

Confucius and Chairman Mao: Towards a Study of Religion and Chinese Marxism

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Abstract:

The common impression is that Mao Zedong unrelentingly dismissed Confucius as a feudal ideologue who developing a position which bolstered the ruling class. However, a careful study of Mao's texts on Confucius reveals a far more complex picture. This study provides a prolegomenon for a fuller study of "religion" and Chinese Marxism. It begins with a brief account of the negative assessments of Confucius, followed by a number of examples of a positive appreciation. In order to make sense of these two facets of Mao's engagement, I argue for a dialectical appropriation, taking my cue from Mao's own observations. This leads into a more detailed exegesis of his efforts to reread Confucius within a dialectical materialist framework, with a focus on the Doctrine of the Mean, ethics, and idealism itself. The result is nothing less than an effort to stand Confucius "on his feet."

Keywords: Mao Zedong; Confucius; dialectical materialism; Doctrine of the Mean; ethics; idealism.

So, Confucius is still useful sometimes after all. (Laughter.)¹

Chairman Mao's attitudes towards Confucius seem reasonably well-known: for Mao, he was the embodiment of out-dated feudalistic thought, the "spokesman of the decadent slave-owning aristocracy."² The contrast with today could not be sharper, when the study of Confucianism is fostered by the government – symbolised by the celebration of ten years of Confucius Institutes worldwide in 2014. Yet, the relation between Mao Zedong and Confucius is far more complex than this simplistic opposition suggests. Since this is a preliminary study and since my great love is textual work, I prefer to focus on the actual texts by Mao Zedong rather than making generalised and unfounded comparisons.

Let me be clear, my argument is neither that Mao and Confucius are diametrically opposed, nor that a deeper harmony may be found between their works. Instead, I argue that Mao Zedong continued to struggle with Confucius throughout his life. At times, he condemns

1 Mao 1957 [1992]a, pp. 358-59.

2 Editors 1974, p. 7. This quotation is drawn from one of many articles published during the "Criticize Lin, Criticize Confucius" campaign in the *Peking Review* between 1969 and 1976.

Confucius, or what the name “Confucius” stood for, and at other times he seeks to understand Confucius and his role in modern China. In order to see how this is so, I propose to follow a simple but effective argument. I begin with Mao Zedong’s negative observations on Confucius, before turning to his positive comments. I close by focusing on those that are ambivalent and indeed dialectical. If it is dialectical, it has profound implications for today. Since I cannot deal with all of his many texts on Confucius here, I focus on the most significant ones in each of the three steps of my argument.

Feudal Ideologue

“Bullshit” – so Mao describes, bluntly, the thought of Confucius.

More fully:

There is no end to learning from experience ... People make mistakes when they are young, but is it true that older people can avoid making mistakes? Confucius said everything he did conformed to objective laws when he was seventy. I just don’t believe it, that’s bullshit.³

This sums up sharply Mao’s negative assessment of Confucius. This speech was given in 1957, but we find such assessments throughout his works. Not so bluntly perhaps, but still with the point that Confucius embodies the old, feudal China. He speaks from the perspective of the old ruling class, the landlords and exploiters, all with the aim of ensuring that the ancient hierarchical system continues to function smoothly.

But was this a late development in Mao Zedong’s thought? A careful study of his writings indicates that he was already reading anti-Confucian literature in his youth, such as that by Tan Sitong, especially his sweeping and systematic attacks on the traditional Confucian customs and institutions.⁴ At about the same time, he observes, “I think that old man Confucius’ bureaucratic airs must be somewhat attenuated after all these years.”⁵ The context was of course the immense debate

3 Mao 1956 [1992]b, p. 160. The *Selected Works* choose a lighter term, “bragging” rather than “bullshit” (volume 5, p. 333). The allusion is to section 4 in “Chapter II, *Wei zheng*” (On Government, Part II) in the *Analects*, where Confucius claimed: “At fifteen, I set my mind on learning; at thirty, my principles became firm; at forty, I became free of confusion and doubt; at fifty, I knew the decree of Heaven; at sixty, my ears became obedient for the reception of truth; at seventy I followed whatever my heart desired, without transgressing what is proper.” Legge 1960, pp. 13-14.

4 Zhang 1917 [1992], pp. 138-39. Tan Sitong was a Hunanese philosopher and reformist and was perhaps the most radical of the three leading figures of the Reform Movement of 1898. He was executed by the Qing authorities. His key work is *Renxue* (The Study of Benevolence).

5 Mao 1919 [1992]e, p. 346.

over “new studies” from outside China.⁶ So strong did such a direction seem that Mao observes that any effort to stick to Confucius and resist the new learning was tantamount to making the Chang Jiang (Yangzi River) flow back in the opposite direction from the Kunlun Mountains, so that people from China could “get to Europe by just taking a boat over the Kunlun range.”⁷

In this light we may understand his early attacks on old methods of education,⁸ the fostering of new schools in Hunan, his deep criticism of old marriage customs,⁹ and even the use of Confucius to justify subservience to the Japanese occupation.¹⁰ In short, this was “The Problem of Confucius.”¹¹ He would gradually become more openly critical of Confucius, advocating alternatives to the Confucian tradition, such as Lu Xun, or the dialectical materialism of Marx, Engels and Lenin.¹² Already in 1927, he famously stated: “a revolution is not like inviting people to dinner, or writing an essay, or painting a picture, or doing embroidery; it cannot be so refined, so leisurely and gentle, so ‘benign, upright, courteous, temperate and complaisant’.”¹³ The refined and gentle qualities are precisely those that Confucius is said to have used when he sought information about the governments of countries he visited.

Perhaps the clearest statement appears some years later in the important text, “On New Democracy”:

China also has a semi-feudal culture reflecting its semi-feudal politics and economy, whose exponents include all those who advocate the worship of Confucius, the study of the Confucian canon, and the old ethical code and the old ideas in opposition to the new culture and new ideas ... This kind of reactionary culture serves the imperialists and the feudal class and must be swept away. Unless it is swept away, no new

6 Mao 1919 [1992]b, p. 371.

7 Mao 1919 [1992]c, p. 347.

8 Mao 1919 [1992]d, pp. 400-1.

9 Among others, see Mao 1919 [1992]g; 1919 [1992]f.

10 Mao 1919 [1992]i, p. 355.

11 Mao 1919 [1992]h, p. 408.

12 Mao 1937 [2004]b, p. 97; 1957 [1992]k, p. 775; 1937 [2004]a, p. 631. See also Mao 1957 [1992]g, p. 627.

13 Mao 1927 [1994], pp. 434-35.

culture of any kind can be built up. There is no construction without destruction, no flowing without damming, and no motion without rest; the two are locked in a life-and-death struggle.¹⁴

I do not wish to say more here on the negative image of Confucius in Mao Zedong's writings, since that image is reasonably well-known. But let me close this discussion with yet another sharp formulation from 1957: "Emperor Shihuang of the Qin [dynasty] came out on the short end because he only buried 460 Confucian scholars."¹⁵ The reference to the infamous *fen shu kang ru* (book burning and burying alive of scholars) under the first Chinese emperor, Shihuang (259-210 BCE), who sought to promote the Legalist school at the expense of the Confucian school.

The Good Sayings of Confucius

In the midst of the waves of negative appraisals of Confucius and the Confucian tradition, Mao also includes ample signs of appreciation. In one of his early texts, he writes:

The writings of the Confucian scholars are different from those of the men of letters. The former were translucent and pure, but the latter, unrestrained and argumentative.¹⁶

Contrary to the general impression, even in China, this positive view of Confucius is not restricted to his earlier writings. I have found that it carries through well into his late writings. Or rather, his appreciation goes through different periods, with waves of close interest, troughs of relative neglect and then a return once again. The initial wave of extensive engagement with Confucius appears in the early text, simply called "Classroom Notes" (from 1913),¹⁷ closely followed by his influential text on physical education and some of the correspondence from this time.¹⁸ Like any diligent and restive student, Mao Zedong knew Confucius's works exceedingly well. This interest and knowledge would stay with him for the rest of his life. Let me give three examples.

The first concerns Confucius's favoured disciples, Yan Hui. Mao

14 Mao 1940 [2005], p. 357; see also pp. 362-63

15 Mao 1957 [1992-e, p. 667.

16 Mao 1913 [1992], p. 33.

17 Mao 1913 [1992], pp. 13, 18, 19-20, 23, 24, 31-32, 37, 44-47, 50, 55.

18 Mao 1915 [1992]a, p. 67; 1915 [1992]c, p. 72; 1915 [1992]d, pp. 75, 79; 1915 [1992]e, p. 81; 1915 [1992]b, p. 84; 1917 [1992-a, pp. 133-34; 1920 [1992], p. 504. A number of references also appear in the commentary or marginal notes on Friedrich Poulsen (from 1917-18): Mao 1917-1918 [1992], pp. 187, 289, 292. See also Mao 1919 [1992]a, p. 335.

mentions Yan Hui a number of times, particularly with reference to the simplicity of his life: "With a single bamboo dish of rice, a single gourd dish of drink, and living in his mean narrow lane, he did not allow his joy to be affected by it."¹⁹ Or more fully:

Confucius praised Master Yan, saying that, with a single bamboo dish of rice and single gourd of drink, while others could not have endured the distress, did not allow his joy to be affected by it. Hui had the sage as his model, and a ladleful of food and a gourd dish of drink to keep him alive. Wasn't it easy for him to be not sad but happy?²⁰

I have selected this example for an obvious reason: the admonition to living simply, if not ascetically, would become a standard feature of rectification and anti-corruption campaigns. The one that comes most to mind is the warning that Mao Zedong gave to party cadres after the final success of the revolution in 1949. Here he warns the cadres not to become carried away with the exercise of power, but to remember the need for the honest and simple living that they had experienced during the long struggle beforehand.²¹

A second example of this deeper appreciation of Confucius is found in the early essay called "A Study of Physical Education." Here Mao famously outlines his daily gym routine, with some intriguing and difficult exercises that should be performed naked. "Too much clothing impedes movement," he writes. "Exercise should be savage and rude." In this condition, you may undertake exercises such as the following:

Make fists, and hold the arms straight out in front of you. Extend one leg to the side and bend the other forward. The extended leg can be moved around, while you stand on the toes of the bent leg, with the heel touching the buttocks. Left and right successively, three times.

Apart from the intriguing image of a naked Mao engaged in such vigorous and complex exercise routines, I am interested in the theoretical justification for such energetic pursuits. It comes from none other than the Confucian texts, references to which appear throughout the essay. "To know what is first and what is last will lead near to the way,"²² he quotes. And then, "I wish to be virtuous, and lo!

19 Mao 1913 [1992], p. 27. *Analects* VI and IX. Legge 1960, p. 118.

20 Mao 1913 [1992], p. 56. See also Mao 1913 [1992], pp. 16, 24, 55; 1917 [1992]a, p. 136.

21 Mao 1949 [1971].

22 Mao 1917 [1992]b, p. 115. *The Great Learning*, I. 3. Legge 1960, p. 357.

Virtue is at hand.”²³ Mao points out that this insight is even truer of physical education. It is all very well to quote choice phrases, but what of Confucius himself? Does the use of the mind mean one is deficient in physical health, and does a robust body mean one is deficient in mental capacities? Not at all, for “Confucius died at the age of seventy-two, and I have not heard that his body was not healthy.”²⁴

The third example relates to the slogans of the rectification campaigns, which often drew upon the Confucian classics. So we find from 1957: “I propose a general review be made of the work of eliminating counterrevolutionaries either this year or the next year in order to sum up the experience, promote justice, and stem evil trends.”²⁵ Here “justice” (*zhengqi*) invokes the spirit of rectitude and justice that in Confucian teaching (especially Mencius) is the fundamental spirit of heaven and earth. Or more fully:

Positive and constructive criticism will always be needed in the people’s cause. The rectification campaign of the Communist Party of China is precisely a systematic campaign of criticism and self-criticism. To encourage criticism and to dispel the worries of those who are offering criticism, the Party’s directive on the rectification campaign pointed out that we must implement resolutely the principles of “telling all that one knows; saying everything that one wishes to say; those who speak up must in no way be incriminated, those who listen [to criticism] should learn a lesson; if there are errors, corrections would be made; if not, there should be encouragement” Every member of the Communist Party should firmly commit to heart the adages of ancient China that say “Good medicine is bitter to the taste but good for curing the illness; an honest word bends the ear the wrong way but is a true guide to good behaviour.”²⁶

The most pointed appears in the text ‘On Dialectical Materialism’,

23 Mao 1917 [1992]b, p. 117. *Analects* VII, XXIX. Legge 1960, 204. For other quotations, see Mao 1917 [1992]b, pp. 113-14, 122.

24 Mao 1917 [1992]b, p. 118.

25 Mao 1957 [1992]f, p. 322. See also: “As for mistakes of other kinds, the same method can be adopted. We can issue a notice beforehand to announce that rectification will be conducted at a certain time. Then this would not be punishment without prior admonition that would be a method of small democracy.” Mao 1956 [1992]b, p. 171.

26 Mao 1957 [1992]i, p. 568. The three sayings here are: *Zhi wu bu yan; yan wu bu jin, yan zhe wu zui, wen zhe zhu jie* and *You guo ze gai; wu ze jiamian*. The first is a common saying with uncertain roots. The second and third come from “*Da xu*” (Major Preface) in the *Shi jing* (Classic of Odes) and from “*Yi*” in the *Yi jing* (Classic of Changes). The third also echoes the Confucian saying: “If there is a mistake, fear not to amend it” (*Guo ze wu dan gai*) in the chapter “*Xue er*” in the *Analects*.

where Mao writes: “‘When internal examination discovers nothing wrong, what is there to be anxious about, what is there to fear?’ This is also a correct saying of Confucius.”²⁷ The implications for today’s ‘mass line’ or anti-corruption campaign being pursued by President Xi Jinping should be obvious.

I could cite further examples of the positive assessment of Confucius, such as the need to concentrate on the true nature of things in order to accomplish goals; or the need to “ask about everything” (*Analects*, III, XV); or the need to avoid being lazy and studying hard; or the ideal of morality in which all things are nourished together without their injuring one another; or the ideal of the great peace and harmony (*taiping* and *datong*); or the need to counter-attack if needed; or the need for unity through struggle; or bringing consequences on one’s own organisation as a result of causing strife; or the need to scorn imperialism as one would scorn the term “superior man” (*da ren*); or the sacrificial connection between Socrates, Confucius and Jesus Christ; or even in his poetry.²⁸ But I have chosen these three examples – concerning simple living, the discipline of physical exercise and the need for self-criticism and rectification – since they would deepen over time and pervade later teaching and practice.

Towards a Dialectical Approach

What are we to make of this complex picture? One approach is to assume – following Mao’s own comments²⁹ – that he may have studied Confucius in his youth, but that such study was not much use. Another is to suggest that Mao was largely hostile to Confucius and that the occasional comments and references are mere window-dressing for a deeper antipathy to the purveyor of ‘feudal’ values. Neither is correct,

27 Mao 1937 [2004]a, pp. 623-24. *Analects*, XII, IV, 3. Legge 1960, 252. On a similar theme, see also: “Good medicine is bitter to the taste but beneficial for the sickness”; “Sincere advice is not pleasant to hear, but it is beneficial for one’s conduct”; “To love yet know their bad qualities, to hate and yet know their excellences.” Mao 1937 [2004]a, p. 657. See further Mao 1941 [2005]a, p. 810.

28 Respectively from Mao 1917-1918 [1992], pp. 285-86; 1930 [1995]a, p. 420; 1939 [2005]b, pp. 84, 87-88; 1913 [1992], p. 21; 1917 [1992]a, pp. 135-36; 1937 [1999], p. 615; 1939 [2005]a, p. 204; 1939 [2005]g, p. 27; 1941 [2005]b, p. 652; 1956 [1992]a, p. 60; 1956 [1992]c, p. 83. See also Mao 1956 [1992]d, p. 103; 1938 [2004], pp. 490-91.

29 “In the past, when I was a student, the conditions were not so good as those you enjoy today. First we read the works of Confucius, that is, the old stuff which goes, ‘Is it not pleasant to learn with a constant perseverance and application?’ Later, I went to a foreign-style school and received some bourgeois education. Although in school I did hear something about what Sun Yatsen and Marx had said, I did not learn the true doctrine of Sun Yatsenism and Marxism until after I had left school. Now you can hear about everything, except that there is a bit less about Confucius.” Mao 1939 [2005]c, p. 92. The quotation is from opening sentence of the *Analects*: Legge 1960, p. 137. See also Mao 1957 [1992]k, p. 775.

it seems to me. Instead, Mao Zedong's own texts indicate a far more complex picture. In this case, resolutely negative engagements are found side by side with sustained and even positive assessments of the legacy of Confucius.³⁰ These engagements are, however, not uniform throughout his texts. Confucius ebbs and flows throughout Mao's writings. Thus, we find an early absorption and at times criticism of Confucius in the 1910s, after which there is a break of a little over a decade with few references. However, by the end of the 1930s he returns to Confucius. Now we find many references, with some sustained pieces where he feels the need to come to terms with Confucius.³¹ This engagement would feed into his later observations on Confucius.

But I would like to close with an eye on the situation in China today regarding Confucius and Chairman Mao. In doing so, I suggest that the best way to understand Mao's complex engagement with Confucius may be understood not in terms of an unresolved contradiction, but as a dialectic. The text, "On the New Stage" (1938), makes this point very clearly:

Another of our tasks is to study our historical heritage and use the Marxist method to sum it up critically. 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 ...* 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 before it can be put into practice. There is no such thing as abstract Marxism, but only concrete Marxism. What we call concrete Marxism is Marxism that has taken on a national form, that is, Marxism applied to the concrete struggle in the concrete conditions 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, this Marxism is merely an empty abstraction. Consequently, *the sinification of Marxism* – that is to say, making certain that in all its manifestations it is imbued with Chinese characteristics,

30 For the more ambivalent observations on Confucius, see Mao 1917-1918 [1992], p. 202; 1930 [1995]b, pp. 363, 402, 404-5; 1935 [1999], p. 92; 1937 [1999], pp. 622-23; 1957 [1992]d, p. 303; 1957 [1992]a, pp. 358-59; 1957 [1992]b, p. 365; 1957 [1992]i, p. 733; 1957 [1992]k, p. 777.

31 Mao 1939 [2005]d, pp. 23-25; 1939 [2005]e; 1939 [2005]f.

using it according to Chinese peculiarities – becomes a problem that must be understood and solved by the whole Party without delay ... Our attitude toward ourselves should be "to learn without satiety," and toward others "to instruct without being wearied."³²

Confucius is at the beginning of this precious legacy, which makes up the specific characteristics of China. All of this must be summed up critically, weighed and assessed, in light of Marxism.

How is this to be done? Mao provides an intriguing example by means of an assessment of the political significance of some Confucian doctrines, particularly the Doctrine of the Mean, ethics and then how Confucius's idealism may be stood "on its feet." They appear in a couple of letters, one to Chen Boda and one to Zhang Wentian.³³ The focus of these letters are two articles by Chen Boda, who had joined the communists in 1927 and had become Mao's political secretary in 1937, while also working in the Propaganda Department of the Central Committee. The articles in question, "The Materialist Philosophy of Mozi" and "The Philosophical Thought of Confucius,"³⁴ indicate not only that reassessing earlier Chinese philosophers was part of the lively debates during the period of the Yan'an Soviet, but also that Mao himself was intensely interested in these discussions. Mao was one of the circle to whom Chen Boda circulated the articles for comment and suggestions, before publishing them. Given the importance of these texts, I exegete them in some detail.

In the initial letter, written directly to Chen Boda, the discussion of Confucius takes place through the medium of the Moist school of thought, founded by the lower-class artisan, Mozi (470-391 BCE).³⁵ Significantly, Mao interprets Mozi as largely in line with Confucius, an approach that had precursors in Mencius and other Confucians, but goes against Mozi's own attacks on Confucius, the subsequent antagonism between the two schools, and even the early communist

32 Mao 1938 [2004], pp. 538-39. The quotations are from the *Analects* of Confucius, VII, II. Legge 1960, p. 195. See also his comments on the need to pass down new things, such as big character posters, in the tradition, as they have done with the Confucian Classics: Mao 1957 [1992]c, p. 608; 1957 [1992]g, pp. 626-27.

33 Mao 1939 [2005]d, pp. 23-25, 1939 [2005]e.

34 The first article was published in *Jiefang* 82, 102, and 104, in 1939 and 1940. The second appeared in *Jiefang* 69, in 1939, pp. 20-24. Chen Boda also published an article on Laozi, entitled "Laozi's Philosophical Thought," which was published in *Jiefang* 63/64, in 1939.

35 A complete translation of the surviving works of Mozi is now available in Johnston 2010.

tendency to champion Mozi against the Confucian tradition.³⁶ A core issue for Mao concerns the doctrine of the mean. In the first letter, to Chen Boda, he begins by citing three phrases from Mozi: “in desiring *zheng*, one weighs the benefit; in aversion to it, one weighs the loss”; “*zheng* is unshakable”; “maintaining a balance between the two without veering to one side.”³⁷ The key term is *zheng*, which may be rendered as “position,” “appropriateness,” “uprightness,” or even, in a distinctly Confucian direction, as “the Middle Way.” Significantly, Mao opts for this Confucian sense, a sense sanctioned by a long tradition that had absorbed Mozi into a Confucian framework. To make his point, he quotes four phrases from Confucius, thereby weighting his argument in favour of the latter. They all turn on the doctrine of the mean: “hold the two extremes and employ the Mean”; “choose the Mean, grasp it firmly, and do not lose it”; “stand erect in the middle and do not incline to either side”; “maintain this course to death without changing.”³⁸

Having established this closeness between Mozi and Confucius (for the sake of his argument), Mao makes his crucial point. The Mean in question is neither two positions between which one finds a balance or common ground, nor is it a substantive position with two sides. Instead, his argument is suppler. He begins by stating that a substantive disposition does have two sides, but that it will tend to veer to one side in a single process, which thereby becomes its principle meaning. This meaning is what defines the stable and core sense of the substantive. Only when one has clarified this substance disposition does it become possible to identify what veering in one or the other direction actually means: veering to the right or left is to negate the substantive, and thus another substantive would be created. One cannot avoid reading

36 Mozi's for the early communists is that he took a stand against Confucian nostalgia and the embrace of harmony and universal love (*boai*) within the existing – and thereby hierarchical – forms of human relations. For the lower-class artisan Mozi, universal love (*jian'ai*) was non-differentiated and community oriented, against the narrow focus on family and clan. After the Warring States period, Moism suffered at the hands of imperial fostering of Confucianism, so much so that it was ignored for two millennia.

37 These are all drawn from the tenth book of Mozi's works, chapters 40, 41, and 42. Chapters 40 and 41 are called “Canon” (*Jing*), while chapter 42 is “Commentary on the Canon” (*Jingshuo*).

38 The first couple of phrases are quoted from *Doctrine of the Mean* VI; VIII. Legge 1960, pp. 388, 389. Since Mao quotes the full texts from which these phrases are drawn in his next article, I have provided the full text below. The context for the remaining two phrases is as follows: “The superior man cultivates a friendly harmony, without being weak. How firm is he in his energy! He stands erect in the middle, without inclining to either side. How firm is he in his energy! When good principles prevail in the government of his country, he does not change from what he was in retirement. How firm is his energy! When bad principles prevail in the country, he maintains his course to death without changing. How firm is he in his energy!” *Doctrine of the Mean* X, 5. Legge 1960, p. 390.

here the political dimensions of this argument, especially in light of Mao's observation, that this “is the explanation that should be made if the Moist school is, indeed, dialectical materialist.”³⁹ The communist movement is indeed an initial veering in one direction, away from capitalism (and thereby the Guomintang), establishing communism itself as a clear and stable substantive disposition. Within communism, turning to the right or the left is not contained within communism, but involves its negation and the establishment of a new, non-communist substantive.

In this initial engagement, Mao mentions in passing a distinction between excess [*guo*] and falling short [*buji*]. A substantive position will oppose both. In the next item – a response to Chen Boda's article “The Philosophical Thought of Confucius” (written to Zhang Wentian) – Mao explicates in more detail what he means by these two Confucian terms. He begins by quoting in full the texts from the *Analects*, which he had quoted in part earlier:

The Master said, “There was Shun – He indeed was greatly wise! Shun loved to question others, and to study their words ... He took hold of their two extremes, determined the Mean, and employed it in his government of the people. It was by this that he was Shun!”

The Master said, “This was the manner of Hui – he made choice of the Mean, and whenever he got hold of what was good, he clasped it firmly, as if wearing it on his breast, and did not lose it.”⁴⁰

The two extremes in question may relate to philosophies, thoughts, even everyday life, but Mao is interested in the political focus of these texts. In this register, he quotes approvingly a commentary on the Doctrine of the Mean by Zhu Xi, who stresses the search for the good in light of the opposition between excess and falling short. This is the key: on the one side lies *gui* (excess), and on other *buji* (falling short). Not only should this opposition be understood in terms of the substantive disposition mentioned earlier, but also as the quality of an object in time and space. Although this quality is to be discerned from the quantities of an object or movement, the relation between quality and quantity is dialectical. One may determine the quality of certain quantities, but at the same time the quantities themselves provide an insight into quality. In this light should we understand excess and falling short:

39 Mao 1939 [2005]d, p. 25.

40 *Doctrine of the Mean* VI; VIII. Legge 1960, pp. 388, 389.

“Excess” is a “leftist” thing, and “falling short’ is a “rightist” thing ... If we say that this thing is not in that state, but has entered into another state, then it has a different quality, and has become “excessive” or gone “to the left.” If we say that this thing still lingers in the same state without new development, then it is an old thing, a stagnant concept, conservative and stubborn; it is rightist and “has fallen short.”⁴¹

While Mao points out that Confucius has no such notion of the development of a position or an object, rejecting positions that had already been accepted, he also indicates his profound appreciation of the insight. Indeed, it was “a great discovery and a great achievement,” so much so that this “important field of philosophy” requires and explanation.⁴²

A couple of other themes worthy of analysis also appear in this engagement with Confucius, notably ethics and the idealism of Confucius. The discussion of these is more critical of Confucius, albeit in a way that seeks to draw insights for Marxist dialectics. On the question of ethics, the communists faced extensive deployment of Confucian traditions by the Guomindang for their own purposes. It would have been easy to consign Confucius to the reactionaries – as Mao does on other occasions – and attack the system of thought and culture as a whole. Instead, he seeks to draw the seeds of a materialist ethics from the Confucian combination of wisdom, benevolence, courage, loyalty and righteousness.

He attempts such a reworking by deploying two strategies: translation into a materialist register and a reordering of the relations between the virtues. The underlying and largely unspoken issue is class. In their initial Confucian context, these ethical precepts simply reinforce the position of the ruling class. So the challenge is to translate the Confucian virtues into ones appropriate for peasants and workers. As they stand, and as they had been used for thousands of years, the virtues read as follows: wisdom is idealist and arbitrary, benevolence is restricted to the ruling class, and courage merely entails the “courage” to oppress the poorer classes. Translated into a materialist register: wisdom is concrete, nothing less than “a theory, a thought, a plan, a program, a policy,” benevolence is the need to “love and unite with” the

41 Mao 1939 [2005]e, p. 35.

42 Mao 1939 [2005]e, p. 35.

theory and program first developed, and courage is the perseverance to overcome hardships faced in acting on the program. As with Mao’s treatment of the Doctrine of the Mean, we can discern the experiences of the communist party and the peasant-worker struggle more generally, but also the glimpses of how a socialist society might work in light of these translated Confucian virtues: program, unity and perseverance become the new forms of wisdom, benevolence and courage. The second strategy involves reordering the relations between the virtues. Mao’s real target here is benevolence, for it was regarded as the prime Confucian virtue. His initial move is to suggest that the three virtues are actually determined by loyalty: without loyalty wisdom is empty words, benevolence hypocritical and courage an empty shell. But we can also see how the act of translation above has made benevolence secondary. It belongs to the realm of practice, of enacting the theory and program first developed in the exercise of wisdom. He then reinforces the point by elevating yet another virtue, righteousness, over benevolence. Righteousness belongs to wisdom, to the developing of theories and programs – a point that runs counter to the Confucian assumption that benevolence is more important than righteousness. Of course, this inversion has its own dialectical feature, for elsewhere Mao will stress the crucial role of practice in developing theory.⁴³ Obviously, these different emphases should not be taken in isolation, for the theory-practice dialectic is a central feature of Marxism. Indeed, it is precisely in terms of running Confucius through the dialectic that we find the deepest engagement with Confucius.

Conclusion: Dealing with Confucian Idealism

So I come – by way of conclusion – to the final issue, namely, the idealism of Confucius. Simply put, this idealism is not to be condemned, but to be analysed for its insights, criticised for its partial nature, and recast in a dialectical materialist framework. Mao begins his argument on this matter with a quotation from the *Analects*: “If names be not correct, language is not in accordance with the truth of things. If language be not in accordance with the truth of things, affairs cannot be carried on to success.”⁴⁴ For Mao, this provides only half the truth, comparable to the common Marxist point that without correct theory, one cannot have correct practice. Yet, as the Marxist tradition makes

43 Mao 1937 [1965].

44 *Analects* XIII, III, 5. Legge 1960, pp. 263-64.

clear, the theory itself arises from practice in a dialectical fashion. In this light, if Confucius had prefaced his observation on names with the sentence, "If the facts are unclear, then the name will not be correct," then he would have developed a materialist position, with the reality of practice as the necessary other component in the theory-practice dialectic. One cannot help noticing the appreciation of Confucius in this text, so much so that certain parallels may be drawn, keeping in mind Mao's dialectical point: "Confucius was rectifying the names of the feudal order; we are rectifying the names of the revolutionary order." In other words, Confucius provides an intelligent idealism, one that may fruitfully become part of dialectical materialism.⁴⁵ The echoes of Marx's famous standing of Hegel on his feet, of using dialectics itself to identify the materialism implicit in Hegel and making that the determining framework, should be obvious – albeit with one caveat: Mao's engagement with Confucius is done "with Chinese characteristics."

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45 See also: "Without idealism, we can't show how good materialism is. Without opposition, there will not be struggle. Only that which emerges from struggle can withstand the test. Contradictions continually occur; there must be continuous struggle, and the continuous resolution [of contradictions]; in a billion years, this will remain so. After one learns about the positive things, one must also learn about the negative things. If we talked only about materialism and didn't say anything about idealism, if we only talked about dialectics and said nothing about metaphysics, you wouldn't know anything from the negative side, and the things on the positive side would also not be consolidated. Therefore, not only do we have to publish a collection of Sun Yat-sen's works, but we have to publish a collection of Chiang Kai-shek's works as well. We'll talk about Hegel, Kant, Confucius, Lao Zi, the two Cheng [brothers]. Zhu [Xi], Wang [Yangming]; we'll talk about all of them." Mao 1957 [1992]h, pp. 243-44. See also Mao 1957 [1992]j, pp. 252-56; 1957 [1992]d, p. 303.

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