

MARXIST PHILOSOPHY IN CHINA: FROM QU QIUBAI
TO MAO ZEDONG, 1923-1945

Marxist Philosophy in China: From Qu Qiubai to Mao Zedong, 1923–1945

by

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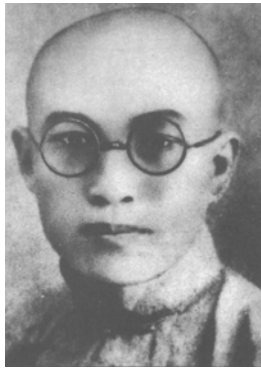
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Ai Siqu



Li Da



Mao Zedong



Qu Qibai

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PREFACE

This book recounts the history of Marxist philosophy in China between 1923 and 1945 through the writings and activities of four philosophers: Qu Qiubai, Ai Siqu, Li Da and Mao Zedong. Two of these philosophers – Qu and Mao – were also political activists and leaders, but their contribution to this history is as important, if not more so, than the contribution of Ai and Li who were predominantly philosophers and scholars. The inclusion of Qu and Mao underlines the intimate connection between philosophy and politics in the revolutionary movement in China. It is not possible to speak credibly of Marxist philosophy in China without considering the political context within which its introduction, elaboration and dissemination proceeded. Indeed, each of the philosophers considered in this book repudiated the notion that the study of philosophy was a scholastic intellectual exercise devoid of political significance. Each of these philosophers regarded himself as a revolutionary, and considered philosophy to be useful precisely because it could facilitate a comprehension of the world and so accelerate efforts to change it. By the same token, each of these philosophers took philosophy seriously; each bent his mind to the daunting task of mastering the arcane and labyrinthian philosophical system of dialectical materialism. Philosophy might well be political, they believed, but this was no excuse for philosophical dilettantism.

In accepting the philosophical credentials of these revolutionary philosophers, my analysis distances itself from much of the Western literature on Marxist philosophy and ideology in China. Written mainly by non-Marxist scholars, this literature tends to be dismissive of the substance and significance of Marxism in China; some of its more egregious examples suggest that Chinese intellectuals and philosophers who converted to Marxism could not possibly have understood Marxism, which grew out of the European intellectual tradition. The fact of being Chinese is presented as an insuperable barrier to the understanding of a theoretical system that originated outside the Chinese cultural hemisphere. This book stands in opposition to this tendency in the Western literature on Marxism in China. It accepts that Chinese intellectuals and philosophers could, and in fact did, accept the

intellectual challenge that Marxist theory posed, and prevail. Consequently, I argue that their efforts to comprehend, develop and apply Marxism are significant, not only for an understanding of the history of Marxism and the Marxist movement in China, but for the general history of Marxism. Moreover, an understanding of the history of Marxist philosophy in China during its seminal years is essential if any sense is to be made of the philosophical and ideological world of Mao's China and post-Mao China.

This book thus takes seriously the claims of these four Chinese revolutionaries to be Marxist philosophers. It attempts to unravel the nature of their thinking, and to identify the source of their philosophical inspiration within European and Soviet Marxism. It also attempts to comprehend the logic of their attempts to discover a formula that would allow the application of Marxism to Chinese conditions without sacrificing its universal dimensions. However, while the book approaches its subject matter positively, it does not do so uncritically. Where there are lapses in logic, these are identified; where elaboration fails to convince, the reasons are explained. In adopting this stance, the book thus moves beyond a descriptive history of Marxist philosophy in China; it represents a reconstruction of this history by one not unsympathetic to the claims of these philosophers, but which provides a critical engagement with prominent themes within their philosophies.

Earlier versions of Chapter 3 and 6 appeared in the following: 'The Dilemma of Determinism: Qu Qiubai and the Origins of Marxist Philosophy in China', *China Information*, Vol. XIII, No. 4 (Spring 1999), pp. 1–26; and 'The Role of Philosopher to the Chinese Communist Movement: Ai Siqu, Mao Zedong and Marxist Philosophy in China', *Asian Studies Review*, Vol. 26, No. 4 (December 2002), pp. 419–46. A section of Chapter 10 appeared in 'On Contradiction and On New Democracy: Contrasting Perspectives on Causation and Social Change in the Thought of Mao Zedong,' *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars*, Vol. 22, No. 2 (1990), pp. 18–34. I am grateful to the editors of these journals for permission to use these articles in this book.

This history of Marxist philosophy in China represents the culmination of an interest that has spanned three decades. During this time, I have incurred many intellectual and personal debts. The help and contribution of a number of colleagues and friends stand out. My particular thanks go to the following Chinese Mao scholars and philosophers: Ran Changuang, Li Yongtai, Li Junru, Chen Zuhua, Tan Zhen, Duan Qixian, Song Jingming and Wang Jionghua. My sincere thanks also go to my friend and colleague Wang Yuping of Griffith University's School of Languages and Linguistics for her help with Qu Qiubai's complex rendition of Marxist philosophy, and her tolerant and good-humoured attempts to improve my Chinese. Dr Liu Xian, my research assistant, gave considerable help with chapters 7 and 11, for which I am very grateful. Professor Arif Dirlik of the University of Oregon read the entire manuscript and offered incisive suggestions for improvement. I am grateful for the support he has given my research over many years. I am also grateful to the advice offered by the publisher's two anonymous referees.

Finally, as always, my most prominent debt is to my partner in life, Jill Kenny. Her unflinching love and support, and downright common sense, have allowed me to

achieve my goals in research and teaching without losing sight of the fact that there is more to life than these things. Thanks – more than I can say.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1. PRELUDE TO PHILOSOPHY, 1919–23

The theoretical preoccupation of Marxist intellectuals in China during the early years of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) was with the social theory of Marxism – the materialist conception of history, or historical materialism.¹ They paid particular attention to this theory's controversial representation of the causal relationship between society's economic base and superstructure, and struggled to make sense of its seemingly contradictory themes. On the one hand, Marxism's social theory talked in determinist tones of the causal significance of the economic base; change within the economic realm (productive forces and class relationships) led to changes within the superstructure, in the realm of politics, ideology, and art and literature. From this perspective, Marxism was an economic theory from which conscious human agency had been expunged; the superstructure reflected and responded to economic forces, lacking any autonomy to influence the course of history. On the other hand, Marxism explicitly called for conscious political struggle to achieve revolutionary change; only through concerted mass action – through the creation of political parties and organisations, the raising of ideological awareness, the honing of political tactics, development of cultural forms and practices appropriate to political struggle – could the progressive class or classes seize power and create a society in which their interests would be realised. From this perspective, Marxism was an activist theory; it recognised human agency in history. Humans, through their own efforts, could bring about change.

¹ For analysis of the early theoretical and ideological history of the Chinese Communist movement, see Michael Y.L. Luk, *The Origins of Chinese Bolshevism: An Ideology in the Making, 1920–1928* (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1990); Arif Dirlik, *The Origins of Chinese Communism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989); Arif Dirlik, *Revolution and History: Origins of Marxist Historiography in China, 1919–1937* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978); Maurice Meisner, *Li Ta-chao and the Origins of Chinese Marxism* (New York: Atheneum, 1973); Benjamin I. Schwartz, *Chinese Communism and the Rise of Mao* (New York and London: Harper and Row, 1951), Chapters 1–3; Hans J. Van de Ven, *From Friend to Comrade: The Founding of the Chinese Communist Party, 1920–1927* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991); Stuart R. Schram (ed.), *Mao's Road to Power, Revolutionary Writings 1912–1949: Volume I, The Pre-Marxist Period, 1912–1920* (Armonk, New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1992); and Stuart R. Schram (ed.), Nancy J. Hodes (Associate Ed.), *Mao's Road to Power, Revolutionary Writings 1912–1949: Volume II, National Revolution and Social Revolution, December 1920–June 1927* (Armonk, New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1994).

Marxism thus contained apparently conflicting tendencies – determinism and activism – that could lead to quite distinct responses. Economic determinism appeared to invite passivity, even fatalism; at best, political action could achieve no more than a marginal influence on a history destined to proceed through economically preordained stages. Activism, unanchored by recognition of the constraints imposed by economic forces, appeared to elevate human agency – will, consciousness, ideas – to voluntaristic proportions; political action inspired by will could accelerate the momentum of history towards predetermined goals.

Marxism's materialist conception of history thus presented a challenge to intellectuals in China persuaded of the veracity of this theory. The manner in which the dilemma of determinism (unconscious historical forces versus human agency, economic base versus superstructure) was elaborated within the discourse of Marxism during its early years in China was to be a major factor in the ideological development of the Communist movement in China. Marxist intellectuals in China confronted the dilemma of determinism in different ways. Li Da (1890–1966), who in the 1930s was to become one of China's most important Marxist philosophers, provided in his copious writings of 1919–23 a dialectical perspective on the interaction of the economic and non-economic realms. Drawing on a wide variety of European and Japanese Marxist and socialist sources, he arrived at the conclusion that Marxism *is* an economic theory of history, but one in which politics, ideology and other superstructural levels possess a definite, though qualified, capacity to react on the economic base, and thus influence the course of history. His interpretation of the materialist conception of history was founded on a complex economic determinism that appeared to resolve the apparently conflicting tendencies within Marxist social theory. However, Li's relatively sophisticated foray into Marxist theory was restricted, in the early 1920s, to the realm of social theory. It was not until the mid 1920s that he devoted any attention to Marxist philosophy, and it was not until the late 1920s and early 1930s that it became a preoccupation. Only then did he provide a concerted philosophical response to the dilemma of determinism within Marxist theory. It was in dialectical materialism, the philosophical twin of the materialist conception of history, that Li sought the ontological and epistemological framework that would resolve Marxism's theoretical tensions. By that time, as we will see, the political and philosophical context had changed dramatically, and Li was restricted, in the name of orthodoxy, in the sort of philosophical responses he could make (see Chapter 8).²

Other early Chinese Marxist intellectuals approached the dilemma of determinism within the materialist conception of history differently. Li Dazhao (1888–1927), for example, balanced an acceptance of the idea of history moving towards a determined future with an activist inclination to both political and personal struggle, one in which the ethical dimensions of history and personal life were accorded a more pronounced role than was usual in conventional readings of Marxist social theory. Indeed, Li Dazhao was dissatisfied with the apparently minimal role accorded to ethics and spiritual factors by Marxist theory, and he suggested that Marxism required revision to ensure that any reorganisation of the

² Nick Knight, *Li Da and Marxist Philosophy in China* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview, 1996).

economic realm be accompanied by concomitant changes to the realm of the human spirit.³ Li Dazhao thus went much further than Li Da in pushing at the restrictions represented by an economic determinist reading of Marxism, although not as far as Zhou Fohai (1897–1948), who withdrew from the CCP having arrived at the conclusion that humans had the power to control the direction of historical development.⁴ But such views were not characteristic of mainstream theoretical opinion amongst Marxist intellectuals in China before and after the formation of the CCP, which accepted the thrust of orthodox Marxism, with its emphasis on the inexorable unfolding of history's stages, and the necessity of a capitalist stage of development for the emergence of a socialist revolutionary movement. This picture of history, of vast elemental forces unleashed by transformations in the economic foundation of society, appeared to consign to impotence the actions of individual humans. Yet this apparently deterministic vision was, quixotically, accepted by many as a clarion call to political action; for it exuded confidence that its adherents were on the winning side, and that their political aspirations would, in the fullness of time, triumph.

China's early Marxist intellectuals, even those who adopted a conventional Marxist reading of society and historical change, nevertheless recognised that Marxism contained conflicting theoretical tendencies: an economic determinist theory of history rendered problematic the significance of ideas and conscious political action. The way in which they responded to this dilemma was not only to set the scene for the subsequent ideological development of Marxist ideology within the CCP, it defined the ideological poles between which many subsequent political struggles within the CCP were fought. At times, the deterministic tendency within Marxism attracted greater support: the unfolding of history is preordained and inexorable, and the stages through which history must pass are fixed; capitalism must replace feudalism, and socialism can only emerge on the foundation laid by capitalism's development of the forces of production. At other times, the activist potential within the materialist conception of history has been stressed: human consciousness and agency play a vital role in the direction and speed at which history develops; the superstructure – the arena of ideas and political action – is not a passive reflection of the economic base, but one that can react on the economic base, and thus constitutes a dynamic agent in facilitating political and social change.

Until 1923, however, consideration of the tensions within Marxism remained within the theoretical realm of the materialist conception of history. It was in the language of historical materialism (its concepts, modes of discourse and forms of debate) that theoretical inquiry and elaboration proceeded. The purely philosophical dimension of Marxism attracted no attention. Why was this the case? First, little if any Marxist philosophy had been translated into Chinese during the years between the Russian Revolution in 1917 and the formation of the CCP in 1921, and in the years immediately following. While many documents of Marxist provenance were translated into Chinese, these had focused on the materialist conception of history,

³ Meisner, *Li Ta-chao and the origins of Chinese Marxism*, esp. pp. 91–5.

⁴ Chester C. Tan, *Chinese Political Thought in the Twentieth Century* (Newton Abbot: David & Charles, 1972), pp. 102–3.

the policies of the new Soviet government in Russia, the history of the socialist movement in Europe, the writings of Lenin, women's liberation, and other topics of practical concern to radical intellectuals. Philosophy was bypassed in favour of these apparently more pressing theoretical concerns. This in part reflected a dearth of appropriate texts on Marxist philosophy in languages accessible to and comprehensible by the cadre of youthful translators within the emerging revolutionary movement. Few could read German or Russian, the two primary languages of Marxist theory. Many more could read Japanese, and it was Marxist and socialist texts available in Japanese, either authored in that language or translated into it from European languages, which largely constructed the corpus from which Chinese translators selected texts for translation. Many of the translators to the early revolutionary movement in China had studied in Japan, were fluent in its language and familiar with the Japanese socialist movement and the writings and translations of its intellectuals. The European and Russian sources chosen for translation by Japanese intellectuals consequently had a material impact on the choices open to Chinese translators, such as Li Da, who provided the early communist movement in China with an unwittingly selective body of texts on Marxism that excluded its philosophical dimension. It is no coincidence that Li Da's first translations (published in 1921) were of Japanese editions of Karl Kautsky's *The Economic Doctrines of Karl Marx* and the Dutch Marxist Herman Gorter's *An Explanation of the Materialist Conception of History*. Both of these volumes deal with issues central to Marxist theory – the theory of surplus value and its function within capitalism, and the theory of historical materialism – but incorporate no significant consideration of dialectical materialism, the philosophy of Marxism.⁵ Similarly, Li Hanjun (who had grown up in Japan) translated Kawakami Hajime's *Introduction to 'Das Kapital'*, which focused on the economic and materialist dimensions of Marx's theory.⁶ It was not until later in the 1920s that Japanese Marxists, such as Kawakami Hajime, began themselves to translate and write extensively on dialectical materialism, and it was these sources that Chinese translators then made accessible to a Chinese audience.⁷ The years 1929–30 saw a flood of translations from Japanese of Marxist philosophical texts, although these had often originated in European languages.

Second, the theoretical needs of the nascent communist movement in China led in directions other than philosophy. As we have observed, there was a keen interest in the materialist conception of history, for this dimension of Marxism promised to reveal the particular characteristics of the Chinese historical context, on an understanding of which could be built strategies for successful revolutionary action. Similarly, the new CCP was in urgent need of information about the practical tasks

⁵ Knight, *Li Da and Marxist philosophy in China*, Chapter 5.

⁶ See Van de Ven, *From Friend to Comrade*, pp. 81–4, for examples of the sorts of translations read by members of the early Marxist research societies.

⁷ See, for example, Kawakami Hajime, *Makesizhuyi jingjixue jichu lilun* [The fundamental theories of Marxist economics], translated by Li Da and others (Shanghai: Kunlun shudian, 1930). Despite its title, this book contains a very substantial section on Marxist philosophy. It was later read and annotated by Mao. See *Mao Zedong zhexue pizhuji* [The philosophical annotations of Mao Zedong] (Beijing: Zhongyang wenxian chubanshe, 1988), pp. 453–92.

of party building, and the contemporary state of affairs of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) and the other member parties of the Communist International (Comintern). For the time being, at least, an interest in the seemingly abstract realm of philosophy would have to wait.

Third, the tendency of Chen Duxiu, the CCP's leader, was to emphasise political action and the practical needs of the Party over the development of theory during the Party's early years. This was, at least, the view of some of the Party's most important intellectuals. It was a major consideration in the decision of Li Da and Li Hanjun to quit the Party, for their inclination was to stress intensive study of theory in order to establish the theoretical foundation required by the nascent communist movement in China. As Li Da later recalled, 'I requested that we gain a thorough understanding of revolutionary theory. However, the others within the Party emphasised practical action, and put no emphasis on study, demanding rather, 'Marxist practitioners and not Marxist theorists''.⁸ Chen, while himself a famous intellectual, felt the current emphasis had to be placed on practical political action in the consolidation of the new Party. The tension between those theorists such as Li Da and Li Hanjun and a Party leadership, understandably preoccupied with the myriad details of organisation that accompanied the formation of the Party, militated against the creation of an environment in which Marxist philosophy and its elaboration could be regarded as valued pursuits.⁹ Given the often life-and-death struggles of the diminutive Party during its first difficult years, it is little wonder that philosophy was low on the Party leaders' priorities.

Fourth, while Marxist philosophy had become an issue of very serious debate and contention amongst European and Russian Marxists prior to 1921, it had not yet become a core determinant of Party orthodoxy, as it would from the late 1920s within the CPSU and member parties of the Comintern.¹⁰ The influential Russian Marxist George Plekhanov (1856–1918) had engaged, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, in some vicious philosophical polemics with opponents in the Russian revolutionary movement in defence of his rather deterministic brand of Marxist philosophical orthodoxy.¹¹ Similarly, Vladimir Lenin (1870–1924) was to write his most important philosophical treatise, *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* (1908), in the form of an extended polemic with 'would-be Marxists' and those guilty of 'philosophical revisionism'.¹² These philosophical forays by Plekhanov and Lenin in defence of 'orthodox' Marxist philosophy were to set in train a process that would ultimately result in the establishment of 'correct' philosophy as a criterion against which claims to Party orthodoxy could be tested (see Chapters 2 and 5).

⁸ Song Jingming, *Li Da zhuanji* [Li Da – A Biography] (Hubei: Hubei renmin chubanshe, 1986), p. 69.

⁹ See Van de Ven, *From Friend to Comrade*, p. 63. According to Van de Ven, Li Hanjun's vision of the CCP was of a decentralised party that advocated communism among intellectuals, and was opposed to the covert involvement of intellectuals in the labor movement.

¹⁰ See David Joravsky, *Soviet Marxism and natural science, 1917–1932* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1961).

¹¹ See, in particular, George Plekhanov's *Materialism Militans* (Moscow: Foreign Publishers, 1973), *In Defence of Materialism: The development of the monist view of history* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1947), and *Fundamental problems of Marxism* (London: Martin Lawrence Ltd., n.d.).

¹² V.I. Lenin, *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1972), pp. 5–7.

However, up to and throughout most of the 1920s there remained considerable philosophical debate within the CPSU, and it was possible for a Party member to espouse one of any number of philosophical positions, each claiming some allegiance to Marxism, without being the subject of censure or worse. The effect of this relatively relaxed atmosphere had, in turn, the effect of diminishing while not eliminating the significance of philosophy as a preoccupation of the CPSU; the Party's attention was elsewhere. This lack of focus on philosophy undoubtedly communicated itself to member parties of the Comintern, of which the CCP was one, and served to reinforce, at least in the case of this latter Party, the inclination to give priority to practical political matters, and kudos to 'Marxist practitioners' rather than those whose theoretical inclinations inclined towards philosophy.

2. FROM QU QIUBAI TO MAO ZEDONG: MARXIST PHILOSOPHERS IN CHINA

For these reasons, CCP theorists paid scant attention to philosophy during the first few years of the Party's existence. It was only in 1923, with the pioneering efforts of Qu Qiubai to teach and write on Marxist philosophy, that its vocabulary and theoretical concerns were introduced to the CCP and its supporters. As we will see (Chapters 3 and 4), Qu was to provide a relatively sophisticated commentary on many facets of Marxist philosophy in his valiant though inconclusive attempt to achieve a resolution, at a philosophical level, of the dilemma of determinism. In so doing, he not only provided a substantial array of information on the position of Marxist philosophy in the history of Western philosophy, he introduced to his Chinese audience novel ways of thinking *philosophically* within the Marxist system of thought. This was a theoretical initiative of the greatest significance for the ideological development of the CCP and the Chinese revolutionary movement generally. Here, for the first time, was a Chinese intellectual who spoke with authority on Marxist philosophy, and argued that an understanding of philosophy was central to the Marxist revolutionary's conceptual repertoire. Philosophy might involve abstractions, Qu seemed to be saying, but it was nonetheless central to a deep comprehension of the world and the role of humans within it. For the revolutionary, this was not a passing concern, but an imperative need: to change the world, one must first know it. The Marxist revolutionary thus had to invest the intellectual energy sufficient to master philosophy; its history, concepts and modes of thought could not legitimately be regarded as a waste of time. For there to be a credible and productive union of theory and practice, theory had to extend to philosophy; and this would pay dividends in terms of the precision and logic of representations of the world that would function as a guide to revolutionary action. Qu firmly believed in such a union of theory and practice, and attempted to live it in his short but spectacular political career.

While Qu's introduction of Marxist philosophy to a Chinese audience was highly significant to the ideological development of the CCP, the invitation to philosophy that he voiced was not immediately answered by other theorists within or around the Party. It was not until the late 1920s and particularly during the early 1930s that

other philosophers stepped forward to build on the groundwork Qu had laid. During that hiatus, the political context of Marxist philosophy was to change dramatically with the triumph of the New Philosophy in the Soviet Union (see Chapter 5). The triumph of this version of dialectical materialism was to have enormous consequences for Marxist philosophy in China, for it signalled the subordination of philosophy to Party dictate, and it introduced a particular view of philosophical orthodoxy. As we will observe, influential Marxist philosophers in China chose to operate consciously within the strictures of this orthodoxy, but nevertheless were persuaded by it *philosophically*. This is an important point, for Western observers have by and large given little credence to the persuasive power of the New Philosophy. Yet, Chinese philosophers of considerable intellectual stature and strength of will were so persuaded; it was not only the political implications that deterred them from adopting a more independent philosophical stance. The voluminous writings of Ai Siqi and Li Da, two of the most important Chinese philosophers of the twentieth century, give every indication that they were convinced by the philosophical claims of the New Philosophy, and accepted the logic of its linkage of philosophy and politics. No one who has experienced the sparkling wit and philosophical erudition of Ai's philosophical columns and articles of the early 1930s could doubt the sincerity of his philosophical commitment (see Chapters 6 and 7). Not only was Ai capable of sophisticated philosophical discourse and debate, he was able to communicate at a less challenging level with his lay audience, which was hungry for enlightenment on the seemingly impenetrable abstractions of dialectical materialism. His capacity for simplification and his skill as a populariser represent a significant theme in the early history of Marxist philosophy in China. While Li Da did not possess Ai's happy knack for popularisation, he established his philosophical reputation by composing *Elements of Sociology* (first edition published 1935), a vast and uncompromising treatise on the New Philosophy, which traverses and pronounces judgement on all areas of significance within dialectical and historical materialism (see Chapter 8). These two philosophers were, through their translations of key Soviet texts on philosophy and through their own elaborative texts, central to the complex process through which the Soviet Union's New Philosophy was introduced to a Chinese audience.

It was these, Ai's and Li's translations and elaborations, which constituted the corpus of texts that their most important reader – Mao Zedong – turned to in late 1936 when the opportunity and inclination facilitated his close engagement with the New Philosophy (see Chapter 9). Mao was not, like Ai and Li, a professional philosopher; if anything, he more closely resembled Qu Qiubai who combined political activism and leadership with a penchant for intellectual inquiry and composition. Mao accepted implicitly the New Philosophy's assertion of the 'Party-character' of philosophy; but like Ai and Li, he recognised that the New Philosophy *was* philosophy, and not merely Party-inspired dogma. While it certainly possessed a tendency towards the latter characteristic, it was the breadth and complexity of its philosophical system that appealed to Mao's inclination to understand the world intellectually and philosophically. Philosophy intrigued Mao; and the New Philosophy combined so rich a brew of philosophical inquiry and political rectitude that its appeal to Mao was instant and instinctive. The compass

that guided Mao's journey of discovery through the New Philosophy was, however, rather different to that of Ai and Li. Mao had by 1936 established himself as the CCP's most formidable political leader, although the reality of this had not yet been translated into appointment to the Party's supreme office. While philosophy was only one of the themes on which he wrote (military strategy was another), he recognised that an acceptable level of competence in Marxist theory and philosophy was essential to those who aspired to leadership of a Marxist party. His motivation for engagement with the demanding texts of the New Philosophy was thus not just a disinterested quest for philosophical erudition. Desire for philosophical understanding and shrewd political calculation combined to generate a powerful incentive to accept the rigours of sustained philosophical study.

Mao's period of intense philosophical study was to have a profound effect on the development of his thought and on the trajectory described by the CCP's ideology. Not only did Mao continue to engage philosophically with the New Philosophy after mid 1937, and well into the early 1940s (see Chapter 10), he continued thereafter to think philosophically about the practical problems of China's revolution and socialist transition. Some of his best-known texts of the 1950s and early 1960s – 'On the ten great relationships', 'On the correct handling of contradictions among the people', 'Where do correct ideas come from?' – have a clearly philosophical orientation, and bear the unmistakable stamp of the New Philosophy, although without formal attribution.¹³ Other less known texts – 'Talks on questions of philosophy' (1964), 'Talk on Sakata's article' (1964), and his annotations to various texts on philosophy written after late 1964 – confirm Mao's predilection to think philosophically and in terms clearly recognisable as originating in his study of philosophy in 1936–37.¹⁴ Not only did Mao continue to study philosophy and think philosophically after the late 1930s, he encouraged the establishment of institutions – such as the Yanan New Philosophy Association – whose brief, as its title implies, was to propagate the New Philosophy amongst Party members during the late 1930s and early 1940s (see Chapter 11). The influence of the New Philosophy, with Mao's backing, was such that Party cadres came to assume that the study of Marxist philosophy was a normal requirement of Party life.

It was not, however, to be too many years before the title, although not the substance, of the New Philosophy was to disappear from the Party lexicon, as Mao strove to unite the various dimensions of Party ideology under the rubric of his own thought: 'Mao Zedong Thought'. The process of the Sinification of Marxism had been a theme close to Mao's heart for some years, as had been the Sinification of Marxist philosophy for Ai Siqi (see Chapters 6 and 7). With the Party's adoption, at its Seventh Party Congress in April 1945, of 'Mao Zedong Thought' as the Party's guiding ideology, that process was formally resolved, although it left unstated

¹³ See Stuart R. Schram (ed.), *Mao Tse-tung unrehearsed: Talks and letter, 1956–71* (Harmondsworth: Penguin 1974), pp. 61–83; *Selected Works of Mao Tsetung* (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1977), Vol. V, pp. 384–421; and Mao Tse-tung, *Four Essays on Philosophy* (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1968), pp. 134–6.

¹⁴ Schram, *Mao Tse-tung unrehearsed*, pp. 212–30; *Miscellany of Mao Tse-tung Thought (1949–1968)* (Arlington, Virginia: Joint Publication Research Service, 1974), Part II, pp. 397–402; *Mao Zedong zhaxue pizhuji*, pp. 493–507.

(deliberately so) the extent of Mao's debt to his intellectual sources. The danger for the unwary observer is to assume that this change of nomenclature signalled a diminution in Mao's commitment to the universal principles of Marxism (at least, as he saw these) and the emergence of a specifically Chinese or Sinified Marxism that owed little to its European and Soviet progenitors. Having recognised the immense influence of the New Philosophy on the development of Mao's thought in the late 1930s, it is not difficult to discern its continuing influence in his own thought and amongst Marxist philosophers in China down through and beyond the period of Mao's China. And this raises the possibility that Marxism in China – at least in its philosophical dimension – did remain more orthodox than many observers have allowed.

3. THE MARXIST PHILOSOPHER IN CHINA AS 'AUTHOR'

The history of Marxist philosophy in China during its seminal phase – 1923 to 1945 – is this book's principal focus. It is a history told through the writings and activities of four philosophers – Qu Qiubai, Ai Siqi, Li Da and Mao Zedong. Other Marxist philosophers in China (such as Shen Zhiyuan) made a contribution, but it was the contribution of these four to the introduction, elaboration and dissemination of Marxist philosophy in China that was the most significant. Without their contribution – theoretical as well as practical – the history of Marxist philosophy in China would have been very different. It is consequently their writings on philosophy that our main concern; it is their handling of the complex problems of Marxist philosophy and their modes of elaboration that will occupy our attention.

Before plunging into their philosophical writings, however, it is important to raise a cautionary note about the concept of the 'author'.¹⁵ These philosophers wrote their texts on philosophy consciously under the influence of an existing tradition of Marxist philosophy. Qu, for example, wrote his initial and most extensive pieces on Marxist philosophy soon after his sojourn in Russia and conversion to Marxism in 1922. While in Russia, he had steeped himself in Marxist theory and had experienced Communist institutions and theoretical practices at first hand, and he quickly came to recognise that the role of the Marxist theorist and philosopher was to work within the framework of Communist theoretical traditions, with all the limitations that this imposed.¹⁶ His task now was to elaborate and, importantly, defend that tradition. While there remained room for disagreement and debate in Marxist parties over philosophical issues in the early 1920s, Qu was under no illusion that the Marxist philosopher's scope for personal discretion in matters of

¹⁵ For a critical discussion of the concept of the 'author', see Michel Foucault, 'What is an Author?', in Paul Rabinow (ed.), *The Foucault Reader* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), esp. pp. 103–13.

¹⁶ Qu was certainly not unaware of other theoretical and philosophical perspectives at the time of his conversion to Marxism. He had read Hu Shi's *Zhexue shi dagang* [Compendium on the history of philosophy], had studied Indian philosophy, and had steeped himself in Buddhism. See *Qu Qiubai wenji* [Collected Writings of Qu Qiubai] (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 1987–1995), Vol. 7, p. 704. See also Marián Gálik, *The Genesis of Modern Chinese Literary Criticism (1917–1930)* (London: Curzon Press, 1980), Chapter 9.

theoretical innovation was unlimited or unaffected by party affiliation. Indeed, the evidence suggests that Qu accepted that his conversion to Marxism did bring limitations to his naturally creative and expressive intellect.¹⁷ Having once situated himself within the Marxist theoretical framework, Qu accepted that he wrote within the parameters of that theoretical tradition; he was, as it were, on the 'inside'. While this mental relocation did not entirely stifle his capacity for fine judgements and distinctions of a personal nature, his mental horizons were now more severely limited by contemporary constructions of orthodoxy than had previously been the case.

The philosophical texts written by Qu are thus, from this perspective, not the work of a sole author; they are, in a sense, 'owned' by a tradition.¹⁸ The same is true of Ai Siqi, Li Da and Mao Zedong. While they wrote in a philosophical and political context somewhat different from that within which Qu's principal writings on philosophy were composed, they also consciously accepted the limitations that the New Philosophy imposed. While they may have physically 'written' the texts on philosophy that bear their name, they were in them addressing issues of common and longstanding concern to the theoretical tradition to which they had now affiliated themselves. Their philosophical writings cannot, therefore, be regarded as expressions of individual worldviews arrived at through a process of deep personal introspection. Rather, they are, in large part, the voice of the collective theoretical movement in which they had submerged themselves. As Marxist philosophers to the communist movement in China, they could lay little claim to originality in terms of the general thrust of their analysis; their task was to elaborate, disseminate and defend an already existing worldview. Nevertheless, within these larger parameters, their exposition of philosophy from a Marxist perspective often reveals a capacity for interesting and creative judgements, and novel forms of elaboration. We will identify these as we proceed through their writings.

While there did remain a notional sphere for personal discretion in the elaboration of Marxist philosophy, even into the 1930s, one should not press this point too far or exaggerate the distinctiveness of the response of these philosophers to problem areas in Marxist philosophy. There is often predictability in their responses, one anticipated by the logical structure of Marxism itself, and, in the case

¹⁷ *Qu Qiubai wenji*, Vol. 7, pp. 696–7. Bernadette Li Yu-ning makes the following perceptive observation: 'As a Party spokesman, Ch'ü Ch'iu-pai drew a dark curtain over his inner mind: no longer are there any philosophical ramblings and self-reflections in his writing'. *A Biography of Ch'ü Ch'iu-pai: From Youth to Party Leadership, 1899–1928* (New York: Unpublished PhD thesis, Columbia University, 1967), p. 117.

¹⁸ Indeed, we know from his own testimony that Qu used only a limited number of translations of foreign works, most certainly Russian, in the preparation of his lectures on philosophy. *Qu Qiubai wenji*, Vol. 7, p. 705. Bernadette Yu-ning Li has argued that Qu relied entirely on Bukharin's *Historical Materialism*, although the evidence for this assertion is less than convincing. See *A Biography of Ch'ü Ch'iu-pai*, pp. 138–40. Widmer suggests that there is good reason to believe Qu's article 'Russian literature before the October Revolution' (published 1927, written 1921–22) was pieced together by Qu from one or more studies in Russian. Despite this suggestion, one supported by Russian and Japanese scholars, she argues that it is still important to analyse this work as reflective of Qu's own views. A similar argument is made here about his writings on philosophy. See Ellen Widmer, 'Qu Qiubai and Russian literature', in Merle Goldman (ed.), *Modern Chinese literature in the May Fourth era* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1977), p. 106, and note 12.

of Ai, Li and Mao, by the philosophical and political imperatives of the New Philosophy. The challenge is to focus attention on the problematic notion of Marxist philosopher in China as ‘author’, and through this achieve a deeper understanding of the process through which Marxist philosophy was introduced into China and elaborated for a Chinese audience. While they may have put their own gloss on aspects of Marxist philosophy, they should not, for that reason, be conceived as authors whose philosophy was the highly personalised creation of individual thinkers free to think and write whatever they pleased. The implications of this judgement are important for an evaluation of the extent to which Marxism in China drew on Marxism in Europe and the Soviet Union, and particularly the latter; they are important too for an understanding of the level of theoretical awareness of Marxism within the early Chinese communist movement. The tendency of interpretation has been to emphasise discontinuity, to regard Marxism in China as a very different creature to its European and Soviet counterparts, and to downplay the importance of Marxist theory to early proponents of Marxism in China. The writings of our four philosophers can be employed to challenge these conclusions. They wrote consciously within the confines of the established theoretical tradition of Marxism. They perceived their principal function as being to introduce and explain that tradition to a Chinese audience; it was not to generate a highly personalised philosophy. This, in itself, signals a high level of continuity between their philosophical writings and those of their Marxist sources. At the moment of its birth, Marxist philosophy in China, through Qu’s elaboration, drew its first breath from European and Russian air, and continued to draw sustenance from it in the later writings of Ai, Li and Mao. Moreover, their commentary on philosophy, while in large part derivative, was wide-ranging and at times complex. This suggests that the mainstream view of the theoretical isolation and immaturity of the early communist movement in China does not bear close scrutiny. From 1923, erudite explanations of Marxist philosophy flowed from the pens of Chinese philosophers. Subsequent chapters offer a validation of this judgement.

The writings of Marxist philosophers in China cover many themes. One that emerged in Qu’s writings of 1923 and remained a continuing concern for later philosophers was the dilemma of determinism. To resolve this dilemma, they found it necessary to understand the history of Western philosophy, and in particular the great division between idealism and materialism. They perforce had to address the major and interrelated themes of Marxist philosophy – ontology, epistemology and logic – areas of concern to all philosophies. Their understanding of these themes is interesting in its own right, but more particularly for what it tells us about the history of Marxist philosophy in China. One of the characteristics evident in their combined consideration of Marxist philosophy and other philosophies is repetition. This characteristic flows logically from the point made earlier: that Marxist philosophers in China worked within the constraints of a philosophical tradition and, after 1931, within the even tighter constraints of orthodoxy. This characteristic of Marxist philosophy in China, while rather tedious for those who seek novelty, is highly informative of the developmental trajectory and level of orthodoxy of this philosophy; it speaks volumes of the genealogy of Marxist philosophy in China, and its provenance in European and Soviet Marxist philosophy. While I have

endeavoured to minimise repetition in elaborating the philosophy of the four philosophers under consideration, justice can only be done to this subject and to the philosophers under consideration by reference to and explanation of themes that are present in the writings of one philosopher that may have appeared in the writings of previous philosophers. Reading the texts of Marxist philosophy in China is not for the faint hearted; they are theoretically dense, complex, frequently abstract, and often repetitive. Hopefully the elaborations offered in this volume serve as an accessible introduction to the difficult but highly significant realm of intellectual inquiry that is Marxist philosophy in China.

The focus of the next chapter is the history of Marxist philosophy prior to its introduction to China in the early 1920s. When Chinese intellectuals turned to the daunting task of comprehending and elaborating Marxist philosophy, they quickly discovered that it had a history tightly interwoven with the history of the various Marxist movements and parties in Europe and Russia, and the struggles between them. They were thus obliged to make choices, both philosophical and political, for there was no uncontested interpretation of Marxist philosophy to which they could readily turn. Their choices were, however, simplified by the political contexts in which they found themselves, for these pointed in the direction of a reading or readings of Marxist philosophy that were acceptable, even orthodox. And it was the eventual emergence of orthodoxy in Marxist philosophy, and the radical narrowing of choices this imposed, which constructed the framework within and around which the history of Marxist philosophy in China proceeded.

CHAPTER 2

MARX, MARXIST PHILOSOPHY AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF 'ORTHODOXY'

Prior to its introduction to China, Marxist philosophy had become the subject of bitter controversy amongst Marxist intellectuals. Their fierce polemics derived from a growing awareness that Marxist philosophy – often referred to as ‘dialectical materialism’ – encompassed the core ontological and epistemological premises of the entire Marxist theoretical system, including its political economy, social theory and philosophy of history. Dialectical materialism posed questions about the very nature of reality, a reality that Marxists sought to understand in order to change it. Thus, while dialectical materialism deals with issues that any philosophy must address – about the nature of reality and how humans can know it – it differs from other philosophies in possessing a quite articulate political significance and intention. If the nature of reality – its ontological character and laws of motion – could be comprehended through a correct epistemology, then the possessor of this knowledge would be in a position to steal a political march on those whose understanding of reality was faulty or less comprehensive. The stakes were thus high, or so it seemed to Marxist intellectuals, and their motivation for philosophical erudition keen.

Marxism does not therefore perceive philosophy as a disinterested inquiry into the relationship between humans and their natural and social worlds. Rather, an understanding of the laws that govern movement and change in the universe has been regarded as the rational premise from which extrapolations regarding the direction and speed of change in human society can be based, and the extent to which political intervention might accelerate this process. The philosophical laws deduced by dialectical materialism have thus been seen as relevant to an understanding of the historical process whereby the proletariat, the class nominated by Marx as the ‘universal class’, will (supposedly) in the fullness of time triumph in its revolutionary struggle with classes antagonistic to it, and establish a communist society. Philosophy has thus not been seen within the Marxist tradition as separate from history, or from politics. Rather, philosophy has been perceived (although, as we will observe, not necessarily by Marx himself) as the indispensable tool of the communist revolutionary. It is no coincidence that philosophy has held a fascination for prominent Marxist leaders such as Lenin and Mao, as well as Marxist theorists like Lukács, Korsch and Lefebvre.¹⁹

¹⁹ See Karl Korsch, *Marxism and Philosophy* (London: NLB, 1970); Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics* (London: Merlin Press, 1971); and Henri Lefebvre, *Dialectical Materialism* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1968). See also the four volume series – *Issues in*

In the first part of this chapter, we turn to a necessarily brief reconstruction of the history of Marxist philosophy in Europe and Russia prior to the 1920s. The purpose of this exercise is to provide a sense of the philosophical tradition inherited by philosophers in China on their conversion to Marxism. It will become apparent that they were immediately confronted by theoretical choices and political challenges when approaching the elaboration of Marxist philosophy for a Chinese audience. Marxism, they discovered, was not and never had been a unified theoretical tradition; there were competing currents within it, each claiming legitimacy as the correct interpretation. They discovered that even the dominant or ‘orthodox’ version of Marxist philosophy – that endorsed by powerful figures and institutions within the Marxist revolutionary movement – was contested. How were Marxist philosophers in China to know which of the available versions of dialectical materialism was correct; and to what extent were their judgments to be influenced by political as opposed to purely philosophical considerations? From the early 1930s, as we will observe, Marxist philosophers in China were persuaded by the version of Marxist philosophy propagated in the Soviet Union and described as the ‘New Philosophy’, which laid emphatic claim to the status of ‘orthodoxy’ within the international communist world. Most Marxist philosophers in China were persuaded by the New Philosophy’s claim to orthodoxy, yet their commitment to this philosophy, and its elaboration in China, was premised on philosophical as well as political grounds. They were persuaded by its philosophical logic; but they were also conscious of the political implications attendant on any equivocation regarding the New Philosophy’s claim to orthodoxy. The issue of the New Philosophy’s ‘orthodoxy’ was never far from the minds of Marxist philosophers in China; and they assumed the responsibility of ensuring that the Chinese rendition of the New Philosophy remained as orthodox as its Soviet progenitor.

The concept of ‘orthodoxy’ – how it is constructed, how it is reinforced – is thus central to an understanding of the way in which Marxist philosophers in China confronted the challenge of the elaboration and dissemination of Soviet Marxist philosophy in the early to mid 1930s. I will argue, in the second part of this chapter, that ‘orthodoxy’ is an intellectual construction whose claim to represent the ‘truth’ is reinforced politically, and relies ultimately on its relationship with power; it is power that sanctifies ‘truth’ and employs it for its own ends. ‘Orthodoxy’ is thus a construction, an historically and politically created belief. This perspective on ‘orthodoxy’ underpins the argument pursued throughout this book that Marxist philosophy in China, when measured against the prescriptions of the Soviet Union’s New Philosophy, which constituted the orthodoxy of the day in the international communist world, was very much more orthodox than one would anticipate from Western scholarly accounts of Marxism in China. The issue for Marxist philosophers in China was not whether the Soviet Union’s New Philosophy was orthodox – which they accepted it was – but how this reading of Marxist philosophy might be applied in the Chinese context *without* sacrificing the supposedly universal truths on which its claims to orthodoxy rested. The ‘Sinification’ of Marxist

philosophy thus became a major theoretical preoccupation. We will explore in subsequent chapters their attempts to discover a philosophical formula that could sustain the status of 'orthodoxy', as understood by the criteria of contemporary Soviet Marxist philosophy, but which nonetheless could be applied in the Chinese context in a way that facilitated the achievement of the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) historically conditioned revolutionary goals.

But why could Marxist philosophers in China not appeal directly to the authority of Marx in their quest to understand Marxist philosophy; after all, had he not written widely on philosophical issues in his early critique of Hegelian philosophy? Why need they defer to an interpretation of Marxist philosophy that appears well removed from the philosophical concerns of Marx himself? The answer lies in Marx's decision, in the mid 1840s, to abandon philosophy for political economy as the key to comprehend human history, and Engels' decision to fill the consequent philosophical lacuna in Marx's writings with a philosophy very much at odds with the philosophical concerns of the young Marx. Engels' foray into philosophy was sufficiently extensive to lay the basis of a Marxist philosophy later described as 'dialectical materialism'; and it was this rendition of Marxist philosophy that was to have a far more pronounced influence on Marxist philosophy in China than Marx's own philosophical writings, which remained largely unknown in China until the post-Mao era.

Not all Marxists in Europe and Russia shared Engels' views on philosophy, and they quickly became the subject of philosophical polemic and personal invective. These controversies, from the late nineteenth century, saw the emergence of claims by its supporters that Engels' reading of Marxist philosophy represented *the* philosophical orthodoxy of the Marxist tradition and should thus be immune from criticism. It was not, however, until the late 1920s and early 1930s that one version of 'dialectical materialism' was to achieve the status of orthodoxy through the political intervention of the CPSU. By that time, Marxist philosophy had travelled a long distance – politically and philosophically – from the philosophical concerns of the young Marx.

1. MARX ON PHILOSOPHY, ENGELS ON PHILOSOPHY

Some commentators perceive the origins of 'dialectical materialism' in the general project of Western philosophy from earliest times to explain the nature of reality, and movement and change within it.²⁰ Others have argued strongly and often critically that its origins are to be found in Engels' attempt to formulate a philosophy of nature from which the history of human society might be deduced, an intellectual project that Marx himself did not endorse.²¹ The latter viewpoint thus rejects the assumption, so important to the establishment of dialectical materialism as orthodox

²⁰ See for example Loren R. Graham, *Science and Philosophy in the Soviet Union* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1972), esp. Chapter 2.

²¹ See Z.A. Jordan, *The Evolution of Dialectical Materialism: A Philosophical and Sociological Analysis* (London: Macmillan, 1967), p. 11.