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The Despotism of Concepts : Wittfogel and Marx on China

By MAURICE MEISNER

DESPITE his claim to have advanced beyond Marxism and arrived at an entirely new conception of the nature of traditional non-Western societies, it is somewhat surprising to learn that Professor Karl Wittfogel still feels the need to seek the testimony of no less an “authority” on Asia than Karl Marx. In a recent article in this journal¹ Professor Wittfogel has once again examined the canons of Marxism in order to find support for the theory of “Oriental despotism.” In this case the articles that Marx and Engels wrote on China during the 1850s have been rescued from obscurity and presented as major canonical texts in the evolution of the doctrine of “Oriental despotism.”

From his reading of the scripture, Professor Wittfogel has concluded that the writings of Marx on China “enriched his concept of a completely Asiatic society.”² These writings, we are told, figured significantly in a “reappraisal of oriental society” that Marx and Engels supposedly undertook after 1853. This reappraisal is described as having “drastically reshaped their socio-historical concepts.”³ It is stated, moreover, that Marx applied to China the concept of the “Asiatic mode of production” that he set forth in articles on India and—what is of more significance for the political import of Professor Wittfogel’s theory—it is argued that Marx regarded the traditional Chinese mode of production and social structure as more or less immune to the influences of Western imperialism.⁴

For those who do not share Professor Wittfogel’s particular fascination with Marxian texts, the actual content of Marx’s writings on China will seem largely irrelevant to the questions that Professor Wittfogel has posed and the conclusions that he has arrived at. These writings of Marx are, in fact, very largely concerned with matters of British foreign policy in the 1850s rather than with the question of the nature of Chinese society.

¹ Karl A. Wittfogel, “The Marxist View of China” (Part 1), *The China Quarterly*, No. 11 (July–September 1962), pp. 1–20.

² *Ibid.* p. 1.

³ *Ibid.* p. 4.

⁴ *Ibid.* pp. 8–10.

The scattered comments that Marx did make about the internal conditions in China say surprisingly little about the social structure of traditional China in particular, and have only the most limited significance for the theoretical conceptions of Marxism in general. Yet, for the sake of historical accuracy it might be worthwhile to review what Marx actually did write about China, assess its significance (however limited) for Marxist theory, and examine the validity of the conclusions that Professor Wittfogel has drawn from these writings.

In the same year that Marx set forth his ideas on the nature of pre-British Indian society—the ideas from which the theory of “Oriental despotism” has grown—he also wrote the first of a number of articles dealing with contemporary events in China. The article of 1853, “Revolution in China and Europe,”⁵ is in striking contrast to his articles on India. The picture that Marx drew of India is well known. Pre-British India, in Marx’s view, was a stagnant and semi-barbaric society that revolved about unchanging, isolated and economically self-sufficient village communes. It was this social structure that served as the foundation for an exploitive and “Oriental despotism” state structure that ruled over society and both reflected and perpetuated its “semi-civilised” conditions. Upon this situation British imperialism intruded, and it is the major point of Marx’s articles that British imperialism, however mercenary the motives of the imperialists, was playing an historically progressive role by dissolving the traditional social and political structure and bringing about a genuine social revolution.⁶

The article on China, on the other hand, far from enriching this conception of “Oriental despotism” reveals a much different and contradictory strand in Marx’s thought. The article is not concerned with the nature of traditional Chinese society or with the historical role of Western imperialism. Rather, Marx’s attention is focused upon the possible effects of the T’ai-p’ing rebellion on the political situation in Europe. Referring to Hegel’s “law of the contact of extremes,” Marx begins with a rather startling statement:

Whether the “contact of extremes” be such a universal principle or not, a striking illustration of it may be seen in the effect the Chinese revolution seems likely to exercise upon the civilised world. It may seem a very strange, and a very paradoxical assertion that the next uprising of the people of Europe, and their next movement for republican freedom and economy of government may depend more probably on what is now passing in the Celestial Empire—the very opposite of Europe—than any other political cause that now exists. . . .⁷

⁵ *New York Daily Tribune*, June 14, 1853, p. 4.

⁶ See particularly “The British Rule in India” in Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Selected Works* (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1958), I, pp. 345–351.

⁷ Marx, “Revolution in China and Europe,” *loc. cit.*

The sources of Marx's hope that events in China might influence European politics was his belief that the T'ai-p'ing rebellion would contract the China trade and thus intensify what he thought was the beginning of a general economic crisis in Europe. "It may safely be augured," Marx concluded, "that the Chinese revolution will throw the spark into the overloaded mine of the present industrial system and cause the explosion of the long-prepared general crisis, which, spreading abroad, will be closely followed by political revolutions on the continent." Marx went on to muse over the possibility of the "curious spectacle" of "China sending disorder into the Western world while the Western Powers, by English, French, and American war steamers, are conveying 'order' to Shanghai, Nanking, and the mouths of the Great Canal."⁸

For the later Chinese Communists, saddled as they were with the deterministic economic strictures of Marxist theory, Marx's article of 1853 seemed to confirm their conviction that China could make an immediate and creative contribution to the world revolution. As early as 1926, Li Ta-chao, the pioneer of Marxism in China, translated the article into Chinese and published it in the Peking Communist periodical *Cheng-chih Sheng-huo (Political Life)*.⁹ In interpreting Marx's article Li was particularly attracted to the suggestion that China might provide the stimulus for revolution in Europe. Since Li's interpretation is indicative of the way in which Marx's writings on China can and have been viewed by Chinese Marxists, it might be of interest to quote the main portions of Li's concluding remarks:

After reading this article by Marx we ought very clearly to recognise that in both theory and fact the Chinese revolution is part of the world revolution. . . . The pressure of English imperialism on China has created the Chinese revolution, and the Chinese revolution has in turn influenced England and through England, Europe, and [thus] has a role in the world revolution. The T'ai-p'ing Rebellion, which occurred during Marx's lifetime, was like this and today the explosion of the whole Chinese nation in the era of the anti-imperialist movement is also like this, and it will be like this until the world revolution is completed; the manifestation of [China's] role is daily becoming more obvious, and the tendency for the Chinese revolution to urge on the world revolution is increasing day by day. . . . Now at the same time that the Chinese national revolutionary movement has spread throughout the whole country, the English workers have called an unprecedented strike of a million men. . . . Is this not the phenomenon of China returning [to the West] the violence that has been brought to us by the "order" imposed by the armies and warships of the English bourgeoisie? Is not

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ See the reprint of Li's translation of Marx's article, and his comments on it, published under the title "Ma-k'o-ssu ti Chung-kuo min-tsu ko-ming-kuan" ("Marx's Views on the Chinese National Revolution") in *Li Ta-chao Hsüan-chi (The Selected Writings of Li Ta-chao)* (Peking: Jen-min Ch'u-pan-she, 1959), pp. 545-555

the Chinese revolution a spark for the landmine that has already been planted in the over-accumulation of Europe's productive system which is about to produce a great explosion? This will be proved in the historical facts of the revolution that is imminent.¹⁰

Li's interpretation is significant because it illustrates how easily the non-deterministic strain in Marx's thought could be adapted by nationalistic Chinese Communists who were searching for means to reconcile their own voluntaristic predispositions with the Marxist tradition.

Between 1857 and 1862 Marx and Engels wrote at least twenty articles dealing with China, all but one of which originally appeared in the *New York Daily Tribune*.¹¹ Both for the student of China and the student of Marxist theory, these articles make for rather dull reading. They are, in large part, tirades against the foreign policy of the then British Prime Minister, Lord Palmerston, who Marx was convinced was consciously working in favour of the interests of Czarist expansionism. In part, these articles are concerned with the statistics and future prospects of the China trade.

There are, nevertheless, several noteworthy features about these articles that bear upon the argument set forth by Professor Wittfogel. It is of some significance, for one thing, that nowhere does Marx directly refer to China as "Oriental despotism"—as Professor Wittfogel suggests that it was his intention to do. To support his assertion Professor Wittfogel has reproduced Marx's statement that the economic structure of Chinese society is based on the combination of "minute agriculture with domestic industry."¹² Yet this is a proposition applicable to a wide variety of pre-capitalist societies, including medieval Europe, where local economic self-sufficiency was maintained on the basis of this very combination. It is by no means a peculiar feature of so-called "Asiatic society." Surely Professor Wittfogel has not forgotten the well-known description of a variety of pre-capitalist societies, including feudalism, in the first volume of *Capital*, where Marx states that "peasant agriculture on a small scale, and the carrying on of independent handicrafts . . . together form the basis of the feudal mode of production."¹³ Taking the same formulation that he used to argue that Marx regarded China as an "Oriental despotism," Professor Wittfogel might just as easily have

¹⁰ *Ibid.* pp. 553-555.

¹¹ The citations made here from the *New York Daily Tribune* are taken from the original newspaper texts. Most of the articles are also available in Dona Torr, *Marx on China* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1951). The only article that did not appear in the *New York Daily Tribune* was published in 1862 in the Vienna newspaper *Die Presse*. See Marx and Engels, *Werke* (Berlin: Dietz, 1961), Vol. XV; also *Ma-k'o-ssu En-ke-ssu lun Chung-kuo* (*Marx and Engels on China*) (Peking: Jen-min Ch'u-pan-she, 1957), pp. 514-516.

¹² Karl Marx, "Trade with China," *New York Daily Tribune*, December 3, 1859, p. 8.

¹³ Karl Marx, *Capital* (New York: Modern Library), I, p. 367, footnote.

concluded that Marx viewed traditional Chinese society as an example of a European-type feudal system.

Actually, there is no significant evidence to suggest that Marx viewed China either as representative of European feudalism or in terms of the model of “Oriental despotism” that he outlined on the basis of his studies of Indian society. The theory that if a society is not feudal according to the Western European pattern then it must, to a greater or lesser degree, be described as of the “Orientially despotic” variety is an assumption that has been made by Karl Wittfogel and not by Karl Marx.

It is also of some interest to note that in his discussion in *Capital* of large-scale irrigation works—presumably the foundation of the theory of the “Asiatic mode of production” and the “Orientially despotic” state—Marx presents, as examples, Egypt, Lombardy, Holland, India, Persia, Spain and Sicily; but he does not mention China.¹⁴

If we probe a bit more deeply into the question of why Marx described India as an “Oriental despotism” but not China, then it seems quite clear that the crucial factor was Marx’s awareness of China’s system of private landownership.¹⁵ Marx’s conception of “Oriental despotism” is intimately connected with the existence of communally held land and the absence of private landownership. This is, indeed, the main premise with which Marx approached the study of “Asiatic society.” In a letter to Engels written in 1853, Marx stated that “. . . the basis of all phenomena in the East . . . is the absence of private property in land. This is the real key, even to the Oriental heaven. . . .”¹⁶ Again in the preceding statement Marx specifically refers to Turkey, Persia and India, but not to China or Japan. Moreover, in his treatment of the subject in *Capital*, Marx lists communal landownership as the first of the distinguishing characteristics of the “Asiatic mode of production.” The relevant passage reads as follows:

These small and extremely ancient Indian communities, some of which have continued down to this day, are based on possession in common of the land, on the blending of agriculture and handicrafts, and on the unalterable division of labour, which serves, whenever a new community is started, as a plan and scheme ready cut and dried.¹⁷

The idea of “Asiatic society” is a socio-historical rather than a geographical concept. While Marx was reluctant to categorise Chinese society, he did not hesitate to describe Japan as feudal in the European

¹⁴ *Ibid.* p. 564.

¹⁵ Marx, “Trade with China,” *loc. cit.*; Wittfogel, *loc. cit.*, p. 6.

¹⁶ Letter of Marx to Engels, June 2, 1853. Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Selected Correspondence* (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1953), p. 99.

¹⁷ *Capital*, I, p. 392. “Oriental despotism” is also specifically identified with communal landownership by Engels in *Herr Eugen Duhring’s Revolution in Science* (New York: International Publishers, no date), p. 184.

sense¹⁸—despite the fact that he knew even less about Japan than he did about China.

Since Professor Wittfogel admits that Marx was aware of the existence of private landownership in China,¹⁹ he faces something of a dilemma in reconciling this with his argument that Marx regarded China as an example of “Oriental despotism.” He attempts to resolve this dilemma by engaging in a bit of semantic juggling of Marxist terminology. It is argued that Marx made a distinction between the “mode of production” as the “real process of production” and “property relations” which are merely its “legal expression.”²⁰

It is difficult to believe that someone as well versed in Marxist doctrine as Professor Wittfogel could be unaware that Marxist theory demands correspondence between the property relations of a given society and its mode of production. It is a prime article of the Marxist faith that class and property relations reflect the mode of production that produced them. The only time when property relations can be in a state of disharmony with the “real process of production” is when the development of the latter has outgrown the property relations which it had originally given rise to. It is this situation, according to Marx, that inaugurates a period of social revolution when the property relations are transformed in accordance with the new productive forces.²¹

Thus, to a Marxist, the existence of differing property relations is in itself suggestive of differing modes of production. It seems reasonable to assume that it was for this reason that Marx was reluctant to classify China as either a feudal or an “Asiatic” society. It is for this very same reason that Professor Wittfogel’s attempt to read Marx’s mind and tell us what he really meant is unconvincing.

It is quite true, as Professor Wittfogel has frequently pointed out, that Marx viewed social development in a multilinear rather than a unilinear fashion. He had nothing but contempt for those who universalised his schematisation of Western European history. In 1877, for example, he bitterly criticised a Russian writer who, he complained, transformed “my historical sketch of the genesis of capitalism in Western Europe into an historico-philosophic theory of the *marche générale* imposed by fate upon

¹⁸ In a footnote in the first volume of *Capital*, Marx wrote: “Japan, with its purely feudal organisation of landed property and its developed petite culture, gives a much truer picture of the European middle ages than all our history books. . . .” *Capital*, I, p. 789.

¹⁹ Wittfogel, *loc. cit.*, p. 6.

²⁰ *Ibid.* p. 5.

²¹ This is one of Marx’s most basic and explicit theoretical formulations. See, for example, Karl Marx, “Preface to a Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy,” Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Selected Works* (Moscow: 1958), I, p. 363.

every people, whatever the historic circumstances in which it finds itself. . . .”²²

But this does not mean that Marx recognised only the two types of social development—the Western European and the “Asiatic”—with which Professor Wittfogel has chosen to polarise the world. On the contrary, Marx insisted upon the necessity of studying the particular characteristics of diverse paths of historical development. He argued that analogous events taking place in different historical surroundings lead to totally different results. “By studying each of these forms of evolution separately and then comparing them,” Marx stated, “one can easily find the clue to this phenomenon, but one will never arrive there by using the universal passport of a general historico-philosophical theory, the supreme virtue of which consists in being super-historical.”²³

Neither in terms of these historical premises, nor from the reading of what Marx actually wrote about China, is there any reason to assume that he equated Chinese social development with the description of “Oriental despotism” that he outlined for pre-British Indian society. The fact that Marx was rather uninterested in the particular nature of traditional Chinese society reflects his preoccupation with the development of capitalism in Europe and his conviction that through the establishment of a world market the bourgeois mode of production would inevitably spread to encompass the globe. It is only in this latter sense that Marx speaks of universal history. Except for this sense Marx’s methodology was strictly historical rather than historicist. Unlike that of most of his successors, the perspectives of Marx allowed for diversity and variety in historical development. They are perspectives that are far different from both the unilinear historical scheme of contemporary Communist ideologies and the equally rigid, dualistic system of Professor Wittfogel.

A second noteworthy feature of Marx’s articles on China is the highly legalistic and moralistic standpoint from which he viewed the relations between China and the Western Powers. His articles are filled with sarcastic references to “the Christianity-canting and civilisation-mongering British government.”²⁴ He accused the English of waging an “unrighteous war” (the Second Anglo-Chinese War) in which “the unoffending citizens and peaceful tradesmen of Canton have been slaughtered, their habitations battered to the ground and the claims of humanity violated. . . .”²⁵ Marx attributed the “true cause” of the hostilities of the late 1850s not to the pretence that China was unwilling to acknowledge the Western countries as her equals but rather to “the unwillingness of

²² Letter from Karl Marx to the editors of *Otechestvenniye Zapiski* (November 1877), *Selected Correspondence*, p. 379.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Karl Marx, *New York Daily Tribune*, September 25, 1858, p. 4.

²⁵ Marx, *New York Daily Tribune*, April 10, 1857, p. 4.

the Chinese authorities to allow their subjects to be poisoned with opium for the pecuniary benefit of the British East India Company and a few unprincipled British, American and French traders.”²⁶

Typical of the tone of Marx’s articles on China is the following statement :

After a first Chinese war undertaken by the English in the interests of opium smuggling, and a second war carried on for the defence of the lorcha of a pirate, nothing was wanted for a climax but a war extemporised for the purpose of pestering China with the nuisance of permanent Embassies at its Capital.²⁷

In view of the commonly held image of Marx as a cold, objective analyst of economic and historical movements, the frankly moral and legal criteria that he employs in his writings on China may come as something of a surprise. Yet Marx specifically defended this approach by arguing that the only alternative was to fall back upon the pretence that “might makes right.”²⁸ Needless to say, these criteria were later to enable left-wing Chinese nationalists to receive Marx’s articles warmly.²⁹

Finally, we might briefly note that the article “Persia-China,” actually written by Engels in 1857, although submitted to the *New York Daily Tribune* by Marx with the contents of the article apparently approved by him, contains the first suggestion of the later Marxist-Leninist concept of a “national revolution” against imperialism. Contrasting the character of Persian and Chinese resistance to British imperialism, Engels argues that while Persia’s semi-Westernised army was easily defeated by the British, China “meets the Europeans with its own resources” and has thereby found an effective system of resistance. Although China’s “irregular army of Asiatic masses” will be easily defeated, Engels suggests the possibility that the Chinese might wage what he terms a “national war” against the English invaders. He goes on to observe that,

There is evidently a different spirit among the Chinese now to what they showed in the war of 1840–42. Then the people were quiet; they left the Emperor’s soldiers to fight the invaders and submitted after a defeat with Eastern fatalism to the power of the enemy. But now, at least in the southern provinces, to which the contest has so far been confined, the mass of the people take an active, nay, a fanatical part in the struggle against the foreigners. . . . The piratical policy of the British Government has caused this universal outbreak of all Chinese against all foreigners; and marked it as a war of extermination.³⁰

²⁶ Marx, *New York Daily Tribune*, June 2, 1857, p. 4.

²⁷ Marx, “The New Chinese War,” *New York Daily Tribune*, October 18, 1859, p. 6.

²⁸ Marx, *New York Daily Tribune*, March 25, 1857, p. 5.

²⁹ The articles by Marx dealing with China were translated into Chinese and published in Peking in 1950. See the reprint of 1957 entitled *Ma-k'o-ssu En-ke-ssu lun Chung-kuo* (*Marx and Engels on China*), *op. cit.*

³⁰ F. Engels, “Persia-China,” *New York Daily Tribune*, June 5, 1857, p. 6.

Later in the same article, the Chinese resistance to British imperialism is characterised as “a popular war for the maintenance of Chinese nationality.”³¹

The highly approving tones that marked this discussion of Chinese “national” resistance to imperialism, as well as the legal-moralistic criteria that Marx employed in treating Chinese relations with the West, reflect certain changes that occurred in his views on the entire question of the nature and historical role of Western imperialism. I shall comment on this shortly. It is first necessary, however, to deal with one other conclusion that Professor Wittfogel has drawn from Marx’s writings on China—the assertion that Marx believed that certain peculiarities of the traditional Chinese social structure made it virtually immune to influences from without.

In relying on Marx to support his contention that the traditional Chinese social structure was (and is) essentially immutable, Professor Wittfogel points to Marx’s references to the self-sufficient character of the Chinese economy (based upon the combination of “minute agriculture with domestic industry”) as a barrier to the large-scale expansion of the importation of Western products.³²

It may be noted, first of all, that resistance to capitalist trade is not a feature peculiar to the economies of “Oriental despotisms.” It is, in fact, characteristic of all self-sufficient, pre-capitalist economies, including that of feudal Europe where the transition to capitalism was a slow and painful process that spanned several centuries.

Secondly, Professor Wittfogel has failed to inform us of the context of Marx’s reference to the resistance of the Chinese economy to Western commerce. In the article in question Marx was addressing himself to the English and American business communities. He was attempting to convince the English and American traders that a new war against China would only benefit Russia and would not yield the commercial rewards they anticipated. Thus he argued that there were natural economic limitations to the expansion of the China trade that could not be immediately overcome by political or military measures. At the same time Marx contended that the opium trade—which he opposed on both moral and economic grounds—was an additional factor that restricted the development of the Chinese market.³³ It was thus in the context of Marx’s opposition to both the renewal of hostilities against China and the opium trade that his remarks on the resistance of the Chinese economy to foreign imports appear.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Wittfogel, *loc. cit.*, pp. 4 and 8.

³³ Marx, *New York Daily Tribune*, October 5, 1858, p. 4. See also “The New Chinese War,” *New York Daily Tribune*, October 15, 1859, p. 4; and “Trade with China,” *New York Daily Tribune*, December 3, 1859, p. 8.

Of the two factors, Marx regarded the trade in opium as the more important barrier. As he wrote to Engels in 1858:

The chief reason for the failure of this market appears to be the opium trade, to which in fact any increase in the export trade to China is continually limited; but added to this is the internal organisation of the country, its minute-scale agriculture, etc., which will take an enormous time to break down.³⁴

Nowhere in the writings of Marx is there to be found any suggestion of the immutability of the Chinese social and economic structure that is so prominent a feature of Professor Wittfogel's theory. The idea that the Western capitalist nations were remaking the world after their own image is a basic theoretical formulation that Marx never abandoned, even though he never specified how long this process would take. Marx did at times suggest that the dissolution of the traditional, pre-capitalist social structures of China and India might be lengthy and involved processes—perhaps the more so in China where the Western powers did not exercise direct political control³⁵—but he never doubted that this dissolution was inevitable. Indeed, Marx and Engels were quite explicit in indicating that they thought that the transition from a pre-capitalist to a capitalist economy in China was well under way:

All these dissolving agencies acting together on the finances, the morals, the industry, and the political structure of China, received their full development under the English cannon in 1840, which broke down the authority of the Emperor, and forced the Celestial Empire into contact with the terrestrial world. Complete isolation was the prime condition of the preservation of Old China. That isolation having come to a violent end by the medium of England, dissolution must follow as surely as that of any mummy carefully preserved in a hermetically sealed coffin, whenever it is brought into contact with the open air.³⁶

It is interesting to note that this statement is followed by the sentence: "Now, England having brought about the revolution of China, the question is how that revolution will in time react on England and through England on Europe."³⁷

In 1857 Engels declared: "One thing is certain, that the death hour of Old China is rapidly drawing nigh. Civil war has already divided the South from the North of the Empire . . . the very fanaticism of the southern Chinese in their struggle against foreigners seems to mark a consciousness of the supreme danger in which Old China is placed; and before many years pass away, we shall have to witness the death struggle of the oldest empire in the world, and the opening day of a new era for all Asia."³⁸

³⁴ Letter of Marx to Engels (October 8, 1858), *Selected Correspondence*, pp. 134–135.

³⁵ Marx, *Capital* (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1962), III, p. 328.

³⁶ Marx, "Revolution in China and Europe," *loc. cit.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ Marx, "Persia-China," *loc. cit.*

Not only were the founding fathers of Marxism convinced that China was experiencing a capitalist economic revolution, Marx went so far as to express fears that the socialist revolution in Europe might be inhibited by the ascendancy of capitalism in the vast non-European areas of the world.³⁹ As late as 1894, the year before his death, Engels wrote of “the conquest of China by capitalism” which, he predicted, would provide “the impulse for the overthrow of capitalism in Europe and America. . . .”⁴⁰

If Professor Wittfogel wishes to prove that there has not been, and cannot be, a fundamental change in the traditional Chinese social and economic structure, then he will have to bring forth more evidence than the textual authority of Marx and Engels.

In so far as Marx's articles on China were not hastily written commentaries on contemporary international events (and they were largely that), their main significance lies in the non-deterministic strain in Marx's thought that they reveal. Throughout the whole body of the writings of Marx there run the contradictory streams of economic-historical determinism and an impatient revolutionary activism. While we are not concerned here with the philosophic premises of Marxism, it should be mentioned that this activistic tendency receives a certain theoretical justification in the philosophic humanism of Marx's early writings—even though the deterministic elements dominate the formal theory. In the articles on China, this activistic tendency is revealed in Marx's willingness to suggest that a revolution in China might stimulate revolution in Europe.

To understand why Marx could so interpret the T'ai-p'ing Rebellion, it is not necessary to refer to the mysterious workings of the dialectic. Marx was an active revolutionary as well as a social philosopher. When the political situation in the West seemed unpromising, he was not unwilling to look to the East for omens of revolution. This tendency was not only manifested in his articles on China but also reappeared in the 1870s, when Marx flirted with the possibility that a revolution in Russia might serve as the spark for a socialist revolution in the West.⁴¹

³⁹ In a letter of October 8, 1858, to Engels, Marx wrote: “We cannot deny that bourgeois society has experienced its sixteenth century a second time—a sixteenth century which will, I hope, sound the death knell of bourgeois society just as the first one thrust it into existence. The specific task of bourgeois society is the establishment of a world market, at least in outline, and of production based upon this world market. As the world is round, this seems to have been completed by the colonisation of California and Australia and the opening up of China and Japan. The difficult question for us is this: on the Continent the revolution is imminent and will immediately assume a socialist character. Is it not bound to be crushed in this little corner, considering that in a far greater territory the movement of bourgeois society is still in the ascendant?” *Selected Correspondence*, p. 134.

⁴⁰ Letter of Engels to F. A. Sorge (November 10, 1894), *Selected Correspondence*, p. 558.

⁴¹ For some of Marx's varying views on this question, see the letters of Marx on Russia in Paul Blackstock and Bert Hoselitz (editors), *The Russian Menace to Europe*

As in the case of Russia, Marx's views on the T'ai-p'ing Rebellion changed as the actual situation changed. When the T'ai-p'ing movement began to disintegrate in the 1860s, Marx was far less sanguine about its prospects than he had been ten years earlier.⁴² But the important point to recognise is that Marx's perspectives and predispositions were not such as to prevent him from considering the possibility that a revolution in the East might serve as a stimulus to revolution in the West whenever and wherever the situation seemed promising.

Closely related to his activist disposition was the modification of Marx's earlier and more optimistic view that Western imperialism was playing a basically progressive role in world history. The legal and moral criteria that Marx employed in discussing relations between China and the West and his encouragement of Chinese "national" resistance to the foreign intrusion suggest a significant change of emphasis in his attitude towards imperialism. In his articles on China Marx is less concerned with the historically beneficial effects of Western economic power on the Chinese social structure than he is with the political implications of Chinese opposition to imperialist pressure. This change of emphasis on the question of imperialism, foreshadowed in the articles on China, became more explicit when Marx formally revised his views on the "Irish Question" in 1869:

For a long time I believed that it would be possible to overthrow the Irish régime by English working class ascendancy. . . . Deep study has now convinced me of the opposite. The English working class will never accomplish anything before it has got rid of Ireland. The lever must be applied in Ireland. That is why the Irish question is so important for the social movement in general.⁴³

Marx also had second thoughts about the progressive role of British colonialism in India: "As concerns East India, for example, everyone knows only too well that there the suppression of the communal ownership of land was only an act of English vandalism, which has brought not an advance, but a setback to the native peoples."⁴⁴

Neither the revolutionary activism of Marx nor the themes in his writings that suggested that the non-Western areas of the world might play more than a passive role in the world revolution survived in the rigidly orthodox, official German Marxist ideology of the late nineteenth

(Glencoe, Illinois: Free Press, 1952), pp. 203-226. See also Marx's letter to F. A. Sorge (September 27, 1877), *Selected Correspondence*, pp. 374-375.

⁴² Marx, "Chinesisches" (July 7, 1862) in Marx and Engels, *Werke* (Berlin: Dietz, 1961), Vol. 15, pp. 514-516. For a Chinese translation of this article see "Chung-kuo Shih-chien" ("Matters Chinese"), *Ma-k'o-ssu En-ke-ssu lun Chung-kuo*, *op. cit.*, pp. 137-140.

⁴³ Letter of Marx to Engels (December 10, 1869), *Selected Correspondence*, p. 280.

⁴⁴ Marx, "Letter on the Russian Village Commune" (1881), in Blackstock and Hoselitz, p. 219.

and early twentieth centuries. But these earlier non-deterministic elements nevertheless remained a part of the Marxist tradition and were later used by Russian and Asian Marxists to serve their own particular needs.

Marx's comments on China, as on many other subjects, are fragmentary and contradictory. To those given to the exegesis of holy writ, individual passages, phrases, and words can be selected to "prove" almost any thesis. But there is no way to state, with any degree of certainty, how Marx did, or would have, categorised traditional Chinese society—if, indeed, he seriously thought about the question at all. It is fair to say, however, that his writings on China are based less on weighty socio-economic analysis than they are marked by a spirit of moral protest and revolutionary fervour. Since Marx did not attempt to apply to China the theory of "Oriental despotism," or, for that matter, any other socio-historical generalisation, and since China's system of private landownership presented a major conceptual difficulty in assigning China to the category of the "Asiatic mode of production," it is difficult to accept the claim that "Marx's interpretation of China enriched his concept of a completely Asiatic society." To the extent that what Marx actually did write about China bears upon the issues posed by Professor Wittfogel's theory, it is the widening of Marx's revolutionary perspectives and the anti-imperialist sentiments revealed in these writings that are the most prominent and most significant features. These features, which flow from the activist strain in Marx's thought, tend to break down rather than to enrich the deterministic concept of an unchanging and unchangeable "Asiatic society" that lay outside the realm of history.