity of opposites is the dissociation of a unified entity to become mutually exclusive opposites, and includes the mutual connections between these opposites. This is the source of the so-called principal contradiction, and of so-called self-movement’ (Mao 1937d, 72; 1937f, 723–24). Or more directly in ‘On Contradiction’, which arose from this study: ‘The law of the contradiction in things, that is, the law of the unity of opposites, is the basic law [*genben faze*] of materialist dialectics’ (Mao 1937e, 299; 1937g, 311). While in the lectures on dialectical materialism and in the influential essay this ‘basic law’ develops a life of its own, let us stay with the reading notes and focus on a specific concern: the relations between contradiction and antagonism.

26 Beyond my remit are both the criticisms of formal logic (especially in the notes to Ai Siqu’s *Philosophy and Life*) and the fascinating treatment of dialectical epistemology based on social practice, which would come to fruition with ‘On Practice’ and later with ‘Where Do Correct Ideas Come From?’ (Mao 1937d, 22–33; 1937f, 684–97; 1963a; 1963b; see also Knight 2005, 157–58). Note, however, his observation: ‘Reflection does not consist in passively copying the object; it is an active process. In production as well as in class struggle, knowledge is an active factor; it plays a role in transforming the world’ (Mao 1937d, 15–16; 1937f, 679).

27 While this is also Lenin’s emphasis (see above), the notes make it very clear that Mao saw the value of all three laws (Mao 1937d, 113–36; 1937f, 752–64; see also Knight 1990a, 15–24). This reality belies the suggestions by some that Mao dismissed the other laws and focused only on the unity and struggle of opposites (Wang Nanshi 2011; Schram 1989, 65, 140).

A long note begins with: 'Although contradiction exists universally, antagonism only emerges when the contradictions of certain processes have developed to a definite stage' (Mao 1937d, 83; 1937f, 732; see also 1937d, 174; 1937a, 794). Already there is a difference in emphasis from the Soviet works, which tend to speak of the way contradictions, under certain circumstances, may become antagonistic or non-antagonistic. For Mao, the key point is that contradictions – which is to say non-antagonistic contradictions – are obviously universal, while antagonism is not. This point may have been implicit in the Soviet works, but Mao immediately sharpens it. There follow some examples of antagonistic situations, drawn by and large from capitalist systems: between oppressing and oppressed classes and nationalities, between state and state, between political parties – and antagonisms take the forms of oppression, war, clash and conflict.

However, Mao is keener to move onto non-antagonistic contradictions (in the texts on which he is commenting the *locus classicus* of Lenin's observation appears here). Many are the examples offered, from the communist movement, through culture, economy and nature, to conditions 'under socialism'. Of specific interest here are the examples of the Communist Party and the construction of socialism. In the notes, Mao identifies the basic contradiction as that between the forces and relations of

production (see also Mao 1957a, 214; 1957b, 393),²⁸ but let us supplement this material with the essay ‘On Contradiction’, where we find the following:

For instance, the contradiction between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie is resolved by the method of socialist revolution; the contradiction between the great masses of the people and the feudal system is resolved by the method of democratic revolution; the contradiction between the colonies and imperialism is resolved by the method of national revolutionary war; the contradiction between the working class and the peasant class in socialist society is resolved by the method of collectivisation and mechanisation in agriculture; contradiction within the Communist Party is resolved by the method of criticism and self-criticism; the contradiction between society and nature is resolved by the method of developing the productive forces (Mao 1937e, 311; 1937g, 321–22).

The first three examples – socialist revolution, bourgeois revolution, and anti-colonial liberation – are obviously antagonistic contradictions that require a revolutionary resolution. But the next three examples are qualitatively different: workers and peasants, within the Communist Party, and the liberation of productive forces. The solutions offered indicate that these three contradictions are primarily non-antagonistic, taking place within the socialist-communist context. As Mao’s notes on Shirokov and Iankovskii observe: ‘The method for the resolution of contradictions and that for the resolution of antagonism are different’ (Mao 1937d, 85; 1937f, 723).²⁹

28 The reality of the non-antagonistic contradiction between forces and relations of production would be emphasised in Stalin’s ‘Economic Problems of Socialism in the U.S.S.R.’ (1952b, 196–204; 1952a, 266–74). Stalin points out that there may be periods when the relations of production conform to productive means – periods that lead to rapid growth of production and living conditions – but one should expect that at different periods either the productive relations or productive forces may lag behind and act as a brake the other. In these situations, the task becomes one of reforming the laggard and bring it into conformity with the one leaping ahead. At times, it may be the productive relations that take the lead, while at other times it may be the productive forces, which in turn requires a reshaping of the productive relations. Importantly, this constant adjustment is not merely an objective process that would happen anyway, for it also entails specific policies to correct the imbalance: ‘Given a correct policy on the part of the directing bodies, these contradictions cannot grow into antagonisms, and there is no chance of matters coming to a conflict between the relations of production and the productive forces of society’ (Stalin 1952b, 203; 1952a, 273). Mao and a reading circle, which met from December 1959 to February 1960, studied intensely this text and other works of political economy, leading to a collection of annotations and talks (Mao 1998; see also Zhou Xincheng 2016).

29 The next sentence anticipates my treatment of specific characteristics: ‘This is the particularity of contradiction and the particularity of the method for the resolution of contradiction, a question which

Despite the quotation from 'On Contradiction' above, in general the concern in the essay with antagonism in contradiction seems somewhat muted, appearing almost as an appendix. Nonetheless, there is one significant development: instead of an abstract formula, Mao observes that in light of concrete developments, 'some contradictions which were originally non-antagonistic develop into antagonistic ones, while others which were originally antagonistic develop into non-antagonistic ones' (Mao 1937e, 335; 1937g, 344). Notably, he goes on to focus on ideological struggles within the Communist Party³⁰ and the town-country relation. In the latter case, the contradiction is antagonistic under capitalism, as well under the rule of the Guomindang, in which foreign imperialism and the 'big comprador bourgeoisie' ruthlessly plundered the countryside. However, 'in a socialist country and in our revolutionary base areas, this antagonistic contradiction has changed into one that is non-antagonistic; and when communist society is reached it will be abolished' (Mao 1937e, 336; 1937g, 345). Even so, a question remains: is it possible that such contradictions may become antagonistic during socialist construction? If so, what is to be done? Mao offers only the principle that the methods for resolving contradictions will differ according to the specific differences in the nature of contradictions.

We need to wait almost twenty years for a more comprehensive assessment of this problem, in 'On the Correct Handling of Contradictions Among the People' (Mao 1957b; 1957a). Obviously, the question had come to the fore once again during the first few years of socialist construction after Liberation, and it is no coincidence that this was also the time when Mao laboured over revisions to 'On Contradiction'.³¹ Immediately in the 'Correct

requires distinctions to be made' (Mao 1937d, 85; 1937f, 723).

³⁰ Initially, such contradictions may not be antagonistic, but they risk and can indeed become so. Mao gives examples from the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (Lenin and Stalin versus Trotsky) and then the Chinese Communist Party, in which incorrect thinking can avoid antagonism if those guilty of such positions correct themselves. Obviously, the party should enable such a process, but if those comrades insist on errors, the situation may lead to antagonism.

³¹ So long did the revisions take him that the essay's initial publication appeared in the second volume of his *Selected Works* (subsequent editions would place the essay in the first volume). For a comprehensive analysis of the similarities and differences between the lecture notes from 1937 and the final publication of

Handling' piece, Mao assumes a position he had hammered out twenty years earlier: the qualitative difference in contradictions depending on their circumstances. Here the difference refers to contradictions with anti-socialist enemies of the people and contradictions among the people. The two are, he writes, 'totally different in nature' (Mao 1957a, 204; 1957b, 384; see also 1956a, 164). The main concern of the essay is contradictions among the people, but if one expected that such contradictions might have been somewhat simplified in the context of socialist construction, then one will be sorely disappointed. In this context, there are even more contradictions: within and between workers, peasants and intelligentsia, between governance and people, centralism and democracy, collective and individual, and so on (see also Mao 1956b; 1956c). He devotes considerable attention to practical matters in relation to a number of these contradictions, but the basic point is that contradictions among the people need to be managed carefully so that they do not become antagonistic and can be resolved in a non-antagonistic manner. In other words, Mao does not assume that internal contradictions are always non-antagonistic, that they can always be resolved amicably. There is always a risk that they may become antagonistic and that counter-revolutionary forces – internal and external – may seek to exacerbate such antagonism. Thus, policies should always be concerned to avoid such developments, to direct contradictions in a non-antagonistic direction, and seek to resolve them in this manner. Mao writes that in 'ordinary circumstances, contradictions among the people are not antagonistic'. However, 'if they are not handled properly, or if we relax our vigilance and lower our guard, antagonism may arise' (Mao 1957a, 211; 1957b, 391). To reinforce this point, Mao reverts to his initial insights from the 1930s. While some may have expected that the unity of opposites would become paramount during socialist construction, he reminds them of the core insight from dialectical materialism – now described as 'Marxist philosophy' – that

'On Contradiction', see Knight (1990a, 154–229). Other philosophical texts appeared during the 1960s, but our only source is the unverified and therefore unreliable *Mao Zedong Sixiang Wansui*, published by some Red Guards (Mao 1964b; 1964a).

the unity of contradictions is temporary and transitory, but the struggle is absolute. In light of this primacy of struggle, 'socialist society grows more united and consolidated through the ceaseless process of correctly handling and resolving contradictions' (Mao 1957a, 213; 1957b, 393).

Principal and Secondary Contradictions

In regard to principal and secondary contradictions and their aspects, Mao devotes a significant annotation to the topic, going well beyond his source text (Mao 1937d, 87–90; 1937f, 735–36). That text speaks only of the relation between a dominant aspect of a contradiction and its secondary aspect (see more below). By contrast, Mao immediately makes the distinction between principal and secondary contradictions, and then observes: 'Because the development of the principal contradiction determines the development of the various secondary contradictions, if one cannot distinguish between the principal and secondary contradictions, between the determining contradiction and those that are determined, one cannot seek out the most essential thing of a process' (Mao 1937d, 87; 1937f, 735). As Knight suggests (2005, 156), there is a direct path from this annotation to the lectures and then the essay 'On Contradiction', so much so that we can see the structure of the later work already emerging as Mao was studying the Soviet source. Even more, the principal as formulated by Mao has come to guide CPC policy and the development of the New China until today, so much so that the determining feature of all government policy turns on identifying the principal contradiction to which all the other secondary contradictions relate. Importantly, it arose during Mao's close study of Shirokov and Iankovskii in 1936-1937, but it could arise only through Mao's sharpening of the point in response to Soviet treatments of dialectical materialism, a sharpening that simultaneously did so in light of the Chinese tradition and challenged its assumptions.

As for the notes, the long annotation that is my focus is by no means the first time Mao had spoken of principal and secondary contradictions.

Thus, in the initial treatment of the unity and struggle of contradictions, Mao picks up a relatively minor point in the source text concerning the need to identify a basic or fundamental contradiction in a process. Mao pounces: 'it is necessary also to know the fundamental contradiction which allows development of the process, for that is the source of movement of the process' (Mao 1937d, 66; 1937f, 719). Thus, the fundamental contradiction of capitalism is between the forces and relations of production, as manifested in the tension between the social character of production and the private character of ownership. From here, Mao moves to the contemporary situation in China, where the principal contradiction is between China and Japan, and thus the way to solve this contradiction is through a united front against the Japanese imperialist invasion (see also Mao 1937d, 73–74; 1937f, 725).³² Of most interest for my purposes is the third principal contradiction, which is focused on the transition from capitalism to socialism. Mao simply assumes – along with the text he is studying – that contradictions will indeed be a feature of socialist construction. The contradiction: between the relics of capitalism, embodied above all in big peasants who exploit others, and large-scale socialist industry and the working class. The solution: further industrialisation and socialisation of agriculture (Mao 1937d, 67–69; 1937f, 720–21).

With respect to the principal and secondary aspect internal to a contradiction, Mao moves well beyond the source text by Shirokov and Iankovskii. They stipulate a more static view concerning the foundational role of value in relation to use value, and of production in relation to consumption (drawing on Marx's *Capital*), but also of practice in relation to theory. Mao recognises these points, but then asks 'which aspect is principal'? He observes: 'It is necessary to observe the situation of the development of a

³² Within a couple of years, Mao would elaborate: 'The contradiction between imperialism and the Chinese nation and the contradiction between feudalism and the great masses of the people are the basic contradictions in modern Chinese society. Of course, there are others, such as the contradiction between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat and the contradictions within the reactionary ruling classes themselves. But the contradiction between imperialism and the Chinese nation is the principal one' (Mao 1939b, 631; 1939a, 313).

process, and it will be determined under definite conditions' (Mao 1937d, 88; 1937f, 735). He goes on to provide a long series of examples, including military (China-Japan, forces in the revolutionary struggle, strategy and tactics, mobile and positional warfare, and so on), classes and economic realities (bourgeoisie and proletariat, proletariat and peasantry, manual and mental labour, and so on), and those between capitalism, feudalism, imperialism and socialism.³³ But who is to decide which aspect is primary and which is secondary? When a process attains a definite stage of development, 'the strength of the two sides in the struggle will determine it'. Even more, the 'dominant and the non-dominant change from one to the other' (Mao 1937d, 90; 1937f, 736). In fact, this is precisely the point with which Mao began the whole analysis of primary and secondary aspects, framing it in terms of the results of a struggle between the two aspects, leading to a 'change of mutual interpermeation', which entails not merely a 'transformation to achieve identity', but even more a 'transformation to its opposing aspect'. This reality is not a case of simple identity, for precisely through this transformation can one find the 'indivisible interconnection of the two opposed aspects' (Mao 1937d, 87; 1937f, 735).

As commentators point out (Yang and Yang 2007, 17–18; Wang Nanshi 2011; Sun 2017, 17), this emphasis is a distinct contribution from Mao: apart from constant need to identify the primary contradiction that determines the many secondary contradictions, within each contradiction is a primary and a secondary aspect. The relation between the two will change in light of circumstances. In the notes, Mao initially developed this analysis in the context of his study of the unity and struggle of contradictions, but by the time he came to write the lecture notes on dialectical materialism and then revise the text of 'On Contradiction', the whole question of primary and secondary became a topic in its own right (Mao 1937c, 259–65; 1937h, 643–50; 1937e, 320–27; 1937g, 331–37).

³³ Compare the astute analysis – in 'On Contradiction' – of the changing relations between principal and secondary aspects in the long Chinese anti-colonial and revolutionary struggle (Mao 1937e, 320–21; 1937g, 331–32).

Chinese Characteristics

The final point to be drawn from the notes is the philosophical background for what later became known as socialism with Chinese characteristics. It arises from both the self-movement of qualitative change and the qualitative difference between processes and their contradictions. The first point is obvious: if internal processes are the primary contexts for qualitative transformations (Mao 1937d, 110; 1937f, 749–50), then it follows logically that the Chinese revolution, as well as the arduous task of constructing socialism, have their own particular characteristics. Of course, Mao denies neither the role of external causes, nor the internal-external dialectic, as the notes on Ai Siqui's *Philosophy and Life* and 'On Contradiction' make clear (Mao 1937e, 301–3; 1937g, 313–15). But he does agree with his source texts that 'internal cause determines the necessity of change in things, not external cause' (Mao 1937d, 201; 1937i, 832; see also 1937e, 301; 1937g, 313).³⁴ Thus, it is only through the 'intrinsic attributes of each stage that the nature of the process will develop' (Mao 1937d, 48; 1937f, 705).³⁵

In regard to quality and quantity,³⁶ Mao almost immediately observes: 'In knowing a process, we must first determine its quality, and the differences between it and other processes, that is, know its special characteristics' (Mao 1937d, 41; 1937f, 700; see also 1937d, 165; 1937a, 786–87). Special or particular characteristics – *tedian* or *texing* (Mao uses both terms) – would of course come into its own soon enough to designate the specific characteristics in China – *Zhongguo tese*. But let us stay with the question of contradictions.

34 Later in the notes, in the discussion of the relativity of unity and the absoluteness of struggle, Mao further emphasises the primacy of the internal process of contradictions. In this light, he offers a series of examples, mainly drawn from the revolutionary struggle in China along with some Chinese sayings, such as – from *Lu shi chungiu* – 'a door hinge is never worm eaten, but a piece of wood from a door hinge will be' (Mao 1937d, 107–9; 1937f, 748–50).

35 We may find a precursor to this philosophical argument, albeit with less detail, in relation to the development of socialism in one country (Shirokov and Iankovskii 1932b, 166–67; 1937, 203–5). At the same time, this was by no means a new idea propagated suddenly in the Soviet Union in the 1930s, for it has a much longer history in the socialist tradition (Van Ree 1998; 2015).

36 In what follows, I emphasise a distinct feature of Mao's notes on quality and quantity, but it should be noted that he acknowledges the dialectical relation between the two. This is so particularly in his notes on Mitin's *Dialectical and Historical Materialism* (Mao 1937d, 181–87; 1937a, 800–805).

Mao elaborates that the first step is to ‘indicate all of the particular characteristics of a process’, especially the ‘fundamental particularity’. Here we touch on the need to identify a principal contradiction, now meshed with the specific characteristics of a context. In the same note, Mao goes on to indicate the second step of the process: ‘only then is it possible to know the laws of development of a process, because the laws (*faze*) are contained in the development of the contradictions of the basic particularity’ (Mao 1937d, 44; 1937f, 702). In other words, the fundamental or basic characteristics of a process of development are contradictory; and this principal contradiction is a contradiction particular to a specific context. Such contexts necessarily differ, whether one considers Western Europe, the Soviet Union, or China. Indeed, if one studies a specific course of development such as China in its more recent past, multiple contradictions emerge, each of which has its own particularity (Mao 1937e, 311–12; 1937g, 322–23). A little later in the notes, Mao points out that a dialectical materialist approach enables one to identify the ‘particularity of contradictions’ within a process, but also that it is necessary to know the ‘contradictions of the various aspects of a process’ (Mao 1937d, 74; 1937f, 725). It is not enough to identify the specific nature of a basic contradiction in a particular context, for it also needs a careful awareness of the way such a contradiction develops and changes in light of developments. By now, the connection with the interpermeation and indeed transformation of principal and secondary aspects of a contradiction throughout an internal process should be clear (see also Mao 1937d, 46; 1937f, 703).

Given Mao’s interest in the particularity or specific characteristics of a contradictory process, it should be no surprise that in the lectures on dialectical materialism and then in ‘On Contradiction’ this emphasis too would become an important section in its own right, entitled ‘The Particularity of Contradiction’ (Mao 1937c, 241–55; 1937h, 631–43; 1937e, 308–20; 1937g, 319–30). Noticeable in this material are the extensive examples, which begin with science and nature, move onto the Russian Revolution and then focus extensively on China’s specific context. As for the notes, Mao

enthusiastically seeks to identify a host of contradictions, not only from the immediate context of the communist revolutionary struggle in China, but also from the Chinese tradition (Mao 1937d, 77–78, 80; 1937f, 727–28, 729–30). Our situation is unique, he wants to say, not only in terms of the contrast with capitalist contexts, but also with other communist projects, of which the Soviet Union was – in the 1930s – the prime example. On a theoretical level, Mao observes: ‘Qualitatively different contradictions require different methods for their resolution’ (Mao 1937d, 73; 1937f, 724). On a practical level, as ‘On Contradiction’ puts it: ‘Why is it that the Chinese revolution can avoid a capitalist future and be directly linked with socialism without taking the old historical road of Western countries, without passing through a period of bourgeois dictatorship? The sole reason is the concrete conditions [*juti tiaojian*] of the time’ (Mao 1937e, 331–32; 1937g, 341).³⁷

In sum, I have emphasised the way Mao Zedong’s creative engagement with this material from Soviet Marxist philosophy provided him with the philosophical framework for the development of the key idea that the communist struggle in China had its own distinct characteristics. It should be no surprise that a year later, in 1938, he observes in a key work, ‘The New Stage’:

The history of this great nation of ours goes back several thousand years. It has its own laws of development, its own national characteristics, and many precious treasures. As regards all this, we are mere schoolboys. Today's China is an outgrowth of historic China. We are Marxist historicists; we must not mutilate history. From Confucius to Sun Yatsen, we must sum it up critically, and we must constitute ourselves the heirs to this precious legacy. Conversely, the assimilation of this legacy itself becomes a method that aids considerably in guiding the present great movement. A Communist is a Marxist internationalist, but Marxism must take on a national form [*minzu xingshi*] before it can be put into practice. There is no such thing as abstract Marxism, but only concrete Marxism [*juti de makesizhuyi*]. What we call concrete Marxism is Marxism that has taken on a

³⁷ In English language works, Knight’s efforts (1983; 1990b; 2005, 165–69, 205–9) to understand Mao’s efforts to sinify Marxism are the most insightful, even though they are still caught at times in the either-or logic of Western thought.

national form [*minzu xingshi*], that is, Marxism applied to the concrete struggle in the concrete conditions [*juti huanjing*] prevailing in China, and not Marxism abstractly used. If a Chinese Communist, who is a part of the great Chinese people, bound to his people by his very flesh and blood, talks of Marxism apart from Chinese peculiarities [*Zhongguo tedian*], this Marxism is merely an empty abstraction. Consequently, the sinification of Marxism [*Makesizhuyi zhongguohua*]— that is to say, making certain that in all its manifestations it is imbued with Chinese characteristics [*Zhongguo de texing*], using it according to Chinese peculiarities [*Zhongguo de tedian*]— becomes a problem that must be understood and solved by the whole Party without delay' (Mao 1938a, 658–59; 1938b, 538–39).

This position would be reasserted in more pithy form by Deng Xiaoping at the opening of the CPC's Twelfth National Congress in 1982:

We must integrate the universal truth of Marxism with the concrete realities of China, blaze a path of our own and build a socialism with Chinese characteristics – that is the basic conclusion we have reached after reviewing our long history (Deng 1982b, 2–3; 1982a, 14).

Conclusion

This chapter has entailed a step back, before the Reform and Opening-Up, in order to identify the philosophical background of the contradiction analysis that remains today a core feature of socialism with Chinese characteristics. This task has entailed working through Lenin's initial succinct deliberations, the extensive developments in dialectical materialism in the Soviet Union of the 1930s, and Mao Zedong's creative engagement with this material in light of Chinese conditions. My focus has been on the themes of the unity and struggle of opposites, the quality-quantity dialectic, contradiction and antagonism, as well as the philosophical basis for socialism with Chinese characteristics, or the sinification of Marxism. Importantly, this basis emerged in Mao Zedong's creative and critical engagement with Soviet and Chinese works on dialectical materialism in the 1930s, specifically in terms of the priority of self-movement and in the qualitative difference of

contradictions.³⁸ Thus, the path of revolutionary struggle and – after Liberation – the task of constructing socialism would be determined primarily by the internal and qualitatively distinct contradictions of the Chinese context. Of course, this concrete Marxism could not appear or work without the universal principles of Marxism, but these principles had to be concretised. However, it was not merely these features of dialectical materialism that supplied Mao and others with the philosophical basis, for contradiction analysis as a whole comes into play: Marxism is at one and the same time thoroughly universal, as a philosophical method and revolutionary program, *and* concretely specific in light of local conditions, for Marxism is not Marxism without such scientific rigour. Without one you do not have the other. This dialectical reality of universal and particular is embodied in the phrase ‘socialism with Chinese characteristics’ (Li, Zhang, and Li 1994, 58; Zhou Yinzu 1997, 120).³⁹

Let me close with a brief survey of government policy in light of contradiction since the founding of the New China and in the process of socialist construction. In more than 70 years, there have been only three principal contradictions.⁴⁰ To begin with, at the Eighth National Congress of the CPC in 1956, it was resolved that ‘the principal contradiction facing

38 By now it should be obvious that the wayward hypotheses that Mao was not so much a Marxist philosopher but a Chinese one, or that he inverted dialectical materialism in favour of ‘voluntarism’ or ‘idealism’, are without foundation (Schram 1969, 71–73; 1989, 67; Wakeman 1973; Meisner 2007, 146–49).

39 Mao was not the only one who was advocating such an approach at the time, for we also find Ai Siqi, who in person in Yan’an (arriving in October of 1937) and through his writings both influenced Mao and was a close conversation partner. Apart from an essay – entitled ‘Lun Zhongguo de teshuxing’ (Ai 1940) – directly tackling this question, Ai Siqi also observed in *Sixiang fangfalun*: ‘What we can “copy” is only the basic theory; when it is “repeated” in China, we need to apply it concretely to the practical problems of China, and we cannot simply copy, but need to concretely develop it in various ways’ (Ai 1936b, 160). Further, Ai’s formidable organisational and editorial ability ensured, after his arrival in Yan’an, that Mao would entrust him with establishing the institutional structures to ensure the widespread dissemination of these philosophical developments (Knight 2005, 197–214).

40 One may ask: what about Mao’s emphasis on class struggle as the principal contradiction during the Cultural Revolution? For Chinese scholars, this was clearly an incorrect assessment of the situation and thus of the principal contradiction (Xiao 2004, 63). We may go further: Mao had seemingly forgotten or pushed aside his earlier emphases on both the necessity of managing contradictions among the people in a socialist system so that they do not become antagonistic, and on the core need for liberating the forces of production (Zhou Yinzu 1997, 123, 126). This deviation was rectified by the late 1970s and early 1980s.

Chinese society has become the one between the need for building a modern industrial country and the reality of the backward agricultural country, and that between the needs of the people for rapid economic and cultural development and the failure of current economic and cultural supplies to meet their needs'. After the chaos and loss of direction during the Cultural Revolution, a second principal contradiction was identified at the Sixth Plenary Session of the Eleventh Central Committee in 1981: 'between backward social production and the ever-growing material and cultural needs of the masses' (CPC Central Committee 1981, 16).⁴¹ The third principal contradiction came 36 years later, identified by Xi Jinping at the Nineteenth Congress of the CPC in 2017. Pointing out that socialism with Chinese characteristics has made major developments, a new principal contradiction has emerged, 'between unbalanced and inadequate development and the people's ever-growing needs for a better life [*meihao shenghuo*]' (Xi 2017a, 5; 2017b, 9–10).⁴² One can see the similarities and differences between the three principal contradictions: structurally, they all share an emphasis on production (supply-side) and on the people's needs (Yang Ruiqin 2018, 188).⁴³ Each differs as well: as productive forces have been liberating ever further, the emphasis shifts, moving from an absence and then backwardness in production to unbalanced and inadequate development in 2017.⁴⁴ In terms of the people's needs, these move from material and cultural needs to the need for a better life (*meihao shenghuo*), which encapsulates material, cultural, political, public and environmental life. Obviously, contradiction analysis is alive and well, but so is the dialectical materialism that provides its

41 This final agreement had a lengthy gestation, since it was first proposed at the Third Plenary Session of the Eleventh Central Committee in December, 1978, as – in Deng Xiaoping's words – the 'level of our productive forces is very low and is far from meeting the needs of our people and country' (Deng 1979a, 182; 1979b, 189). Discussion, debate and refinement eventually came up with the wording of the Sixth Plenary Session in 1981.

42 For a full overview of principal contradictions from Mao Zedong to Xi Jinping, see Jin Zhenglian (2017).

43 They also echo the definitions of socialism and indeed communism: from each according to ability, to each according to work (socialism) or according to need (communism).

44 Evidence for such imbalance and inequality in production is abundant, although it has improved already since the 1990s and early 2000s: eastern and western development, urban and rural income gaps, and indeed differences between regions in incomes and provision of services such as education and health.

philosophical framework. For those who have taken the time to work their way through this chapter, this point should be obvious, although it is a dialectical materialism updated and refitted for the times (Wang and Wang 2015; Su 2017; Jiang 2018, 2; Liu Hao 2018; Xie 2018; Yang Ruiqin 2018). One can hardly begin to understand China's Marxist project without understanding the central role that dialectical materialism continues to play. Further, one does not toss out ever new contradictions on a whim; only three have been identified since the foundation of the New China, with each one requiring assiduous research and assessment by multiple government departments and research institutes. One more dialectical twist: the three principal contradictions are not seen in terms of either evolution or revolution, but rather in terms of the dialectical interaction of change and not-change. Thus, each new principal contradiction indicates a new era (*xin shidai*), whether in 1956, 1981, or 2017, but the fact that socialism is still in its initial or primary stage has not changed (Liu Hao 2018, 42).

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