

Beyond Murderous Dialectics: On Paradoxical Thinking and Maoism

Fabian HEUBEL*

Abstract

This essay has been inspired by the writings of the contemporary Neo-Confucian philosopher Mou Zongsan and the German sinologist Wolfgang Bauer. It assumes that the power of Mao Zedong's thought sprung from its ability to systematically subordinate the transformative philosophy of the classical *Book of Changes* to the Marxist model of revolutionary class struggle. If dialectical thinking requires thought to think against itself and thereby be able to continuously change itself from the inside, Mao seems to have been a master of dialectical thinking. One of the intellectual impulses for the Great Cultural Revolution was the radically unsentimental judgement that, in order for the socialist revolution to succeed, it was necessary to erase the ancient Chinese legacy of paradoxical thinking, and that this was a precondition of the possibility of Mao's Sino-Marxist discourse. But the enormous power that Mao's thought derived from the tension between revolutionary heroism and transformative flexibility revealed itself as self-destructive. Mao tried to fight against the failure of his revolutionary vision and the possibility that the wisdom of paradoxical thinking and the classical heritage of China could, finally, gain the upper hand in the ongoing struggle for modernization. From this perspective, this essay touches upon a contradiction, which can be understood as the principle contradiction of contemporary Chinese philosophy: the contradiction between the defence of Sino-Marxism as the ideological foundation of a "socialism with Chinese characteristics" on the one hand, and the renaissance of traditional culture and classical learning on the other, which entails a powerful challenge to this very foundation.

Keywords: dialectics, paradoxical thinking, Mao Zedong, Mou Zongsan, Wolfgang Bauer

Onkraj morilske dialektike: O paradoksnem mišljenju in maoizmu

Izvleček

Navdih za esej prihaja iz razmišljanj sodobnega neo-konfucijanskega filozofa Mou Zongsana in nemškega sinologa Wolfganga Bauerja. Osnovna predpostavka eseja je, da je moč Mao Zedongove misli izviral iz sposobnosti, da transformativno filozofijo klasične *Knjige premen* sistematično podredi marksističnemu modelu revolucionarnega razrednega

* Fabian HEUBEL, Research Fellow, Institute of Chinese Literature and Philosophy, Academia Sinica, Taipei; Professor, Institute of Philosophy, National Sun Yat-sen University, Kaohsiung. This essay is a shortened and revised English version of chapter VIII of Heubel (2016).
Email address: heubel[at]gate.sinica.edu.tw



boja. Če dialektično mišljenje v končni fazi zahteva od misli, da misli proti sami sebi in s tem neprestano spreminja samo sebe od znotraj, se zdi, da je bil Mao mojster dialektičnega mišljenja. Ena od intelektualnih pobud za Veliko proletarsko kulturno revolucijo je bila radikalno nesentimentalna sodba, da je za uspeh socialistične revolucije nujno izbrisati staro dediščino paradoksnega mišljenja in da je to predpogoj za možnost Maovega sino-marksističnega diskurza. Vendar pa se je neznanska moč, ki jo je Maova misel črpala iz napetosti med revolucionarnim heroizmom in transformativno fleksibilnostjo, izkazala za samodestruktivno. Mao se je poskušal boriti za svojo revolucionarno vizijo in za možnost, da bi lahko modrost paradoksnega mišljenja in dediščina klasične Kitajske nazadnje prevladali v nenehnem spopadu za modernizacijo. S tega stališča se ta esej dotakne težave, ki jo lahko razumemo kot temeljno protislovje sodobne kitajske filozofije: protislovja med obrambo sino-marksizma kot ideološkega temelja »socializma s kitajskimi značilnostmi« in renesanso tradicionalne kulture in klasičnega učenja, ki predstavlja velik izziv temu temelju.

Ključne besede: dialektika, paradoksalno mišljanje, Mao Zedong, Mou Zongsan, Wolfgang Bauer

Murderous Dialectics

For Mou Zongsan, one of the most important and widely recognized Confucian philosophers of the 20th century, Mao Zedong was a “great devil.” A devil, however, whose thoughts and actions were nourished by philosophical sources, especially materialistic dialectics. For Mou, this materialistic turn in dialectics has been extremely harmful. Polemically, he intertwines dialectical thinking, political practice, and historical catastrophe:

The harm was not yet apparent in Hegel himself, but with Karl Marx, the arising of dialectic from absolute existence settled upon material existence as “materialist dialectics,” whose emergence was not just the “source of tremendous chaos,” but became actual chaos for the whole world and caused millions of heads to fall. Look at how many people died in China because of this! Mao Zedong was a great devil, and the source of his devilry is in Hegel. (Mou 2003a, 464; Engl. 114–19)

For Mou Zongsan, the chain from Hegel to Marx to Mao entails a materialistic turning of Hegel’s idealistic dialectics. The idea of dialectics, thereby, expands its reach into the realm of historical developments, which now can be understood as driven by struggles between different social classes. The political implementation of this idea has thus led to murderous consequences.

Even a superficial glance at the *Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-tung* (Mao Zedong) will suffice to show that he thought of class struggle in China as a struggle

for life and death—and acted accordingly: “A revolution is an insurrection, an act of violence by which one class overthrows another.” (Mao 1968, 6–7) In March 1949, for example, he expresses the conviction that the class struggle would not end with the military victory over the bourgeoisie led by Chiang Kai-shek (Jiang Jieshi): “After the enemies with guns have been wiped out, there will still be enemies without guns; they are bound to struggle desperately against us, and we must never regard these enemies lightly.” (ibid., 9) Even before the victory in the civil war and the foundation of the People’s Republic of China, Mao stressed that the class struggle between the proletariat and bourgeoisie would continue after the Communist seizure of power, and “continue to be long and tortuous and at times will even become very acute.” (ibid., 10) It is well known that ideological struggles were fought again and again with relentless cruelty in the years after 1949, and until Mao’s death (see Dikötter 2014, 2010, 2016). For critics of the Marxist theory of class struggle (from Sun Yat-sen (Sun Yixian) to prominent Confucian philosophers), the disastrous consequences of socialism in China are not merely due to mistakes in the realization of a good idea, but due to the basic idea of historical materialism and a “history of civilization” driven by class struggles as such (Mao 1968, 10).¹ In addition, the ideological struggles became especially brutal because of the nationalist orientation of the socialist revolution in China, which merged social and national liberation, the class enemies with the traitors of the people.

“*Der Tod ist ein Meister aus Deutschland*” (“death is a master from Germany”). This famous line from a poem by Paul Celan seems to be true also for some masters of German philosophy: the dialectical thought of Hegel and Marx is, for Mou Zongsan, one of the devilish sources, which in Chinese reality “caused millions of heads to fall.” There is a strong consciousness of the catastrophic side in modern Chinese history among contemporary Neo-Confucians like Mou Zongsan. They have shown great interest in German philosophy, but what about reflections on the dark side of contemporary German history? May they even be accused for not recognizing and addressing the philosophical significance of the “destruction of the European Jews” (Raul Hilberg)? Particularly with regard to the central position of Auschwitz in Frankfurt School Critical Theory, silence in this respect must be deeply disturbing. One reason may be that racial ideology and the idea of racial struggle (*Rassenkampf* in the vocabulary of National Socialism) that emerged in 19th century Europe did not play a role in China’s internal political struggles; we do not find the philosophical exaltation of this idea that is evidenced in Heidegger’s link between anti-Semitism and the “history of being” (see Trawny 2015).

1 “Classes struggle, some classes triumph, others are eliminated. Such is history, such is the history of civilization for thousands of years. To interpret history from this viewpoint is historical materialism; standing in opposition to this viewpoint is historical idealism.”

There has been some influence of social-Darwinist racial ideology, expressed in the sometimes almost alarmist fear about the extinction of the “yellow race” in its struggle with the “white race” (evident in Sun Yat-sen’s *The Three Principles of the People* but also in the *Confucian Manifesto* of 1958) and in largely defensive ideas of national self-strengthening. On the other hand, class ideology and the idea of class struggle were so powerful and effective that they had to be perceived as a philosophical problem of extreme urgency. Therefore, the criticism of materialistic dialectics and the theory of class struggle is, for Mou Zongsan, one of the main reasons to develop an idealistic moral philosophy. And the relation between Kant and Hegel is, in contemporary Chinese philosophy, marked by ideological struggles that have left deep and painful traces in the interpretations of their writings.

In the Chinese context, why are moral questions connected to the discrimination and murder of millions of Jews by the regime of National Socialism often regarded as a European problem, or even as German idiosyncrasy? In most cases, this attitude does not seem to imply a revisionist intention. Rather, it simply seems difficult to understand why the destruction of the European Jews should be attributed such a prominent place in the history of modern historical catastrophes. Adorno, for example, famously stated that a “new categorical imperative” has been imposed on humanity by Hitler, namely, “to arrange their thoughts and actions so that Auschwitz does not repeat itself, so that nothing similar will happen” (Adorno 1975, 358; Engl. 365). From a Chinese perspective, does it not appear as a bitter irony of history that shortly after Adorno published his reflections on that “new categorical imperative,” not only students but also well-known philosophers in Western Europe indulged in glorification and defence of Mao Zedong, who undoubtedly belongs to the ranks of 20th century political mass murderers? Did many left-wing intellectuals not hail Mao as an alternative to the encrusted Soviet ideology and celebrate the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution with barbaric naivety? The collective blindness toward leftist cruelty remains mysterious so long as those fundamental problems of liberalism and liberal democracy are ignored, problems arising from their entanglement in economic structures that are, in many respects, exploitative and disastrous. How deep must contempt and hatred for “liberal thinking” and “capitalo-parliamentarism” be in order to make philosophers like Alain Badiou willing to defend, with provocative gestures, the thought of Mao Zedong, whose murderous consequences are well documented today? He concedes “serious mistakes” and the “high price of human lives,” only to praise, in the next moment, the great dialectical mastery of Mao. This leader of the Chinese Communist Party succeeded in fighting his party “completely alone,” and in rebelling against state socialism while being, at the same time, the highest representative of that socialist state; he has thus, for Badiou, opened the possibility

of revolutionizing the socialist revolution; by pushing a revolutionary party to abolish itself, he opened up the possibility of a breakthrough towards a politics “without a party” (Badiou 2009, 124–26).² These are interesting points, but the euphemistic undertone appears to be fatally reminiscent of Martin Heidegger’s loyalty to the “greatness of the movement.”

In the last chapter of his *Negative Dialectics*, entitled “Meditations on Metaphysics,” Adorno revolts against the tendency towards “squeezing any kind of sense, no matter how bleached, out of the victims’ fate” (Adorno 1975, 354; Engl. 361). He is convinced that the Nazi “administrative murder of millions” (ibid., 355; Engl. 362) excludes any construction of historical-philosophical sense. No course of history, however dialectical, no cunning of reason, however twisted, may or can be allowed to appropriate these crimes as a step toward historical progress or the realization of higher ends. The understanding of Auschwitz as a “rupture of civilization” and as the “signature of an entire age” (Jürgen Habermas) attempts to mark this radical discontinuity. In his unsentimental self-reflections and paradoxical turnings of negative-dialectical thinking, Adorno considers that Hitler’s thoughts and actions confront philosophy with the impossibility of coming to terms with them. But those thoughts and actions by no means fall out of history, and, on the contrary, must be reconsidered, precisely for this reason, in their pre- and post-history. One condition of the possibility for realizing the “new categorical imperative” is thus to integrate Auschwitz into modernity, to recognize it as a paradoxical consequence of modernity. Adorno’s reflections show that Germany’s cultural and political development after the Second World War remains dialectically tied to the Nazi-regime from which it tried to distance itself as clearly as possible.

Does it make any sense to see a paradoxical cunning of reason at work in the Nazi regime because its barbaric destructiveness opened up the possibility of Germany’s successful democratization? Or: Cannot Maoism in its most destructive, anti-cultural, and anti-Confucian excesses be understood as the inevitable price to be paid, either for the victory of communism or for the so called “rejuvenation of the Chinese nation?” A price that may have been very high, but ultimately seems to be justified from a greater historical perspective? And has the barbaric destructiveness of the Communist regime not only failed to achieve the goal of destroying traditional culture and classical learning, but even created the conditions for their creative transformation?

These are questions that arise when one tries to critically approach the constellation of Hegel, Marx, and Mao as Mou Zongsan understood it, or the “continuity

2 See also the “Introduction” by Slavoj Žižek to Mao (2007).

of the dialectical line Hegel-Marx-Lenin-Mao” (Holz 1970, 84). What emerges then are questions about the relationship between the dynamic of modernization, dialectical thinking, and the transformational philosophy of the *Book of Changes*, a relationship with which the German thinkers Joachim Schickel and Hans Heinz Holz had already dealt in an interesting manner at the time of the Great Cultural Revolution (Schickel 1976, 231–33; Holz 1970, 72–99). First of all, they have made clear how grotesquely one-sided the esoteric reception of this classical book has been in the West. They have also perceived something the desperate anti-communism of Mou Zongsan had to underestimate in its traumatic fear concerning the destruction of Chinese culture by the politics of the Chinese Communist Party, namely, that Mao’s thought, however unconsciously and against his will, was able to go beyond Hegel, Marx, Lenin, and the Soviet Russian ideology precisely because he was able, in a strangely radical way, to make the transcultural dynamics of Old and New, East and West fruitful for his own thinking. The “spiritual atom bomb of infinite power,” as Lin Biao, in his Introduction to the *Quotations of Chairman Mao Tse-tung* describes Mao’s thought (Mao 1968, xxxiv), is, as I would like to suggest, the result of a transcultural dynamic in which dialectical either-or (*entweder-oder*) and paradoxical as-well-as (*sowohl-als-auch*) have entered a complex and explosive relationship.

Mou Zongsan’s criticism of Mao’s theory of contradiction seems intellectually helpless in the face of the power and violence of such revolutionary thought. One reason for the discursive weakness of Mou’s thought consists in the failure to conceive the *Book of Changes* as a “logical model of permanent revolution” (Holz 1970, 79).³ Mou can be regarded as an expert on the subject as one of his first book publications from 1935 was *Natural Philosophy and the Moral Meaning of the Book of Changes*. Later, his criticism led to the moral accusation that the philosophy of the *Book of Changes* has been materialistically abused by Mao, by exploiting the ability to “observe subtle tendencies of development in the change of things”—like those legalist philosophers who helped the first emperor of the Qin dynasty to unify the empire. In this sense, Mou considered the Chinese Communist Party as guided by a modernized version of Legalism.⁴

3 “Daß die Interpretation der Zeichen 63 und 64 zum logischen Modell einer permanenten Revolution kommen muß, liegt auf der Hand.”

4 From very early on, Mou Zongsan developed a sharp understanding of dialectics as technique of power (*quanshu* 權術) in the hands of Mao Zedong. Simon Leys has defined this sardonic side of dialectics with admirable precision: “Dialectics is the jolly art that enables the Supreme Leader never to make mistakes—for even if he did the wrong thing, he did it at the right time, which makes it right for him to have been wrong, whereas the enemy, even if he did the right thing, did it at the wrong time, which makes it wrong for him to have been right” (Leys 2013, 194; see also Mou 2003b, 89–119).

Mao sometimes provocatively compared himself to the violent unifier of the empire, and Mou likes to allude to this comparison. But this perspective is rather misleading insofar as the explosive potential of the hybrid entanglement between transformation and revolution in Mao's theory and practice remains largely unthought. As a consequence, Mou Zongsan seeks refuge in the moral demonization of Mao Zedong.

“Heaven” has used the private and partisan aspirations of the first emperor to promote the public good. This is a famous idea from the historical-philosophical writings of Wang Fuzhi that Mou Zongsan links to the paradoxical effects of the cunning of reason in Hegel. However, Mou hardly makes any attempt to involve Mao and materialist dialectics in the movement of such paradoxical thinking. Theoretically, he withdraws from it by introducing a sharp contrast between idealistic and materialistic dialectics, in which the limits and potentials of his philosophy become particularly obvious. It seems as if, in the rupture between these two types of dialectics, Mou despairs of the transcultural entanglement between Old and New, East and West. He retreats to a simplistic opposition between old and new China, Chinese and Western dialectics: the idealistic or, as he also says, “ascetic dialectics” (*gongfu bianzheng* 工夫辯證), which has been developed in Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism is contrasted to the dialectics of the Chinese Communists, who absorbed from the West the poison of a materialistic turn of dialectics, already contained, for him, in the inadequacy of Hegelian thought. According to Mou, this inadequacy consists in the fundamental problem of having brought dialectics into the world of historical struggles and thereby anthologising them instead of restricting them, as in classical Chinese philosophy, to the ascetic sphere of “spiritual cultivation” (*jingshen xiuyang* 精神修養). For Mou, this self-limitation of dialectics has a great advantage. First, the old conflict between logical and dialectical contradiction can be circumvented by introducing a distinction between logical paradoxes that can be solved and dialectical paradoxes that are unsolvable. What emerges here is the possibility of a dialectics that becomes aware of the paradoxical and, at the same time, turns into an *exercitium*, into an exercise of cultivation dedicated to learning how to think and live with and through paradoxes. “Dialectics must finally be applied again to dialectics,” as Mou Zongsan says. As soon as this happens, the broad field of “ascetic dialectics” opens up, a field Confucian, Daoist, and Buddhist philosophers have been concerned with for millennia. Mou seems to be convinced that only “ascetic dialectics” have saved and can save dialectical thought from “turning into disaster” (*zhuanywei huohai* 轉為禍害). (see Mou 2003a, 462–65; Mou 2003c)

At this point, a philosophical correspondence to Adorno's move from Hegel's dialectics to negative dialectics comes to the fore. In negative dialectics, as Jürgen

Habermas observed in his criticism of Adorno, dialectical thinking has once again “reflected on itself,” thereby transforming dialectics into something that can “only be understood as an exercitium, as an exercise” (Habermas 1987, 515). If Mou Zongsan had known Adorno’s turn of dialectics against itself, he might have arrived at a different conclusion: an understanding of dialectics as *exercitium*, as an exercise in self-cultivation began, finally, to emerge in modern Western philosophy. However, the likelihood that both would have been able to discuss this problem in a meaningful way is very slim. More or less unavoidable misunderstandings about the ideological opposition between idealistic and materialistic dialectics would probably have made a dialogue impossible from the start. Both philosophers had developed their philosophical positions through painful meditations on the historical catastrophes associated with the names of Mao Zedong and Adolf Hitler, respectively, but Mou’s reflections on Mao led him to a radical critique of materialism, while Adorno’s reflections on Hitler led him to a radical critique of idealism.

Mou claims that Wang Fuzhi already developed a dialectical thinking, which resembles that of Hegel’s philosophy of history, and applied it to China. But, for him, this is a highly ambivalent achievement, because thereby Wang also paved the way for the reception of Marxist dialectics within Chinese thought. With regard to Wang Fuzhi’s philosophy of energetic transformation, which is systematically intertwined with his historical-philosophical reflections, Mou’s tendency to oppose idealistic-ascetic dialectics (China) with materialistic dialectics (Europe) turns out to be problematic. The affinity between Wang Fuzhi’s philosophy and the thought of the young Mao seems to have led Mou Zongsan to a forced and uncompromising rejection of philosophical perspectives developed within the so-called “energetic learning” (*qixue* 氣學) of Neo-Confucianism from Zhang Zai to Wang Fuzhi.⁵ Even today, followers of Mou Zongsan tend to deny the very existence of “energetic learning” within the broader field of Song and Ming dynasty Neo-Confucianism.

This line of Confucian learning, strongly influenced by the “Grand Commentary” of the *Book of Changes* and the *Zhuangzi*, has elaborated a discourse on what can be called “experience-dependent metaphysics” (*erfahrungsabhängige Metaphysik*). Mou is reluctant to use the paradoxical dialectics developed in the *Book of Changes*, and articulated in all its richness by Wang Fuzhi’s commentary, for an immanent critique of materialistic dialectics. In order to do this, it would have been necessary to break through the ideological frontline

5 For a more detailed discussion of this topic see Heubel (2007).

between idealistic and materialistic dialectics and connect the “paradoxical as-well-as” (*guijue xiangji* 詭譎相即), which he identified as the basic motive of Confucian, Daoist, and Buddhist philosophy, with the “ontology” of materialistic dialectics.

This is at least what I try to do in this essay: On the one hand, to liberate philosophy and reflections on the modernization of China from the teleological narrowness of dialectical materialism and to open it to the horizon of the three dominant traditions of modern political discourse (conservatism, liberalism, socialism) and their paradoxical constellation; on the other hand, however, the question I want to address here is to what extent the awareness of the paradoxical needed for such an analysis already has, in itself, “ascetic” conditions and cannot be separated from exercises in paradoxical thinking. By cultivating an “equalizing assessment” of idealistic and materialistic dialectics and by transforming their relationship into a paradoxical one, the freedom to a “solution by non-solution” (*Lösung durch Nicht-Lösung*) begins to emerge.

Solution by Non-solution

A rustic from Lu sent to King Yuan of Song a puzzle consisting of two knotted cords. King Yuan issued an order throughout the state that anyone who was clever should come and unravel them, but no one could do so. A disciple of the dialectician Ni Shuo begged leave to go unravel them, and he succeeded in untying one but not the other. He explained, “It is not that it could be untied and that I was incapable of doing it, rather that it was inherent in the nature of the thing that it was impossible to untie it.” He asked the rustic of Lu about it, and he said, “That is so. It is inherent in the nature of this knot that it is impossible to untie it. I knew it could not be untied, because I made it. But you knew without having made it—thus, you are cleverer than I am.” Therefore, those like the disciple of Ni Shuo untie things by not untying them. (*The Annals of Lü Buwei* 2000, 412)

It seems to me an ingenious intuition of Wolfgang Bauer to conclude the last chapter of *China and the Search for Happiness*, focusing on Chinese Marxism and

Maoism, with this parable (Bauer 1989, 575; Engl. 419).⁶ For Bauer, this parable expresses the “paradoxical secret” of every search for happiness, of every pursuit to realize ideals and utopias; the stronger people aspire to their realization, the more distant those ideals become. In his reflections on this paradoxical secret, he touches upon issues which are imposed by a Chinese modernization that has, for a long time, neglected or even denied its inherent paradoxical knot, because it has mistaken *forgetfulness of the paradoxical* for a necessary precondition of modernity. Furthermore, Bauer proposes a theoretical perspective that makes an interesting suggestion for further reflections on the modern dialectic of enlightenment and liberation. He proposes to “solve” (*lösen*) or “untie,” in a “wise and more cultivated” manner, the “mysterious problem” as to why the ardent striving for the realization of modern ideals and utopias has, paradoxically, turned into unprecedented disasters. The solution he proposes is “solution by non-solution” (*Lösung durch Nicht-Lösung*). This solution is at the same time non-solution, insofar as it consists of relinquishing the solution of that part which is unsolvable; it entails to solve (or undo, untie, unravel) the knot through contemplation of its (partial) insolubility. To the “solution by non-solution” (*yi bu jie jie zhi* 以不解解之) Bauer contrasts the classic example of a “total solution”—the violent cutting of the Gordian knot with the sword. “During long periods of its history, and particularly in recent centuries, the West preferred,” according to Bauer, this kind of solution (Bauer 1989, 575; Engl. 420).

In the same chapter, Bauer interprets the modern idea of revolution in China in the light of the philosophy of transformation developed in the *Book of Changes*. He thereby seeks to better understand the inscrutability of the relationship between revolution and transformation. He provides some interesting evidence for

6 Wolfgang Bauer uses the translation by Richard Wilhelm (*Frühling und Herbst des Lü Bu We* 1928, 267–68). My discussion has been strongly inspired by this translation, which plays with the word *lösen* (*jie* 解) in a manner I find more consistent than that of the English translation, where *jie* is rendered as “unravel” and “untie”: “Ein Mann aus Lu schenkte dem König Yüan von Sung einen Knoten. Der König ließ einen Befehl durch sein ganzes Land gehen, daß alle geschickten Leute kommen sollten und den Knoten auflösen. Aber niemand vermochte ihn aufzulösen. Ein Schüler von Erl Schuo bat um die Erlaubnis hinzugehen und ihn auflösen zu dürfen. Aber er konnte nur eine Hälfte auflösen, die andere Hälfte konnte er nicht lösen. Da sprach er: ‘Es ist nicht so, daß man ihn auflösen kann und nur ich ihn nicht auflösen vermag, sondern er läßt sich überhaupt nicht auflösen.’ Man befragte den Mann von Lu. Der sprach: ‘Ja man kann ihn wirklich nicht auflösen. Ich habe ihn gemacht und weiß, daß er nicht auflösbar ist. Aber einer, der ihn nicht gemacht hat und doch weiß, daß man ihn nicht lösen kann, der muß noch geschickter sein als ich.’ So hat der Schüler des Erl Schuo den Knoten dadurch gelöst, daß er ihn nicht gelöst hat.” (魯鄙人遺宋元王閉，元王號令於國，有巧者皆來解閉。人莫之能解。兒說之弟子請往解之，乃能解其一，不能解其一，且曰：「非可解而我不能解也，固不可解也。」問之魯鄙人。鄙人曰：「然，固不可解也。我為之而知其不可解也。今不為而知其不可解也，是巧於我。」故如兒說之弟子者，以不解解之也。)

the hypothesis that the modernization of China has been shaped by the blending of revolution and transformation, but also for the idea that the classical Chinese philosophy of transformation can only be meaningful for the present if it is not simply opposed to revolutionary change. In the course of these reflections, the question arises whether the transcultural entanglement between the Old and the New, between East and West in contemporary China can be “solved.” Moreover, can the paradoxical constellation of these moments perhaps even be understood as internal to Mao Zedong’s way of thinking and acting? Bauer remarks that Mao was, from the beginning, “the most Chinese” in the group of leading Chinese communists (Bauer 1989, 533; Engl. 389). However, Bauer’s analysis does not fail to suggest that Mao was also highly “un-Chinese,” because, like no other, he advocated a “total solution,” a solution that did not actually solve the “secret problem” (the paradox of Chinese modernization), but “destroyed it in an almost barbaric fashion” (Bauer 1989, 575; Engl. 419).

Is the hermeneutic contrast of total solution (West) and solution by non-solution (China), introduced by Bauer, misleading because it does not sufficiently recognize that there have been experiments with total solution in Chinese history too, and that Mao was able to affirmatively refer to those experiments? Such an objection is certainly not unjustified. It should, however, not obscure Bauer’s fascinating hypothesis that, on many occasions, the Chinese Communist Party fatefully ignored the “necessarily complicated, paradox-stricken conditions” in China, whereas, on the other hand, it also helped to bring about a breakthrough for a dialectical thinking that is, to a considerable extent, less forgetful of and more tolerant towards paradoxes.

Bauer’s analysis points to the affinity between the philosophy of transformation in the *Book of Changes* and the Maoist understanding of permanent revolution as a way of life. He arrives at the remarkable diagnosis that the pathological consequences of Chinese modernization can be traced back to a kind of short-circuit between transformation and modern revolution. The dialectic of stillness and movement is replaced by the heroization of revolutionary unrest: “According to Mao’s conception of the permanent revolution, such movement does not lead to a happy society, but already represents happy society” (Bauer 1989, 559; Engl. 408). The transfiguration of restlessness reaches into the realm of the ethical, where immobility and injustice correspond to one another. Within Maoist anti-traditionalism, Confucianism represents a rigid, hierarchically ordered, unequal society, and therefore is understood as an obstacle to modernization, which must be removed for moral reasons, as well. In this sense, a de-Confucianised, de-cultured, running wild type of human being was gradually created, “inclined toward combat and movement by natural disposition, and who also carried this orientation into the civilian sphere.” It was exactly this

human type Mao sought to strengthen as an ideal during the Great Cultural Revolution in order to “combat the ‘demon’ of solidification [*Erstarrung*]” (Bauer 1989, 561; Engl. 410). This cult of movement, ready for every sacrifice, arose out of the fear that the forces necessary to cope with the task of Chinese modernization could be so greatly diminished and hindered by the burden of tradition that they might cause the failure of the whole project of modernity in China:

Every step toward stabilization is now viewed with suspicion as the onset of a new stagnation, as the beginning of the end. All recourse to the past arouses the fear that, like so much mildew, the dust of the centuries will settle once again on what has newly grown. This is the reason for the constant forward thrust, those countless movements and leaps. They are meant to stay the drift into the sleep of the past. (Bauer 1989, 572; Engl. 417–18)

Can the dialectic between stillness and movement, which has been a central component of the classical philosophy of transformation, be reintroduced into this revolutionary movement, which is increasingly, in the aftermath of the Great Cultural Revolution, not experienced as happiness, but as disastrous restlessness? Can the socialist tradition be transformed in this direction? Bauer discusses this question philosophically by linking Mao’s theory of contradiction and practice with the “conceptual framework of the *Book of Changes*” (Bauer 1989, 538; Engl. 393). Following a quotation from Mao’s “On Contradiction,” Bauer remarks:

To find the bases for this conviction of a “dialectics of nature,” we need not go back to Engels, still less to Trotsky, with whose “Permanent Revolution” Mao only has the name in common. Here also the traces lead back to the oldest Chinese book, the *Book of Changes*. For it is hardly possible to find a more exact description of the ontological system in back of the *Book of Changes* than this statement of Mao about the creative contradictions of things. (Bauer 1989, 541–42; Engl. 395)

The Chinese notion of transformation stems from historical sources that date back to the archaic beginnings of philosophical discourse in the *Book of Changes*. From this perspective, it seems reasonable to conclude that Mao’s vision of modernization, including his anti-traditional radicalism, arose from intertwining transformation and revolution. Dialectical thinking in 20th century China may have been more long-lived than Soviet ideology—by which it has been influenced, but with which it also fought bitterly—because the combination of materialistic dialectics and philosophy of transformation helped to develop greater ideological flexibility. This, at least, seems to be a plausible explanation for the strong

tendency of socialism with Chinese characteristics towards historical experimentalism. By way of this experimentalism, the Chinese Communist Party succeeded, even after 1989, in maintaining the necessary amount of political legitimacy that cannot be secured by brute force and sophisticated mechanisms of control alone. Now, the assumption emerges that precisely within this socialist experimentalism a historically deep-reaching capability of paradoxical thinking and doing was able to overwinter. This enduring capability has recently found expression in the idea of a new communication among the three traditions of conservatism, liberalism, and socialism or in the dialogue among Chinese tradition, Western influence, and Marxism. If these developments can be understood as an indication for the reactivation of paradoxical thinking in contemporary China, the question arises whether they serve, primarily, the purpose of stabilizing so-called “socialism with Chinese characteristics.” This may be true to a certain extent, but this renaissance of paradoxical thinking within contemporary Chinese thought corresponds also to the discursive crisis of legitimacy which haunts the Communist regime. The internal dynamic of this renaissance may become so challenging and far-reaching that, sooner or later, it may lead to the collapse of the cultural and ideological (political) framework established in 1949.

Following Wolfgang Bauer, I would like to suggest that the explosive power of Mao’s thought emerged from the ability to systematically subordinate transformative thinking to the Marxist model of revolutionary class struggle. Mao sensed the dangers that this ancient legacy could pose to his revolutionary project. If dialectical thinking requires thinking to think against itself, to be able to turn against the innermost driving forces of one’s own thinking in order to constantly change it from the inside, Mao can be seen as a master of dialectical thinking. One of the intellectual impulses for the Great Cultural Revolution has been the radically unsentimental judgement that, in order for the socialist revolution to succeed, it is necessary to erase the ancient legacy of paradoxical thinking which has been a condition of possibility for Mao’s Sino-Marxist discourse.

This is consistent from the perspective of a dialectics infused in messianic utopianism, which seeks, in one last turn, to sublimate itself (*sich selbst aufheben*). In this regard, to speak of a “continuity of the dialectical line Hegel-Marx-Lenin-Mao” seems to be justified. From the perspective of the transformative and paradoxical—or negative—dialectics of the *Book of Changes*, however, this consequence is highly non-dialectical. Thus, the enormous powers of change and destruction that Mao’s thought derived from the dialectic of revolutionary heroism and transformative flexibility must, inevitably, turn into self-destruction: “Things cannot remain permanently destroyed,” as is said in an explanation to the hexagram 24, “The Return (The Turning Point)” (*I Ging* 1924, drittes Buch, 102). The return of the light

(bright) and living force announces itself only inconspicuously by the emergence of a continuous Yang-stroke on the bottom line of the hexagram *fu* (☰). However, this revitalization, “just at the moment when it seems completely conquered,” is inevitable—at least according to philosophers who think about the renaissance of classical Chinese culture from the rather detached perspective of an ongoing “to-and-fro between cultivation and vitalization” (*wenzhi xiangfu* 文質相復) (Ke 2012, 37–91). Mao fought, with all his powers, against the failure of his revolutionary vision and thus against the possibility that the wisdom of paradoxical thinking and the classical heritage of China could still gain the upper hand in the ongoing struggle for modernization. How to deal with the contradiction between the defence of revolutionary heritage and the renaissance of classical culture? This question is one of the most important, if not *the* most important, philosophical challenges in contemporary China.

Philosophically speaking, Mao’s struggle against the legacy of the *Book of Changes* contains a fundamental problem within his own thinking—the dialectics of nature. “Consistent dialecticians from European philosophical traditions reject a dialectics of nature,” as Hans Heinz Holz argues (Holz 1971, 82). However, for Holz, such a rejection is based on the assumption that “the cosmological bond between man and nature is broken” (*ibid.*).⁷ As mentioned above, Wolfgang Bauer recognized in Mao’s theory of contradiction and his conception of the “creative contradictions within things,” as well as in his conviction of a dialectics of nature, the “ontological system” of the *Book of Changes* (Bauer 1989, 540–42; Engl. 394–95). Similarly, Holz sees in this system an operational model for a “nature-grown dialectic” (*naturwüchsige Dialektik*), which at the same time develops a typology of situations with regard to content and a formalized procedure of movement out of contradictions” (Holz 1971, 83). In my view, however, Holz misjudges the difficulties that Mao had with the recognition of this side of his own thought. Mao himself had a very ambiguous relationship with cultural tradition; the legacy of classical learning, especially Confucianism, was generally regarded, by Chinese Communists, as an obstacle to the modernization of China. On the one hand, Mao styled himself in a traditional way as poet and calligrapher, but on the other hand did everything in his power to destroy the social and political conditions of classical literati culture. Seen in this light, his thinking seems to have been deeply influenced by a paradoxical knot formed by Marxist-Leninist orthodoxy on the one hand and the classical thought of transformation on the other. Against the legacy of paradoxical dialectics *within* his own thought, Mao believed that the

7 For Holz, Leibniz has developed the “only European system of thought in which related problems have been overcome in an exemplary way” (Holz 1971, 117).

sword of revolution in his hand could still bring this knot to a “total solution” (Bauer: *totale Lösung*).

The pathological and traumatic consequences of Mao’s attempts at total solution are hardly understood and worked through in China, even decades after his death. On the contrary, the urgently needed working through the Maoist past is still not encouraged and faces many obstructions. Hence, the barriers that obstruct the communication of the three traditions and the equal realization of their normative ideals are undoubtedly enormous (see Heubel 2018). Part of the theoretical attempt to come to terms with this troubled past could be the reconstruction of discursive struggles among conservative, liberal, and socialist positions that have accompanied the twisted and tortuous way of Chinese modernization. In this essay, it is not possible to enter into a deeper discussion of the cultural, social, economic, and political conflicts which make it almost impossible to solve the knot of modernization by (partial) non-solution. I would just like to mention one particularly interesting barrier to communication, which seems to render such a possibility unthinkable.

It is characteristic of the dialectic of enlightenment that enlightenment produces, both itself and out of itself, the monsters that destroy it. This is one of those modern paradoxes which, of course, can be seen at work not only in Europe, but also, in one way or another, in all the regions of the world that have been dragged into the maelstrom of modernization in the course of European expansionism. Today, European intellectuals find it extremely difficult to recognize the consequences and side effects of European influence in the sometimes very unpleasant challenges emerging out of globalization. Europe has exported the paradoxes of modernity as well as its pathologies, and has contributed to the emergence of hybrid discourse formations all over the world, largely being unaware of it. Worse than that: the philosophical discourse of modernity in Europe seems to lack the basic curiosity and sincerity to face the paradoxical consequences of this discourse in non-Western parts of the globe. Without self-reflection the tendency towards further self-provincialization of contemporary European philosophy will intensify. For now it is the “others,” the “foreigners,” who rather than “we (Europeans)” bear the conditions of possibility for a trans-positional thinking capable of working with the complex connections between Old and New as well as East, West, South, and North.

Conclusion

It is hard to deny that Mou Zongsan hits the mark when he claims that Mao’s thought abused the wisdom of the *Book of Changes* for his revolutionary purpose.

He made the transformational logic of the 64 hexagrams serve a theory of contradiction, which is no longer concerned with the twisted communication marked by the paradoxical turning and reversal of interconnected positions, but mainly with the annihilation of the political enemy. However, Mao was enough of a dialectical thinker to know that, on ideological grounds, no total solution is possible. He nevertheless still strived for it.

“The sudden change after his death in 1976 revealed his great vision as Chimerica” (Bauer 1989, 576). Mao foresaw, feared, and condemned the paradoxical turn to economic liberalism that occurred soon after his death. Does this not indicate that, finally, the paradoxical dialectics of transformation prevailed over the murderous dialectics of revolutionary struggle? Mao was, until the very end, a revolutionary ideologue, deeply convinced that the tolerance towards paradoxical thinking cultivated in classical Chinese philosophy would be an obstacle to China’s modernization, and that it should be replaced by a friend-enemy distinction that would serve revolutionary class struggle. Since Mao’s death, the deep-seated fear that transformative and paradoxical thinking may lack the competitive power to meet global challenges seems to have gradually given way to greater confidence in a Chinese “way” of modernization. Thorough reflections on this development, however, are in need of further elaboration, even within the world of contemporary Sino-philosophy (*dangdai hanyu zhexue* 當代漢語哲學). This may be due to the fact that Western philosophers still have great difficulties in overcoming their old fear of the paradoxical, and still tend to regard paradoxes primarily as a problem or even as an illness, a pathology which has to be cured.

It is not only Chinese hybrid modernization that fits well with the phrase from Kant’s famous essay “Answering the Question: What is Enlightenment?": “Here as elsewhere, when things are considered in broad perspective, a strange, unexpected pattern in human affairs reveals itself, one in which almost everything is paradoxical.” Does the confrontation with contemporary Chinese philosophy not lead to the assumption that this statement is true in a far more radical sense than Kant could have foreseen in his time: because the way of Chinese modernization urges “us” to learn how to think and live paradoxically?

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