

Philosophy in China

What Can We Learn From It ?

Jonathan Rée

China and Chinoiserie

I went on a three-week general tour of China in November 1975. I know very well that this does not make me an expert on China; nevertheless many of the rumours about China that circulate in the West derive from sources no more authoritative than myself, so I think I have the right to comment on some of these.

The rumours I mean are utopias about the virtues of the Chinese, such as those being put about by Shirley Maclaine at the moment. They have a long history. Antecedents can be traced at least as far as the Enlightenment: Leibniz, Welff, Voltaire, and Quesnay, for example, were all fanatical advocates of Cathay. In 1776 Grimm commented:

The Chinese Empire has become in our time the object of special attention and of special study. The missionaries first fascinated public opinion by rose coloured reports from that distant land, too distant to be able to contradict their falsehoods. Then the philosophers took it up and drew from them whatever could be of use in denouncing and removing the evils which they found in their own country. Thus this country became in a short time the home of wisdom, virtue and good faith, its government the best possible and the longest established, its morality the loftiest and most beautiful in the known world; its laws, its policy, its art, its industry, were likewise to serve as a model for all nations of the earth. (1)

The purpose of the various optimistic descriptions of Chinese society was, as Grimm put it, 'denouncing and removing the evils which they found in their own country', and clearly today's Chinese utopias have the same function - though it is worth noting that they are associated with conservatives as much as with socialists. And even in the mouths of socialists, it is possible for them to be conservative in their implications, since they tend to foster contempt or distaste for everything in the West, including Western proletariats and Western socialist organisations. It is in the context of these Western discussions that I wish to raise doubts about how much we can learn from philosophy in China.

Philosophical Chinoiserie

Today, as in the eighteenth century, Western enthusiasm about China is often based on the state of Chinese philosophy. A recent example of the genre is a collection of three articles by a Canadian philosophy professor, K T Fann.

The collection, *The Making of the New Human Being in the People's Republic of China* (Far Eastern Reporter) was reviewed by Sean Sayers in *Radical Philosophy* 10. Fann is avowedly a socialist and a Marxist; however, he does not appear to see Western societies in terms of a struggle against capitalism by a progressive proletariat, or, indeed, in terms of any kind of struggle at all. His enthusiasm about China is complemented by a condemnation of everything and everyone in the West (including presumably the proletariat and its achievements) for being 'bourgeois'. He contemplates 'capitalist man' in his 'decaying society' with the kind of comfortable cultural pessimism that used to be the stock in trade of extreme conservatism. For example, he describes 'bourgeois society' as follows:

The motivation of every activity and every profession is self-interest, profit. Money becomes the bond of all bonds. . . The capitalist way of looking at things is so ingrained in our thoughts that we cannot even recognise the fact that there are legitimate reasons for doing things other than making money. . . People cannot appreciate the value of an object of art unless a price tag is attached to it. In their bourgeois way of thinking, everything has a price; otherwise it is worthless. (p29)

The core of Fann's enthusiasm for China is a contrast between Western and Chinese philosophy. Western philosophy is typified by the 'professional writings of career philosophers':

In contrast with the traditional philosophy which begins with wonder, it may be said that for the Chinese philosophy begins with a task. Bourgeois philosophers wonder about how to prove the existence of the external world, or wonder about the existence of other worlds (minds?). With good reasons, these problems do not exist for the workers and peasants of China. (p15)

To this it can be retorted that in the West too not only workers and peasants but also many philosophers are uncontaminated by 'traditional philosophy' as Fann defines it. Fann himself, in another context, has argued this in relation to Wittgenstein (see his Wittgenstein and Bourgeois Philosophy' in *Radical Philosophy* 8) and to take less controversial examples, it is surely hard to dissolve, say, the entire Frankfurt school, or the phenomenological movement, or Lukacs, or Gramsci, or Sartre, or Merleau-Ponty, or

1 Quoted in Hugh Honour's excellent *Chinoiserie: The Vision of Cathay*, London, John Murray 1961 p11. See also Basil Guy, 'The French Image of China before and After Voltaire', *Voltaire Studies* xxi (1963)

Marcuse, or Althusser, into an undifferentiated mass of 'bourgeois philosophy'.

China's Ideological Campaigns

I will now try to approach an assessment of the state of philosophy in China without getting entangled in questions about the West. The subject has to be investigated at several different levels. First, there is the question of the use of philosophy in mass campaigns of ideological education. Then there is the question of the meaning and use of the canonical texts of Chinese philosophy - which means, chiefly, a few articles by Mao Tse-tung. Thirdly, there is philosophy as an academic subject - as a course of formal, assessed study in universities and to some extent in schools. I will discuss these three levels in turn.

For Western visitors the most exhilarating first impression of China is that all the Chinese appear to share a feeling of total devotion to China's socialist destiny, and a belief that everyone's effort in achieving it is indispensable. And this sense of commitment is accompanied by an ideology of thoroughgoing anti-elitism, according to which it is up to everyone to be relentlessly vigilant against China's internal enemies, and to be constantly free to demand explanations and make criticisms of people in positions of power.

To some extent, these feelings and beliefs have been produced deliberately, as a matter of conscious central policy, by means of mass ideological campaigns. The campaigns are centrally co-ordinated but based on small autonomous study groups, consisting of about a dozen people meeting for a few hours a week. Such groups originated with the Socialist Education Movement which followed China's break with Russia in 1961, and whose main objective was to explain what had gone wrong with the Russian revolution. Millions



of copies of Krushchev's writings were distributed around the country for group study, in the confident belief that the study groups would arrive at 'correct' evaluations of 'Krushchev's Phoney Communism'.

The Cultural Revolution was itself based on such discussion groups. Since then, campaigns have included the 'Criticise Confucius' campaign, which involved learning chunks of the history of Chinese philosophy, the campaign on the dictatorship of the proletariat, which was based on the study of extracts from various Marxist texts, and the campaign criticising depiction of peasant revolts in the classic novel, *The Water Margin*. This campaign was at its height when we were in China, and wherever we went we found people

alluding to and saw both home made and printed posters of scenes from the book, in schools, factories and on the streets.

These campaigns have provided a common stock of textual knowledge, of historical reference points, and indeed of stock phrases - 'the unity of theory and practice', 'the three-in-one combination', 'the struggle for production', 'the mass line', 'capitalist roadism', 'bourgeois rights', 'the four authorities oppressing women', 'the three great mountains', 'serve the people', 'put politics in command', 'bad things can be turned into good', etc etc, and in general they have produced a level of mass ideological awareness without parallel in human history.

Mao's Philosophical Essays

Words like 'dialectics', 'metaphysics', 'practice', 'contradiction' and 'idealism' seemed to be in constant use amongst the Chinese, and everyone appeared to believe in the political importance of explicit philosophical study, which means, chiefly, the study of philosophical articles by Mao. During the Cultural Revolution they were known mainly through the 'Little Red Book' or Quotations from Chairman Mao, but this now appears to have fallen into disuse. Instead, people are encouraged to read whole articles by Mao, including many which are explicitly philosophical in character. These articles are also the basis of the compulsory philosophy component of the 'Political Studies' courses which all students in senior middle school (aged 15-17) and in universities and other higher education institutions have had to take since the cultural revolution.

A western reader is likely to be surprised by the familiarity of Mao's philosophical concepts rather than by their strangeness. For although Mao occasionally quotes a slogan from traditional Chinese philosophy, his philosophical mentors are thoroughly European: Plato, Aristotle, Spinoza, Kant, Goethe, Hegel, Rousseau and even Benjamin Franklin, as well as Marx, Engels, Lenin and Stalin (2). Mao's philosophy is not so much Chinese, as an application of Western concepts to a Chinese context.

Mao's basic philosophical essays are 'On Practice' and 'On Contradiction', which were written in 1937 in deliberate opposition to the Russian school of Dialectical Materialism (3).

'On Practice' is an affirmation of a sort of empirical pragmatism and a rejection of metaphysics, theoreticism, and appeals to authority:

Knowledge begins with experience - that is the materialism of the theory of knowledge... Marxists hold that man's social practice alone is the criterion of the truth of his knowledge of the external world. What actually happens is that man's knowledge is verified only when he achieves the anticipated results in the process of social practice (material produc-

² See Edgar Snow, *Red Star over China* (1937). Revised ed. Penguin Books 1972, p211; Stuart Schram, *Mao Tse-tung Unrehearsed*, Penguin Books 1974, p220

³ cf. Guy Planty-Bonjour, *The Categories of Dialectical Materialism: Contemporary Soviet Ontology*, Dordrecht, Reidel, 1967

tion, class struggle, or scientific experiment). If a man wants to succeed in his work, that is, to achieve the anticipated results, he must bring his ideas into correspondence with the laws of the objective external world; if they do not correspond, he will fail in his practice. (Selected Readings p67)

The political implication of such remarks, in the context where they were written, is clear; the Chinese Communist Party must develop its perspectives from its own practice, rather than on the basis of the 'formalistic' conceptions of dogmatic Marxism. But what of their philosophical value? Followers of Gramsci or Sartre may argue that they constitute a 'simple but genuine "reappropriation" of Marxism', specifically of the Marxist 'philosophy of Praxis'(4), and the criterion of truth proposed in 'On Practice' would be hard to disagree with. But this, surely, is its weakness: it is so indeterminate as to qualify almost any theory or ideology as 'true knowledge'. In particular, Mao's criterion would make the entire bourgeois ideology of capitalism - the idea of everyone's equality in relation to a free wage contract - into true knowledge, its validity being proved in daily practice. To put this point in the language of another of Mao's philosophical essays, written in 1963, to say that 'correct ideas come from social practice, and from it alone' is pointless since presumably most incorrect ideas come from this source too.

'On Contradiction', written a month after 'On Practice', is a more substantial philosophical work. It relies heavily on Lenin, and, unusually for its time, on the Lenin of the Philosophical Notebooks (1914-1915) rather than of Materialism and Empirio-Criticism (1909). Although going along with Soviet-style 'Diamat' in taking for granted the idea of a 'dialectic of nature', this essay attacks the 'idealism of the Deborin school' of Russian dialectical materialism for failing to acknowledge the autonomy of particular analyses of particular contradictions. This essay contains Mao's celebrated distinctions between principal and non-principal contradictions, principal and non-principal aspects of contradiction, antagonistic and non-antagonistic contradictions; and the particularity and universality of contradictions.

Somewhat surprisingly, in view of the pragmatism of 'On Practice', Mao's account of these distinctions is based on a universal, a priori metaphysical thesis. His starting point is a distinction between internal and external causes - between self moving developments and ones which are externally induced. He then asserts that 'the fundamental cause of the development of a thing is not external but internal', and his generalised metaphysical conclusion seems, at least in some passages, to be a sort of vulgar-Leibnizian belief that everything is a 'windowless monad', independent of everything else, and with the causes of its development lying entirely within itself. One of Mao's examples illustrates how paradoxical the implications of this doctrine can

⁴ Roland Lew, 'Maoism and the Chinese Revolution', Socialist Register 1975, pp115-159, 131

⁵ Cf. Raya Dunayevskaya, 'Heaven and Earth Change Places' in New Politics Vol. X No. 3 Spring 1973

be:

In battle, one army is victorious and the other is defeated; both the victory and the defeat are determined by internal causes. The one is victorious either because it is strong or because of its competent generalship, the other is vanquished either because it is weak or because of its incompetent generalship.

Presumably Mao would say that if the victorious army was subsequently defeated, this would simply demonstrate that it was not so strong or well led any longer; and any apparently external factors, such as terrain, unexpected aid, disease, the accidental death of a leader, or freak weather conditions, would either have to be interpreted as internal relations of each of the armies, or ruled out as having no power to influence the outcome.

I should make it clear that this criticism of Mao is not based on any general scepticism about the concept of internal relations or the distinction between internal and external causes. The flaw in Mao's concept of internal causation, as in his concept of practice, is not that it is untrue but that it is indeterminate: it provides no criteria for distinguishing internally conditioned, self-moving processes from ones which are externally conditioned. An example will help explain this.

At one point Mao tries to draw a direct political conclusion from his concept of internal causation, namely that the fate of the Chinese revolution depends purely on the policies and internal organisation of the party - as if it were metaphysically impossible for the Russians, the Japanese, or the Chinese bourgeoisie or peasantry to have any influence on it (p90). Similar reasoning would presumably establish that the fate of say the capitalist class in England depends entirely on its own internal organisation, and is not affected by international competition, the actions of the proletariat etc. At least there is nothing in 'On Contradiction' to prevent Mao's philosophy from leading to such a conclusion. (5)

The Chinese Use of Mao's Philosophy, then and now

Although they contain many isolated, quotable, pungent and true statements, Mao's philosophical texts are weak from the point of view of academic theoretical research. It is obvious, however, that they need to be judged not as academic texts but as political interventions. 'On Practice' and 'On Contradiction' were written in the summer of 1937, following the disastrous defeats which had led to the heroic Long March and the establishment of a communist base in Yen-an, and during the Japanese invasion which was to force them into an alliance with their enemy, the Kuomintang under Chiang Kai shek. In this situation, the Chinese party was in danger of being over-dependent on the Russians. The political intention behind Mao's philosophical writings becomes clear in this context: they were to provide a basis for resisting Russian domination of the Chinese Communist Party. They implied that every contradiction (such as that between the

Chinese CP and the Kuomintang) had to be understood in its particularity, and that the criterion for judging CCP policies must be its own practice; hence there was no reason for the Chinese Communists to take their line from the Russians. These political struggles, however, now belong to the dim and distant past, and the function of Mao's texts, as used in today's mass ideological campaigns, must be very different.

Since the Cultural Revolution, workers and peasants have been encouraged to write philosophy as well as to read it, and to show how it can be applied to the solution of practical problems. Take for example 'Keeping Vegetables Fresh', by the Peking Chungwen District Vegetable Station Scientific Experiment Group, which is available along with several similar articles in a pamphlet published by the Foreign Language Press called Serving the People with Dialectics. The article describes the problems of fluctuating vegetable supply, saying

to solve this contradiction it became necessary to store surplus vegetables

However, this led to the problem of keeping the stored vegetables fresh, so the Group

set out to use the philosophic teachings of Chairman Mao to help solve these problems through scientific experiment

The hardest problem was tomatoes.

We tried storing them, and one day discovered three of our tomatoes still well preserved after more than a month. Why had the rest

spoiled? Here, Chairman Mao's teaching that it is 'in the particularity of contradiction that the universality of contradiction resides' gave the clue. If three tomatoes could be preserved over a month, it should be possible to preserve all of them.

Three conditions were identified as contributing to the preservation of the three tomatoes: controlled temperature, humidity, and ventilation.

What was needed was to handle the relations among the three conditions well. We turned to Chairman Mao's teaching that 'in studying any complex process in which there are two or more contradictions, we must devote every effort to finding its principal contradiction. Once this principal contradiction is grasped, all problems can be readily solved'. We analysed the three basic conditions of temperature, humidity and ventilation and experimented with different relationships. The contradiction between temperature and ventilation was apparently the principal one. (pp27-28)

What is striking in this example is that on the face of it the quotations from Mao have no logical connection with the search for ways of preserving tomatoes, and to be a mere distraction from the process. For instance, Mao's concept of the particularity of a contradiction could perfectly well have been taken to imply that the preservation of three tomatoes amongst masses of rotting ones proved that these tomatoes were intrinsically different from the rest, rather than that they were being stored in more suitable conditions. Similarly, the advice that one should always grasp the principal contradiction, at least as long as no procedures are indicated for identifying it, seems to amount to no more than a banal platitude to the effect that one should always pay attention to what is most important.

But it would be wrong to leave it at that, and to conclude that the vaunted 'principal applications' of Mao's philosophy are a mask for mechanical piety. For phrases like 'principal and non-principal contradiction', and 'particularity of a contradiction', however indeterminate their philosophical meaning, do imply a certain special attitude to the world. However vague it may be to say that one ought to 'grasp the principal contradiction', people who attempt to carry out the advice will automatically be treating their problem as something which it is in their power to solve; they will be adopting a practical orientation towards the world; and this seems to me to be the real importance of Mao's philosophy in China.

In industrialised, proletarianised countries, where life and work are dominated by man-made machines, such a lesson might be less appropriate or less accessible. But China is not like that. The industrial proletariat is less than a fifth of the population, and the rest work on the land with practically no modern machinery. The rhythms of their work are determined by such tools as buffalo ploughs and buckets with

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shoulder poles; and the patterns of their life follow the succession of the seasons and depend upon the climate, soil, etc. Such conditions obviously tend to produce obstacles to economic, technical, social and political progress in the form of an unconsidered belief that the conditions of human life never really change, or at least change only in response to factors outside human control, such as storms and floods. Seen as attempts to disband the passive, fatalistic ideology of the peasantry, the use of Mao's philosophy in China's ideological campaigns is a fascinating example of the ways in which a philosophy may need to be judged not primarily as a source of theoretical illumination but rather as an aspect and perhaps to some extent an agent of massive social change.

Philosophy as an an Academic Discipline in China

Apart from its use in mass ideological campaigns, philosophy in China is also an academic subject for specialised study in universities, and the professional vocation of hundreds of academics. (The philosophy department at Peking University is said to employ 200 professors and lecturers for its 300 philosophy majors (see Fann p43).

At the beginning of the Cultural Revolution, academic philosophy was singled out for special attack in the People's Daily. An editorial on 16 January 1966 was entitled 'Philosophical workers, Pack up and go among the masses'. It said that there should be a movement to bring philosophy to the masses, and that it should realise Mao's 'mass line' in philosophy and break the intellectuals' monopoly of philosophy, promote the study of Marxism through Mao's writings, and recognise that the masses were already doing better philosophy than the philosophers (see Fann p19).

And one of the events that sparked off the Cultural Revolution was the posting of a big character poster by philosophy lecturers in the philosophy department at Peking University on 25 May 1966. The poster criticised the authoritarianism of the University President and two municipal civil servants and censured them for trying to make the Cultural Revolution a 'purely academic affair'. When we visited the lavish leafy campus of Peking University we already knew how much the Cultural Revolution had altered university education: as an attempt to counteract academic elitism, courses have been shortened (to three years for a first degree), students are required to spend several years working in the countryside before being enrolled, and both teachers and students are required to do regular stints of manual labour and to go and teach and learn amongst the masses. We also knew that teaching methods would be conservative by Western standards. Students, we discovered, are timetabled for seven one-and-a-quarter hour periods a day (some of them free) six days a week, and are taught through lectures in groups of about twenty, their lectures being

based on pages of a textbook precisely prescribed in advance. They all specialise in a single conventionally defined subject, such as English, philosophy, or political economy and are bound by their initial choice of specialism. But what of the contents of philosophy courses following the Cultural Revolution?

The philosophy course was explained to us by Li Chin, a philosophy lecturer. The course, he said, is divided into six semesters, each of them with some kind of (fairly informal) assessment at the end. In the first semester, students take a logic course, in which they are taught Aristotelian classifications of syllogisms. Li himself taught this course, and claimed that there had been 'no great change' in logic since Aristotle. For the next four semesters (up to the middle of their final year), philosophy students take three concurrent courses, in addition to the 'political studies' course which is compulsory for everyone; these are History of Western Philosophy, History of Chinese Philosophy, and Dialectical and Historical Materialism. In their sixth and last semester students write a thesis, either collectively or individually. One such collective project had been a set of notes on the *Analects* of Confucius, which had subsequently been published.

Li then explained the History of Western Philosophy course, which he also taught. What he said was exceedingly familiar to anyone who has come across so-called 'history of philosophy' courses in the West. Like the American built campus in which we were sitting, and the entire organisation of Chinese education, it reminded one forcibly that academic culture in China is, historically, an adjunct of Western imperialism. The course begins with the PreSocratics, but centres on 'modern philosophy' and the 'battle between empiricism and rationalism': it is distinctive only in appending materialist explanations to this

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old-fashioned account. 'This is the period of the rising bourgeoisie trying to overthrow feudalism' said Li, 'and therefore of bourgeois philosophy against feudal philosophy, that is, catholic theology'. Empiricism and rationalism were two bourgeois reactions against catholicism, empiricism being the more radical. In seventeenth century France the bourgeoisie was weak and therefore had to uphold rationalism, but in England and in eighteenth century France they were able to raise the banner of empiricism (materialism and atheism) against feudalism.

What struck me most in Li's conversation was the extent to which his philosophical outlook was dominated by familiar Western reference points: For example, when we pressed him to describe recent debates in philosophy, he said that there had recently been lively discussions about positivism, which had concluded that it was 'idealist like Berkeley and Hume'; and when we asked about the Yin-Yang philosophy of the legalists, he said that it was partly materialism and partly 'a priorist', so that it was 'like the eighteenth century French materialists, Holbach and Helvetius - empiricist in the theory of knowledge but idealist about history'.

Li and his students, I gathered, would not have made any ambitious claims for philosophy as a theoretical discipline. They accepted that the real philosophical struggles were being waged by workers and peasants, and did not claim that their own academic privileges gave them any philosophical advantage. (The journal Philosophical Research has not been published since

the Cultural Revolution.) The students, as far as I could judge, were not concerned to challenge the account of philosophy in their textbooks and lectures, and they did not share the Western obsession with philosophical 'controversies'. In fact when I inquired what areas of discussion and disagreement there were, I am not sure that I made myself understood. Was there any problem about teaching both formal logic and dialectics? No, said Li, for formal logic was concerned only with the laws of thought and could only be supposed to conflict with dialectics if it was mistaken for a description of the external world. Was there any problem about introducing what were basically Western philosophical concepts into Chinese language and culture? No, for although dialectical and historical materialism - the heart of philosophy - originated in Europe, they had been transformed and transposed by Chairman Mao. Did the Maoist emphasis on education, moral virtue and culture conflict with the arguably Marxist ideas of base and superstructure? No, for Marx himself used to admit that there was a two-way interaction. And so on.

Thus, as one might expect, and perhaps hope, philosophy as an academic discipline at Peking is overshadowed by philosophy as used in the mass ideological campaign. And while the Cultural Revolution has obviously transformed the context in which they are taught, philosophy courses themselves remain traditional and 'academic'.

My conclusion, I admit, is negative: I do not see that we have much to learn from philosophy in China. This conclusion is not I think based on complacency about the state of Western philosophy or on a negative judgment of the role of Chinese philosophy in China, but I know it will be seen as provocative by many 'friends of China'; I think we should be clear that such disagreements have more to do with the wishes and dreams of the West than with the realities of Asian history.

THE FOX

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There is a whole constellation of specialized institutions in New York which by this time we all ought to recognize for what they are: immanently antagonistic to the possibility of a socially penetrating art. To make art a social act not a sham-historical psycho-individualistic one requires first a modicum of consciousness about the ways in which we have been conditioned to blindly participate in the world. It is true but truistic to say of this social act that it is "individually meaningful." The current array of sanctioned "art problems" is mainly a function of the mad tendency to take specialization to the limit, to divide labor, to treat problems in a blindly analytic manner, to separate "art," "politics" and "private life." This isn't just an art problem resolvable only by artists, it's a social problem, a problem of all artists, critics, laypeople, butchers, bakers and candlestick makers. *Content of Number 2 includes articles on Decentralization; Media Madness—the lowdown on Art Museums; The Architecture of Contemplation; Modern Masters at MOMA; More on Pricing Works of Art; Populist Culture; Art Packaging—the Middle-Class Aura; On Don Judd; Robert Smithson; On Bruce Marden and Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe; On Art & Language; On "People's Art" in New York City; Conceptual Art: Style or Alternative? Also in this issue: More on the PR "Renaissance" of Painting; Educating Artists; Letters and Discussions; Critical Surveys of The Fox Number 1, and a Special Article for Boring Art Historians. Contributors to Number 2 include: Michael Corris, Adrian Piper, Andrew Menard, Lizzie Borden, Paul Wood, Joseph Kosuth, Karl Beveridge, Mel Ramsden, Sarah Charlesworth, Terry Atkinson, Preston Heller, Ian Burn, David Rushton, Eunice Lipton, Terry Smith, Mark Kleinberg, Stefan Morawski, Bruce Kurtz, and others. Price \$3.00.*
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