



Universiteit  
Leiden  
The Netherlands

## **Mao Zedong's Dialectical Materialism: A Matter of Translation**

Isaev, Berkant

### **Citation**

Isaev, B. (2024). Mao Zedong's Dialectical Materialism: A Matter of Translation. *Leiden Elective Academic Periodical*, (4), 129-145. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3764637>

Version: Publisher's Version

License: [Creative Commons CC BY 4.0 license](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3764637>

**Note:** To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

## **Mao Zedong's Dialectical Materialism: A Matter of Translation**

Berkant Isaev

---

In this paper I examine Mao Zedong's translation of the concept of dialectical materialism from its origins in Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels and Vladimir Lenin to the Chinese context. Although the history, development, and influence of Maoism have received scholarly attention, considerably less has been written on Mao's dialectical materialism and its relation to Marxism and Chinese thought. To date, this relation has received only partial attention in histories of communist thought, such as in an article by Holubnychy and the more concentrated recent approaches.<sup>1</sup> Overall, there have been several views concerning Mao's dialectical materialism. One view, particularly popular among the Soviet academics of the past, is that Mao's dialectics are essentially those of Marx understood through the works of Lenin, and that Mao does not contribute anything substantial to the discourse on dialectical materialism. Another view maintains that Mao's dialectical materialism should be understood on its own terms as an autonomous concept that differs in significant ways from Lenin's interpretation of Marx and Engels, and in some ways even from the formulation by Marx and Engels themselves.<sup>2</sup> For example, it has been argued that Mao's dialectical materialism is distinct because of its use of correlative thinking, its heavy emphasis on contradiction as present within the very basic constituents of reality, and its limited epistemology (in comparison to that of Lenin).<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Holubnychy, "Materialistic Dialectics." See also: Knight, *Mao Zedong*; Tian, "Mao Zedong;" Dirlik, Healy, Knight, *Critical Perspectives*.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Althusser in Holubnychy, "Materialistic Dialectics;" Knight, *Mao Zedong*; Tian, "Mao Zedong;" Dirlik, Healy, Knight, *Critical Perspectives*.

<sup>3</sup> Tian, "Mao Zedong."

In this paper I follow a similar interpretation of Mao's dialectical materialism. My aim is not to disprove but to contribute to this discourse by examining the relation between Marx, Engels and Lenin's, and Mao's notions of dialectical materialism through the concept of translation. I understand Mao's approach to dialectical materialism and his later formulation of his own concept of it as an act of creative translation. On the one hand, Mao's concept of dialectical materialism refers back to Marx, Engels and Lenin in some key aspects, such as its purpose as a tool for the analysis of history, society, and reality, its conceptualization of contradiction, and its prediction of the culmination of history with the end of class struggle. On the other hand, Mao's concept of dialectical materialism is distinct as it relies on Confucian and Daoist concepts and approaches toward reality. Although Mao does not use these concepts and approaches in their own context, their meanings and implications influence his reading of dialectical materialism. I claim that Mao's reading and formation of his own concept of dialectical materialism should be understood in terms of creative translation.

### **Translation**

The English word 'translation' comes from the Latin *translatio* which is a particular supine form of the verb *transfere*. *Transfere* means 'to bring across' or 'to carry over.' By 'translation,' for the purposes of this article, I refer to the act of carrying a specific item or a whole system of knowledge from one epistemic context to another and, in the course of that act, changing it so that it fits the new context it is put in, without altering the very core of the original item or system. This could apply to linguistic translation, as commonly understood, in which a signifier needs to be moved into a new language without that movement affecting its overall meaning or message. While this understanding of linguistic translation corresponds to the concept of translation used in this article, it does not exhaust that concept's meaning. Translation can also be understood in terms of communicating and moving ideas, practices, theories, subjectivity, and power from one context to another. The notion of vocabulary is useful here to illustrate the point more precisely. According to Richard Rorty, a vocabulary is a "collection

of concepts” that form complex interrelations within a system of thought.<sup>4</sup> In Marxism, for example, the concept of dialectics is related to other concepts such as labor, materialism, etc., and these relations form the Marxist vocabulary. Dialectical materialism is therefore a concept that is part of the larger Marxist vocabulary. Marxist theory can be understood as a ‘text’ and its movement and introduction in China through Chinese philosophical vocabularies can be understood as an act of translation. Just as the translation of a text requires the translation of its every component, the translation of a theory requires the translation of the concepts that construct it.

Sometimes the product of a translation becomes so different from its source material that it barely resembles it at all, making this an act of creation of something autonomous, operating according to its own logic and not according to the core idea of the translated item. This outcome, however, need not be understood as something negative; it is one of the many nuances of translation. As Walter Benjamin argues, the task of the translator is not simply to make an exact translation or even communicate all the senses of the text.<sup>5</sup> He writes: “however, a translation that seeks to transmit something can transmit nothing other than a message—that is, something inessential.”<sup>6</sup> Benjamin claims that a good translation is that which finds and preserves what is essential to the original text and then transforms it into the other language.<sup>7</sup> For him translation is not equivalence, but rather a transformation. Moreover, he writes, a good translation is possible if the translator strives towards a “pure language” (i.e., such a form of expression that can capture the core of the text in another language). Of course, Benjamin’s work is about the translation of ‘texts;’ because of that, I will not be following his philosophy strictly. I will, however, take a similar approach to the creative translation of concepts and, more precisely, to Mao’s translation of dialectical materialism. I argue that Mao is faithful to the core ideas of dialectical materialism but at the same time reads the concept through correlative thinking in Daoism and

---

<sup>4</sup> Rorty, *Philosophy*, 48.

<sup>5</sup> Benjamin, “The Task,” 153.

<sup>6</sup> *Id.*, 151.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

Confucianism, thereby transforming and articulating dialectical materialism in such a way that it becomes autonomous.

### **Dialectical Materialism according to Marx and Engels**

Marx's concept of dialectics is inspired by Hegelian dialectics, although he develops his method as a critique of the philosophies of Hegel and the Young Hegelians. Marx sees the Hegelian view of history and subsequent Young Hegelian critique of society as attempts to understand consciousness and the development of ideas through the analysis of the dialectical movement of ideas. According to him and Engels, however, this critique is fruitless as it is only a critique of ideas, of ideology. In the Young Hegelian critique, for Marx and Engels, "men and their relations appear upside-down as in a camera obscura," and the grounding of history remains abstract and thus unable to fully grasp historical progress.<sup>8</sup> Marx and Engels then provide a view of history based

not of setting out from what men say, imagine, conceive, nor from men as narrated, thought of, imagined, conceived, in order to arrive at men in the flesh; but setting out from real, active men, and on the basis of their real life-process demonstrating the development of the ideological reflexes and echoes of this life-process.<sup>9</sup>

According to Marx and Engels, the material conditions and the material base precede the movements of ideas between people. They argue that material reality (in the form of social-material relations between people) comes first and serves as the basis for the following development and historical progress. It is important to note that although Marx and Engels both apply the basic logic of Hegelian dialectics to changes in the material conditions and society, a distinction should be made between their understandings of dialectics. Marx's notion of dialectics is specifically concerned with historical change while Engels, especially in his later works, includes

---

<sup>8</sup> Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology*, 120.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

the natural processes of the world. That is not to say that Engels disagreed with Marx about dialectics. On the contrary, while preserving Marx's analysis and use of the concept, he built on and broadened the scope of Marx's dialectical analysis by applying it to the whole of reality.

According to Marx, the 'material base' is the way societies organize by engaging with matter through labor which transforms nature in order to maintain themselves and provide for their basic necessities.<sup>10</sup> The foundation of society is the mode of production: the way the resources are extracted through the technology a society has, but also the relationship of the various members of that society to the means of production (i.e., if one group owns the physical place of production and the materials with which resources are acquired, then that group is the elite and all other groups are its subordinates).<sup>11</sup> The conflicts that arise from this order include the difference in interests between the ruling class and those below it, the friction between the middle and lower classes, the friction between the lower and the elite, and so on. Here, the dialectical nature of those conflicts can be seen: every social organization based on class contains various contradictions and the way in which those contradictions are resolved leads to the change of the whole social system. In more general terms, the base creates and influences the superstructure, and the superstructure influences the base until enough contradictions and solutions to those contradictions accumulate to be a prerequisite for a new base to emerge (e.g., contradictions in the superstructure can lead to the creation of new technologies, which in turn will significantly change the mode of production). This is how historical progress happens. The ultimate resolution of the class conflict and of history then, is the realization of a "classless, moneyless and stateless society."<sup>12</sup> In other words, the realization of a communist society in which class conflict does not exist as ownership is common.

In summary, Marx's notion of dialectics explains historical and social change through an analysis of the dialectical relations

---

<sup>10</sup> *Id.*, 47.

<sup>11</sup> *Id.*, 128.

<sup>12</sup> Marx and Engels, *Selected Works*, 212.

between classes. Engels uses several important components from Marx's dialectics to broaden the concept. For example: first, the notion of qualitative change (i.e., the change from one way of organizing society to another, which according to Marx happens through changes in the technology of production, the quantity of production, etc.); second, the idea that every social organization is based on class and every class contains its own contradictions; third, the idea that every emergent social organization based on class will have its own negation from its internal contradictions. All of these components of Marx's dialectics were further developed by Engels, who used them to form a framework through which nature and reality as a whole could be investigated. Engels essentially based his three laws of dialectics on Marx's dialectical methodology. The first law states that qualitative changes can happen only in conditions of quantitative changes and the second law states that everything contains its own contradiction.<sup>13</sup> Reality is therefore a fluctuating web of interactions in which each thing contains its own contradiction (or opposite). This is true for basic material particles as well as for the structures they form: each structure contains its own contradiction. In the same manner, human interactions are the result of countless contradictions and conflicts happening on a smaller material level and class conflict is a contradiction in the various human ways of organizing society around property. It should be noted that this conflict or contradiction that defines reality is not static; the interactions between opposites result in physical as well as social motion, which leads to quantitative change that ends in qualitative transformation. According to Engels, the third law of dialectics states that the process does not end simply by a transformation by negation (i.e., the contradiction happening within a thing or a system) but by 'negation of the negation' (i.e., when the first contradiction has resulted in qualitative change, it in turn faces its opposite and is negated).<sup>14</sup>

It should be clear by now that Engels understood dialectics largely in Marx's terms, with the difference that Engels gives dialectics a broadened scope and purpose. Because of that, Soviet

---

<sup>13</sup> Lenin, *Materialism*, 48.

<sup>14</sup> Jordan, "The Dialectical Materialism," 271.

scholars made a distinction between dialectical and historical materialism, with the former referring to the broader concept developed later by Engels, which includes natural processes in the world, and the latter referring to the concrete approach to history described above. In this paper, I use the term dialectical materialism for the broader concept that includes both Marx's historical materialism and Engels' enlargement of it. This is necessary for approaching Mao's definition of dialectical materialism because although Mao had little access to Engels' work, he was influenced by Lenin, who was heavily influenced by Engels.

### **Lenin's Dialectical Materialism**

There are two important aspects to Lenin's articulation of dialectical materialism: the idea that objective reality in the form of matter exists independently of human experience and mind, and the inclusion of two of Engels's laws of dialectics.<sup>15</sup> The idea that matter exists independently from human experience and interaction serves as the basis of Lenin's materialism—here, the mind-body dichotomy is superseded and humans are also in the domain of matter, so their being is ultimately material as is that of every being. Thus, when we grasp material things we grasp their essence.<sup>16</sup> All the processes that happen to material essences are also processes that happen to and within us, so there must be universal laws to the basic processes that guide change in the world. Lenin understands Engels' two laws of dialectics as the basic laws through which reality and change should be understood, namely reality as a dynamic web of contradicting elements each of which contains its own contradiction and changes when enough quantitative changes accumulate, leading to a new cycle of negation and quantitative changes. Following Plekhanov, however, Lenin deems Engels' third law unnecessary as he sees it already implied in the first law.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, Lenin uses the second law to account for the contradictions that exist within larger systems and complex bodies. Lenin largely omits Engels' idea that contradictions exist within every single element that constitutes the

---

<sup>15</sup> *Id.*, 272.

<sup>16</sup> *Id.*, 274.

<sup>17</sup> *Id.*, 275.



world. At the same time, this idea will be a very important part of Mao's dialectical materialism.

### **Tension and Clash between Concepts in Translation**

As mentioned above, the main argument of this paper is that Mao's concept of dialectical materialism should be best understood in terms of creative translation. It is not to be understood as a one-directional translation of an epistemic item, nor as a mere continuation of an adopted idea. Moreover, it is not to be seen merely as a result of syncretism between Marxist, Leninist and Chinese philosophical ideas. Here, I will show why those approaches to understanding Mao's notion of dialectical materialism fail to grasp the rich nuances of its essence.

The predominant view amongst Soviet academics during the existence of the USSR was that Mao's notion of dialectical materialism is simply an adoption of the core ideas of Marx, Engels, and Lenin, with small changes in the articulation here and there.<sup>18</sup> But although Mao bases his understanding of dialectical materialism on Marx, Lenin, and Engels, his understanding of it is not simply an adoption or word-for-word translation. Throughout Mao's works, more than half of his references are to Confucian, Neo-Confucian, Mohist, and Daoist writings, Chinese folk legends, and contemporary Chinese intellectuals.<sup>19</sup> Mao infrequently refers directly to Marx or Engels, usually doing so indirectly through the works of Lenin. Although Mao frequently cites Lenin in his main works dealing with dialectical materialism ("On Practice," "On Contradiction," "Lecture Notes on Dialectical Materialism"), he still uses a vocabulary borrowed mostly from Confucian and Daoist philosophers.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, as will be shown later, Mao's notion of dialectical materialism differs in some key aspects from those of Lenin, Engels and Marx.

On the other hand, the idea, noted and mentioned by Knight, that Mao's concept of dialectical materialism is syncretic, in the sense that it is a blend of Chinese and Marxist thought, presents the

---

<sup>18</sup> Holubnychy, "Materialistic Dialectics," 13.

<sup>19</sup> *Id.*, 16.

<sup>20</sup> *Id.*, 18.

translation as a rather undisturbed flow of syncretic blending, without actually addressing the tensions and conflicts that would arise from such a flow of translation thus fails to appreciate the ways in which Mao attempts to resolve those conflicts.<sup>21</sup> The tensions that I am referring to are mainly between the concepts that Mao borrows from Chinese philosophy and those that he takes from Marx and Lenin: when one concept is superimposed over another, the latter resists and the superimposed concept sets the terms and the direction of the discourse but the other concept still maintains its own multilayered meaning and resists total assimilation into that discourse. Such power dynamics exist because Mao's theory ultimately refers back to Marxism (i.e., the implications of dialectical materialism, its purpose, etc., remain Marxist as they rely on Marx's analysis of social relations and history). Thus, the Marxist point of reference stands as the ground for Mao's thought. At the same time, Mao understands the Marxist vocabulary mainly through the lens of Confucian and Daoist concepts, which, even when detached from their original context, still possess their own implications and philosophical and semantic weight. Thus, while it is impossible to fully assimilate Confucian and Daoist concepts to the Marxist vocabulary, Mao opens a space for negotiation where these resistant concepts question and subvert the premises of that superimposed vocabulary. The translation is not broken because the terms set by the superimposed concept are followed. Rather, the negotiation between superimposed and resistant concepts implies the creativity of the translation and the uniqueness of the new system that Mao creates: while it is not strictly autonomous and detached from its Marxist base, as it constantly refers back to that base, this system still manages to unfold in such a way that is no longer constrained by the original theoretical framework. Instead, the system manages to maintain a creative tension between that original framework and the resistant concepts, thus remaining open for further and potentially unpredictable development.

Here the superimposed concept is the dialectical materialism that Mao finds in Marx and Lenin; the resisting concepts are the notions of change and contradiction that Mao borrows mainly from

---

<sup>21</sup> Knight, *Mao Zedong*, 49.

Confucian and Daoist classics. In the following section I will demonstrate the tension between these concepts by showing how the notions of change and contradiction in the mentioned Chinese philosophies interact with the Marxist dialectical materialism in Mao's writings.

### **Correlative Thinking and Dialectical Materialism**

Correlative thinking is a term first used by the Western sinologist Joseph Needham to describe a particular mode of thinking and knowing that is emphasized in many prominent Chinese philosophical traditions. Correlative thinking should be understood in contrast to causal thinking, a mode of knowing that privileges the search for causation and causal connections. In contemporary times, Roger Ames and David Hall are probably the scholars who have worked most extensively on the definition and history of correlative thinking in the Chinese context. They point out that causal thinking was the privileged and preferred mode of knowing in the Western philosophical discourse up until the second half of the nineteenth century and was established as such by Plato, while earlier examples include Parmenides, Zeno, etc. Because this way of thinking is concerned with the first principles and the causal relations between the first and the following, the primary and the secondary, being and becoming, it presupposes a primal unchanging mover (such as Aristotle's philosophical god or the transcendent Christian God) that is full, necessary, always present Being.<sup>22</sup> This Being stands in contrast to the becoming that arises from it through some form of causal connection.

In contrast to causal thinking, "correlative thinking involves the association of image or concept clusters related not by physical causation but by meaningful disposition."<sup>23</sup> Correlative thinking does not order being through causation, but through meaningful correlations of concepts, terms, feelings, etc. The correlations are based on similarity and synchronicity (e.g., the correlations between the Five Directions of the world or the different elements of fire, metal, earth, etc.). As Hall and Ames note, "correlatives are not

---

<sup>22</sup> Needham, cited in Hall and Ames, "Rationality," 89.

<sup>23</sup> *Id.*, 92.

logically or causally related.”<sup>24</sup> Rather, they are dispositions in which the harmony of the world is maintained. Such correlative pairings do not denote radical contradictions or relations in which one excludes the other but are rather complimentary and different at the same time. For example, *yin* and *yang* are a meaningful pairing that complete each other not in the service of a totality, but rather as a correlation of difference. From *yin* and *yang*, we can derive the difference between broken and solid (as is the case in the *Yijing*) and the difference between active and passive.<sup>25</sup> There need not be a causal or logical connection between those differences – their meaningful disposition is enough.

Ames and Hall note that in the *Zhuangzi*, meaningful dispositions imply no ultimate unity or wholeness of the world and no fixed essences. In the overall discourse of correlative thinking “there are no least units, no absolute laws privileging this or that type of pattern regularity, no fundamental forces, no ends or aims shaping the processes of ambiance.”<sup>26</sup> Harmony is in accordance with the Dao, the ultimate flow of things.

Tian discusses correlative thinking further, stating that it allows for a metaphysical view of the world where change—the change of everything from one state to another, from one thing to another—is a central principle. According to Tian, there are four ideas that characterize correlative thinking: first, the idea that everything correlates with something else; second, the idea that every difference and interaction between things is a matter of their interconnectedness in “complementary opposition”; third, the idea that the “basic pattern of *yin* and *yang* . . . ceaselessly brings everything in the world into constant change or movement”; and fourth, the idea that everything happens to be in constant change.<sup>27</sup> It should be noted that here the dichotomy between material and immaterial world is not expressed and processes of change encompass everything. While there is much more to be said about correlative thinking, for the purpose of this article I will move to

---

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> *Id.*, 94.

<sup>26</sup> *Id.*, 93.

<sup>27</sup> Tian, “Mao Zedong,” 17. Italics in original.

examine the tension in Mao's writings between the notion of change presented here and the notion of change in Marxist dialectical materialism.

It seems that the notion of dialectical materialism (that of Lenin in particular) has some commonalities with the idea of correlative thinking and the notion of change that follows from it. Both dialectical materialism and correlative thinking are all-encompassing systems: they both include the change of matter (or material change) and they both conceive of change as a constant. These basic similarities entail the possibility of dialogue between the two systems, but the differences between dialectical materialism and correlative thinking should not be underestimated. Although the system of correlative thinking technically includes material change, the term 'material' does not seem to make much sense when applied to it, because, as noted earlier, there is no meaningful way to distinguish matter and the material from anything else. In fact, neither Confucianism nor Daoism could be characterized as materialist philosophies. The term metaphysical could be more appropriate here, but this term should not be used lightly as it is debatable whether the Confucian and Daoist view of reality would fit into the traditional Western notion of metaphysics. Another difference between dialectical materialism and correlative thinking is that although the notion of constant change is present in both, it is articulated in different ways. In Lenin's broader view, dialectical change is the constant state of things in material nature. Dialectical change is defined by contradiction and progress through qualitative leaps after quantitative change. Correlative thinking, on the other hand, views change very differently: as a constant flow in an interconnected web of associations and dispositions in accordance with harmony. Reality, here, is not based on contradiction and progressive change, but on the relations between correlative concept clusters. The change does not lead to a progression towards something else. Another difference is that Marx's dialectics examines history as a class conflict that leads to societal change. In Confucianism and Daoism, such a view of history is absent.

Based on those main differences, I will now examine how Mao managed to translate the concept of dialectics through the use of correlative thinking. One important tension that appears in such

translation is that between materialism and the all-encompassing system of correlative thinking. On the one hand, there is an idea of materialism resulting from the dichotomy between idealism and materialism. On the other hand, there is an all-encompassing system that does not make such distinctions. In Mao's writings, materialism is superimposed on correlative thinking, but it fails to assert itself over it. Rather the material world blends with the all-encompassing reality of correlative thinking. The world remains material, but in Mao's writings it still largely bears the characteristics of the world of correlative thinking. In contrast to Lenin, who relies heavily on the idealism-materialism dichotomy to argue in favor of materialism by superseding the dichotomy, Mao's starting point is simply a purely material world.<sup>28</sup> Although, as mentioned earlier, according to Confucianism and Daoism the world cannot be described in materialist terms, these philosophies still see the world as a whole with different elements that are tied into a correlative network. Mao takes this understanding of the world as a unity and puts it into the materialistic framework of Marxism.

The elements within that unity exist in a correlative relation with each other, as in Confucianism and Daoism, and Mao describes those relations in terms of correlation and contradiction. Thus, the world appears as a unity of opposites that correlate with and negate each other and accumulate contradictions until change happens. This is in contrast to Lenin, who understands the larger reality simply in terms of relations of contradiction, but not of correlation. For Mao it is essential that opposites correlate in order for contradictions to arise.<sup>29</sup> Correlation, for him, is not a law like the laws of contradiction, but the very foundation of reality, which is known a priori. Without that foundation, there cannot be contradictions in the first place. Mao writes: "in order to understand the development of a thing, we should study it internally and its relationship with other things."<sup>30</sup> For Mao, 'relationship' refers to the position of the thing in relation to other things. In other words, things are positioned in such a way that they have a correlative

---

<sup>28</sup> Dirlik, Healy, Knight, *Critical Perspectives*, 90.

<sup>29</sup> Holubnychy, "Materialistic Dialectics," 30.

<sup>30</sup> Mao, "On Contradiction."

relation with each other. This is taken as a basic fact and Mao does not spend much time on it. Instead, he moves on to establish the fundamental laws of dialectics that cause things to move towards each other, and within themselves, in contradiction.

The next point of tension appears with the notions of contradiction and change. As discussed earlier, correlative thinking does not view change as a result of conflict but as a reality that follows from the meaningful disposition of things. So naturally philosophies of correlative thinking do not give an extensive account of contradiction. In this case, Mao's notion of contradiction presents a break from the traditional system of correlative thinking while at the same time relying heavily on the notion of correlative thinking. Mao's introduction and use of the law of the unity of opposites is his most original contribution to the Marxist theory, and he describes it as the main law of dialectics through which every other law can be derived.<sup>31</sup> The law of the unity of opposites states that the contradictory aspects of something (referring to Engels' first law) constantly transform into each other as each is complementary with the other while at the same time its opposite. Mao gives the example of war and peace, arguing that there can only be peace if there has been war before and war can exist only as a disruption of the peace.<sup>32</sup>

Thus, the contradictory aspects of something form a 'unity of opposites,' an identity that is contradictory and complimentary at the same time. This is strikingly similar to the relations between the clusters of concepts in correlative thinking and, as Holubnychy points out, Mao's law "resembles elements of the dialectics . . . of the Zhuangzi, the Laozi, the Great Commentary of the Yijing."<sup>33</sup>

It is essential to consider the importance of contradiction to Mao's overall theory and his views on dialectics and reality. In *On Contradiction* he writes: "without contradiction nothing would exist."<sup>34</sup> Here a difference with Lenin can be observed, as Lenin never put such emphasis on contradiction. Moreover, Lenin's view of contradiction appears to be more limited than Mao's, as he

---

<sup>31</sup> Holubnychy, "Materialistic Dialectics," 30.

<sup>32</sup> Mao, "On Contradiction."

<sup>33</sup> Holubnychy, "Materialistic Dialectics," 30.

<sup>34</sup> Mao, "On Contradiction."

understood contradiction solely as a relation between things, while Mao understood it as a relation both between and “within things, phenomena, thoughts.”<sup>35</sup> As he writes: “contradiction exists universally and, in all processes, whether in the simple or in the complex forms of motion, whether in objective phenomena or ideological phenomena.”<sup>36</sup> The mention of thoughts and ideas is interesting for two reasons: first, Mao argues that these are ultimately the extension of matter and not independent substances; and second, in contrast with Lenin, Mao emphasizes the importance of understanding ‘ideological phenomena’ through the law of the unity of opposites.

Yet another point of tension arises on the question of epistemic teleology in dialectical materialism. For Lenin, “in accordance with its nature, man’s thinking is capable of giving and gives us an absolute truth which adds up as a sum total of relative truths.”<sup>37</sup> In line with his view that when we grasp the material world, we have a full grasp of its essence, Lenin claims that such accumulated thought from the observation of dialectical processes amounts to an accumulation of relative truths about reality which in turn may provide access to the absolute truth. In correlative thinking, where processes and changes are essentially eternal and multifaceted, such knowledge is impossible to achieve as the infinity of correlating elements simply cannot be grasped. Although Mao agrees with Lenin’s idea about the absolute truth as the sum of all relative truths, he still denies that any such epistemological teleology is possible, as the accumulation (in line with correlative thinking) would last an eternity. Thus, Mao’s epistemology, while balancing between the resistant concept of correlative thinking and the superimposed notion of absolute truth, ultimately remains more embedded in direct experience and denies the possibility of accessing the absolute truth.

---

<sup>35</sup> Holubnychy, “Materialistic Dialectics,” 30.

<sup>36</sup> Mao, “On Contradiction.”

<sup>37</sup> Lenin, *Materialism*, 50.



## **Conclusion**

With the given examples I hope to have demonstrated two things: first, how the superimposed Marxist framework of dialectical materialism (through Lenin) clashes in Mao's writings with resistant concepts stemming from the correlative thinking of Confucianism and Daoism; second, how Mao attempts to creatively translate dialectical materialism through the lens of decontextualized concepts from correlative thinking that nevertheless carry their own philosophical and semantic weight.

As shown, Mao's dialectical materialism is quite different from Lenin's in some important aspects. It places far greater importance on contradiction as the basic law according to which reality functions, it understands the initial position of things as the correlative from which the first interaction (contradiction) arises, it emphasizes contradiction as present within the most basic constituents of reality, and it does not present itself as a tool for reaching the absolute truth. At the same time, Mao's dialectical materialism refers back to the 'original' in the sense that it follows some of the essential characteristics of dialectical materialism as defined by Engels (who based his work on Marx) and Lenin. Mao's dialectical materialism belongs to a larger Marxist framework for the analysis of history, society, and reality (as do the dialectical materialisms of Engels and Lenin) and most importantly, it follows the premises of class struggle as the main contradiction in society and the Marxist quest for the establishment of classless, moneyless and stateless society. Thus, Mao's translation of dialectical materialism results in the formation of a dynamic concept that, on the one hand, refers back to its source, but on the other hand, refers to correlative thinking as an important aspect of traditional Chinese philosophies. Thus, Mao's dialectical materialism remains Marxist in its basic tenets and goals but a distinct and autonomous concept in its content.

## **Bibliography**

Benjamin, Walter. "The Task of the Translator," translated by Harry Zohn. In *Illuminations*, edited by Hannah Arendt, 69-82. London: Fontana Press, 1973.

- Dirlik, Arif, Paul Michael Healy, and Nick Knight, eds. *Critical Perspectives on Mao Zedong's Thought*. Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1997.
- Hall, David Lynn, and Roger T. Ames. "Rationality, Correlativity, and the Language of Process." *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 5, no. 2 (1997): 85–107.
- Holubnychy, Vsevolod. "Mao Tse-Tung's Materialistic Dialectics." *The China Quarterly* no. 19 (September 1964): 3–37. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0305741000042090>.
- Jordan, Z. A. "The Dialectical Materialism of Lenin." *Slavic Review* 25, no. 2 (1966): 259–286.
- Knight, Nick. *Mao Zedong on Dialectical Materialism: Writings on Philosophy*. Armonk, NY: Sharpe, 1997.
- Lenin, Vladimir Ilich. *The State and the Revolution: The Marxist Teaching on the State and the Tasks of the Proletariat in the Revolution*. Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1973.
- . *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism: Critical Comments on a Reactionary Philosophy*. Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1973.
- Mao, Zedong. "On Contradiction" (1937). Marxists Internet Archive. Accessed March 28, 2024. [https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-1/mswv1\\_17.htm](https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-1/mswv1_17.htm).
- Mao, Zedong. "On Practice" (1937). Marxists Internet Archive. Accessed March 28, 2024. [https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-1/mswv1\\_16.htm](https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-1/mswv1_16.htm).
- Mao, Zedong. "Lecture Notes on Dialectical Materialism" (1938). Marxists Internet Archive. Accessed March 28, 2024. [https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-6/mswv6\\_30.htm](https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-6/mswv6_30.htm).
- Marx, Karl, and Friedrich Engels. *The German Ideology*. London: Lawrence. Wishart, 1970.
- . *Selected Works*. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1973.
- Rorty, Richard. *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979.
- Tian, Chenshan. "Mao Zedong, Sinicization of Marxism, and Traditional Chinese Thought Culture." *Asian Studies* 7, no. 1 (2019): 13–36.