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# *The Marxist View of China (Part 1)*

By KARL A. WITTFOGEL

MARX's interpretation of China enriched his concept of a completely Asiatic society. While dealing with England's relation to the Far East, he became aware that in imperial China, unlike in other oriental countries, land was privately held. His analysis of this seeming exception to the rule is unsatisfactory, but it is indicative of his socio-historical position. He continued to view China as a major case of "Asiatic production" even after he learned that there communal landed property had long been abolished.

In the history of the Marxist view of China, Russia's role has been a prominent one. Plekhanov elaborated the comments on China's orientally despotic condition, which, under the eyes of the ageing Engels, were made by the leading young German Marxist, Kautsky. He stressed China's "Asiatic" quality when he rejected the *Kitaishchina* (China's orientally despotic system) in his debate with Lenin which was focused on the possibility of Russia's Asiatic restoration. After the October Revolution, the Russian Communists induced their Chinese comrades to interpret the society of imperial China as feudal.

The Russian side of this story is little known; the Chinese side is even less known. Using documentary evidence which the Soviet ideologists hide and Mao's adherents are equally eager to obscure, we are able to show how, under Moscow's guidance, the Chinese Communists invented a new societal history of their native land.

## **1. The Marxist View of China**

The Communists assure us that, by applying the ideas of Marx, Engels, and Lenin, Chinese society can be said to have moved from slavery to feudalism and, in the nineteenth century, to semi-feudalism (and semi-colonialism) and the beginnings of capitalism. In the twentieth century the Chinese Communist revolution, supported by the U.S.S.R., brought into being a new-type democratic society which was the starting point for China's advance to a Socialist, and ultimately, to a Communist order.

Does this view of China's history correctly express the ideas of the founding fathers of Marxism? Did they, indeed, consider nineteenth-century China a feudal society that could be placed on a universal and unilinear developmental ladder: primitive communism—slavery—feudalism, etc.?

From 1853 on, Marx and Engels upheld a multilinear view of societal development. They were convinced that for millennia, and long before any “ancient” slaveholding society emerged in Greece or Rome, there had existed a specific “Asiatic” or “Oriental” society.<sup>1</sup> They were convinced that, unlike the ancient slaveholding societies, in which work slavery was the mainstay of the economy, in “Asia” slavery was essentially domestic slavery<sup>2</sup>; and that unlike feudal society, in which most of the rural surplus was taken by the feudal lords, in “Asia” it was taken by the state and the despotic ruler.<sup>3</sup> Marx and Engels considered pre-colonial India a classical example of the Asiatic order; and, although they knew less about China than India, they also considered China a typically Asiatic society.

The Communists, who misrepresented the Marxist view of Russia, also misrepresented the Marxist view of China. As in the case of Russia, the decisive change was initiated by Lenin and elaborated by Stalin. It was adjusted to the Chinese scene by three heads of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP): Ch'en Tu-hsiu, Ch'ü Ch'iu-pai, and Mao Tse-tung.

#### MARX AND ENGELS ON CHINA

##### *Prior to 1853*

Several years before Marx became a historical materialist he took a course at the University of Berlin with Karl Ritter,<sup>4</sup> who emphasised the hydraulic aspect of China's human geography<sup>5</sup>; and he avidly studied the writings of Hegel who recognised the hydraulic functions of the Chinese government. It is possible that Marx profited little from Ritter's researches (his interest in geographical matters was slight; later he was happy to leave them almost entirely to Engels).<sup>6</sup> But he and Engels repeatedly referred to that part of Hegel's *Philosophy of History* which dealt with Chinese conditions, hydraulic and otherwise.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>1</sup> They indicated its early appearance by occasionally referring to it as “old” Asiatic society. See Karl Marx, *Das Kapital. Kritik der politischen Ökonomie*, 3 vols. (Hamburg: Otto Meissner, 1919), I, pp. 45, 297 (hereafter cited as Marx, DK); cf. *idem*, *Zur Kritik der politischen Ökonomie* (Stuttgart: 8th ed. 1921), pp. 124, 133, 161 (hereafter cited as Marx, ZK).

<sup>2</sup> Karl Marx, *Grundrisse der Kritik der Politischen Ökonomie (Rohentwurf) 1857–1858* (Berlin: Dietz, 1953) (hereafter cited as Marx, GK), pp. 392 *et seq.*; *idem*, DK II, p. 455; Friedrich Engels, *Herrn Eugen Dührings Unwägung der Wissenschaft. Dialektik der Natur 1873–1882* (Moscow: Marx-Engels-Verlag, 1935), pp. 184 *et seq.* 395; *idem*, *Der Ursprung der Familie, des Privateigentums und des Staats* (Stuttgart: 20th ed., 1921), p. 162.

<sup>3</sup> Marx, GK, pp. 371, 377; *idem*, DK I, pp. 103, 298, 322; III, 1, pp. 310, 315, 318; III, 2, p. 324; *idem*, *Theorien über den Mehrwert*, 3 vols. (Stuttgart: Dietz, 1921), (hereafter cited as Marx, TMW), III, pp. 453, 479, 501.

<sup>4</sup> Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Historisch-Kritische Gesamtausgabe. Werke-Schriften-Briefe* (Moscow-Berlin: Marx-Engels-Institut, 1927 *et seq.*) (hereafter cited as MEGA), I, 2 p. 248.

<sup>5</sup> Ritter 1834, pp. 723 *et seq.*

<sup>6</sup> See his letter of March 10, 1853, to Engels (MEGA III, 1, p. 455).

<sup>7</sup> See Marx and Engels, “Die Deutsche Ideologie,” MEGA I, 5, pp. 145, 147, 151.

In 1843–44 Marx and Engels began to dissociate themselves from orthodox (idealistic) Hegelianism; but they continued to use Hegel's dialectic method as well as many of his factual insights. For instance in February of 1843, Marx compared Prussian censorship to China's completely controlled press. In Hegel's *Philosophy of History* we read: "Everything [in China] is carefully supervised; a strict censorship prevails."<sup>8</sup> And in 1847 Engels, in his draft of the *Communist Manifesto*, included India and China among the "semi-barbarian countries that so far had remained more or less aloof from historical development."<sup>9</sup> In Hegel's *Philosophy of History* we read: "China and India still appear to live outside world history. . . . There is neither in China nor in India any progression on to something else."<sup>10</sup>

Engels' use of the term "semi-barbarian" in this statement reflects his (and Marx's) rejection of Hegel's four historical "ages" (the Oriental, Greek, Roman, and Christian "worlds"),<sup>11</sup> and of their growing preference for Fourier's construct which postulated a unilinear development from "patriarchy" to "barbarism" to "civilisation," and which correlated patriarchy and "small industry," barbarism and "middle-sized industry," and civilisation and "big industry."<sup>12</sup> But they still upheld Hegel's idea that China and India lay outside the realm of history which did not fit Fourier's scale of progressive development.

In the final draft of the *Communist Manifesto* Marx proclaimed that the modern bourgeoisie "has made barbarian and semi-barbarian countries dependent on the civilised ones, nations of peasants on nations of bourgeois, the Orient on the Occident."<sup>13</sup> At that time he did not doubt that the bourgeoisie, on the basis of modern production and communications, would "draw all, even the most barbarian nations into civilisation." Obviously thinking of China, and perhaps also of India, Marx continued: "The cheap prices of its commodities are the heavy artillery with which it batters down all Chinese walls, with which it forces the barbarians' intensely obstinate hatred of foreigners to capitulate. It compels all nations, on pain of extinction, to adopt the bourgeois

<sup>8</sup> Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Weltgeschichte*, ed. by Georg Lasson, 2 vols. (Leipzig: Meiner, 1920) (hereafter cited as Hegel 1920), II, p. 297.

<sup>9</sup> MEGA I, 6, pp. 507 *et seq.*

<sup>10</sup> Hegel 1920, II, p. 275.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.* I, pp. 136 *et seq.*

<sup>12</sup> Charles Fourier, *Oeuvres Complètes*. Vol. VI: *Le Nouveau Monde Industriel et Sociétaire* (Paris: A la Librairie Sociétaire, 2nd ed. 1845), p. xi. Marx and Engels had been showing a preference for Fourier's scheme which, by the way, comprises many phases, since the mid-forties. See *Marx-Engels Werke*, 16 vols. (Berlin: Dietz, 1957–1962), II, pp. 207 *et seq.* (1845, written in 1844); *op. cit.*, p. 607 (1846, written in 1845).

<sup>13</sup> MEGA I, 6, pp. 529 *et seq.*

mode of production; it compels them to introduce what it calls civilisation into their midst, *i.e.*, to become bourgeois themselves.”<sup>14</sup>

This formulation shows Marx unaware that the “barbarian” societies of the Orient, because of their peculiar institutional structure, might resist such a transformation, which could occur quite easily in the pre-capitalist “barbarian” countries of the West. He remained unaware of this fact for several more years. In 1850 he and Engels thought that China, under the influence of the importation of British textiles, might soon undergo a “societal transformation,” which, with a crude native socialism as background, might result in a Chinese version of the French Revolution. At that time the two friends playfully presented the following perspective: “Chinese socialism is to European socialism as Chinese philosophy is to Hegelian philosophy. It is nevertheless amusing that in the course of eight years the oldest and most unshakeable empire on earth has been brought by the cotton bales of the English bourgeoisie to the brink of a societal transformation (*gesellschaftliche Umwälzung*), which in any event must have the most significant results for civilisation. When our European reactionaries on their imminent flight through Asia eventually arrive at the Chinese Wall, at the gates that lead to the refuge of ur-reaction and ur-conservatism, who knows whether they will not find there the sign: *République chinoise—Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité.*”<sup>15</sup>

### 1853

Marx still held this view in an article, “Revolution in China and Europe,” which he wrote on May 20, 1853,<sup>16</sup> that is, at the very moment he and Engels were beginning to make their reappraisal of oriental society which so drastically reshaped their socio-historical concepts.

In this reappraisal Marx and Engels centred their attention primarily on India. But India, to them, was only one of a number of oriental countries; and soon we also find a significant reference to China. Marx had defined the two peculiar “circumstances” of Asiatic society (government-controlled waterworks and the dispersed self-contained villages) in an article dated June 10 and in a letter to Engels written on June 14, 1853.<sup>17</sup> In an article dated July 19, 1853,<sup>18</sup> he noted that a new industrial crisis in Europe would be “affected and accelerated quite as much by this semi-Eastern complication [Russia’s attack on Turkey]

<sup>14</sup> Marx-Engels Werke, I, 6, p. 530.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, VII, p. 222. This passage appears at the end of a “Revue” written by Marx and Engels for their *Neue Rheinische Zeitung*; it is dated “London, January 31, 1850.”

<sup>16</sup> Karl Marx, “Articles” in *New York Daily Tribune*, June 14, 1853 (hereafter cited as Marx, NYDT). For the date of writing see *Karl Marx, Chronik Seines Lebens in Einzeldaten* (Moscow: Marx-Engels-Lenin-Institut, 1934), p. 139.

<sup>17</sup> Marx, NYDT, June 25, 1853.

<sup>18</sup> NYDT, August 5, 1853.

as by the completely Eastern complication of China [England's attack on China]."

In view of the two issues discussed in this article (the Russo-Turkish war and recent developments in India's system of land tenure), these qualifying terms may seem strange. However, they become entirely meaningful if they are seen as applications of Marx's newly-formulated "Asiatic" concept. Since both peculiar "circumstances" were present in India, Marx consistently viewed India as a typical Asiatic society. Since in Russia only the second was present, he consistently called Russia "semi-Eastern." His reference to China as "completely Eastern" was equally consistent.

### 1857-1859

In an article published in June 1857 which compared the reactions of Persia and China to the British attack, Engels pointed to Persia's "Asiatic barbarity," to China's "semi-civilisation" and "barbarism," and to China's army as an "irregular array of Asiatic masses"<sup>19</sup>; but this was all he said on the Asiatic issue.

From 1857 through 1859 Marx wrote a number of articles dealing with England's military and diplomatic activities in China in which he designated Chinese conditions as "semi-barbarian,"<sup>20</sup> "barbarian,"<sup>21</sup> or "patriarchal."<sup>22</sup> Sometimes he referred to the court and its bureaucracy as the country's ruling force<sup>23</sup>; and sometimes he pointed to the combination of small agriculture and small handicraft as the pivot or foundation of China's economic order.<sup>24</sup> It was this combination of small agriculture and small handicraft—and not communal landownership—that he considered decisive for the second peculiar circumstance of Asiatic society. This conclusion accorded completely with his key thesis that "the mode of production" (the technical-organisational aspect of material production) is "the real process of production,"<sup>25</sup> whereas "property relations" are merely "the legal expression" of the existing production relations, and as such parts of the "ideological forms in which men become conscious of this conflict [the conflict between the material productive powers and the existing relations of production] and fight it out."<sup>26</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Dona Torr, *Marx on China 1853-1860* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1951) (hereafter cited as Marx 1951), pp. 45 *et seq.*

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.* p. 55.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 87 *et seq.*

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.* p. 56.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 56, 73.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.* p. 64 (NYDT, October 5, 1858), pp. 87, 90 *et seq.*, 91 *et seq.* (NYDT, December 3, 1859).

<sup>25</sup> Marx, "Die Deutsche Ideologie" (MEGA I, 5, p. 27; cf. Karl A. Wittfogel, "Die natürlichen Ursachen der Wirtschaftsgeschichte," *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik*, 67, pp. 476 *et seq.*

<sup>26</sup> So Marx in his most famous theoretical pronouncement which he made in 1859 at the close of the period under discussion (Marx, ZK, p. 1v).

Marx was never completely clear regarding the extent and character of the private landownership that existed under the Asiatic mode of production. In a number of generalising statements he called the Asiatic ruler or the Asiatic state the supreme landlord; but from 1853 he was aware of the complexity of the property question. In that year he warned Engels against over-simplifying this question,<sup>27</sup> and in the first draft of his *magnum opus*, written in 1857–58, he noted that “in the Asiatic (at least in the predominant) form the individual had no ownership, although possession.”<sup>28</sup>

From the late fifties he knew that there were private landholdings in China. In an article published on December 3, 1859, he quoted from an account of China’s rural economy given in a recently issued *Blue Book* —“Correspondence Relative to Lord Elgin’s Special Mission to China and Japan.” Among other things this account stated that the villagers of China “for the most part . . . hold their lands, which are of very limited extent, in full property from the Crown,” and that their conditions, or “advantages” as they were called in the Report, “supply abundantly their simple wants, whether in respect of food or clothing.”<sup>29</sup> Unfortunately Marx did not further explore the relation between the “Crown” and the landowning peasants, which, like the relation between the hydraulic operations of the state and peasant farming, needed more clarification. Instead he used the Elgin Report to re-emphasise the crucial importance of the “combination of husbandry and manufacture.” Such a pattern had long existed in the self-sustaining village communities of India. And while the British “as the supreme landlords of the country” were able to undermine these communities, “in China [they] have not yet wielded this power, nor are they likely ever to do so.”<sup>30</sup>

Indeed, China remained decidedly oriental in that, below the turbulent political surface, the economic and social foundation persisted unaltered. In 1862, commenting on the last phase of the Taiping Rebellion, Marx considered it not at all extraordinary that China, this “living fossil,” could be involved in such a venture, since “the Oriental empires present us with permanent changelessness in the social substructure and restless change among the persons and tribes that seize the political superstructure. Why should there not be a movement for the overthrow of this dynasty after three hundred years? From the start the [Taiping] movement had a religious coloration, but it shared this with all Oriental movements. . . . Original in this Chinese revolution are only its protagonists. They are aware of no tasks, except the change of the dynasty.

<sup>27</sup> Marx’s letter of June 14, 1853, to Engels (MEGA III, 1, p. 487).

<sup>28</sup> Marx, GK, p. 383.

<sup>29</sup> Marx 1951, p. 91.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.* p. 91.

They have no slogans. Their goal seems to be only to assert, in contrast to the conservative marasmus, destruction in grotesque repulsive forms, destruction without any germ of a new formation. . . . After ten years of noisy pseudo-activity they have destroyed everything and produced nothing.”<sup>30a</sup>

### *Das Kapital*

This then was Marx’s image of China when he began to write his *magnum opus*. And this was the image presented in both the published and unpublished parts of *Das Kapital*, which he worked on from 1860 to 1870.<sup>31</sup>

In *Das Kapital* I, Marx viewed the traditional handicraft of China and India as “two different old Asiatic forms”<sup>32</sup>; and he pointed to the economic self-sufficiency of the villages, which in India was linked to a communal system of land tenure,<sup>33</sup> as “the key to the secret of the unchangeableness of Asiatic societies.”<sup>34</sup>

In a long passage he stressed the formative effect of “the natural setting” on the development of “the means and modes of labour”; and to illustrate his point he referred to the significance of large water works in various countries. However, he did not include China among his examples. But since Kautsky and Plekhanov later cited this passage and/or the attached footnotes to bolster their hydraulic interpretation of oriental civilisations, including China, and since the doctrinal threads run from Plekhanov to Lenin, I shall reproduce it here together with the key sentences from the footnotes.

Wrote Marx :

It is not the absolute fertility of the soil, but its differentiation, the variety of its natural products, which form the natural basis for the social division of labour, and which, by changes in his natural setting,<sup>35</sup> spur man on to the multiplication of his wants, his capabilities, his means and modes of labour. The necessity of bringing a natural force under the control of society, of economising with it, of appropriating or subduing

<sup>30a</sup> Karl Marx, “Things Chinese” [*Chinesisches*], *Die Presse*, Vienna, July 7, 1862, in *Marx and Engels Werke*, XV (Berlin: 1951), pp. 514 *et seq.*

<sup>31</sup> Marx completed Volume I in 1866 and published it in 1867. He finished working on Volume II by 1870, Volume III by 1865 (Engels’ Preface to *Das Kapital* II, p. v), and Volume IV, later published as *Theorien über den Mehrwert*, by 1863 (Kautsky, Preface to Marx, TMW, I, p. vii). According to Engels’ letter of March 5, 1885, to Laura Lafargue, the greater part of the manuscript of *Das Kapital* III was written between 1860 and 1862 (Friedrich Engels, Paul et Laura Lafargue, *Correspondence* (Paris: Editions Sociales, 1956), I (1868–86), p. 272.

<sup>32</sup> Marx, DK, I, p. 345.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.* p. 322.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.* p. 323.

<sup>35</sup> Marx and Engels insisted that the outer world, in which man operated, was not a constant phenomenon, but a “historical product,” that is, something that changed with the activity of man (Marx and Engels, “Die Deutsche Ideologie,” MEGA I, 5, pp. 32 *et seq.*).



it on a large scale by the work of man's hand, plays the most decisive role in the history of industry. Examples are water control in Egypt,<sup>a</sup> Lombardy, Holland, etc., in India and Persia, etc., where irrigation by means of man-made canals not only supplies the soil with the indispensable water, but also carries down to it mineral fertilisers in the form of sediments from the mountains. The secret of the flourishing state of industry in Spain and Sicily under Arab rule lay in their irrigation works.<sup>b</sup>

Footnote (a) (no. 5 in *Das Kapital*), which is attached to the word "Egypt," reads in part as follows: "The necessity for predicting the rise and fall of the Nile created Egyptian astronomy and with it the domination of the priests, as directors of agriculture."

Footnote (b) (no. 6 in *Das Kapital*), which is attached to the word "works," reads in part as follows: "One of the material foundations of the power of the state over the small disconnected producing organisms in India was the regulation of the water supply."<sup>36</sup>

In *Das Kapital* II, Marx listed as peoples exposed to capitalist trade, without apparently having their mode of production altered: "Chinese, Indians, Arabs, etc."<sup>37</sup> In another context he distinguished between production based on slavery, on "peasants (Chinese, Indian *ryots*)," on village communities (Dutch East India), etc.<sup>38</sup> Marx was aware of the Indian *ryots* as early as 1853.<sup>39</sup> The leading British expert on Indian land tenure explains the *raiayatwari* system as a condition under which "there is no middleman or landlord over the individual raiyats [*ryots*] who are severally (and not jointly) liable for the L[and]-R[ent] assessment on the holding."<sup>40</sup>

While working on *Das Kapital* III, Marx engaged in a comprehensive study of agrarian conditions and land rent. With respect to China he might have used a memoir on land tenure published by the great French Sinologist, Edouard Biot, in 1838, in the *Journal Asiatique*. However, another competent study, "On Landed Property in China," by the Russian Sinologist, Sakharov, was published in Russia in 1857, together with related studies; and in 1858 this volume appeared in German, the translation having been made by Carl Abel and F. A. Mecklenburg.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>36</sup> Marx, DK, I, p. 478. For regressive elements in these formulations—regressive compared with Marx's position in the fifties—see Karl A. Wittfogel, *Oriental Despotism* (Yale Un. Press, 1957) (hereafter cited as Wittfogel 1957), pp. 381 *et seq.*

<sup>37</sup> Marx, DK, II, p. 12.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.* p. 82.

<sup>39</sup> See Marx, NYDT, August 5, 1853.

<sup>40</sup> B. H. Baden-Powell, *The Land-Systems of British India*, 3 vols. (London and New York: 1892), III, p. 621. This system existed among other places in the Madras area (*ibid.* I, pp. 293 *et seq.*).

<sup>41</sup> *Arbeiten der Kaiserlich russischen Gesandtschaft zu Peking über China, sein Volk, seine Religion, seine Institutionen, sozialen Verhältnisse*, Erster Band (Berlin: 1858). The first essay, "Über das Grundeigentum in China von J. Sacharoff," is presented in pp. 1–43. For references to irrigation canals as an essential part of China's traditional agriculture see Sacharoff, 1858, pp. 6, 13, 39; for a description of the old communal land system see *op. cit.*, pp. 5 *et seq.*; for later attempts to reinstitute

Marx's most important statement on Chinese land tenure in the manuscript of *Das Kapital* III contains a footnote which asserts the previous existence of communal landownership in China and ends with a reference to "Abel, etc.": "That in China too this primeval communism (though itself the product of a long historical process) was the original form one sees from Abel, etc."<sup>42</sup>

Engels, who after Marx's death prepared this volume for publication, omitted the reference to "Abel, etc.," probably because he found its identification cumbersome; and he rephrased the rest of Marx's statement and placed it in the body of the text—without, however, destroying its substance. Almost certainly the eliminated reference pointed to the information on land tenure given in the 1858 volume which on its title page carries the names of Carl Abel and F. A. Mecklenburg.

Marx's argument, however, does not depend on the correctness of this assumption. Like Marx's 1859 article quoting Elgin, the passage in *Das Kapital* III which originally mentioned "Abel" dealt with China's and India's resistance to British trade. This passage reads:

The broad foundation of the mode of production is here constituted by the unity of small agriculture and domestic industry, to which is added in India the form of [village] communities resting upon the common ownership of land that, by the way, was also the original form in China. In India the English employed their direct political and economic power as rulers and masters of the ground rent to shatter these small economic communities. Their trade has a revolutionising effect on the mode of production only in so far as they destroy, by the low price of their commodities, the spinning and weaving industry, which constitutes an ancient and inherent part of this unity of industrial-agricultural production, and thus tears the communities apart. Even here they succeed only gradually in their work of dissolution. Still less so in China where it is not aided by immediate political power. The great economy and the saving of time that result from the immediate combination of agriculture and manufacture offer here the most stubborn resistance to the products of big industry, whose prices are increased by the cost of a process of circulation that perforates it everywhere. On the other hand, Russian trade, in contrast to the English, leaves the economic foundation of Asiatic production untouched.<sup>43</sup>

The socio-historical view of China that Marx intended to present in the last volume of his major work can be summarised as follows:

(1) Traditional China, like pre-British India, was characterised by "Asiatic production."

this system see *op. cit.*, pp. 15 *et seq.*; for the ultimate establishment of private landownership, which, according to the author, had prevailed during the preceding thousand years, see *op. cit.*, pp. 20 *et seq.*

<sup>42</sup> Manuscript of *Das Kapital*, Volume III, NM, 282. For help in deciphering this sentence I am indebted to Dr. W. Blumenberg of the Amsterdam International Institute of Social History, which possesses the bulk of Marx's and Engels' manuscripts.

<sup>43</sup> Marx, DK III, 1, p. 318.

(2) This mode of production, both in China and in India, was based on a combination of small agriculture and small industry.

(3) For a political reason (the absence of Western colonial rule) China was more successful in preserving its traditional mode of production than nineteenth-century India, and this despite the fact that China, unlike India, had long abandoned its communal system of land tenure.

Neither in the above key passages in *Das Kapital* III nor in related passages in this volume<sup>44</sup> did Marx specify the varieties of Asiatic landholding known to him or the hydraulic development which he emphasised in the final version of *Das Kapital* I. He was just as indefinite on these issues in the *Theorien über den Mehrwert* which he planned to publish as Volume IV of *Das Kapital*. For India he cited Jones' definition of "ryot rents" as rents paid to the sovereign as the owner of the soil.<sup>45</sup> It will be remembered that in Volume II of *Das Kapital* he had listed the Chinese "peasants" and the Indian "ryots" as related types that differed from members of communal villages. Marx also reproduced Jones' statement that the peculiarity of urban handicrafts in China and India was determined by the fact that the Asiatic state was the distributor of the revenue. And referring to Bernier, who made a similar point, he concluded: "This also is based on the form of landownership in Asia."<sup>46</sup> Occasionally he called the Asiatic sovereign "the main landlord,"<sup>47</sup> thus implying there were others.

Marx's comments on China provide few details, and their conceptual shortcomings are obvious. They are nevertheless socio-historically stimulating<sup>48</sup> and of course they are pivotal for the understanding of the doctrinal position of original Marxism.

#### KAUTSKY AND PLEKHANOV

Marx's and Engels' view of China was accepted and elaborated by two young socialists who were soon to play a prominent role as Marxist theoreticians: Karl Kautsky, who was particularly interested in history, Marxist economics, and politics, and George Plekhanov, who in his early days was particularly interested in Marxist philosophy and its Hegelian roots.<sup>49</sup> Kautsky developed into a seasoned Marxist under

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.* III, 2, p. 324.

<sup>45</sup> Marx, TMW, III, p. 452.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 499–501.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.* p. 453.

<sup>48</sup> Cf. Max Weber's remark about this singular heuristic significance of Marx's ideal-typical "laws" and developmental constructs (Max Weber, *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Wissenschaftslehre* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1922), p. 205).

<sup>49</sup> Engels found even Kautsky and Bernstein wanting in this respect. See "Talks with A. Voden," *Reminiscences of Marx and Engels* (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, no date), p. 331.

Engels' personal guidance. In 1883 he became, with Engels' wholehearted approval,<sup>50</sup> the editor of *Die Neue Zeit*, which during the next decades was generally recognised as the leading theoretical Marxist journal. Until 1914 Kautsky was considered the outstanding spokesman of Marxist orthodoxy.

### Kautsky

In 1887 Kautsky, stimulated by the footnotes to Marx's hydraulic passage in *Das Kapital* I,<sup>51</sup> discussed the formative role of government-managed waterworks in the rise of oriental despotism in an article entitled "The Modern Nationality." In this article he elaborated on Marx's and Engels' thesis that under oriental despotism the primitive co-operative ("communistic") agrarian communities generally persist.<sup>52</sup> And among the significant hydraulic areas he included Mesopotamia and China, which had not been so specified in Engels' and Marx's 1853 lists or in Marx's hydraulic passage in *Das Kapital* I.

Kautsky found the hydraulic origin of Pharaonic Egypt reflected in the legend of Menes as told by Herodotus. And he drew attention to an analogous account by Mencius of China's culture hero, Yü. The key sentences of Kautsky's quotation from the Chinese classic read as follows: "In the time of Yâo, when the world had not yet been perfectly reduced to order, the vast waters, flowing out of their channels made a universal inundation. . . . Yü separated the nine streams, cleared the courses of the Tsî and T'â, and led them all to the sea. He opened a vent also for the Zû and Han, and regulated the course of the Hwâi and Sze, so that they all flowed into the Chiang. When this was done, it became possible for the people of the Middle Kingdom to cultivate the ground and get food for themselves."<sup>53</sup>

In 1890 Kautsky expressed his agreement with Plekhanov's praise of Mechnikov's hydraulic interpretation of the great oriental civilisations. But he also noted, and quite correctly, that he himself had presented the gist of this idea in 1887 and that "already twenty years prior to Mr. Metschnikoff, Marx in his 'Kapital' had indicated some of the essential foundations of the 'river civilisations.'" <sup>54</sup> Kautsky remained aware—and proud—of his early recognition of the Marxist view of the Orient. In his most comprehensive account of historical materialism (1929) he

<sup>50</sup> Karl Kautsky, *Aus der Frühzeit des Marxismus*, Engels Briefwechsel mit Kautsky (Prague: 1935) (hereafter cited as Kautsky 1935), p. 255.

<sup>51</sup> See Kautsky's editorial note to Plekhanov's Mechnikov article (G. Plechanoff, "Die Zivilization und die grossen historischen Flüsse," *Die Neue Zeit*, No. 14, 1890-91, (hereafter cited as Plekhanov 1890/91), p. 447.

<sup>52</sup> Karl Kautsky, "Die moderne Nationalität," *Die Neue Zeit*, V (1887), pp. 395, 396.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.* p. 395. For this translation of Mencius see James Legge, *The Chinese Classics*, 7 vols. (Oxford: 1893-95), II, pp. 250 *et seq.*

<sup>54</sup> Note to Plekhanov 1890/91, p. 447.

discussed irrigation agriculture, large-scale public works, oriental despotism, and the thus conditioned stagnation of the great Eastern civilisations in a number of chapters,<sup>55</sup> and with special reference to Marx's position and Plekhanov's and his own elaboration of that position.<sup>56</sup>

### *Plekhanov*

Marx and Engels, in their comments on Asiatic society, dealt mainly with India, a not unexpected consequence of their long residence in England and their England-centred approach to the East. Kautsky was, and remained, rooted in Austria and Germany, two countries that had neither Asian colonies nor Asian neighbours. For him the Orient was primarily a historical phenomenon; and thus, quite understandably, he chose as his examples, besides Egypt—which had also intrigued Marx—ancient Mesopotamia and prehistoric China. From 1879 Plekhanov lived in exile, for the most part in Switzerland; but his major concern continued to be Russia. Among the hydraulic civilisations his preferred example for the past was Egypt, for the present China.

Of course, China was Russia's most important Oriental neighbour, but quite likely Plekhanov's choice was also influenced by Hegel's preoccupation with that country. Hegel's objective idealism had many realistic features; and his investigation of the geographical foundations of history was an important part of his effort to determine order in nature and society.

The critical analyst will recognise the dangers of an ecological or economic determinism<sup>57</sup>; but he will not, for this reason, disregard the many serious attempts to establish causal relations between man's natural setting and his way of life. Divorced from their deterministic distortions, these attempts constitute a significant contribution to the development of a rational social science.

In *Our Differences* (1885) which cited Marx verbatim on the unchangeableness of Asiatic society,<sup>58</sup> Plekhanov doubted "that the workers' revolution in the West could 'force' upon China in the near future a 'socialist organisation in the sphere of domestic commercial exchange.'" Why? Because "the 'social structure' of China greatly resists the decisive influence of European ideas and institutions." He added: "The same can be said of Turkey, Persia, etc."<sup>59</sup> And he suggested that a misdirected Russian revolution might bring into being

<sup>55</sup> Karl Kautsky, *Die Materialistische Geschichtsauffassung*, 2 vols. (Berlin: 1929), II, pp. 94 *et seq.*, 204, 206 *et seq.*, 213, 226, 247 *et seq.*

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 207–210.

<sup>57</sup> See Wittfogel 1957, pp. 16 *et seq.*, 414 *et seq.*

<sup>58</sup> G. V. Plekhanov, *Sochinenia*, II, p. 236.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.* p. 317.

not a socialist society, but a restoration of Tsarist despotism—which he equated with the despotisms of ancient China and Peru.<sup>60</sup>

In an article also published in 1885 Plekhanov stressed Hegel's concept of the geographical foundations of world history and its application to the river valley despotisms of China, Egypt and Russia.<sup>61</sup> In 1889 he discussed China's relation to pre-Emancipation Russia. "Muscovy was a kind of China in Europe instead of in Asia." "The old Muscovite Russia" had in its economic and political institutions a "completely Asiatic character," and in this respect it was a kind of China. But being situated in Europe, "our Muscovite China"—in contrast to self-secluded China—"tried by every means in her power from the time of Ivan the Terrible to open at least a small window on Europe." And while Peter's introduction of European technical, military, and administrative features carried Russian "despotism to the degree of might unknown until then," the Crimean War enforced reforms such as the Emancipation of 1861, which initiated the disintegration of Tsarist despotism.<sup>62</sup>

All this Plekhanov saw by 1889, but it was only in 1890 in his discussion of Mechnikov's *La Civilisation et Les Grands Fleuves Historiques* (Paris: 1889) that he clearly formulated the hydraulic foundation of the river-valley despotism of the East.<sup>63</sup> He rejected Mechnikov's "idealistic" inclinations and his anarchistic criticism of the strong state; but he applauded his approach which led "to the same conclusions the Marxists come to."<sup>64</sup>

Plekhanov returned to his geo-historical key concepts in a series of articles on Hegel, printed in *Die Neue Zeit* in November 1891. In the second of them he again praised Hegel's notion of the geographical foundations of world history<sup>65</sup> and his interpretation of the great river-valley civilisations of China, India, Babylonia and Egypt. And he noted the closeness of Hegel's and Mechnikov's geographical position to "the materialistic view."<sup>66</sup> Engels followed *Die Neue Zeit* with great interest. In April 1891 he found the journal greatly improved,<sup>67</sup> and in December of that year he found Plekhanov's articles on Hegel "excellent."<sup>68</sup>

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.* p. 81.

<sup>61</sup> G. W. Plechanow, *Kunst und Litteratur*, trans. by Joseph Harhammer (Berlin: Dietz, 1955) (hereafter cited as Plekhanov 1955), p. 574. Russia, of course, was no river valley despotism.

<sup>62</sup> G. Plekhanov, *Selected Philosophical Works*, 5 vols. (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, no date), I, pp. 441 *et seq.* In a speech he made a few months after the publication of the just-cited article he criticised certain eager and well-meaning writers who viewed Russia as "a kind of European China, whose economic structure has nothing in common with that of Western Europe." They overlooked that "the old economic foundations of Russia are now undergoing a process of complete disintegration" (*Ibid.* pp. 451, 453).

<sup>63</sup> Plekhanov 1890/91, pp. 440 *et seq.*

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.* p. 447.

<sup>65</sup> G. Plechanow, "Zu Hegel's Sechzigstem Todestag," *Die Neue Zeit*, X (1892), p. 240.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 241 *et seq.*

<sup>67</sup> Kautsky 1935, p. 283.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.* p. 301.

In his book, *The Development of the Monist View of History* (1895), Plekhanov again presented the geographical argument and again he approvingly referred to Mechnikov.<sup>69</sup> He did not, at that time expressly mention China, but he quoted *in toto* both the above-cited hydraulic passage from *Das Kapital* I and the attached footnote dealing with India's hydraulic foundation.<sup>70</sup>

In 1897 Plekhanov reverted to the problem of societal stagnation. He compared Russia with "other historical Oblomov countries, such as Egypt and China," Oblomov being the ever-sleepy hero of Goncharov's famous novel. Russia, he asserted, had been saved from eternal stagnation by the impact of Western neighbours that had put it on "the road of the general European development."<sup>71</sup>

This then was the way Plekhanov saw China in the eighties and nineties, and this was the way he saw it until the end of his life.

#### LENIN

Plekhanov was the leading Russian Marxist in the mid-nineties when Lenin appeared on the political scene. In 1910 Lenin declared that, through his *Monist View*, Plekhanov had "educated a whole generation of Russian Marxists."<sup>72</sup> Among the so-educated Marxists was Lenin himself. Any analysis of Lenin's treatment of the Marxist view of Russia and China must keep this fact clearly in mind.

#### *Prior to World War I*

The twenty-one year period from 1894 to 1914 during which Lenin upheld the Marxist view of Asiatic society has three phases.

*1894-1899:* During these years Lenin unquestioningly accepted this view as part of orthodox Marxism. But since he then maintained that economically Russia was already a capitalist country,<sup>73</sup> he was little concerned with the Asiatic peculiarities of Russia's traditional order (the *Aziatchina*).<sup>74</sup> And he occupied himself even less with the "Asiatic" quality of such countries as China.

*1900-1905:* At the turn of the century the Russian Social Democrats began to concentrate on the political struggle—the struggle against

<sup>69</sup> G. Plekhanov, *The Development of the Monist View of History* (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1956), p. 199.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.* p. 160.

<sup>71</sup> Plekhanov 1955, p. 690. Following Marx and Engels, Plekhanov considered the Crimean War and the Emancipation of the serfs the starting point in Russia's economic "European" development.

<sup>72</sup> V. J. Lenin, *Sochinenia*, 4th ed., 35 vols. (Moscow: 1941-50) (hereafter cited as Lenin, S.), X, p. 58.

<sup>73</sup> V. I. Lenin, *Collected Works*, 3 vols. (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1960), I, pp. 160, 299.

<sup>74</sup> For occasional references to the issue see *ibid.* I, p. 235; *idem*, *Samtliche Werke*, 25 vols. (Vienna-Berlin, later Moscow-Leningrad: 1930 *et seq.*) (hereafter cited as Lenin, SWG), III, pp. 44, 164.

Tsarist “autocracy”; and during the next five years Lenin stressed the Asiatic aspect of Russian society vigorously. The Russian revolution of 1905 demonstrated that even in the villages the “old” order was stronger than Lenin had assumed.<sup>75</sup> Hence in that year Lenin particularly emphasised the importance of the *Aziatchina*.<sup>76</sup>

At the beginning of the twentieth century the Boxer “Rebellion” gave China a front place on the international scene. When Lenin discussed this development he stressed China’s “Asiatic” heritage. Characteristic of his attitude is a passage in his article, “The Chinese War,” which appeared in the first issue of *Iskra* in September 1900: “The Chinese people suffer from the same evils that weigh so heavily on the Russians—an Asiatic government which squeezes taxes out of a starving peasantry and uses military force to crush every desire for freedom, and the oppression of capital which has entered into the Middle Kingdom also.”<sup>77</sup> Like Engels, Lenin placed Asiatic oppression ahead of capitalist oppression; and like Plekhanov, he equated Russia’s “Asiatic” government and the government of China.

1906–1914: Stimulated by the revolution of 1905, Lenin proposed a new type of bourgeois-democratic revolution based on the support of the peasants who, in turn, would be attracted by the policy of nationalising (and distributing) the land. Early in April 1906, on the eve of the Stockholm Party Congress, Lenin published a pamphlet, *The Revision of the Agrarian Programme of the Workers’ Party*. In it he sought to refute the criticism of this policy which Plekhanov had voiced in No. 5 of his magazine, *Diary of a Social Democrat*, in March 1906. In a footnote Lenin objected to the way in which Plekhanov had referred to certain aspects of China’s Asiatic land policy: “Comrade Plekhanov warns Russia against a repetition of the experiments of Wang An-shih (a Chinese reformer of the eleventh century, who unsuccessfully tried to nationalise the land) and he endeavours to demonstrate that the present idea of the nationalisation of the land is reactionary. The far-fetched character of this argument is evident. Indeed: *qui prouve trop, ne prouve rien!* If twentieth-century Russia could be compared with eleventh-century China, then Plekhanov and I would certainly not speak of the revolutionary-democratic character of the present movement or of capitalism in Russia.”<sup>78</sup>

The reader who does not know what Plekhanov actually wrote may find Lenin’s objection to a comparison of twentieth-century Russia and

<sup>75</sup> V. I. Lenin, *Selected Works*, 12 vols. (New York: International Publishers, 1943) (hereafter cited as Lenin, SW), III, p. 233; *idem*, SWG, VIII, p. 72.

<sup>76</sup> Lenin, SWG, VII, p. 249; VIII, pp. 70, 84, 203, 453, 557.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.* IV, 1, p. 65.

<sup>78</sup> W. I. Lenin, *Werke* (Berlin: Dietz, 1956–60), X, p. 173, note.



eleventh-century China entirely reasonable; and since in his subsequent polemics Lenin did not repeat this objection the reader may assume that in Plekhanov's argument the Chinese example signified little. But an examination of Plekhanov's initial article and of his speeches on the agrarian question at the Stockholm Party Congress (April 10–25) leads to a very different conclusion.

In the first place in his *Diary* article Plekhanov was not comparing traditional (eleventh-century) China and twentieth-century Russia. He spoke of "our old order, in which the land and its tillers were the property of the state"; and he called this order "the Muscovite version of an economic order, which is the foundation of all great oriental despotisms." And while he recognised that Russia's old order was greatly weakened (it "suffered several blows already in the eighteenth century and it has been seriously shaken in the course of the economic development in the second half of the nineteenth century"), he felt that the nationalisation of the land, which Lenin and certain peasant leaders were favouring, would mean a return to that old order.<sup>79</sup> To bulwark his argument, Plekhanov quoted two attempts under Chinese despotism to make all land state property, one by Wang An-shih (1021–1086) and one by Wang Mang (33 B.C.–A.D. 23).<sup>80</sup>

Essentially, then, Plekhanov was comparing Russia's "old" order with Oriental conditions in general and with two phases of imperial China in particular. "It has to be admitted that there is unfortunately too much of the Chinese system (*Kitaishchina*) in the agrarian history of Muscovite Russia."<sup>81</sup> Under the Muscovite régime—and under the Petrinean régime, which "completed and systematised" the Muscovite policy<sup>82</sup>—the government controlled the land, enslaving the peasants and subduing the landholders, *pomeshchiki*, who until 1762 had been the Tsar's serving men and who after 1762 were "not-serving 'servants.'"<sup>83</sup>

Plekhanov's argument implies that in recent Russia the despotic state still dominated the state peasants as well as the *pomeshchiki*-landlords. And it shows him completely hostile to any policy, new or old, that put the state in control of all the land. Such a policy would lead to the kind of cyclical movement that had occurred in China several times: "The

<sup>79</sup> G. V. Plekhanov, *Dnevnik Sotsial-Demokrata (Diary of a Social Democrat)*, No. 5, March 1906, p. 12 (hereafter cited as Plekhanov 1906).

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 12 *et seq.* In the context of his argument, which is historically faulty, Plekhanov referred to the account of these actions given by the anarchist geographer Reclus, who, he believed, had based himself on Sakharov. Plekhanov's assumption is not confirmed by Reclus' bibliography, but it suggests that Plekhanov knew Sakharov's account of Chinese land tenure, which we mentioned above.

<sup>81</sup> Plekhanov 1906, p. 14.

<sup>82</sup> Cf. Marx's thesis that Peter "generalised" the policy of Tatarised Muscovy (Karl Marx, "Revelations of the Diplomatic History of the 18th Century," *The Free Press*, February 25 and April 1, 1857).

<sup>83</sup> Plekhanov 1906, pp. 14 *et seq.*

Chinese social revolutions also were based on the fact that the land was taken away from 'the men of the emperor'—by the state; then the old story starts all over again, producing new 'men of the emperor' and giving birth to new revolutions and the old *Kitaishchina*. We need no *Kitaishchina!*"<sup>84</sup> Quite the contrary: the socialists must support a land distribution that does not involve nationalisation. They must support it despite its "bourgeois character," if it furthers the country's economic development—and if it becomes "an obstacle to the restoration of our statist-economic *Kitaishchina*."<sup>85</sup>

Thus Plekhanov invoked Marx's Asiatic interpretation of Russia and China to combat Lenin's new-type revolutionary land policy. And he kept repeating his argument. At the Stockholm Congress in his first speech on the agrarian question, he said: "The agrarian history of Russia resembles more closely that of India, Egypt, China, and other oriental despotisms than that of Western Europe"<sup>86</sup>; the *Kitaishchina* is "the nationalisation of the land"<sup>87</sup>; "our programme must eliminate the economic foundation of Caesarism."<sup>88</sup> And in his concluding speech he said: We must destroy "the economic basis of our old order. What was its character? It was that nationalisation of the land, which in my *Diary* I called our *Kitaishchina*."<sup>89</sup>

Plekhanov's association of the *Kitaishchina* and *Aziatchina* and of both with the dangers of an Asiatic restoration perturbed Lenin greatly. He was not willing to abandon his new revolutionary policy, and he was not ready to abandon the Asiatic concept. In a report on the Stockholm Congress, written immediately after it ended, he admitted that "insofar as (or if) there existed in Muscovite Russia a nationalisation of the land its economic foundation was the Asiatic mode of production."<sup>90</sup>

But what he upheld semantically, he obscured terminologically. From 1906 on, Lenin reduced his use of the terms "Asiatic" and "*Aziatchina*." Increasingly, and generally without explanation, he employed designations such as "bonded," "mediaeval," or "patriarchal," that could denote either Western feudal or non-feudal oriental institutions. And he unabashedly employed the term "feudal," which was completely misleading except when placed in an Asiatic context, as Martynov had done at the Stockholm Congress.<sup>91</sup>

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.* p. 17.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>86</sup> *Protokoly Obyedinitelnago Syezda Rossyskoi Sotsialdemokraticeskoi Rabochei Partii (Protocols of the Unification Congress of the R.S.D.R.P. held in Stockholm, 1906)*, Moscow, 1907, p. 44.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.* p. 43.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.* p. 44.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.* p. 116.

<sup>90</sup> Lenin, *Werke*, X, p. 332.

<sup>91</sup> Occasionally Lenin referred to Martynov's usage (SW, III, p. 241), but generally he gave no such warning.

This terminological confusion also shaped the image Lenin presented of China.

1908: Until 1905 "the majority of the countries of Asia . . . were fast asleep."<sup>92</sup> But now there is in China as in other Asiatic countries a rapid growth of European tendencies. In China there is now developing a "revolutionary movement against mediaevalism."<sup>93</sup>

1912: On the occasion of the Chinese revolution Lenin called Sun Yat-sen a Chinese populist (*narodnik*), who combined a sincerely democratic spirit with the idea of social reform. "The platform of the great Chinese democracy—for Sun Yat-sen's article [in *Le Peuple*, Brussels] is precisely such a platform—compels us and gives us a convenient opportunity once more to consider the question of the relation between democracy and Narodism in the present-day bourgeois revolutions of Asia from the angle of new world events. This is one of the most serious problems that confronted Russia in its revolutionary epoch which began in 1905. And it not only confronted Russia, but the whole of Asia, as is evident from the platform of the provisional President of the Chinese Republic, especially if we compare this platform with the development of revolutionary events in Russia, Turkey, Persia, and China. In very many and very essential respects Russia is undoubtedly an Asiatic country, and, moreover, one of the wildest, most mediaeval, and shamefully backward of Asiatic countries."<sup>94</sup>

The Chinese "narodniki," of whom Sun Yat-sen was the outstanding example, were dreaming "socialist dreams, with the hope that China will be able to avoid the path of capitalism, prevent capitalism; and in the second place, with the plan and propaganda of radical agrarian reform."<sup>95</sup> In part these tendencies reflected Sun's hatred of all oppression and exploitation, and to that extent he was *subjectively* a socialist. However, "the *objective* conditions of China, of a backward, agricultural, semi-feudal country, place on the order of the day, in the lives of a nation numbering nearly half a billion, only one definite, historically peculiar form of this oppression and exploitation, namely, feudalism. Feudalism was based on the predominance of agricultural life and of natural economy; the source of the feudal exploitation of the Chinese peasant was the *attachment* of the peasant, in some form or other, to the land; those who politically expressed this exploitation were the feudal rulers, jointly and severally, with the emperor as the head of the whole system."<sup>96</sup>

<sup>92</sup> Lenin, SW, IV, p. 303.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.* IV, p. 300.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.* IV, pp. 305 *et seq.*

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.* IV, p. 308.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.* IV, p. 308, italics in original

Lenin's reference to China's "feudalism" did not imply the contractual relations between overlord and feudal lord, which are the core of authentic feudalism. His insistence that Russia was still predominantly an "Asiatic" country showed him unwilling to abandon the original Marxist doctrine, as did his occasional comments on the Asiatic background of contemporary China. In this same article he depicted China as "wild, deadly asleep, *Asiatic China*,"<sup>97</sup> and he called Sun Yat-sen "the *Asiatic* provisional President of the Republic."<sup>98</sup>

1913: Lenin hailed the democratic revolutions in such "Asiatic and semi-Asiatic countries" as Russia, Turkey, Persia, and China.<sup>99</sup> He also declared that China, which for so long "was considered a typical land of unmitigated stagnation," was now awakening like Turkey, Persia, and India. Thanks to world capitalism and the 1905 revolution in Russia hundreds of millions of people in Asia had been aroused from "mediaeval stagnation."<sup>100</sup>

1914: Again Lenin pointed to the bourgeois-democratic revolutions in Eastern Europe and Asia. And in this context he mentioned specifically four countries: Russia, Persia, Turkey, and China.<sup>101</sup> This remark appeared in an article in which, in agreement with Rosa Luxemburg, he asserted that "the state system of Russia" should be judged by "its economic and political and sociological characteristics and everyday life—a totality of traits which, taken together, produce the concept 'Asiatic despotism'." And he added: "Everyone knows that, with an economy in which purely patriarchal, pre-capitalist features predominate, and with commodity production and class differentiation hardly developed, this type of state system possesses great stability."<sup>102</sup>

Thus, despite his confusing terminology, Lenin, until 1914, clung to the Asiatic view of China (and Russia) which Marx and Engels upheld from 1853, and which Kautsky and Plekhanov elaborated from the close of the nineteenth century.

*After August 1914: "Nil, nil, nil"*

After the outbreak of the First World War Lenin combined his political activities (the denunciation of the socialist "traitors," the discussion of the international political crisis, and attempts to establish new international connections) with a re-examination of the theoretical foundations of his dialectical position. As part of this effort, he filled his

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.* IV, p. 306, italics added.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.* IV, p. 307, italics added.

<sup>99</sup> V. I. Lenin, *The National Liberation Movement in the East* (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1957), p. 53.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 59 *et seq.*

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.* p. 76.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.* p. 73.

notebooks with abstracts from some of Hegel's major works, among them the *Philosophy of History*. Hegel's ideas, it will be remembered, had played an important part in Plekhanov's evaluation of China as an Asiatic society. Lenin knew this well. After copying Hegel's caption, "The geographical foundation of world history" and paraphrasing several of Hegel's pertinent examples, he wrote in the margin: "NB cf. Plekhanov."<sup>103</sup> But he did not include in his excerpts any of Hegel's ideas about Asia's river-valley civilisations, or Hegel's remarks about the hydraulic functions of China's traditional government, which Plekhanov had considered crucial for the understanding of the country's societal order. Lenin wanted none of this. Voting with his pen, he summarised this significant section as follows: "China. Chapter I (113–139). Description of Chinese *character*, institutions, etc. etc. Nil, nil, nil."<sup>104</sup>

In 1913 Lenin had still faithfully abstracted from Marx's letters on India the first circumstance of the "oriental order"—the "public works."<sup>105</sup> In the winter of 1914–15 he found it unnecessary to copy out Hegel's comments on the hydraulic and despotic features of traditional China.

*The second part of Prof. Wittfogel's article will appear in our next issue.*

<sup>103</sup> Lenin, S, XXXVIII, p. 306.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.* XXXVIII, p. 306.

<sup>105</sup> M. Trush, "Lenin's Abstract of Marx's and Engels' Correspondence," *Kommunist* (Moscow), No. 2, 1960, p. 50.