

A HARMONIOUS DIALECTIC: TANG YIJIE 汤一介 (1927–2014)
AND THE “CONFUCIANIZATION” OF MARXISM

FEDERICO BRUSADELLI

Preliminary Remarks: Sinicization in the Plural

In an article published in 2012 in the journal *Dangshi yanjiu yu jiaoxue* 党史研究与教学, historians Zhou Quanhua 周全华 and Ma Aiyun 马爱云 sketched a history of the concept of *makesizhuyi zhongguohua* 马克思主义中国化 (sinicization of Marxism), tracking “its emergence, its demise and its return” from the late nineteenth century to the present day. The paradigm of sinicization is presented by the authors as a response to the discourse of a complete Westernization (*quanpan xibualun* 全盘西化论), which had reached its peak with the May 4th movement. After the Japanese invasion – Zhou and Ma argue – the urgent need to protect the nation led to the reaffirmation of a national spirit, as “the slogan ‘revive the traditional culture of the nation’ substituted the May 4th slogan ‘shut down Confucius’s shop’.”¹ In the 1930s the narrative of sinicization was pivotal to Chinese nationalism, and its use was widespread, reaching across the political or ideological spectrum. Among the intellectuals using the concept of *zhongguohua* in those years, the article mentions Guo Moruo 郭沫若 (1892–1978), Fan Wenlan 范文澜 (1893–1969), Qian Mu 钱穆 (1895–1990), Lü Zhenyu 吕振羽 (1900–1980), Li Pingxin 李平心 (1907–1966), and Yan Zhongping 严中平 (1909–1991). The vagueness of the concept and the diversity of political options available within the general category of nationalism favored different, and often conflicting, uses of the same term. To bring some order, Zhou and Ma identify three different “developmental orientations” of the same concept: “the Confucianization of the Three Principles, the modernization of Confucianism of the New Confucians, and the sinicization of Marxism.”²

The third thread – which is both the focus of Ma and Zhou’s paper and of the present article – was the inevitable response provided by Chinese intellectuals to the need to denationalize and then renationalize an ideology that, as universal as it aspired to be, was nonetheless rooted in the European experience.³

1 Zhou and Ma 2012, 18. All translations from Chinese are mine.

2 抗战时期的“中国化”思潮表现为三个不同的发展路向——三民主义的儒学化、新儒学的儒学现代化、马克思主义的中国化. Zhou and Ma 2012, 19.

3 Zhou and Ma 2012, 18.

That approach, first proclaimed by Ai Siqu 艾思奇 (1910–1966) in 1938 as the “need for sinicizing Marxist philosophy,”⁴ was to become tightly connected to the figure of Mao Zedong. Mao was the first prominent member of the Communist Party of China (CPC) to apply the concept of sinicization to Marxism, as a blueprint for its success in China, clearly in opposition to his “xenophilous” opponents within the Party.⁵ For Mao the adaptation of Marxism to China was more a matter of social and economic circumstances than spiritual or philosophical concerns. In this sense Mao’s idea of sinicization was closer to the efforts of Wang Yanan 王亚南 (1901–1969) – who in the mid-1940s proposed a sinicization of the economic and political aspects of Marxism through the establishment of a “school of Chinese economics” (中国经济学)⁶ – than it was to the “Confucianization” of Marxism attempted by other members of the CPC such as Liu Shaoqi in the late 1930s.⁷ These two different paradigms of sinicization reached an open conflict during the Cultural Revolution, and at the beginning of the 1970s the campaign against Lin Biao and Confucius clearly attempted to redefine what the correct trajectory of Chinese history was, and consequently what a correct “sinicization” had to look like. If until 1976 the discussion on the sinicization of Marxism, both in China and abroad, was dominated by the Chairman, when the country moved into the post-Maoist era, the same interpretive category was again adopted to survey and analyze non-Maoist forms of Chinese Marxism.⁸ Besides serving as a framework for understanding post-Maoism, the narrative of “sinicization” was cast retrospectively onto the study of pre-Maoism, or of the attempts of those who opposed Mao’s version of Chinese Marxism.⁹ The rehabilitation of Liu Shaoqi’s positions, and the tense discussions on the role of class struggle that dominated the ideological debate at the Third Plenum in 1978, are fully understandable in this light as a reprise of the debate on what “Chinese Marxism” had to be.¹⁰

The idea that Marxism has to be sinicized not just because of economic and social circumstances, but by force of a national cultural essence that inevitably adapts “foreign”

4 Yi 2006. On Ai Siqu’s contribution to the development of a Chinese Marxism, see also Tian 2002.

5 Yi 2006.

6 Zhou and Ma 2012, 19.

7 For the Confucianization of Marxism in the 1930s, which paradoxically was another attempt at “sinicizing” it, see Chen 2014, esp. 157–189, and Nivison 1956.

8 The quantity of articles, essays, and books in Chinese and other languages devoted to the study of the sinicization of Marxism is strikingly abundant, and surveying its trends and history goes far beyond the limited scope of the present article. For a review of recent literature on the issue produced in the People’s Republic of China (PRC), see Yu 2012.

9 See Chan 2003.

10 Sullivan 1985.

materials to the specific historical trajectory of China has been consciously used by the post-Maoist CPC in connection with the portmanteau slogan of “Chinese characteristics” and a parallel rediscovery of the imperial and traditional roots. Thus, the application of sinicization as an interpretive and prescriptive paradigm is not just limited to Marxism but is increasingly used with regard to socialism, the free market, capitalism, and democracy. This focus on Chineseness proved useful as a conceptual tool for non-Chinese observers, as well. Especially so as the country ascends to the status of a global power, and its seemingly puzzling model – in which economic growth and openness to the world are still framed within a communist rhetoric and a increasingly nationalist and traditionalist attitude toward the past – shows all the limitations of a linear paradigm of Westernization.

In all its uses, however, both approaches – Westernization and sinicization – appear to be the offspring of a general theoretical framework by which China is not just “different” but “opposite” to Europe, and has to strive to “adapt” to its own conditions, and not just to “adopt” the constituent blocks of modernity (which is, in turn, assumed to be an exclusively Western product). A corollary of this view – as preliminarily underlined by Zhou and Ma in their paper – naturally stresses how Marxism is a “Western and modern,” or more precisely “European and German,” product.¹¹ Far from being the ideology developed by the historical individual named Karl Marx, Marxism is correctly presented as the coalescence, and to some extent the conclusion, of a number of significant European intellectual currents originating from the eighteenth century that could have only occurred in Europe. As said, stressing the Western and even “national” (*minzu*) nature of Marxism, is not incorrect, since Marxism can undoubtedly be considered a powerful synthesis of those intellectual, social, and political tendencies unleashed in Germany during the *Sattelzeit* (to use Reinhart Koselleck’s lexicon).¹² However, the sinicization model seems to imply that Marxism had (or still has) to fit into an alien framework, in which the existence of a powerful – and most importantly, *monolithic* – tradition of some sort makes it impossible for this process to be described as a neutral adaptation. To be clear, the pattern of “sinicization” is generally charged with a conflictive understanding, as the “alterity” of premodern China vis à vis Marxist thought, and modern Western philosophy *in general*, is inevitably stressed.

The different attitude toward Russia’s relationship with Marxism might shed some more light on this aspect: the use of “russification” as a methodological framework for the study of Marxism never enjoyed the same success of “sinicization.” This could be explained by the perception of Russia as a (at least semi-) Western country, even if its social and cultural conditions might have appeared almost as alien to the context in which

11 Zhou and Ma 2012, 18.

12 Koselleck 1979.

Marxism was produced as those of China. Some historians rarely used the term when referring to the construction of Lenin's theories¹³ and others did so, more often, when studying Stalin's ideology¹⁴; in both cases, the focus was more on individual contributions, and to a set of specific contingencies, rather than to an alleged Russian nature or some "traditional spirit" at work.

However, as the brief history of the concept of sinicization presented earlier demonstrates, the Eurocentric, or Western-centric, attitude of non-Chinese observers was (and is) only for a small part responsible for this approach. The category was (and is) mainly used by Chinese thinkers in connection to a long conceptual and intellectual domestic tradition. A comparison with the paucity of equivalents to the model of "sinicization" in other Asian or non-Western contexts confirms that the idea that there is a "Chinese spirit" modeling a non-Chinese ideology in a coherent and possibly foreseeable way, responding to historical, cultural, and conceptual necessities, appeared both as an aspect of the Western ideology of modernity, and as a Chinese defense of its imperial order. This is easily understandable if we extend our investigation to the history of the concept of sinicization *before* the late nineteenth century. Sinicization as a concept was already formed and alive, and even pivotal to China's self-image as a world-shaping power, in the imperial age. It originally encoded the predominance of the Han people in their ability to "transform" their environment and most importantly to civilize the neighboring people: in that case, China was the standard to which the "rest of the world" had to be measured. Tightly entwined with the idea of "sinocentrism," the concept of sinicization was repeatedly used as a response against Western shockwaves, from the "national essence movement" in the late imperial and early republican period,¹⁵ to the post-1989 reflections on Confucianism and democracy produced by thinkers such as Jiang Qing 蒋庆 (1953–) and Kang Xiaoguang 康晓光 (1963–), in all these cases serving as a key to the definition of a Chinese path, safely grounded in a "tradition" that seems as legitimate as a seemingly threatening Western "modernity." As with every concept whose ambition is to provide a general worldview, then, its borders are blurred, and its limits are shown when it is submitted to rigorous historical analysis.¹⁶ The debate on the degree of sinicization of the non-Han people throughout the imperial era, which was substantially questioned by the proponents of the "new Qing history" from the late 1980s in the United States (an approach that is still today refused by some orthodox Chinese historians in the PRC), is just an

13 See Perlinski 1963.

14 See van Ree 2005.

15 Hon 2013.

16 Katzenstein 2012.

example of how contested and problematic this approach can be in the understanding and re-understanding of Chinese history.

Turning back to the specific field of Marxist studies, a distortive and limiting outcome of this approach is in the tendency by some Chinese Marxist intellectuals to lump together different European Marxist schools and currents, often opposite to each other, under the broad and vague category of Western Marxism, as Brugger and Kelly noted in 1990.¹⁷ The internal complexity of Marxism is then sacrificed to the altar of a paradigm by which a European intellectual tradition needs to be as (imaginarily) compact as the Chinese essence it faces.

More significantly for the present article – and a counterpart to the previous observation – is the fact that pre-Maoism, Maoism, and post-Maoism could all be interpreted through the same lens of sinicization: this serves as an even clearer signal of all the limits of the concept itself, and it raises interesting questions at the same time. If the Chinese essence allegedly reshaping Marxism in Deng’s or Xi’s “sinicization” is the harmonious, hierarchical, and pragmatic spirit of Confucianism (again, an imaginary Confucianism, whose historical complexity and multifaceted nature is roughly essentialized), how “Chinese” was the revolutionary and disruptive view of Mao? What about dialectics? How far and how philosophically deep can the adaptability of Marx (and of its Hegelian roots) in China go? And is sinicized Marxism a form of Marxism at all, if it has to distort, or even cut off, its European roots?

Without rejecting the validity of the sinicization paradigm *in toto*, this paper will focus on one of the possible *sinicizations of Marxism* operated by different agents and under different circumstances at different times, rather than aiming to unveil a univocal mechanism ruling the interaction between Marxism and China. More specifically, the modest scope of this article will be the interpretation of the interaction between China and Marxism by an individual (and prominent) Confucian thinker: Tang Yijie 汤一介 (1927–2014).

Tang Yijie was born in Tianjin in 1927. His father was the prominent scholar of Chinese Buddhism Tang Yongtong 汤用彤 (1893–1964), and he studied philosophy at Beijing University, graduating in 1951 and joining the Beijing School for the Communist Cadres that same year. Expelled from the Party in 1958 as a rightist together with his wife Yue Daiyun 乐黛云 (1931–), he was later a victim of the Cultural Revolution, losing his teaching position at Beijing University in 1966. In 1973 he would briefly attempt a rapprochement to the Party, participating – together with the famous philosopher Feng Youlan 冯友兰 – in the anti-Lin and anti-Confucius propaganda work organized by the Qinghua professor Liang Xiao 梁效. Later, he would describe this experience as a “mis-

17 Brugger and Kelly 1990.

take.”¹⁸ In 1980 he could resume teaching, and he would later describe the decades between 1950 and 1980 as “wasted years,” in which the anti-rightist and ultra-leftist campaigns made any consistent advance in the humanities impossible. His uneasy and oscillating relationship with the Party was evident once more in 1989, when he signed a petition pleading leniency for the dissident Wei Jingsheng 魏京生 (1950–), thus siding with the democratic camp before the government’s crackdown on the “rebels.”

Defining himself a “humble scholar,” Tang produced dozens of books and articles in which he examined various aspects of Chinese Classicism. If in the 1960s he attempted to underline some progressive aspects of Confucianism, in the early 1970s – while working under the Liang Xiang group – he would adopt a more critical stance toward traditional thought. In the post-Maoist decades he would return to his original interest in Confucianism, this time with more freedom to explore its validity for contemporary China. Especially from the late 1990s, then, after the overcoming of the Tiananmen crisis and the return of China to the world stage, his main aim was to demonstrate the usefulness of Confucianism in the processes of “modernization” and “globalization,” the validity of the Confucian ideal of “harmony” for contemporary China, but also the importance of a philosophical dialogue between the East (represented in his eyes mainly by the Chinese Classical tradition) and the West. But most importantly, he devoted his energies to the monumental project of a Confucian Canon (*Ruzang* 儒藏), which ambitiously plans to collect more than 5,000 classics and is due to be completed in 2025.¹⁹

As is clear from his intellectual biography, Tang’s scholarly focus was not on the evolution of Marxism in China. However, as a Confucian himself interested in the interaction between *Ru* 儒 (Classicism/Confucianism) and Chinese modernity, he approached the issue throughout the years, finally putting on paper his reflections as he turned eighty-five. In 2012 he gave an interesting (and to some extent provocative) answer to some of the questions earlier raised in the preliminary remarks, in a short, but nonetheless significant, essay published in the journal *Zhongguo zhexue shi* 中国哲学史 in 2012 with the title “Transmitting Cultural Bloodline, Promoting Cultural Innovation” (传承文化命脉，推动文化创新).

Tang believed that a sinicization of Marxism – unequivocally understood as its “Confucianization” – was not only possible but inevitable. Already in 2008, writing in the *Shehui kexue bao* 社会科学报, Tang had surprised some readers by defining Chinese Marxism as a “stage in the development of Confucianism.”²⁰ Four years later, he returned to the issue with a more detailed explanation of his understanding.

18 Gálik 2018, 113.

19 For a biography of Tang in Chinese, see Li 2011.

20 “马克思主义是中国儒学发展的一个阶段。” Quoted in Liu 2011, 41.

Making Confucianism “Modern”

Tang opens his reflection by quoting and praising President Hu Jintao’s 胡锦涛 speech on the need for “inheriting the tradition to create the new,” delivered in Beijing for the 100th anniversary of Tsinghua University in 2012. Inviting his fellow intellectuals and researchers to work for this goal, Tang tries to identify what “the traditional” mentioned by Hu actually is. He thus identifies not one, but two Chinese traditions: the old one, which he labels *guoxue* 国学, national studies, more specifically defined as “the traditional culture of Chinese history, in which Confucianism exerted the biggest influence”; and a “new tradition,” represented by Marxism.²¹ Right from the beginning, thus, Tang deprives Marxism of its alien profile: after a century of “influencing and transforming Chinese society,” Marxist ideology is now fully part of the Chinese identity, Tang writes.²² The discussion on “sinicization” is therefore narrowed on how to proceed with the synthesis of these two equally Chinese threads, rather than on the *possibility* of doing so in the first place. The imbalance between China and Marxism is resolved by inserting them into the same conceptual category of *tradition*. Marxism is indeed described as “a revolutionary discourse originating in the womb of European capitalism.”²³ However, any possible tension or opposition between the two traditions, based on their mutually “foreign” natures, is neutralized by the acknowledgment that Marxism has *already* been absorbed into the Chinese identity. Tang does not escape from the key question of how this absorption actually happened. It was not Mao’s sinicization that proved to be successful: rather, the Chairman’s stress on conflict rather than on harmony (see Section 3) caused “deviations” in the trajectory of the sinicization of Marxism, Tang writes.²⁴ It was the spirit of *Ru*, then, that acted as the “root” of Chinese civilization, modeling Marxism into an indigenous tradition. Confucianism was not dispersed over the course of the twentieth century; it managed to survive even through the violent attacks of the Cultural Revolution and there is no reason to dismiss it in the twenty-first century, Tang passionately argues. Not representing a threat to or an opposite of Marxism (and of modernity in general, it is implied), the task of Confucianism is now to “provide a contribution to the construction of a socialism with Chinese characteristics.”²⁵ How to do that? Tang – after modestly admitting that he “does not have the specific research tools for such an investigation”²⁶ – recalls a talk he gave in Montreal in 1983, during the 17th World Congress of Philosophy. There,

21 Tang 2012, 5.

22 Ibid.

23 Ibid.

24 Tang 2012, 6.

25 Tang 2012, 7.

26 Ibid.

amid the curiosity of the audience, he pointed out some of the common features shared by Marxism and Confucianism: **idealism**, **pragmatism**, and a focus on **harmony**. They are still valid in 2012, he states, adding **humanism** as an update to his list.

The “idealist” (*lixiang* 理想) nature of both Confucianism and Marxism might seem a general observation, underlining what appears to be a common feature of every ideology. In fact Tang elaborates on this point with the specific aim of demonstrating how Confucianism is concerned not simply with vaguely philosophical matters, but with the construction of a “better world” exactly as Marxism is. His view – which matured, as he explains in the article, after his extensive research on the *Book of Rites* and more specifically on the *Liyun* 礼运 chapter – postulates utopianism and progressivism, rather than a conservative attitude toward society, as the DNA of Confucianism. For his case, Tang makes extensive use of quotations in which classical concepts such as *datong* 大同, *taiping* 太平, and *gong* 公 are presented and articulated: Confucianism is endowed with a linear and progressive view of time and history, oriented toward the attainment of an age of great concord (*datong*) in which supreme equality (*taiping*) and commonality (*gong*) are fully realized. As utopian as the prescriptions of the *Liyun* for a society based on full equality might be, they nonetheless echo Marxist blueprint and they should be considered a “precious source for the introduction of so-called scientific socialism in China,” Tang suggests.²⁷ Tracing a thread that links Confucianism to the aspirations toward a perfect world articulated by Marx, Tang affirms the “modern” nature of *Ru* (again, in the Koselleckian sense of a linear projection toward the future, from which a political and social program for collectivism derives).

This view is not unprecedented. In fact it could be said that such a “modernizing” attitude toward Confucianism positions Tang Yijie as an indirect heir to the New Text School.²⁸ It is not coincidental that the same concept of *datong* was extensively adopted by Kang Youwei 康有为 (1858–1927) – the last champion of the New Text reading of the Classics – in his eponymous masterpiece (the *Datongshu* 大同书) published posthumously in 1935.²⁹ Kang himself would devote much effort – although far from any interest in Marxism – in commenting on the formula *tianxia wei gong* 天下为公, “making the world public,” also central in Tang’s argument.³⁰

27 Tang 2012, 7.

28 For a survey of the emergence of the New Text School in the eighteenth century, and its development during the crisis of the Qing dynasty, see Elman 1990.

29 For a general summary of the *Datongshu*, see Thompson 1958; Hsiao 1975, 419–513. On the origins of the term *datong* and on its political significance through the imperial era, see Pines 2012.

30 As Kang himself explained in his commentary on the *Book of Rites*, “to constitute all-under-heaven [*tianxia*] in a public space [*gong*] means that each and every man is treated in one and

Tang’s positioning as a bridge-maker between the two “traditions” – and his indirect reference to Kang Youwei’s utopianism – is also reminiscent of the effort of Li Zehou 李泽厚 (1930–), another prominent twentieth-century Chinese intellectual. In two of his early papers, Li explicitly uses Kang Youwei’s utopianism as expressed in the *Datongshu* as a “proxy” for connecting Confucianism to Marx, and for demonstrating the materialist potential of the former.³¹ Even if not articulated in terms of the sinicization of Marxism, but rather, more oriented to some sort of Marxistization of Confucianism, Li’s papers show how the idea of a potential connection between the two ideologies was explored also in the early 1950s, to oppose Mao’s claims that sinicization was not to be intended as a Confucianization.

In continuity with a progressive interpretive tradition of the Confucian Classics, rooted in the Qing era and recurrently revived by Chinese intellectuals throughout the twentieth century, Tang thus worked – not just in his article on Marxism, but consistently across his entire intellectual production – toward a modernization of Confucianism.³² This was the preparatory and necessary stage to its fusion with an undisputedly modern ideology as Marxism, and for his claim that sinicization can at the same time mean modernization, Confucianization, and globalization.

The second point on Tang’s list, **pragmatism**, is rather straightforward: both Confucianism and Marxism are indeed “concerned with practice” (*shijian* 实践), more so than with pure speculation.³³ The Confucian sage and the Marxist adherent are both supposed to be politically involved individuals, working *inside* history rather than observing it. Marxist call for “changing the world” in his *Theses on Feuerbach* (1845) is paralleled by Tang to the well-known “Eight Steps” contained in the *Great Learning* 大学, a set of concentric circles that blend personal cultivation and political transformation with no separation between thought and action.³⁴ As is well known, the American philosopher

the same way” (*Liyun zhu*, quoted in Hsiao 1975, 199). More generally, the speculation on the difference between public-minded and selfish politics dwells on the classic categories of *gong* and *si*. For a survey of those binary concepts in the *Datongshu*, see Huang 2002. As for the always problematic translation of *gong* I have opted for “public,” although it must be noted that late imperial China it was also used to define the sphere of action of the local gentry rather than of the imperial state, therefore appearing more similar to the Western concept of “civic space.” On this, see Rankin 1993; Rowe 1993.

31 On Li’s article and the “triangular intellectual relationship” between him, Kang, and Mao, see Brusadelli 2017.

32 See for example Tang 2000; 2008a; 2008b.

33 Tang 2012, 6.

34 For a political analysis of the Eight Steps, see Kim 2018, 184–189. Kim presents the vision of the relationship between state and society articulated in the *Daxue* as seemingly closer to

John Dewey stressed the pragmatic elements of Confucianism in the 1920s after traveling to China. More recently, Roger Ames and David Hall have advocated for a synthesis of American pragmatism and Confucianism, especially in a “pragmatic” understanding of democracy.³⁵ This philosophical agenda resonated at some point with Tang’s reflections, although not being directly connected to the formative process of his thought (that, as mentioned earlier, is grounded much more on an “internal” look to Chinese tradition than on the employment of Western philosophical theories or categories).

As for the common view of “**man**” shared by both traditions, Tang can easily argue that Confucianism proposed in premodern times a relational view of the individual, as Marxism did in the modern world. Rituality (*li* 礼) was a social act, empathy (*ren* 仁) a relational virtue, and the state – here, again, echoes of the *Daxue* are clearly perceived – based on the relational model of the family, rather than as a contract. From this, a conception of “rights” as a social rather than individual prescription also emerged, unwittingly anticipating Marxism and socialism. In this sense, Elizabeth Perry’s notation on the persistence of social rights in China as the main source of political legitimacy provides a further element of comparison between Confucianism and Marxism that echoes Tang’s stance: both traditions seem to prescribe that the best way to legitimize a government is in its ability to provide the people with a “right to subsistence.”³⁶

The last connection traced by Tang – a common aim for **harmony** – runs parallel to the first point and is equally problematic. Presenting Marxism as a harmony-oriented ideology might sound as disorienting as presenting Confucianism as a future-oriented tradition, and yet it is equally fundamental to Tang’s intellectual project. Is it possible to employ the concept of harmony without delegitimizing the Marxist idea of class struggle? And if not, is a Marxism without class struggle still interpretable as Marxism, even if “sinicized”?

Making Marxism “Harmonious”

“Marxism is based on the law of the synthesis of contradictions, which through Mao Zedong’s stress on conflict produced some deviations; now, we should stress harmony,

Marxism than to the classical liberal tradition. “The Eight Steps is a distinctive totalizing vision in which the theoretical scope of governance goes beyond the state-society relation to include both the innermost reaches of one’s being and the world at large”; in other words, “the state should be imagined as embedded in society rather than isolated from it.”

35 See Ames and Hall 1999.

36 Perry 2008.

and this is a point in which a similarity with Confucianism can be found.”³⁷ Such were Tang Yijie’s words at the Montreal conference in 1983, recalled by himself in his 2012 article. Here, Tang is in line with other Chinese thinkers who, after the end of Maoism, tried to reassert the non-conflictive nature of Marxism. Hu Jintao himself – who was not, coincidentally, quoted by Tang – when presenting his view for a “harmonious society” would try to reconnect it to the socialist utopian tradition of Owen and Fourier, reframed into a Confucian lexicon.³⁸

Yi Jixiong 易杰雄 (1945–), a Marxist and historian of Chinese Marxism, follows the same line:

Some in the West have identified Stalinism and its derivations as the most faithful interpretation of Marxism. And yet, it is clear that Stalinism misunderstood Marxism as being primarily concerned with resolving class struggle and establishing proletarian dictatorship rather than more progressive, humanistic goals. Stalin did deploy Marxist humanist rhetoric as a populist appeal, only to abandon popular interests once power was consolidated. Stalin may be a revolutionary to some, but from a Marxist perspective he is little more than a reactionary.³⁹

Yet, Yi’s judgment on Mao is by far softer than Tang’s:

Despite their differences, both Mao and Deng believed ardently in Marxism-Leninism, which, regrettably, is to admit that both were tainted with Stalinism. Nonetheless, perhaps Mao and Deng both avoided Stalinist excesses because Stalinism simply did not fit China as it did the Soviet Union and because both Mao and Deng were humanists where Stalin was not.⁴⁰

Tang – a victim of leftist extremism himself, before joining the anti-Lin Biao campaign in the “illusion” that Maoism could finally amend itself – moved his criticism not toward Stalin, but directly to the Chairman, who interpreted Marxism under an excessively conflictive light thus causing some “grave mistakes.” Considering, as Tang does, Mao’s totalizing focus on class struggle as a misinterpretation, or even a “deviation” (偏向) of Marxism, does not imply a rejection of Marxist dialectics. The Confucian intellectual, here, does not deny the importance of class struggle in Marxism, but tries to reduce it to a stage along the linear progression from chaos and conflict to harmony and public-mindedness – as Marxist blueprint suddenly appears as mirroring the utopian perspective of the *Liyun* 禮運.

37 Tang 2012, 6.

38 Billioud 2007.

39 Yi, Mahoney, and Li 2009, 179.

40 Ibid., 182.

The role of class struggle in Marxist thought is justified by the historical and social background of its emergence: Marxism was born in a “conflictive” social model like capitalism, so of course it implied a dramatic solution to that conflict, but its final goal – and here Tang quotes Marxist *The Class Struggles in France* – was the “transformation of the world” and the realization of a harmonious society, not a state of permanent revolution.⁴¹

At the same time, since he works from the Confucian side, Tang has to provide the *Ru* with a more dialectic attitude toward change than generally assumed, in order to bridge the gap between the two traditions. Quoting the prominent Song Neo-Confucianist Zhang Zai 张载 (1020–1077), Tang tries to demonstrate that the Classics were not alien to the idea of contrast and dialectic. Zhang’s description of the progress from *dui* 对 (opposite) to *fan* 反 (opposition) to *chou* 仇 (conflict) and finally to *he* 和 (harmony) is interpreted as a quasi-Hegelian process from thesis and antithesis to synthesis.⁴²

In his analysis Tang is not only denying the absence of dialectics in Chinese traditional thought but is also denying that there might be a basic and “unsurmountable” difference in its understanding of change. Chenshan Tian, a scholar who has devoted much of his attention to the reception of dialectic materialism in China by looking at how the concept of *tongbian* 通变 (continuity in change) was developed by Chinese Marxists, presents a slightly different approach to the issue. He moves from the viewpoint that “certain cosmological assumptions of the Western tradition have led to the differences between Western Marxism and particular philosophical currents in the Chinese tradition that developed independently of Western Marxism.”⁴³ Therefore, he argues, “it is crucial to note that what *tongbian* looks for is continuity through change” and it would be “superficial to understand Western dialectics and *bianzhengfa* 辩证法 as equivalent.”⁴⁴ What the Chinese did was to “pursue a Chinese discourse of *tongbian* loaded with Marxist terminology from the West,” he concludes.⁴⁵ As Tian underlines, the passage from one stage of nature to another as described by Chinese cosmology – mainly in the *Yijing* 易经 – is not perceived as a rupture of a given order, and should not include any violent struggle; rather, it is seen as a natural evolution. In its extreme form (encoded in the formula of non-action, *wu wei* 无为, traditionally associated with Daoism) there is no need for human intervention in providing change at all, since the system is self-balancing. In its mildest forms, it prescribes “action,” but in respect of the regularity of nature, thus refraining the sage from taking any unnecessarily traumatic actions. In other words, the two systems

41 Tang 2012, 8.

42 Ibid.

43 Tian 2002, 126.

44 Tian 2002, 127.

45 Tian 2006, 308.

implied a different view of change, and different spaces and modes of action for individuals and groups in history. The *Ru* tradition prescribes one to follow nature and to adjust it to the ritual patterns encoded in tradition, inviting the understanding of and adaptation to the intrinsic rhythm that governs the transformations of the myriad of things. Marxism, in its original formulation, praises action in the world, providing the pattern of linear evolution and the justification for an (often traumatic) effort to realize it.

In his effort to blend Marxism and Confucianism Tang tries to bleach these differences in the first place. He does not empower Chinese dialectics with a conflictive nature, and in this regard his position is not so distant from Tian's. On the contrary – and this is where his position diverges – he aims at “harmonizing” the Marxian one, reducing class struggle and the overarching dialectic mechanism inherited from Hegel to a sort of “limited dialectic” that should be understood only as a passage in the march toward the ultimate order.

To conclude, then, if Maoism resulted in a misunderstanding of Marxism, it is Confucianism which has provided and will provide the most useful substance to the accommodation of Marxist thought in China. In a nutshell, positioning himself halfway between the “red Confucians” (红儒) and the “original Confucians” (原儒),⁴⁶ Tang imagines a harmonized Marxism, in which the traumatic struggle between classes gives way to a view of natural change more inspired by the *Yijing* than by Hegel. The synthesis resulting from the mutual “correction” of Marxism and Confucianism can thus be read – as Tang did in his 2008 article – as a “stage” in the development of Confucianism, and not as an alien element that has to be incorporated. As an heir to the sinocentric view of the imperial age, Tang defines the structuring of Chinese Marxism not as a mere passive reaction to a foreign ideological import, and not even as a stage of the global evolution of Marxism, but as a step in the historical evolution of Confucianism *itself*. Interestingly, all the components of modernity (a linear and progressive view of history entailing a political program based on action and social advancement) are applied to an allegedly premodern ideology such as Confucianism. China is not lagging behind in the race toward modernity, Tang claims, but it is tracing her own path with her own conceptual and cultural materials.

Conclusions

In summary, Tang Yijie's contribution to the definition and further development of a sinicized Marxism moves along the following stages: first, he narrows the multivalent

46 The former are Marxists who increasingly use a Confucian political vocabulary, while the latter are Classicists who praise a return to Confucian value. For a thorough analysis of the origin of the two categories, and for their interaction with and within Chinese Marxism, see Ren 2016.

concept of sinicization to the field of Confucianization; second, he tries to demonstrate the “progressive” nature of Confucianism, thus allowing the concept of “modernization” to be included in, and not opposite to, “sinicization”; third, he defuses the potential opposition between a Chinese tradition and a foreign ideology by providing twenty-first-century Chinese Marxism with the full status of a “Chinese tradition”; fourth, he enumerates the affinities between the two “traditions”; he also mentions the fields in which they can compensate each other as “correctives” (*jiuzheng* 糾正)⁴⁷; finally, he provides Confucianism with the possibility of articulating a dialectic, at the same time softening the Marxist one and reducing class struggle to a phase, thus setting a common “harmonious” goal for the two traditions and condemning Maoism as a “deviation.” This last point, in particular, is the most evidently political in Tang’s argument, and is connected with the opening quotation of Hu’s speech, who not coincidentally turned the praise of a “harmonious society” (和谐社会) into the slogan of his presidency.

In May 2014, a few months before Tang’s death, Hu’s successor paid a personal visit to the philosopher. On that occasion, Xi Jinping 习近平 praised Tang’s contribution “to the development of Chinese thought.” It is understandable how the leadership of the CPC might find Tang’s passionate intellectual effort to keep Marx and Confucius together from a Confucian perspective and in a neo-traditionalist synthesis, at the same time out of the Eurocentric paradigm of Westernization and out of a narrative of revolution, as responding – partially, if not totally – to its platform and aspirations.

References

- Ames, Roger, and David Hall. 1999. *Democracy of the Dead: Dewey, Confucius and the Hope for Democracy in China*. Chicago, IL: Open Court.
- Billioud, Sébastien. 2007. “Confucianism, Cultural Tradition and Official Discourses at the start of the new century,” *China Perspectives* [Online], 3. https://www.academia.edu/21628027/Confucianism_Cultural_Tradition_and_Official_Discourses_at_the_Start_of_the_New_Century_in_China_Perspectives_no_2007_3_pp.53-68. Last accessed on 08.01.2020, 15.00
- Brugger, Bill (ed.). 1985. *Chinese Marxism in Flux, 1978–1984*. Sydney: Croom Helm.
- , and David Kelly. 1990. *Chinese Marxism in the Post-Mao Era*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

47 Marxism has already provided and can still provide Confucianism with a more specific attention to the economy and to an objective rule of law, Tang argues. Confucianism at the same time can enrich Marxism with a more careful attitude toward tradition as a unifying factor and grant more space to personal cultivation and education. Tang 2012, 8.

- Brusadelli, Federico. 2017. “A Tale of Two Utopias: Kang Youwei’s Communism, Mao Zedong’s Classicism and the ‘Accommodating Look’ of the Marxist Li Zehou,” *Asian Studies* 5.1, 103–122.
- Chan, Adrian. 2003. *Chinese Marxism*. London: Continuum.
- Chen, Weigang. 2014. *Confucian Marxism: A Reflection on Religion and Global Justice*. Leiden: Brill.
- Elman, Benjamin. 1990. *Classicism, Politics, and Kinship: The Ch’ang-chou School of New Text Confucianism in Late Imperial China*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Gálik, Marián. 2018. “Tang Yijie: Contemporary Chinese New Confucianist,” *Asian and African Studies* 27.2, 111–124.
- Hon, Tze-ki. 2013. *Revolution as Restoration: Guocui xuebao and China’s Path to Modernity, 1905–1911*. Leiden: Brill.
- Hsiao, Kung-chuan. 1975. *A Modern China and a New World: Kang Yu-wei, Reformer and Utopian, 1858–1927*. Seattle: University of Washington Press.
- Katzenstein, Peter J. 2012. *Sinicization and the Rise of China: Civilizational Processes beyond East and West*. New York: Routledge.
- Kim, Youngmin. 2018. *A History of Chinese Political Thought*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Koselleck, Reinhart. 1979. “Einleitung,” in *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*, vol. I, eds. Otto Brunner, Werner Conze, and Reinhart Koselleck. Stuttgart: Klett Cotta.
- Li Juanjuan 李娟娟. 2011. *Tang Yijie zhuan 汤一介传* [Tang Yijie: A biography]. Beijing: Xinhua chubanshe.
- Liu Dongchao 刘东超. 2011. “Makesizhuyi Zhongguohua shi Rujiagua ma? Jianyu Jin Guantao, Guo Qiyong, Tang Yijie senwei xiansheng shangque” 马克思主义中国化是儒家化吗——兼与金观涛、郭齐勇、汤一介三位先生商榷 [Is the sinicization of Marxism its Confucianization? A discussion with Jin Guantao, Guo Qiyong and Tang Yijie], *Xueshu yanjiu* 7, 38–42.
- Nivison, David. 1956. “Communist Ethics and Chinese Tradition,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 16.1, 51–74.
- Perlinski, Jerome Jude. 1963. “Lenin and the Russification of Marxism,” Master’s thesis, Saint Louis University.
- Perry, Elizabeth J. 2008. “Chinese Conceptions of ‘Rights’: From Mencius to Mao – and now,” *Perspectives on Politics* 6.1, 37–50.
- Pines, Yuri. 2012. *The Everlasting Empire: The Political Culture of Ancient China and its Imperial Legacy*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Rankin, Mary. 2013. “Some Observations on a Chinese Public Sphere,” *Modern China* 19.2, 158–182.
- Rowe, William. 2013. “The Problem of ‘Civil Society’ in Late Imperial China,” *Modern China* 19.2, 139–157.

- Ren Jiantao 任剑涛. 2016. "Hongru yu Yuanru: Makeshuyi yu Rujia de guanxi" 红儒与原儒——马克思主义与儒家的关系 [Red Confucians and original Confucians: The relationship between Marxism and Confucianism], *Jianghai xuegan* 2, 60–73.
- Sullivan, Michael. 1985. "CCP Ideology since the Third Plenum" in Brugger 1985, 67–97.
- Tang Yijie 汤一介. 2000. "Kongzi sixiang yu 'quanqiu lunli' wenti" 孔子思想与“全球伦理”问题 [Issues on Confucian thought and global ethics], *Zhongguo zhaxue shi* 4, 44–48.
- . 2008a. "Ruxue shi jianshe hexieshehui ji zhongyao de sixiang ziyuan" 儒学是建设和谐社会极重要的思想资源 [Confucianism is an extremely important intellectual resource for the construction of a harmonious society] *Zhonggang Ningboshi weidang xiaoxuebao* 4, 67–68.
- . 2008b. "Xifang zhaxue chongji xia de Zhongguo xiandai zhaxue" 西方哲学冲击下的中国现代哲学 [Modern Chinese philosophy under the impact of Western philosophy], *Wenshibe* 305.2, 28–35.
- . 2012. "Chuancheng wenhua mingmai, tuidong wenhua chuanguan: Rujia yu Makeshuyi zai dangdai Zhongguo" 传承文化命脉，推动文化创新——儒家与马克思主义在当代中国 [Transmitting cultural bloodline, promoting cultural innovation: Confucianism and Marxism in contemporary China], *Zhongguo zhaxue shi* 4, 5–8.
- Thompson, Laurence. 1958. *Ta-tung shu: The One-World Philosophy of Kang Yu-wei*, London: George Allen & Unwin.
- Tian, Chenshan. 2002. "Tongbian in the Chinese Reading of Dialectical Materialism," *Philosophy East and West* 52.1, 126–144.
- . 2006. "Qu Qiubai's Reading of Marxian Dialectics," *Monumenta Serica* 54, 299–309.
- van Ree, Erik. 2002. *The Political Thought of Joseph Stalin: A Study in Twentieth-Century Revolutionary Patriotism*. London: Routledge.
- Yi Jixiong 易杰雄. 2006. "Makeshuyi Zhongguohua de tifa yingdang shen yong" 马克思主义中国化的提法应当慎用 [For a careful use of the formula "sinicization of Marxism"], *Journal of Shaanxi University of Technology (Social Sciences)* 24.1, 1–2.
- Yi, Jixiong, Josef Gregory Mahoney, and Xiuling Li. 2009. "A Marxist Perspective on Chinese Reforms: Interview with Jixiong Yi," *Science & Society*, 73.2, 177–192.
- Zhou Quanhua 周全华 and Ma Aiyun 马爱云. 2012. "马克思主义中国化"命题的提出、消失及重提 [Rise, disappearance, and return of the "Sinicization of Marxism"], *Dangshi yanjiu yu jiaoxue* 2, 18–26.
- Yu Anlong 于安龙. 2012. 近年来马克思主义中国化研究述评 [A review of the recent research on the sinicization of Marxism], *Journal of Jiangxi Normal University (Social Sciences)* 45.6, 27–32.