Classical Marxism and Maoism: A comparative study

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A B S T R A C T

The issue of the Marxist character of “Mao Zedong Thought” has never really been resolved. The present work is a comparative analysis of the classical Marxism of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels and the ideology of Mao Zedong. The argument is made that whatever Marxism there was in Maoism was the “creatively developed Marxism” of V. I. Lenin—which allowed for socialist revolution in retrograde economic circumstances—something that had been specifically rejected by Marx and Engels. That led to the theoretical idiosyncrasies that characterized Maoism throughout its history, and ultimately resulted in the form rejected by Deng Xiaoping and post-Maoist China.

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1. Introduction

Since the death of Mao Zedong in 1976, and the seismic changes in policy, legislative enactments, and application, instituted by Deng Xiaoping, there has been a persistent, and as yet unresolved, discussion concerning the nature of the ideology that provides the system legitimacy for the government of the People’s Republic of China (Brugger, 1985; Brugger and Kelley, 1990; Ch’i 1991). One of the central contentions that has fueled the discussion is that after the death of the Chairman, and the suppression of his allies, the new leaders of China have abandoned the ideology that brought Mao to power and chosen to rule China through the employment of an improvised set of political and economic modalities having little, if anything, to do with Marxism (Burton and Bettelheim, 1978).

The fact is that we are not really certain what the relationship of Marxism was to Maoism at any time in its history. In general, we have accepted, without question, the Communist Party’s account of its doctrinal history. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) declared itself “Marxist” at the time of its founding in 1920 but a latter date revision was made to accommodate Mao Zedong, who was not there at the founding (Burton and Bettelheim, 1978).

The CCP officially lists its founding as 1921. The evidence indicates that its founding took place in 1920. The date revision was made to accommodate Mao Zedong, who was not there at the founding.

At the time of its founding, the CCP probably had between two hundred and three hundred members.
discussion about the Marxism that presumably animated China’s communists. Most discussions about the CCP—any time in its history—have simply assumed its Marxism. Even after its transformation with the death of Mao, many have persisted in speaking of the “Marxism” of the People’s Republic of China. In fact, the entire issue of the Marxism of the CCP has continued to fester among those intellectuals who have taken seriously the role of revolutionary ideology.

The problems commenced with the founding of the CCP. The Chinese Communist Party was the creature of Lenin’s Third International. It was funded and directed from Moscow—and its Marxism was that of Russia’s ruling Bolsheviks. It was a Marxism already compromised, an ideology crafted by Lenin, reflecting some of the singular conditions that characterized his revolution.

2. The Marxism of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels

Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov—Lenin—at the turn of the twentieth century was the leader of the radical faction of the Social Democratic Party of Russia. Just approaching thirty years of age, Lenin was a convinced, informed, and determined Marxist. In 1895, he had just published his The Development of Capitalism in Russia, in which he reviewed precedent economic developments in his homeland and anticipated their subsequent course—all in terms of the progression outlined in the major economic works of Karl Marx. At the time of the publication of The Development of Capitalism in Russia, Lenin gave no evidence of expecting any major departures from the “law-governed” schema left by Marx (Marx, 1954, I 18; Lenin, 1961, I, 169). The doctrinal orthodoxy with which he delivered his account suggested that he expected the revolution that his Party anticipated to follow the sequence outlined by the founders of Marxism, i.e., the growth of industry would foster the demographic expansion of the proletariat, until it constituted “the vast majority” of the population. At the same time, the number of capitalists would diminish through competition—to become an increasingly negligible political force. The process had all the appearance of automaticity. In an essay written as a preamble to the Communist Manifesto, Friedrich Engels had contended that the liberating revolution of which he and Marx spoke, was an inevitability, “not in any way whatever dependent either on the will or on the leadership of individual parties or whole classes” (Marx and Engels, 1976, VI 101–102).

The founders of Marxism were apparently convinced that the promised revolution was irresistible, decreed by the inerrant “laws” of capitalist development. They were convinced that industrial capitalism would expand until it had extended to the farthest reaches of the planet—producing an “infinite” abundance of material goods that would make possible a system in which human beings had their every need satisfied and to which they would contribute what they would. If violence were to attend the anticipated revolution, it would be the consequence of a futile resistance against the inevitable by the remaining residue of oppressors.

The logic of the doctrine was eminently simple. In the modern era, industry would expand exponentially, drawing agricultural labor from the countryside into the cities where the large manufactories were soliciting hired help. For rural workers, working for assured wages proved more attractive than the meager and tenuous rewards of agricultural labor—so cities soon formed around the great mills of Lancaster, Manchester, and elsewhere. There, the simple farm laborers were quickly transformed into proletarians—urbanized factory workers. In his The Condition of the Working Class in England in 1844 (1950), Engels drew a picture of simple land labor being transformed into knowledgeable and reasonably sophisticated urban workers by years of working on the factory floor. According to the prognostications of their doctrine, Marx and Engels expected just such urban sophisticates to assume intelligent control over the industrial system that they would inherit with the inevitable socialist revolution.

The political system these endowed workers would create would be one that was fundamentally democratic, its economy built around a great, voluntary, association of equals—producing goods in accordance with a “general plan” collectively agreed upon. It would be a system that would resolve the sense of alienation that had settled down on the workers of the time. It would restore the humanity to human associations that commodity capitalism had reduced to nothing more than impersonal cash payments (Kautsky, 1904).

It was the compelling logic of this doctrine that made both Marx and Engels insist that the socialist revolution could only be the product of an advanced industrial system peopled by urban proletarians. For the founders of classical Marxism, no other class had the properties of the urban working class. The least equipped were the peasants—afflicted with the “idiocy of the countryside” (Marx and Engels, 1976; X 415, 422, 469–72.). For Engels all that was simply the “ABC of socialism” (Marx and Engels, 1961 XVIII 356–67).

This was the general image of revolution the young Lenin carried with him into the twentieth century. Unhappily, by that time both the founders of classical Marxism had passed away—and with their passing, there were those prepared to introduce substantive modifications into the prevailing doctrine.

3 Both Marx and Engels maintained that position until their passing. Marx’s last introduction to the Communist Manifesto insisted that the peasants of Russia could not expect to produce a “socialist” revolution in an economic environment that was industrially primitive. Only if their revolution coincided with—and received support from—a proletarian revolution of urban sophisticates in the fully industrialized West, might socialism be attained. See Marx’s 1882 Preface to the Russian edition of The Communist Manifesto available in English in the 1998, Penguin edition; New York.

4 The Communist Manifesto provides an undisguised summary of the process of socialist revolution and so characterizes the peasantry. Engels, in his The Peasant War in Germany described peasant revolutionaries, because their environment is economically retarded, as conjuring up “chiliastic dream visions” as revolutionary goals.

5 The quotation is from Engels, “Flüchtungsliteratur—V. Soziales aus Russland.” The entire text is relevant.
Soon after the passing of both founders of the original doctrine, Eduard Bernstein, a close collaborator of Engels himself, introduced major substantive changes into the doctrine—providing the grounds for the advocacy of an essentially nonviolent form of “democratic” socialism (Bernstein [1898] 1961). In that same environment of doctrinal review and reassessment, Georges Sorel advocated a form of Marxism that addressed novel issues of mass mobilization through the use of moral suasion and selective violence (Sorel, 1950). Together with the philosophical idealism of Giovanni Gentile, Sorelianism was to provide the revolutionary rationale for Mussolini’s Fascism. For his part, Ludwig Woltmann found an appeal to biological racism at the very theoretical foundations of Marxism, and proceeded to draw out entirely unanticipated entailments. Thus, by 1920, the Marxism left by Marx and Engels had spawned a number of variants among which were those that were to go on to serve as the intellectual rationale for the mass movements of National Socialism and Fascism (Gregor, 2009). Leninism was to be but one among several variants (Lenin, 1961, XXI 85–8).6

3. The Leninist variant

Leninism distinguished itself from most of the other variants of Marxism that had manifested themselves by the first years of the twentieth century—by insisting that it had remained faithful to the doctrinal commitments of the original system. For all of Lenin’s insistence, however, by 1902 that claim had to be significantly qualified. In that year Lenin published “What is to be done?” (Lenin 1961, V 347–529)—an account that clearly revised some of the specific expectations of the revolutionary process as it had been formulated by the founders.

In “What is to be done?” Lenin argued that in the course of revolutionary developments, the proletariat would give expression to a truly “revolutionary consciousness,” essential to revolution, only if that consciousness were “introduced from without”—by declassed bourgeois intellectuals. A revolutionary consciousness could not be expected to manifest itself as a “reflex” of prevailing economic conditions. Karl Kautsky, a recognized spokesman for Marxist orthodoxy, had earlier suggested as much.

The contention had gained currency among Marxists as observers noted that workers in the advanced industrial nations tended to favor a “trade union mentality”—an effort to enhance their wages and secure their employment—rather than assume truly revolutionary aspirations. That, together with a need to justify the existence of political parties advocating revolution, fostered the conviction that the proletariat required some sort of intervention if it were to serve revolutionary purpose. “Revolutionary consciousness” was no longer expected to arise as a “reflex” response in some set of specific economic conditions. It was to be delivered to the proletariat by some self-selected revolutionary leadership. The change altered the intrinsic logic of Marxism. No longer was it expected that factory workers would spontaneously make revolution in a given economic environment. Under the new interpretation, revolution required the leadership of an organized, self-selected, political elite of bourgeois origin—without whom an appropriate revolutionary consciousness would be forever absent.

Defenders of the inherited system were quick to raise objections. Rosa Luxemburg early argued that the change advanced by Lenin would radically transform the democratic substance of the revolutionary vision and provide a justification for hierarchical and nondemocratic rule (Luxemburg, 1961). In fact, Lenin’s Bolshevik faction did assume a hierarchical and authoritarian political stance—that was thereafter to typify its behaviors.

With the advent of the Great War of 1914–1918, Leninism was to introduce still more substantial changes in the doctrine left by Marx and Engels. Once the war commenced, developments proceeded apace. Virtually every country in Europe, committed as they all were to existing security treaties, took sides. In each, their socialist parties all agreed to support their respective governments.

All the socialist parties of Europe had been members of the Second International, and had each vowed to resist any decision by their government to involve the nation in military conflict. The English socialists resisted their government’s call to arms for a brief period, only to comply within a short period.7 Lenin was outraged. He held that all of Europe’s socialists had betrayed both their sacred pledges as well as the revolutionary doctrine on which their pacifism was predicated.

Lenin scrambled to try to understand what had transpired. He sought to understand what had caused the betrayal of their commitments by socialism’s most ardent advocates. Within the space of a year, in an effort to account for the behavior of socialists in the face of international conflict, he had put together a short book, Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism (Lenin, 1961, XXII). It contained theorizing that would transform doctrinal Marxism forever. In his brief exposition, Lenin sought to explain why the irresistible and inevitable revolution Marx and Engels had led their followers to expect had not eventuated. The reason, he went on to argue, was to be found in the growth and developmental of commodity capitalism itself.

Lenin indicated that Marx had demonstrated that the predictable growth of industrial capitalism would lead to a search for market supplements to absorb some of the production that could not be profitably sold in domestic markets. That search was attended by exploration for raw materials to feed the needs of enterprise. Both efforts generated a flood of profits for the home country (Lenin IV, 373). Lenin maintained that what Marx had not anticipated was the evident reality that those “super profits” would be employed by the masters of industry to suborn domestic labor. The funds, he argued, were distributed

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6 Lenin was well aware of the doctrinal origins of those variants. He specifically alluded to the work of Gentile and Woltmann as “important” in the study of classical Marxism—not anticipating where their respective work would lead.

7 Only the Italian Socialist Party remained true to its anti-war pledge. That led to Benito Mussolini’s defection and to the rise of Fascism.
among a thin stratum of industrial labor leaders, who then proceeded to lead the working class into conservative and pro-business political postures—one of the evident results of which was the betrayal by socialists of their vow to resist any war undertaken by capitalists.

More important than that was the impact of the depredations that resulted from the penetration of the advanced industrial nations into the life-space of the peripheral, retrograde economies. Invariably, the response of the indigenous peoples of the “colonies” was outrage. By the beginning of the twentieth century there was resistance to the impostures of the advanced industrial nations. Uprisings occurred throughout the peripheral, economically retrograde regions.

Lenin argued that what was happening was an evident shift in the locale of anti-capitalist revolution. The workers of the advanced industrial nations, betrayed by their suborned leadership, could hardly be expected to undertake anything like a Marxist social revolution. Instead, the task fell to the restive masses of the exploited periphery. They could well be expected to rise up against their tormentors. What that meant for Lenin was that instead of revolution erupting in an environment of advanced industry—as Marx and Engels had predicted—it would make its first appearance in the peripheral, nonindustrial regions. Revolution, Lenin argued, would first occur at international capitalism’s “weakest link.”

If that were to prove true, the immediate problem was that much of what was expected to follow a “Marxist” revolution could not take place. Revolutions in peripheral economies could only have peasants as their recruitment base. They would be the “unsophisticates” that the founders of Marxism had dismissed as irretrievably incompetent and reactionary. The social and economic system they would favor could only be as retrograde as their economy (Marx and Engels, 1976, X). Gone would be the promise of abundance in equality—and any hope of political democracy.

Lenin, as an informed Marxist, was well aware of the implications of his change in the venue of anti-capitalist revolution. He went on to argue that the change only temporarily postponed the revolution Marx and Engels had predicted. He made very clear that his modification involved only a change in the sequencing of the order of revolution. He was to contend that revolution would first occur at the weakest link of capitalism—denying capitalists critical market supplements and resources—thereby precipitating economic collapse in existing advanced industrial systems. That would bring the requisite proletarian revolution to its appropriate setting—and the orthodoxy of Marxism would be fully restored.

As the ruler of Bolshevik Russia, Lenin continued to insist that his revolution was the prologue to the “universal proletarian revolution” that thereafter would sweep over all the advanced industrial nations to fulfill the promise of Marxist liberation. Because he ruled a Russia that had undertaken what was essentially a nonsocialist, peasant based revolution, he acknowledged that his “transitional” governance could only be dictatorial, coercive, and unconstrained by “bourgeois law” (Lenin XXVIII, 250–51, 255, 260, 268). Because he had wrested control of an economically retrograde nation wracked by civil war and wide-spread devastation, he governed with what he understood to be requisite force. He had his followers simply requisition the foodstuffs and supplies necessary to sustain themselves and their allies. He coerced labor and summarily executed recalcitrant “hooligans.” In those parlous circumstances, he enjoined his followers to “hang on” until the anticipated proletarian revolution in the advanced industrial countries would restore the predetermined logic of history.

As it turned out, history would have it otherwise. By the beginning of 1921, revolutionary Russia faced economic ruin and political insurgency. Famine devastated the countryside and the nation’s gross national product fell to about one third its prewar level. There was unrest in the countryside, and an armed uprising broke out among the sailors of Kronstadt. Lenin realized that the nation could not continue to suffer the excesses of what his followers called “war communism.” Under the goad of necessity, Lenin began to speak of what he held to be rational alternatives to the jury-built system he had imposed.

Lenin began to put together what was to be called his New Economic Policy (NEP). Instead of the confiscation of farm produce, the peasants were allowed to pay a fee in kind and whatever surplus remained they would be allowed to market. Small private industries were to be allowed and entrepreneurs were permitted to hire laborers. Foreign investments were solicited and special concessions were offered. In essence, as he himself acknowledged, Lenin was prepared to make a tactical retreat from “doctrinaire” Marxism. He was compelled by events beyond his control to refocus the energies of his revolution. He made its prime responsibility the rehabilitation and expansion of material production. He had been forced to abandon the Marxist goal of product distribution and commit his system to its increased production (Gregor, 1995; ch. 3).

Lenin recognized that what he was driven to advocate was a form of “state capitalism”—a system that would begin to supply the missing economic foundation of a truly Marxist revolution. While he argued that the system he advocated would serve only temporary purpose—until the fulsome proletarian revolution overwhelmed the industrial nations—he was nonetheless resolute and demanding in its administration. These were the prevailing conditions in Bolshevik Russia at the time of the founding of the Chinese Communist Party.

4. The Marxism of Chinese communism

By 1920, with the absence of a redeeming proletarian revolution in Western Europe, the desperate Bolshevik leadership in Russia sought collateral support for their beleaguered efforts—wherever it might be found. China, embroiled as it was in its own revolution since 1911, was seen as a possible candidate. The leadership of the Third (or Leninist) International—the Comintern—understood China to be undergoing a “bourgeois democratic” revolution. Lenin, Leon Trotsky, and Josef Stalin all considered China to be traversing the bourgeois period of its economic history—emerging from the rigidities of monarchial

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8 See the entire discussion in Engels’ The Peasant War in Germany.
rule and the stolid immobility of an agricultural economic system. They held that representatives of revolutionary “socialism” should be represented in the evolving process—and recommended that the Comintern initiate and foster the founding of a “Communist Party” in China to contribute to that end.

Like Lenin (Lenin XVIII, 163–5), the leaders of the Comintern considered the then active revolutionary proceedings in China an essentially bourgeois responsibility. As such, it was held to be primarily the business of Sun Yat-sen’s Kuomintang. Since that was the case, they argued that with the founding of the proposed Chinese Communist Party (CCP), it would be most effective if it merged with the Nationalist Party of Sun Yat-sen to form a revolutionary “united front.” The Communists were expected to assist in the efforts of Sun’s forces, but at the same time remain prepared to exploit any opportunities offered to further the cause of their own Marxist intentions.

Well aware of just those possibilities, Sun had made very clear that he would not countenance uniting his Nationalists with the Communist Party. Sun sought to insure the independence and doctrinal coherence of his revolution. The theoreticians of the Comintern chose not to contest Sun’s position, and the Chinese Communists, subject as they were to the direction of Moscow, had to accept Sun’s insistence that if any Communists wished to join the Kuomintang, they must do so as individuals and not as members of the CCP (Leng and Palmer, 1960). Those were the conditions under which Mao Zedong entered into revolutionary activity in China. He became active as a local leader of revolutionary peasants, not as a Communist, but as a member of Sun’s Nationalist Party.

In retrospect, it seems clear that Mao was not fully aware of what that entailed. We do know that when he assumed leadership responsibilities in the peasant unrest, he had little theoretical understanding of Marxism. His doctrinal convictions, as we find them in his writings that have survived, were a pastiche of notions that were current in his environment. However much these early writings were subsequently modified, there remains in them the traces of the belief system to which Mao was committed as a leader of peasant revolutionary forces in the field.

First of all, Mao stated explicitly that he recognized the ideas that inspired the peasant to revolutionary activity were the ideas of Sun Yat-sen—not those of Karl Marx (Mao, 1961–1965; I, 30–1, 48). The representatives of the Comintern had made it abundantly clear that was to be expected. The revolution in China was a “bourgeois democratic” revolution. Although bourgeois, the theoreticians of the Comintern maintained that China’s revolution would deny imperialism access to China’s markets and resources—thereby weakening capitalism at its core and contributing to the coming of the Marxist world revolution. China’s bourgeois revolution was thus understood to be part of an inclusive international proletarian revolution. As a consequence, Mao seemed to be convinced that since the Chinese revolution was a critical part of the general movement toward the universal Marxist revolution, there was a requirement that “proletarians” provide its leadership (Mao, 1961–1965; I, 27–8, 32, 64–5, 97, 99). He held that China’s peasant revolution—inspired by Sun’s “Three Principles of the People”—was somehow to have a “proletarian” inspiration.

Having taken that position, and having read at least part of the Communist Manifesto, Mao argued that however bourgeois the Chinese revolution might be, it required the “proletariat” to assume a dominant role in the entire process. How that was to be accomplished shaped Maoism as a political doctrine.

Since there were so few urban proletarians in China, what Mao did was to consider peasant laborers, handicraftsmen, students, members of the urban petite bourgeoisie, and intellectuals in general, to be “proletarians.” How that could be possible is not difficult to understand. Lenin had suggested no less when he contended that proletarian consciousness could be delivered, “from without,” to recipients of whatever class. For Mao, that notion, however curious, would make China’s peasant revolution conform to “Marxist” expectations. What it also accomplished at the same time, of course, was to substantially divert the Chinese revolution of whatever classical Marxism it may have entailed.

For the founders of Marxism, peasants and petty bourgeois elements had none of the properties required for a liberating revolution. It was only the urban proletariat that could provide the democratic sentiments, economic competence, and the informed energy for real liberation.

Mao’s revision created a doctrinal curiosity that has puzzled intellectual historians for decades. In fact, there is nothing particularly mysterious about the political views with which Mao identified in the 1920s and early 1930s. They are simply a somewhat garbled and imaginative version of the views advanced, at that time, by the Bolshevik theoreticians of the Comintern.

Lenin had taught his followers the dictum that “proletarian consciousness” was something possessed by the leadership of the Party—because they commanded Marxism’s theoretical substance. So possessed, the leadership had the ability to transmit that consciousness to whatever recipients. Bolsheviks had no difficulty identifying anyone, of whatever objective class membership, as “proletarian” as long as they gave evidence of being motivated by the “correct” political, i.e., Bolshevik, consciousness. Thus, the urban workers who were Mensheviks could not be “proletarians.” Conversely, peasants, who were Bolsheviks, clearly were. The sole test of “proletarian” class membership was overt political behavior. In effect, as long as the

9 As early as 1912, Lenin had made his judgments concerning Sun Yat-sen’s revolution clear in his essay on “Democracy and Narodism in China.”
10 I have used the Wade-Giles transliteration because it is more familiar to Anglophone readers.
11 Mao’s writings from this early period are instructive. His doctrinal notions from the 1920s can be reconstructed with considerable confidence. See his “The Analyses of Classes in Chinese Society,” and “The Chinese Revolution and the Chinese Communist Party,” (Mao, 1961–1965).
12 In one place Mao insisted that he was leading a movement of destitute peasants and “other petty bourgeois elements” that was nonetheless a “revolutionary movement of the proletariat.” See Mao, “Report on an Investigation of the Peasant Movement in Hunan,” “Why Is it that Red Political Power can Exist in China,” and “The Struggle in the Chingkang Mountains,” Mao, 1961–1965, 27–28, 32, 64–65, 97, 99.
behavior of an individual or a group of individuals conforming to the Party “line,” they were certified “proletarian.” They possessed the required “proletarian consciousness.” Gone was the traditional Marxist notion that consciousness was a reflex of the material life conditions of the individual or group. Consciousness was a function of adaptation to the Party line.

Thus, the notion that proletarian consciousness might be transmitted to individuals of any class by Party leadership had been established in the course of the Bolshevik revolution. Successful transmission was determined by obedience to the Party line and continued obedience was assured by regular purges of the Party and its membership—a practice that subsequently came to characterize all Leninist parties.

Mao seems to have accepted the essence of all that. In fact, he took Lenin’s “creative development” a step further. Not only was it no longer deemed true that revolution be made essentially by urban proletarians, Mao argued that revolutions, in general, could be made by peasants, not because they were infused with “proletarian consciousness” from whatever source, but because they were poor.13 Mao maintained that the generic peasant poor were dissatisfied, and because dissatisfied, sought revolution. All the complex Marxist argument about revolution being a function of the “laws” governing the capitalist economic system—producing the requisite political and social maturation of the urban proletariat—was entirely abandoned.

For Mao, peasants made revolution because they were poor. It was as simple as that. Moreover, as peasants they were also unlettered and their consciousness blank. As such, Mao argued, they provided those possessed of the requisite “proletarian consciousness” a canvas on which to inscribe revolutionary thought (Mao, 1974, 940).14 Mao had introduced a further “creative development” into the doctrinal changes made by Lenin to the Marxism of Marx and Engels. Mao was further developing what was to become his own peculiar revolutionary doctrine.

It was with that transmogrified Marxism that Mao faced the years of armed struggle in the hinterland of revolutionary China. It was an odd Marxism because he insisted that the ideology he publicly served was the Three Principles of the People of Sun Yat-sen. While his speeches and essays were dotted with Marxist allusions, he consistently maintained that he sought to realize the “bourgeois democratic” revolution of the founder of the Kuomintang. Over the years he consistently reaffirmed his commitment. In 1927 he explicitly defined Sun’s Three Principles of the People as the chosen weapon of the peasantry against their oppressors (Mao, 1961-1965, I, 30–1). By the fall and winter of 1936, Mao had formalized the central role played by the ideology of Sun in supplying the doctrinal enjoinders of his revolution (Mao, 1961-1965; I, 261, n. 7).15 In 1937, and again in 1943 and 1945, the Central Committee of the CCP “solemnly declared” that the Party was fighting for the “complete realization” of Sun’s doctrine (Mao, 1961-1965, III, 147, 283).

In 1949, Mao acceded to power in China, initially insisting that his intention was to implement the “bourgeois” policies of Sun. “Domestic capitalists” were to be permitted to continue their commodity production as well as its merchandizing. They would be free to hire and fire employees. Peasants could continue to own land, to profit from it as conditions allowed. Only those large landholders who had identified themselves with the opponent Nationalists of Chiang Kai-shek were singled out for revolutionary land redistribution. Those capitalists who had collaborated with foreign imperialists or the Japanese invaders similarly were to suffer. For the rest, Mao assured them that the abolition of private property was but a distant prospect. China would have to first traverse the entire bourgeois period before the socialist eventuality.

It was at least for those reasons that during the years that preceded Mao’s ascendency to power many American academics and government officials considered Mao and his “communists” to be potentially democratic “agrarian reformers” rather than social revolutionaries. At least one of the results of such judgements was the gradual withdrawal of United States support for the “reactionary” Nationalist forces. At the same time, the Soviet Union extended its “unofficial” military and economic assistance to Mao’s armies. That contributed to the defeat of the Nationalist forces in the civil war. In the end, in acknowledgment of defeat, Chiang Kai-shek transferred a major remnant of his forces to the island of Taiwan, there to establish an anti-communist redoubt, leaving continental China the sole responsibility of Mao.

Almost immediately upon securing his position on the Mainland, Mao unexpectedly embarked upon the “socialization” of China. There was no longer talk of the political and economic doctrines of Sun Yat-sen. By 1950, Mao had begun the collectivization of peasant farming. In the years that immediately followed, he merged peasant cooperatives into “People’s Communes,” until private farming no longer existed anywhere in China. In the course of all this, irrespective of his repeated assertions to the contrary, he undertook the comprehensive abolition of private property in China—a process he considered essentially complete by 1956. Throughout the undertaking, Mao had sent his emissaries to the Soviet Union for guidance. Years later, he confided that during the first years of Chinese Communist control of China, the Soviet Union fully directed the course of conduct of his government (Mao, 1974, 98–9; Mao, 1977, 34–8, 122).

In retrospect, what is equally evident is that by the mid-1950s Mao was becoming restless under Moscow’s control. He found reasons to raise objections to aspects of the political thought of both Lenin and Stalin. In 1957 he found occasion to criticize Stalin for failing to fully understand the dynamic potential immediately below the surface of mass mobilization (Mao, 1989, 345). Mao argued that Stalin had failed to understand the full power of “fanatical” masses once aroused. Mao argued that the sentiment of committed multitudes, once engaged, would render them capable of prodigious accomplishments. It

13 Both Marx and Engels understood that revolutions throughout history had been made by those who suffered poverty and oppression. They also insisted that such revolutions were incapable of changing the objectionable conditions that produced them. That would be the exclusive responsibility of the “proletarian” revolution.

14 While Mao had made these characterizations as a young revolutionary, he repeated them in his full maturity.

15 See the statement of CCP policy, Mao, “A Statement on Chiang Kai-shek’s Statement.”
was about that time that he had begun to put together the plans for China’s fateful “Great Leap Forward.” Mao conceived the “Great Leap” a program by virtue of which the Chinese would surpass the level of industrialization of Great Britain—particularly its level of steel production—within a decade or so. A form of unqualified voluntarism had become central to Maoism as a political system.

With the enthusiasm supplied by the Party Center, the peasants of China were expected to work tirelessly, with scant compensation, to satisfy the productive quotas that arithmetically increased at every Party meeting (Mao, 1989, 512–3). Pig iron and steel production was to be in large part made a responsibility of the peasants themselves—who were totally innocent of any understanding of the processes involved. Thousands upon thousands of “back-yard furnaces” were jerry-built by peasants to accomplish their assigned industrial tasks—without the least technical supervision. In the course of attempting to satisfy the demands from the Center, the entire countryside was stripped of vegetation in order to fuel the furnaces. At the same time, the agrarians of the countryside were ordered to produce expanding quantities of food products not only to supply the cities, but to satisfy Beijing’s increasing export obligations—which were expected to furnish capital income to pay the accelerating costs of rapid industrialization.

In response to unremitting pressure from the Center to increase production, local cadre in the peasant communities began to inflate the figures of their agricultural yields. It has been established that cadre in the field fabricated almost all the reports submitted to the central authorities—doubling and tripling the actual production of crops. Beijing immediately entered the fraudulent figures into its calculations. On the basis of those figures, the Center required the peasant communities to deliver crushing amounts of produce to the authorities—leaving almost nothing for peasant consumption and for the seeding of the next year’s crop.

As an immediate result, in many parts of China, the peasants—in order to survive—consumed whatever reserves they had, leaving nothing for seeding. Food security diminished everywhere in the farming regions. China was entering one of the most catastrophic famines in its history (Yang, 2012). Peasants, restricted by their cadre supervisors, could not travel to search for food. For its part, the Center refused to release any of its reserves—all of it held for foreign sales. The result was starvation on an epic scale, with instances of cannibalism and theft so prevalent they alarmed the resident cadre. The Center refused any famine relief, insisting that peasant complaints were exaggerated.

All of that was coupled with the almost immediate realization that perhaps the entire product of the back-yard furnaces, produced at such onerous cost, was so contaminated by extraneous materials as to be entirely unusable. Together with all of that, the irrigation systems, the canals and catchments, laboriously constructed by simple human labor, everywhere was being clogged with silt.

Estimates of the number of lives lost in these unnatural efforts range from a low of thirty million to a high of fifty million. Mao had anticipated as much, but held that China’s rapid industrialization was worth the price in human lives (Mao, 1989, 494).

By 1961, amid the turmoil, popular resistance made its appearance in various parts of China. Some resistance surfaced as well among the highest ranking members of the Party. A call for Mao to surrender some of his power was articulated. In the infighting that followed some of the most senior leaders of the Party were to suffer. Nonetheless, Mao surrendered some of his control over day-by-day affairs. Almost immediately food relief was provided the most devastated regions of the nation. Planting returned to its normal tempo. Work ceased at the back-yard furnaces. General economic production gradually began to return to its normal pattern.

It appears evident in retrospect that Mao only accepted his partial retirement with resistance. He continued to criticize those who had forced him to remove himself from immediate and comprehensive control of China’s politics. He began to fret about “revisionism.” Changes in the Soviet Union that followed the death of Stalin had prompted his initial preoccupation. The leadership of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, he argued, had used the political uncertainties that accompanied the death of Stalin to change the character of their state and society. In their revisionism he saw the shadow of capitalism’s revival. He saw his opponents in the CCP seeking a similar opportunity in his removal from the center of Chinese politics. He was certain that they sought the occasion to insinuate revisionism into the nation’s politics—in order to “restore capitalism.”

By 1966, Mao had organized resistance to the “revisionism” he saw emerging everywhere. His wife Chiang Qing, and some loyalists in Shanghai, formed an organization for precisely that purpose. They undertook to denounce Party members who, in their view, had taken the “capitalist road” in their opposition to the Chairman. Maoists considered a political “road” that sought to abandon socialism and return to the exploitative policies of the past. Included in the retinue of so-called “capitalist roaders” Maoist loyalists identified some of the foremost leaders of the Chinese Communist Party—including not only Marshall Peng Dehuai, but Liu Shaoqi as well. To ensure his success in the political struggle that was becoming increasingly widespread and unpredictable, Mao mobilized the youth of China, as Red Guards, to defend his revolution, his regime, and its prerogatives.

Universities and secondary schools were shuttered to allow the young the latitude to defend “socialism” against the “capitalist roaders” in the Communist Party. The youth of China was exhorted by Mao loyalists to “bomb the headquarters” of the Party—to search out and punish the traitorous revisionists.

The Red Guards appeared everywhere. At Mao’s instigation, they were allowed free transportation on China’s railroads. They surfaced wherever there was government activity. They were hunting “capitalist roaders.” In their efforts, they harassed officials and interrupted work. Many working officials were taken into “custody,” at the whim of the mostly adolescent Red Guards, and publicly humiliated. It was not uncommon for some to be beaten to death in paroxysms of violence. The son of Deng Xiaoping was hurled from a third story window—to remain a paraplegic for the remainder of his life. So threatening and
degrading was the experience that many, confronted with the prospect of such sessions, chose suicide. While no certain statistics are available, the number of regional officials and local Party members demeaned, abused and/or killed surely ran into the hundreds of thousands.

At the same time, Maoist loyalists enjoined the Red Guards to destroy China’s “four olds”—its “old customs, old culture, old habits, and old ideas.” Almost immediately, numberless street names were altered to give expression to revolutionary sentiments—in the enthusiasm of destroying something of the “four olds.” What was to be included among the offending “four olds” was never defined. It was left to the Red Guards to decide what were to be the proper objects of their revolutionary zeal. Their destructive outrage fell upon temples, monasteries, treasured architectural sites, libraries, and graveyards alike. The bodies of presumed reactionaries were disinterred from centuries-old interment and violated. The grave of Confucius was vandalized. Everywhere in China there was vast destruction of books, paintings, and cultural artefacts. In their passion to find and destroy the cultural products of “Old” China, private homes were broken into and looted. An attack on Beijing’s Forbidden City was narrowly averted only by the timely intercession of Chou Enlai.

This entire orgy of violence and destruction was informed, sustained and abetted by Lin Biao—made Minister of Defense by Mao to replace the disgraced Peng Dehuai. Lin produced millions of copies of a small volume of *Quotations from Chairman Mao* to be distributed to the Red Guards as a *vademecum* to guide their efforts. In the weeks and months that followed, the Red Guards held their “little Red Books” as a talisman—to assure their success in battle as well as to ward off “ghosts” and “monsters.”

The thought of Mao Zedong was deemed “the universal truth for the whole world,” understood to convey the deepest verities, inspire miraculous cures, resolve confusion, restore depleted strength, and reanimate political fervor (Urban, 1971, 153 and passim). Elitism, political voluntarism, and the cult of personality, had reached their zenith. Maoism had clearly taken on the properties of a secular surrogate for religion (Gregor, 2012, chaps. 1, 4, 9).

The trajectory traced by Mao Zedong thought over time is eminently clear. Originally a variation of Lenin’s conviction that only the Party leadership possessed the “proletarian consciousness” required for a true Marxist revolution—the notion soon became that Party leaders could not only infuse masses with the requisite proletarian consciousness, but could also invoke an irrepressible disposition among them to obey Party instruction and work tirelessly to fulfill leadership injunctions. Declasse masses would become not only “proletarian” revolutionaries; they would become indefatigable workers for the Party. The nation’s declassed masses would become living instruments in the service of the dictatorship. By the time of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, Mao had convinced himself that his leadership could engender indefeasible moral convictions, irrepressible will, concentrated energy, and absolute dedication among the masses of China—to shape events irrespective of prevailing material conditions.

Seemingly undeterred by the failures of the “Great Leap Forward” and “The Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution,” Mao was heard contemplating still other “great leaps” and further “cultural revolutions.” Appalled by the prospect, the Maoist opposition began to consider how Mao might be countered. In all of that they had an uncertain ally in the military. In the course of the disorder that came to typify the “Cultural Revolution,” some organizations of the Red Guard had attacked and looted armories of the People’s Liberation Army—and proceeded to engage other Red Guard units in random fire-fights. In their revolutionary zeal Red Guards found “revisionists” and “capitalist roaders” everywhere—including in other Red Guard units. Some of these engagements attained the level of pitched battles—destroying both property and lives. At that point, the People’s Liberation Army intervened and ordered a secession of all hostilities. “Revolutionary Committees” were organized to reign in the disorder, with the military exercising control. Order was restored, with the urban Red Guards being sent en masse to the countryside to “learn from the peasants.” What they were to learn was discipline.

As this transpired, Mao succeeded in a massive purge of the most important institutions of the CCP. The Party’s Central Committee lost the majority of its members—with subordinate agencies losing even greater numbers. It was within those parlous circumstances that some of the “capitalist roaders” began to organize an alternative program of reform for China in its entirety. In 1975, while insisting on his loyalty to Mao, Deng Xiaoping proposed a “General Program” that involved sweeping revisions in China’s developmental program—that Maoists immediately dismissed as anti-Maoist “poisonous weeds” (Lotta, 1978).

It is not clear what led Deng to formulate his alternative program at that point, but in 1972 Mao had apparently suffered a stroke. How impaired he was thereafter is unclear, but it seems he no longer had complete confidence in those whom he had charged with maintaining the purity of his revolution. By 1975, he was ready to call upon Deng to restore order to China’s critical railroad system—suffering as it was from the factionalism of radical Maoist groups. Deng proceeded to suppress the radicals, and materials began once again to move between source and sink, to maintain and increase productivity. Irrespective of his evident success, Mao seemed to remain hesitant about investing too much confidence in a revisionist. Conscious of his own imminent demise, Mao once again sought to isolate Deng. Equally aware of the immanence of the Chairman’s passing, members of the various contending factions positioned themselves for the anticipated power struggle.

In September 1976, Mao Zedong died. The various factions jostled for position in the struggle for ascendancy. Initially, the radical Maoist forces seemed to possess distinctive political advantage. But the situation was very fluid. Hua Guofeng, a Mao loyalist, decided that the Maoists to his left were dangerous rivals. Marshalling those security forces over which he had control, he dispatched them to take the most senior leaders of Jiang Qing’s radical Maoist faction into custody. In a short while Hua assumed the leadership of China’s Communist revolution.

In the effort to assure himself victory in the struggle, Hua had insisted that he was the true Maoist and those who followed Jiang Qing were “rightists,” intent on upon abandoning Maoism for some indeterminate alternative. That interpretation of
circumstances allowed him to ally himself, however temporarily, with Deng. The position was unsustainable. That Jiang Qing’s Maoists were rightists was a howling implausibility, and the alliance of convenience with Deng clearly suffered intrinsic centrifugal tensions.

In the time following his rise to the chairmanship of the CCP, Hua insisted, with some qualiﬁcations, on pursuing Maoist economic policies, maintaining that Mao’s selection of grain and steel as the two most critical links in China’s economic program was correct. He even applauded the Chinese rate of economic growth under Mao’s direction. Together with all that, he celebrated the role of “class warfare” in the general scheme of things for a future China under his direction (Vogel, 2011).16

All of this galvanized the Party leaders who had collected around Deng. Hua was made subject to political pressures, and it soon became clear that Deng was systematically increasing his inﬂuence in the Party. At the Third Plenum of the Eleventh Central Committee meeting in December 1978, Hua’s leadership was eclipsed by that of Deng. At the same time, the question of the entire character of Mao’s leadership came under critical review. Within that context, for the ﬁrst time in the history of the CCP, doctrinaire “Leftism” became subject to critical assessment (Joseph, 1984).17

By mid-year 1981 the deliberations of the Third Plenum were formally codiﬁed in a document entitled, Resolution on Certain Questions in the History of our Party since the Founding of the People’s Republic of China (1981). The entire document was carefully worded in order not to appear unduly critical of Chairman Mao, but not a great deal of cognitive acumen is required to appreciate its intent.

The Resolution clearly identiﬁed Mao Zedong as the source of mistaken policies that since the founding of the Republic in 1949 denied the nation at least two decades of economic growth and development. Beyond that, violating the principles of his own Thought, Mao was made solely responsible for the enormities of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution. although it was argued that Mao was a “great Marxist,” it was conceded that for all his Marxism he had made “gross blunders” in his policy interpretations—that led to behaviors that resulted in disabling institutionalized waste and economic misdirection.

It was contended that Mao had allowed himself to fall under the inﬂuence of “Leftism”—a doctrinal perversity that led its advocates to imagine that they would be able to realize their utopian purposes irrespective of the retrograde economic conditions in which they found themselves (Gregor 1995; chap. 2).18 Both Marx and Engels had identiﬁed that kind of revolutionary leadership as irresponsible. The authors of the Resolution chose not to expand on the reference, but anyone familiar with doctrinal Marxism understands the impairments that are a consequence of that kind of doctrinal deviance.

The authors of the Resolution indicated that Mao had been suffering all the disabilities of Leftism at least since 1949, when he abandoned all references to Sun’s Three Principles of the People and undertook the determined socialization of China. What was implicit in the entire discussion was the recognition that China, in 1949, lacked the industrial base to support a socialist superstructure. Deng’s entire reform policy after 1978 constitutes manifest evidence of that. as early as Deng’s “Program” of 1975 it was clear that his intention was to stimulate the growth of the nation’s productive forces—in what was an evident attempt to provide the missing industrial base for a Marxist social revolution.

There is every indication that Deng was a convinced and learned Marxist. He seems to have fully understood what the absence of an adequate economic base would mean for any serious revolutionary. The founders of the Marxism had been very clear on the issue (Engels in Marx Engels, 1961, 469–71). Deng, himself, had experienced what Maoism—attempting to impose socialism on a basically peasant economy—had wrought.

In the reforms that followed the Third Plenum, Deng dismantled the Maoist developmental economy in its virtual entirety. The communes were abolished and agriculture was once again made the responsibility of traditional family units. Required to provide the state with a prescribed proportion of their product, agricultural families were then permitted to market the remainder. The commodity market for farm produce was quickly activated. The proﬁt motive was once again an incentive for individual households. The result was a signiﬁcant and expanding increase in agricultural production. Small businesses were encouraged in the rural communities. Soon this general reorientation of commodity production was introduced in the basic manufacturing sector. State planning was reserved for state owned enterprises. Outside of those selected productive units, the market was allowed to inﬂuence the selection of products to be manufactured, the allocation of resources, the intersectoral ﬂow of material, and proﬁt, once again, became a measure of economic success. Foreign investment was elicited, together with foreign technology and management techniques. China sought membership in international trading and ﬁnancial institutions—and its economy became increasingly driven by export growth. By 1990, China registered a double digit rate of gross domestic productivity. Left behind was every trace of Mao’s “Marxist” economic policies.

The political form in which these changes were contained was equally unique from any Marxist perspective. Deng formulated a set of “Cardinal Principles” to guide the CCP during the post-Maoist period. The Principles unpacked into an insistence that the Party commit itself to the continued imposition of the authoritarianism of the “dictatorship of the proletariat”—the hegemonic single-party rule of the Communist Party. There was to be no concession to political liberalism. This was understood to constitute an expression of the collective, and seemingly perpetual, investment in socialism. Taken all

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16 This entire period was ﬁlled with efforts by all parties to secure their positions. It serves no purpose to attempt a recapitulation here. 
17 The founders of classical Marxism had identiﬁed “Leftism” with the kind of utopian revolutionary convictions that made war and human commitment primary determinants in achieving chosen social ends—to the neglect of material, i.e., basic economic, factors. 
18 Engels speciﬁcally inveighed against just such a revolutionary delusion. He held it to be particularly prevalent among revolutionaries in preindustrial peasant environments. Such revolutionaries imagine that they might create their sophisticated revolutionary vision by inspiring unschooled masses to unimagined creativity.
together, the Cardinal Principles were understood to give living expression to “the thought of Mao Zedong.” In accordance with the Cardinal Principles, the thought of Mao was interpreted to refer not to the thought of any particular person, but to the collective thought of the CCP—as well as that of the thinking population of China in its entirety.

By the time of Deng’s death in 1997, Maoist China was no more. All the Maoist trappings remained to assure the appearance of continuity. But virtually all the substance was gone. The People’s Republic of China had become one of the mass mobilizing, developmental dictatorships so abundant in the twentieth century—few of which laid any claim to being Marxist in inspiration.

5. Post-Maoism in comparative perspective

As a political and economic system post-Maoist China displays some familiar properties. It shares a family resemblance with other developmental systems prominent in the twentieth century. While every such system is unique—the result of significant differences in history, cultural continuities, leadership qualities, and economic circumstances—there are shared features that render them members of an identifiable fraternity.

All members are authoritarian to a degree sufficient to distinguish them from liberal polyarchic arrangements that sustain and foster civil and political rights now traditional in industrialized Western societies. Such liberal political entities characteristically advocate and sustain a measure of free speech and assembly in a nonviolent, competitive multiparty environment. Granted these properties, the developmental systems of which post-Maoist China is a member can be easily distinguished. They are readily recognized as “developmental dictatorships.” Their principal preoccupation is not with the provision of civil or human rights, but with the rapid development of their productive forces (Deng, 1994, 225).

The subclass class of developmental dictatorships to which we here refer include in their number systems as diverse as Fascist Italy (Gregor, 1979), the Soviet Union (Gregor, 2000), Maoist China, and Democratic Kampuchea (Gregor, 2012). They are mass-mobilizing, one party states, animated by a formal ideology, captured by a “charismatic” leader, and typified by major state intervention in the economy (Gregor, 2015). In the recent past at least some have been the active site of mass murder, consuming the lives of millions of their citizens in campaigns of political suppression or in often ill-conceived forced programs of industrial development.

Sun Yat-sen’s Kuomintang was animated by one such ideology. As such, it provided doctrinal support for Mao’s peasant revolution throughout the interwar years. Abandoned by Mao immediately upon his assumption of leadership responsibility of the People’s Republic of China, Sun’s Three Principles of the People became the rationale for the developmental dictatorship on Taiwan (Gregor and Chang, 1981).

Deng’s post-Maoist China shares many features with the developmental economic policies of that island nation. The major doctrinal difference arises out of Sun’s commitment to an ultimate democratic form for the industrialized society his developmental program anticipated—while Deng has argued that China must simply remain a “proletarian dictatorship,” with “Chinese characteristics,” whatever its level of development.

Whatever one makes of the post-Maoist China of Deng Xiaoping, it has very little of the Marxism of Marx and Engels about it. All the elaborate economic and political theorizing of classical Marxism is absolutely irrelevant to the policies and practices of China’s current efforts to establish and foster the mixed economy of Deng’s “primary socialism.” What is relevant to contemporary China is one party hegemony, nationalist fundamentalism, irredentism, and the militarism that provides a defense of it all.

All that remains of Marxism in “Communist” China is the traditional vocabulary with which every university undergraduate is familiar. Nothing remains of its substance. As a matter of historic fact, there never was much Marxist substance in Maoist itself. A careful reading of the Communist Party’s Resolution on Certain Questions in the History of our Party since the Founding of the People’s Republic of China fully establishes that.

A careful reading of all the dense volumes in the Collected Works of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels will not provide any purchase on understanding the present or the future of China. In themselves, appeals to “Marxism,” and “Mao Zedong Thought” will remain part of the legitimating rationale of the one party dictatorship, but will not convey any cognitive insights into the contemporary or future behavior of China.

References


Deng has clearly affirmed that “the primary task of socialism is to develop the productive forces.” The general class of these developmental authoritarianisms include industrializing communities such as Singapore, Hong Kong, and South Korea.

On the margin of these systems are those we speak of as “Arab,” and “African,” socialism. See the discussion in A. James Gregor, Reflections on Italian Fascism: An Interview with Antonio Messina, 2015.

The long term commitment to authoritarian, one party rule is evident in everything to which Deng committed his “first stage socialism.”