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# *The Marxist View of China (Part 2)*

By KARL A. WITTFOGEL

## 2. From Confusion to Perversion

In the present context we need not trace in detail the changes Lenin made in Marx's socio-historical views on the eve of and after the revolutions of 1917. Having previously described Lenin's doctrinal engineering of institutional history in general and of Russian history in particular,<sup>106</sup> I shall here indicate only the change in the image of China that Lenin initiated after 1917 and that after his death Stalin and the Chinese Communists completed.

### DOCTRINAL ENGINEERING

#### *Lenin*

Lenin paved the way for the feudal interpretation of China and other Eastern countries in several of his statements at the Second World Congress of the Comintern in 1920. Previously he had classed Persia, Turkey, and China geographically and institutionally as "Asiatic" countries; now he characterised them according to their external relations: they were a semi-colonial variant of colonial countries.<sup>107</sup>

He was much less specific concerning these countries' internal situation. Frequently he referred to their backwardness,<sup>108</sup> but unlike traditional Marxism, he was reluctant to submit them to a socio-economic analysis. To be sure, he could not avoid this approach altogether. His statements to the Second World Congress of the Comintern contain a number of remarks that hint at the institutional peculiarity of the "backward" colonial countries. There was, according to Lenin, exploitation imposed by a pre-industrial type of capital, merchant capital, and above all there was exploitation of feudal forces by representatives of feudalism or semi-feudalism. "The oppressed masses [of colonial and backward countries] are not only exploited by a merchant capital, but also by feudal rulers, and by the state, on a feudal basis."<sup>109</sup> The peasants live "in a state of semi-feudal dependence."<sup>110</sup> In a passage dealing with the political struggle in the East in colonies and "backward countries" Lenin spoke

<sup>106</sup> Wittfogel 1957, pp. 396 *et seq.*; *cf.* also Wittfogel 1960 *passim*.

<sup>107</sup> Lenin, SW, X, p. 181; *cf.* also pp. 239 *et seq.*

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 236, 237, 241.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.* p. 242.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*

of "landlords," "large landownership," and "manifestations of survivals of feudalism."<sup>111</sup>

Thus, as in his 1919 lecture "On the State," Lenin depicted the Asiatic countries as a subdivision of the feudal world. They had certain peculiarities; but as in that lecture he failed to say clearly what they were, and, of course, he failed to explain his abandonment of the Marxist concept of four antagonistic societies, which he had acknowledged until 1914.

The delegates to the 1920 Congress—mostly radical Western labour leaders with some Marxist training—probably noticed that the "feudalism" of the colonial countries to which Lenin referred looked somewhat different from the feudalism that in the past had characterised their native lands. But Lenin's comments satisfied them that, despite specific features, the "backward" colonial countries of the East were following a general pattern of historical development which the Communists were now spearheading.

Old-timers among the Bolsheviks who recalled the Russian Marxist argument about feudalism and the *Aziatchina* were familiar with the issue Lenin was trying to hide. But for the most part they were ready to follow their acclaimed leader along the road of doctrinal change, which, whatever its theoretical implications, facilitated their present power policy.

### *Stalin*

In the subsequent development Stalin played a decisive role. He had attended the Stockholm Congress, and he was cognisant of the political meaning of the restoration argument. But it took years before he dared to carry the doctrinal perversion beyond the limits set by Lenin.

The ambiguities of Lenin's 1920 formulas indicate how difficult it was to abandon a long-held doctrinal position without having at hand a plausible substitute. Eventually, however, Stalin continued Lenin's effort, first with respect to Russia (1925–26), and then also with respect to China. Significantly, the last discussion of the theory of the Asiatic mode of production (which occurred in Leningrad in 1931) was largely concerned with the character of Chinese society.

For some years after 1920 Lenin's statement on colonial countries which avoided calling Asiatic land tenure "feudal" was still employed by the leaders of the Comintern to guide the young Eastern Communist parties. In January 1922 at the First Congress of the Toilers of the

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.* p. 236.

Far East (held in Moscow with Lenin in the background)<sup>112</sup> Safarov presented the supposedly Marxist thesis that “in China feudalism existed as a military-bureaucratic organisation which dominated the small patriarchal economy.” The survivals of this “feudalism” were being used by foreign capitalism for its own purposes.<sup>113</sup> In a similar context he referred to “the medieval, semi-feudal backwardness of China, Korea and other countries of the Far East.”<sup>114</sup>

But internal and international reasons required an extension of the position that Lenin outlined during the last years of his life. In 1925 the Chinese revolution became the main target of Moscow’s international strategy; and from 1926 the Chinese question was raised by intra-party critics (first by Radek and then by the combined Trotskyist opposition) who, while unwilling to press the “Asiatic” argument, were also unwilling to designate Chinese society as feudal. It was at this time that Stalin, stimulated by his then ally, Bukharin, aggressively asserted the feudal character of traditional China.

Long before the China debate of 1926–27 Bukharin had denied the formative role of geographical conditions for the development of a given society<sup>115</sup>; the natural element, being “more or less constant . . . cannot explain change.”<sup>116</sup> This negative attitude on the role of nature closed his mind to the peculiarity of Asiatic society which had been recognised by Marx, Engels, Kautsky and Plekhanov. It enabled him to speak in 1926 of China’s “feudalism” with a conviction that, because of his theoretical and political prestige, served the “feudal” camp extremely well.

<sup>112</sup> One night three Chinese delegates—the leading Kuomintang spokesman, the top-ranking Communist representative, Chang Kuo-t’ao, and an official of a railroad workers’ trade union—were invited to see Lenin in the Kremlin. The questions the Bolshevik leader asked expressed his primary concern in the establishment of a national united front in China (personal communication from Mr. Chang in Hong Kong in January 1958). Lenin did not attend the conference, obviously because of his deteriorating health. “Beginning with the winter of 1921 he frequently had to stay away from work” (Vladimir I. Lenin, *A Political Biography*. Prepared by the Marx-Engels-Lenin Institute. [New York: International Publishers, 1943], p. 265).

<sup>113</sup> *Der Ferne Osten: Der Erste Kongress der Kommunistischen und revolutionären Organisationen des Fernen Ostens* (Moskau: 1922; Hamburg: Verlag des Kommunistischen Internationale, 1922), pp. 44, cf. also pp. 46, 50, 125.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.* p. 126.

<sup>115</sup> Nikolai Bukharin, *Historical Materialism* (New York: International Publishers, 1934) (hereafter cited as Bukharin 1934), p. 123.

<sup>116</sup> Bukharin 1934, p. 121, italics in original. This passage appears in his *Historical Materialism (Teoria istoricheskogo materializma*, written in 1919). But in substance his argument had already been made in 1915 in his book, *Imperialism and World Economy* (see Bukharin, *Imperialismus und Weltwirtschaft*, with a foreword by Lenin dated December 1915 (Vienna-Berlin: 1929), pp. 17 *et seq.*). In his *Historical Materialism* Bukharin rejected Mechnikov’s view. In this context he claimed that Plekhanov had criticised Mechnikov for “over-estimating ‘geography.’” Bukharin’s statement is misleading. We recall that Plekhanov, while objecting to certain idealistic elements in Mechnikov’s position, had praised his geographical approach, which led “to the same conclusions the Marxists came to” (see above).

Stalin himself did not give an orderly socio-historical explanation of the allegedly “feudal” (or “semi-feudal”) character of China. Endlessly he repeated Lenin’s 1920 formula—“feudal survivals”—and his statements on feudal exploitation, relying obviously, not on an appeal to reason, but on the authority of the dead leader.

1926: China’s native industry (and the national bourgeoisie) is “backward,” and internally the revolution is directed against the country’s “medieval and feudal survivals.”<sup>117</sup>

1927: The “domination of feudal survivals” went hand in hand with “the preservation of medieval feudal methods of exploiting and oppressing the peasantry.”<sup>118</sup> Stalin, however, went beyond the Lenin of 1920 and the Safarov of 1922 when he, in 1927, also asserted that there were “feudal landlords” in the Chinese countryside.<sup>119</sup>

1928: The Sixth World Congress of the Comintern adopted a programme that depicted “colonial and semi-colonial countries (China, India, etc.)” as dominated by “feudal medieval relationships, of ‘Asiatic mode of production’ relationships . . . in their economics and in their political superstructure.”<sup>120</sup> The programme committee was headed by Bukharin, who on this theoretical issue—and on crucial political matters—had already begun to dissociate himself from Stalin.<sup>121</sup> Soon after the Sixth Comintern Congress, Stalin attacked and downgraded his previous ally.

1931: At the Leningrad Conference spokesmen of the Party line—*i.e.*, spokesmen of Stalin—denying the formative influence of the geographic factor, insisted that the Asiatic mode of production was merely a variant of feudal society and that traditional China was a feudal country.<sup>122</sup>

1938, *March*: Stalin’s henchmen ridiculed Bukharin as a “theoretician in quotation marks” and executed him as a traitor.

1938, *Autumn*: In Chapter IV of the *History of the CPSU* Stalin gave a new systematic presentation of historical materialism. In it he noted that natural conditions can affect the speed of a society’s development, but, reproducing the gist of Bukharin’s anti-ecological

<sup>117</sup> J. Stalin, *Works* (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1952–1955), 13 vols., vol. viii, p. 374.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, IX, p. 244; *cf.* also pp. 245, 291 *et seq.*, 294 *et seq.*

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.* IX, p. 229, *cf.* p. 244.

<sup>120</sup> *International Press Correspondence* (English Edition) (Vienna–London: 1921–1938) (hereafter cited as *Inprecor*), year 1928, p. 1761.

<sup>121</sup> In 1960 Boris Nicolaevsky told me that during his last visit to the West (in 1936) Bukharin had expressed a growing interest in the “Asiatic” problem.

<sup>122</sup> *Diskussia ob Aziatskom Sposobe Proizvodstva* (*Discussion of the Asiatic Mode of Production*) (Moscow–Leningrad: 1931), *passim*; *cf.* Wittfogel 1957, pp. 402 *et seq.*

argument, he denied its basic formative role: "Geographic environment accelerates or retards" the development of society, but because of its unchanging character it "cannot be the chief cause, the *determining* cause of social development."<sup>123</sup> Stalin then named only three types of exploitative (class) society—slavery, feudalism, capitalism. In giving his unilinear scheme of development, he did not note that the Asiatic countries represented a specific type of feudal society as Lenin had still done in his last systematic statement of 1919. And he showed his ideological followers how to deal with Marx's crucial programmatic passage of 1859, which had listed four antagonistic modes of production, the "Asiatic" being mentioned first. By quoting the "historic" passage word for word until just before the sentence that contained Marx's reference to the Asiatic mode of production,<sup>124</sup> Stalin "demonstrated for all concerned that Marx, too, could be 'edited,' when necessary, *modo Tatarico*—with a meat cleaver."<sup>125</sup>

#### *Khrushchev's Ideologists*

Khrushchev's ideologues eliminated certain crudities in Stalin's presentation obviously to make his and Lenin's innovations more palatable. The new doctrinal code, *The Foundations of Marxist Philosophy*, goes into more detail. For instance, in the second of the three paragraphs devoted to the "orient" there is a reference to "irrigation works (canals, dams, etc.)" that "could only be maintained by collective labour, and this favoured here the preservation of the [primitive] commune, and it retarded the development of private landownership. The land became the property of the state. . . ." <sup>126</sup> But the "oriental" paragraphs are introduced by a sentence that stresses the general, if variable, economic basis for the emergence of all class societies. "The economic foundation for the origin of classes is the same for all peoples, but the concrete form and deviations of this process are quite diversified."<sup>127</sup> And all three "oriental" paragraphs appear in a passage that discusses the nature of slaveholding society. Immediately after noting that (in the orient) the state is the landlord, the authors of the *Foundations* add that this state "assumed the form of a slaveholding despotism."<sup>128</sup>

Khrushchev's ideological engineers, who certainly know that the geohydraulic argument was developed by Marx and Engels first

<sup>123</sup> Joseph Stalin, "Dialectical and Historical Materialism," Chap. IV of *History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (Bolsheviks) Short Course* (New York: International Publishers, 1939), p. 118, italics in original.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.* p. 131.

<sup>125</sup> Wittfogel 1957, p. 408.

<sup>126</sup> *Osnovy Marksistskoj Filozofii* (Moscow: 1960), p. 455.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*

with particular emphasis on India, and by Kautsky and Plekhanov with reference also to China, are careful, in the paragraph dealing with oriental hydraulic works, not to mention India and China, but only Egypt, Babylonia, and Assyria (India and China are listed together with these countries in the preceding generalising paragraph). And they certainly also know Marx's, Engels', and Plekhanov's treatment of the ecological factor, but they choose to follow Stalin, whose name, here as elsewhere, is discreetly omitted. Reproducing his anti-ecological thesis of 1938 almost verbatim, the authors of the new code proclaim: "The geographical milieu . . . can only accelerate or retard, but it cannot be the determining cause of the changes of social life."<sup>129</sup>

The authors of the *Foundations* acknowledge only three antagonistic (class) societies, slaveholding, feudal, and capitalist<sup>130</sup>; and they avoid citing Marx's 1859 statement on the four antagonistic modes of production in exactly the way Stalin did in his doctrinal code. Thus the reader of the new code is given to understand that in China, too, the first class system was a slaveholding society. And although the point is not explicitly stated, China must have reached the stage of "feudalism," since "for a long time China was a semi-colonial, semi-feudal, economically backward country in which fragmented small commodity production prevailed."<sup>131</sup>

Confusion compounding confusion. But one thing is clear. The more detailed treatment of the Oriental issue in the new code reveals even more strikingly than Stalin's 1938 statement the contrived character of the official Communist view of China.

*The Chinese Communists: Ch'en Tu-hsiu, Ch'ü Ch'iu-pai, Mao Tse-tung*

The Chinese intellectuals who, once they became Moscow-directed Communists, were expected to speak of their country's "feudal" conditions, were faced with a complicated issue. On the one hand, the acceptance of Lenin's revisionist formulas of 1920 was facilitated by the fact that China had no Marxist tradition. There was no memory of a Chinese Plekhanov, no record of a Chinese Stockholm Congress to inhibit the "Marxist-Leninist" ideologists. Moreover, in so far as the historical evidence goes, there never flourished in China the contractual relation between the ruler and his fief-holding vassals that institutional historians call "feudal." Hence the Chinese intellectuals, both non-Communist and Communist, readily accepted the equation of their ancient *feng-chien* system (office land and a communal village order) and

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.* p. 375.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.* p. 392, *passim*.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.* p. 418.

feudalism which Western scholars had suggested long before Lenin's ideas spread to the Far East.

However, Moscow's insistence on viewing *imperial* China as feudal<sup>132</sup> was decidedly embarrassing. For, as every Chinese high school student knew, the "feudal" (*feng-chien*) system was abolished by the founder of the unified empire in the third century B.C.

But fortunately for the Chinese Communists, the feudal interpretation of China crystallised slowly; and this gave their leaders time to adjust to the "feudal" legend.

The First Congress of the CCP (1921) was held with little, if any, Soviet guidance; and its resolutions did not yet designate Chinese society as "feudal."<sup>133</sup> This and other incongruities were erased in large part by the Second Congress in July 1922 under the direction of Ch'en Tu-hsiu, who had been unable to attend the First Congress. As already stated, in January 1922 and in Moscow before a Far Eastern audience Lenin's top-ranking Far Eastern expert, Safarov, described China's feudalism essentially as a political ("military-bureaucratic") system. This formula, which, like Lenin's 1920 remark about the exploitative "feudal ruler," remained unexplained, was quickly taken up by the Chinese Communists. The Second Congress of the CCP referred to China's "militaristic and bureaucratic feudalism"<sup>134</sup>; and the Party's weekly magazine, *Hsiang-tao Chou-pao* (first published in September 1922), soon gave a full translation of Safarov's January speech.<sup>135</sup> In the magazine's opening issue the editor, Ts'ai Ho-sheng, spoke of China's old ruling class as "feudal warlords and bureaucrats."<sup>136</sup>

In 1923 Ch'en Tu-hsiu showed how the generally known facts of Chinese history could be fitted into a feudal frame of reference:

Because of the vastness of the territory and the wealth of the national resources, the Chinese nation tended to remain under an economic system which is characterised by a self-sufficient family agriculture and handicraft industry. Furthermore, it was isolated from the Western European countries that advanced more rapidly in the methods of production. These two reasons explain why the feudal (*feng-chien*) warlord era in China lasted so long. From the days of the Ch'in and Han

<sup>132</sup> To simplify the presentation I here follow the general usage and render *feng-chien* as "feudal." However, I place the term in quotation marks to indicate that I believe it to be unsatisfactory even for the *feng-chien* system of Chou China, which quite clearly was a variant of the service land of Oriental despotism and not a fief associated with conditional and contractual feudal services.

<sup>133</sup> Ch'en Kung-po, *The Communist Movement in China* (An essay written in 1924) (Columbia Un., East Asian Institute Series No. 7, 1960), pp. 106-110.

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 117, 120. Cf. *Chung-kuo Kung-ch'an Tang Wu Nien Lai chi Chu-cheng-chih Chang* (*The Political Programme of the Chinese Communist Party During the Last Five Years*) (Canton: 1926), pp. 13, 19.

<sup>135</sup> *Hsiang-tao Chou-pao*, Nos. 9, 10 and 11, 1923, November 8, pp. 74-76, November 15, pp. 82-84; November 22, pp. 89-92.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.* no. 1, 1922, September [no day specified], p. 4.



dynasties to the present time, the social and political phenomena did not vary, the feudal forces on the one hand often being on the verge of collapse, and on the other tending to return to feudalism. That the feudal forces were on the verge of collapse yet did not collapse is due to the fact that the family agriculture and handicraft industry, which were fully developed in the feudal-patriarchal society, tended to decline, but that the new economic forces (*i.e.*, the big industrial capitalist enterprises) were too weak to replace them.<sup>137</sup>

Ch'en, who in all likelihood had discussed the underlying socio-historical problems with the Comintern representative, Voitinsky, admitted that the Ch'in dynasty (third century B.C.) was an institutional dividing line when he said that China's "feudal" conditions had not changed since Ch'in and Han times. However, by confining the term "feudal" to a single aspect of the political superstructure (territorial disunity), Ch'en was using this term in a way that was improper from the standpoint of institutional reality—and of orthodox Marxism as well. By claiming that the rise and fall of feudal warlordism was typical for this period, he also violated elementary facts of history. "Warlordism" generally connotes—and it does so also in Chinese Communist jargon—the splitting up of China into a number of regional governments headed by strong military men. This type of disruption prevailed from the third to the sixth century A.D. and during the later part of the T'ang period, but it was not characteristic of the 400 years of Han rule nor of the first half of the T'ang period. And it had no significance from the beginning of the Sung dynasty (A.D. 960) until the collapse of the empire in 1912. In other words, warlordism—which indeed plagued modern China—played virtually no role in imperial China for almost a thousand years.

But while it is necessary to recognise the deficiencies of the theory of feudal warlordism, it is equally necessary to recognise its difference from the subsequent theory of feudal landlordism which applied the term "feudal" also to China's rural order. Neither Lenin nor Safarov went that far. Lenin referred only to "*patriarchal* peasant relations" in backward colonial countries<sup>138</sup>; and Safarov pointed to China's "*patriarchal* small peasant economy" that was "dominated" by a military feudal organisation. Ch'en probably had these ideas in mind when, limiting himself, he similarly spoke only of China's self-sufficient family agriculture and when he labelled China a "feudal *patriarchal* society."<sup>139</sup>

The break-through to the feudal interpretation of China's rural economy began in earnest in 1926 and 1927 when Stalin, aided by Bukharin, employed Lenin's concept of feudal survivals against the

<sup>137</sup> Ch'en Tu-hsiu, "The Bourgeois Revolution and the Revolutionary Bourgeoisie," *Hsiang-tao Chou-pao*, No. 22, April 25, 1923, p. 162.

<sup>138</sup> Lenin, SW, X, p. 236.

<sup>139</sup> In this and the two preceding instances I have italicised the key word "patriarchal."

Trotskyists who stressed the leading role of merchant capital in China's internal relations.<sup>140</sup> A Comintern resolution of March 13, 1926, spoke of "the semi-feudal order in the [Chinese] villages"<sup>141</sup>; and a resolution passed on December 16, 1926, declared: "The economy of the Chinese village presents a picture of the numerous survivals of a semi-feudal character closely interwoven with elements of developing capitalism."<sup>142</sup> A call for the (political) struggle against China's "semi-feudal" order appeared in a Comintern resolution of March 1926,<sup>143</sup> and again in the Comintern resolution on China, adopted in December 1926.<sup>144</sup>

Mao Tse-tung, who, although known as a prominent Communist, was then occupying a high position in the KMT hierarchy, published in February 1926 "An analysis of classes in China." This article made no reference to "feudal landlords"<sup>145</sup> (he inserted this formula *post festum* in the doctored edition of Vol. I of his *Selected Works* published in 1951).<sup>146</sup> But in his Report on the Hunan peasant movement written two months after the December resolution of the Comintern he described the rural struggle as a struggle against "the authority of the feudal landlord class."<sup>147</sup> In this same Report he obliquely indicated his awareness of the "oriental" issue. The peasants, he observed, fight against the wicked merchants because they are exploited by them, "not because they want to practise the theory of oriental culture by rejecting industrial goods."<sup>148</sup>

Mao at this time was playing a cautious game with regard to the problem of the agrarian revolution. He was playing an equally cautious game with regard to the interpretation of Chinese society. As head of the Peasant Department of the Chinese Communist Party, he certainly was familiar with the "oriental" view of China that, among other things, stressed the self-sufficiency of the rural producers. But while he associated himself with the dominant "feudal" terminology, he did not deny the existence of the "oriental" theory, nor did he seriously argue its applicability to China. As explained above, in Moscow the odds were then already favouring the feudal interpretation; but the concept of the

<sup>140</sup> According to the Stalin-Bukharin group, merchant capital was an increasingly important, but still secondary, force.

<sup>141</sup> *Inprecor* 1926, p. 649.

<sup>142</sup> *Inprecor* 1927, p. 230.

<sup>143</sup> *Inprecor* 1927, p. 649.

<sup>144</sup> *Inprecor* 1927, p. 232.

<sup>145</sup> Mao Tse-tung, "Chung-kuo ko chieh-chi ti fen-hsi" ("An analysis of classes in China"), *Chung-kuo Nung-min*, No. 2, February 1, 1926.

<sup>146</sup> Mao Tse-tung, *Selected Works* (New York: International Publishers, 1954- ) (hereafter cited as Mao, SW), 4 vols., I, p. 15.

<sup>147</sup> *Hsiang-tao Chou-pao*, No. 191, March 12, 1927, p. 2065.

<sup>148</sup> Mao Tse-tung, *Hsüan-chi* (Chin-ch'a-chi ed., no place: 1947), Hsü-pien, I, p. 33; cf. Mao, SW, I, p. 54.

Asiatic mode of production was still considered a legitimate doctrinal alternative.

Soon the Chinese Communists had an added reason to believe that this was the case. After the collapse of the united front with the KMT, in July 1927, the newly appointed Comintern representative, Lominadze, who the following month demoted Ch'en Tu-hsiu, supported the theory of the Asiatic mode of production.<sup>149</sup> The new provisional Politburo of the CCP, headed by Ch'ü Ch'iu-pai, and "advised" by Lominadze, proclaimed the Asiatic interpretation of China when it held its first enlarged conference on November 14, 1927.<sup>150</sup>

The Stalinist leaders of the Comintern obscured the record of this Conference probably for several reasons.<sup>151</sup> In the first place the November meeting advocated the recklessly aggressive policy that Stalin at the time was demanding and that led to the establishment of the "Canton Commune," which the Comintern, with Stalin's hypocritical approval, was soon condemning as adventurist. The meeting furthermore invoked the idea of the permanent revolution which fitted well the policy of driving the revolution forward, but which unfortunately was associated with Trotskyism. Quite possibly the censoring of the November 14 record was also connected with Ch'ü's and Lominadze's attempt to apply the concept of the Asiatic mode of production to China. Certainly, however, it had nothing to do with the Conference's criticism of Mao Tse-tung. In 1927 Mao was not an important figure in the international Communist movement. Moreover his demotion was justified in terms of the new Comintern policy, according to which he and several other second-echelon leaders had been neglectful of the agrarian revolution during the Autumn Crop Uprisings of August-September 1927.

<sup>149</sup> Ch'en Tu-hsiu, who was demoted because of his "opportunism," had been faithfully upholding the "feudal" interpretation of China. On May 6, 1927, the Fifth Congress of the CCP, headed by Ch'en, adopted a resolution on the agrarian question, which spoke of China's "feudal" relations, the "semi-feudal methods of exploitation," "the remnants of feudal relations and patriarchal power," the "feudal-patriarchal exploitation," etc. (*Chinese Correspondence*, Wuhan, Vol. 2, No. 8, May 15, 1927, pp. 26 *et seq.*). The last public utterances of the Ch'en-directed party emphatically underlined China's feudal or semi-feudal conditions (see *Hsiang-tao Chou-pao*, No. 201, July 18, 1927, pp. 2214-2217).

<sup>150</sup> See *Hsiang-tao Chou-pao*, No. 18, January 24, 1923, p. 147.

<sup>151</sup> In October 1928 Trotsky, who was then in exile in Alma-Ata, stated that the Comintern leaders had withheld the political resolution of the Chinese November Plenum, because they were embarrassed by its combined opportunism and adventurism: They "not only did not publish it, but did not even quote from it" (Leon Trotsky, *Problems of the Chinese Revolution* [New York: Pioneer Publishers, 1932], p. 216). But there was a confidential version of the resolution which "was published in a special *Documentation*, accessible to very few, printed by the Chinese Sun Yat-sen University (No. 10)" (*ibid.*). Trotsky's statement is not completely correct. Excerpts from this resolution were published in *Inprecor* 1928, pp. 121 *et seq.* But the selection was slanted, and the full text of the resolution, like the text of other resolutions of the November Conference, was indeed withheld. In *The China Quarterly*, No. 2, pp. 32 *et seq.*, I published the passage of the Resolution on Discipline that ordered Mao's demotion.

But whatever else the CCP Conference of November 14, 1927, accomplished, it marked an extraordinary moment in the secret history of the Marxist view of China. For it was at this gathering that the Politburo of the most important Asian Communist Party, backed by a Moscow emissary in good standing, identified itself wholeheartedly with the original Marxist (and Leninist) view on China. One of the few leading Stalinists who, as a Far Eastern expert, had access to the November material, Pavel Mif, reproduced the crucial argument—which he rejected—as follows: “In the agrarian programme accepted at the November [1927] Plenum of the CC of CCP and given to the local organisations for discussion, the socio-economic structure of China is defined as the ‘Asiatic mode of production.’ In this programme we read that a certain concurrence of historical conditions led to the formation of a socio-economic system in China which Marx and Engels, and after them Lenin, called the ‘Asiatic mode of production.’ . . . Feudal principalities and landownership of the privileged class were fundamentally destroyed in the early period of Chinese history (third century B.C.) and after a long period of anarchy, after a terrible struggle of classes, the so-called Asiatic mode of production was finally formed. . . . The adding of the peasant’s home industry (spinning and weaving) to agriculture increased the inner stability of the Asiatic mode of production. Today the survivals of this system resist the transition to a new mode of production, the development of the forces of production of the country, the transition of agriculture to a higher technical level.”<sup>152</sup>

According to this analysis, the Chinese revolution was directed against Asiatic rather than feudal survivals. In terms of the Communist strategy for the “bourgeois-democratic” revolution (which rested largely on the peasant revolution) such a view made good sense; in fact, it made more sense than one which postulated a special class of feudal landowners and underrated the landed interests of the “bourgeois” leaders of the Kuomintang. But Stalin, whose perspective had been so badly distorted by his feudal interpretation of the Chinese classes, was probably none too eager to support a theory that exposed his analytical blunderings. Much more important, his previous polemics with Trotsky on the possibility of a Russian restoration showed that he fully realised the danger of accepting the Asiatic theory which—however useful it might be for the implementation of Soviet policy in China and India—suggested that the Soviet Union was an Asiatic, and not an incipiently socialist, society.

Thus, although Stalin had not yet hit upon feasible Aesopian means for discarding Marx’s Asiatic theory, he continued to propound the feudal

<sup>152</sup> P.Mif, *Khitaikai Revoliutsia* (Moscow: 1932).

interpretation of Eastern countries generally and of China in particular. Some Comintern leaders still tried to present the theory of the Asiatic mode of production at least as a legitimate supplementary concept. At the Sixth Congress of the Comintern (in the summer of 1928) Lominadze,<sup>153</sup> Heinz Neumann,<sup>154</sup> and Ch'ü Ch'iu-pai (alias Strachov)<sup>155</sup> defended a diluted version of the Asiatic theory. And as stated above, the Comintern programme adopted by the Sixth Congress declared that it might possibly apply to such countries as India and China.<sup>156</sup> But while the promoters of the feudal interpretation tolerated the inclusion of this plank at the Comintern Congress, they were more aggressively negative at the Sixth Congress of the Chinese Communist Party which was meeting in Moscow at the same time.

According to the Resolution on the Land Question adopted by the Sixth Congress of the CCP, "It is wrong to regard the present Chinese socio-economic system and the economic system in the rural areas as being in the period of transition from the Asiatic mode of production to capitalism. The main features of the Asiatic mode of production are (1) the absence of the system of private landownership; (2) large social construction works (especially water conservancy and waterways) carried out under the guidance of the state, this being the material foundation for the rise of an authoritarian central government and of organisations (clan communities or rural communities) to rule the small producers in general; (3) the existence of a strong commune system (this system based on the phenomenon that industry and agriculture are combined by the family). These conditions, especially the first condition, are contrary to China's actual situation."<sup>157</sup>

The reader who recalls Marx's view of China will easily recognise the tricks the authors of the resolution employed to give authority to their conclusion. He will recognise that only the second and the third of their three "features" are related to Marx's two "circumstances" of Asiatic society, whereas the first, to which they attached special significance, was only a secondary point in Marx's definition of this society.<sup>158</sup> Thus they not only misrepresented Marx's evaluation of the proprietary aspect of social history, but they also misrepresented his ideas on the relation of landownership and the "Asiatic" conditions in China. To be sure, in a number of statements Marx depicted the state as the main landlord in Asiatic society—and in this respect the resolution is on

<sup>153</sup> *Inprecor* 1928, p. 1459.

<sup>154</sup> *Inprecor* 1928, pp. 1416 *et seq.*

<sup>155</sup> *Inprecor* 1928, 1249.

<sup>156</sup> See above, note 120.

<sup>157</sup> "Resolution on the Land Question" in *Resolutions of the Sixth National Congress of the CCP*, September 1928, pp. 7-8.

<sup>158</sup> See an earlier section of this article, *The China Quarterly*, No. 11, pp. 2-10.

firm ground. But since 1853 he had noted the presence of private property in certain parts of Asia; in this respect the resolution, by its failure to mention that fact, is misleading. And in *Das Kapital* III Marx specifically referred to contemporary China as a country in which "Asiatic production" persisted strongly, more strongly indeed than in India, although in China the communal land and village system had disappeared long ago; in this respect the resolution, by its failure to mention this crucial fact, is blatantly fraudulent.

Doctrinal distortions blend appropriately with historical distortions. The importance of the hydraulic factor in China's institutional order is so obvious that it is acknowledged even in recent Russian and Chinese Communist writings.<sup>159</sup> And the importance of a family-based small agriculture and industry is equally apparent.<sup>160</sup>

But undeterred by the weakness of their doctrinal arguments, the authors of the resolution concluded unequivocally that traditional China was not "Asiatic" but "feudal," and more recently "semi-feudal." At the same time they elaborated Lenin's idea of the peculiarities of Asiatic feudalism. They frankly stated that China's feudalism "differed from the European feudal system in many ways."<sup>161</sup> In China "the agricultural economy of the European feudal landlord type was almost lacking"<sup>162</sup>; the rural economy was "a small peasant economy"<sup>163</sup>; and "the landlord class used to be the gentry, the *shen-shih*." This class, which originally consisted of "the *shih ta-fu*" (the ranking officials of ancient China) remained associated with the non-official rural power holders (*hao*); and until the recent inclusion of rich people of every type (merchants, etc.), "the hao-shen landlord class was the ruling class under the Chinese bureaucratic feudal system."<sup>164</sup>

<sup>159</sup> See W. I. Awdijew, *Geschichte des alten Orients* (Berlin: Volk und Wissen Volkseigener Verlag, 1953), pp. 461 and 476. Awdijew's *History of the Orient*, which in its sections on China and on other Eastern civilisations describes the significance of government-managed water works, was used as a government-approved university textbook during Stalin's last years. See also Shang Yüeh's textbook on Chinese history, prepared under the guidance of the CCP, which frequently refers to hydraulic works and their relation to the prosperity and decline of dynastic rule (Shang Yüeh, *Chung-kuo Li-shih Kang-yao* [*An Outline of Chinese History*] [Peking: People's Publishing House, 1954], pp. 16, 37, 45, 62, 66, 73, 116, 124, 168, 182 *et seq.*, 199, 209, 240 *et seq.*, 270, 294).

<sup>160</sup> See Mao's statement of 1939: In traditional "feudal" China "a self-sufficient natural economy occupied the dominant position. The peasants produced not only agricultural products, but most of the handicraft articles they needed" (Mao Tse-tung, *Hsüan-chi* (Ta-chung ed., no place: November 1947 [3rd printing]), p. 157; *cf.* Mao, SW, III, p. 74).

<sup>161</sup> "Resolution on the Land Question," p. 7.

<sup>162</sup> *Ibid.* p. 1.

<sup>163</sup> *Ibid.* p. 2.

<sup>164</sup> *Ibid.* p. 4. Anyone interested in the recent attempts to portray imperial China as a "gentry society," will benefit from a critical study of these and other Communist formulations about the prominence of the "gentry" in traditional China.

In terms of the development of the Marxist-Leninist view of China the 1928 Resolution is significant both for its feudal slant and for its failure to abandon Marx's "Asiatic" theory as such. The Resolution implicitly acknowledged that a peculiar Asiatic mode of production had prevailed in many parts of Asia and that therefore the sequence (slavery—feudalism—capitalism) represented only a partial, and not a general, pattern of societal development.

Thus, in Moscow in 1928 the Chinese Communists, guided by their Comintern advisers, chipped away at the edges of the Asiatic theory, but they left the basic concept unimpaired. Several Western Communist Parties continued to maintain this concept for some time after Stalin liquidated it a decade later,<sup>165</sup> but the Chinese Communists quickly took their cue from Moscow. *The History of the CPSU (B) Short Course* which was edited and in part written by Stalin, appeared in the Autumn of 1938. The next year, in Yen-an, Mao in part edited, in part wrote, a pamphlet-sized textbook, *The Chinese Revolution and the Chinese Communist Party*, which interpreted China in terms of Stalin's unilinear scheme of development.

As stated above, Mao associated himself with the "feudal" interpretation of China early in 1927. He was a politically discredited and theoretically silent guerrilla fighter when the leaders of the CCP declared their adherence to the Asiatic concept in November of that year. Until 1927 Mao's Marxist knowledge was modest in the extreme; and this was still the case for the period 1927-34 when he was prominent in the Communist ("soviet") areas in central China, and even after 1935 when he was the supreme head of the CCP. The textbook of December 1938 did not rise much above the level of Mao's previous socio-historical performances, but it showed him willing to commit himself openly on the feudal character of China's institutional background.

The first chapter, "Chinese Society," which was written by several unnamed persons, was reworked by Mao; and he considered the final product so definitely his own that he included it, together with the second chapter, "The Chinese Revolution," in the official edition of his *Selected Works*. These two chapters give a clear picture of Mao's view of Chinese society.

Not surprisingly, Mao did not mention the concepts of an Asiatic mode of production and an Asiatic society even polemically. His account listed only three class societies—slavery, feudalism, capitalism—which evolved in this order one from the other in a unilinear sequence. Chinese society, although retarded on the "feudal stage," had its place in this general process.

<sup>165</sup> See Wittfogel 1957, pp. 408 *et seq.*

The Chinese nation "developing along the same lines as many other nations of the world . . . first went through some tens of thousands of years of life as an egalitarian communist society."<sup>166</sup> Up to now "approximately 5,000 years<sup>167</sup> have passed since the collapse of the primitive communist society,<sup>168</sup> and the transition to class society, first slave society, and then feudalism."<sup>169</sup>

China's "slave system" supposedly ended some 3,000 years ago (which means at the close of the Shang dynasty); and "beginning from the Chou and Ch'in dynasties" the "feudal system" prevailed<sup>170</sup> with some modifications (unification and bureaucratisation) inaugurated by the Ch'in dynasty, and others—and important ones—made after the Opium War. "A feudal ruling class composed of the landlords, the nobility, and the emperor owned most of the land"; the peasants who tilled the land for them paid them 40, 50, 60 per cent. of the crops as rent.<sup>171</sup> These peasants were "actually serfs." In the feudal states of the Chou period<sup>172</sup> each territorial ruler<sup>173</sup> "held absolute sway in his own realm."<sup>174</sup> Under the empire the power of the feudal state "was centralised in the person of the autocratic ruler, though the independent feudal régimes remained to some extent. In the feudal state the emperor ruled supreme; in each region he appointed officials to take care of the army, the courts, the treasury, the granary, etc., and relied on the landed gentry (*t'u-ti shen-shih*) as the foundation<sup>175</sup> of the entire feudal rule."<sup>176</sup>

The growing impact of capitalism gave China a "semi-colonial" quality<sup>177</sup>; but even though the foreign Powers destroyed "the self-sufficing<sup>178</sup> natural economy of feudal times . . . feudal<sup>179</sup> exploitation

<sup>166</sup> Instead of "egalitarian classless communist society," the official edition has "classless primitive communes" (Mao, SW, III, p. 73). We reproduce Mao's wording as given in the earliest version at hand. Where the text in the official edition differs from Mao's *Selected Works* we give the new wording in a footnote. Where the texts are identical, we accept the official translation unless we disagree with its meaning. When this is the case, we indicate the difference in a footnote.

<sup>167</sup> "4,000 years" (Mao, SW, III, p. 73).

<sup>168</sup> "Primitive communes" (*ibid.*).

<sup>169</sup> Mao Tse-tung, *Hsüan-chi* (Ta-chung ed.), p. 156.

<sup>170</sup> *Ibid.* p. 157.

<sup>171</sup> *Ibid.* p. 158. In the official edition Mao raised the rates to "40, 50, 60, 70, or even 80 per cent. or more of the crops" (Mao, SW, III, p. 74).

<sup>172</sup> "previous to the Ch'in dynasty" (*ibid.* p. 75).

<sup>173</sup> *Chu-hou*. The official English edition has "prince" (Mao, SW, III, p. 75), which is closer to the Chinese meaning than the translation "feudal lord" given in most of the traditional sinological writings.

<sup>174</sup> Mao Tse-tung, *Hsüan-chi* (Ta-chung ed.), p. 158. The notion that in Chou times the *chu-hou* had absolute power within their territories harmonises with Maspero's statement that the socio-political order of these territories was not feudal. This factual statement contradicts Mao's interpretative claim concerning the feudal character of Chou society.

<sup>175</sup> Official translation: "the mainstay" (Mao, SW, III, p. 75).

<sup>176</sup> Mao Tse-tung, *Hsüan-chi* (Ta-chung ed.), p. 158.

<sup>177</sup> Mao, SW, III, p. 80.

<sup>178</sup> "the foundation of the self-sufficing" (*ibid.* p. 80).

<sup>179</sup> In the official edition the word "feudal" is omitted (*ibid.*).



of the peasantry by the landlord class . . .—*the basis of feudal exploitation*—not only remains intact, but is linked with the exploitation of compradore and usurer capital, and holds an obviously dominant position in China's socio-economic life."<sup>180</sup>

Thus Mao upheld the concept of a general and unilinear societal development by viewing China's "feudalism" as having evolved from a "slaveholding" system; and this although he recognised several peculiarities in China's "feudalism," outstanding among them the lack of development toward capitalism. Having reached the feudal stage, Mao wrote in the early version of the textbook: China "remained in a state of stagnation (*t'ing chih*) for a long period of time." And he elaborated this point by noting that in "feudal" China there were "neither new productive forces, nor new relations of production, nor a new class force, nor an advanced political party"; hence "although some social progress was made after each great peasant revolutionary struggle, the feudal political system remained basically unchanged."<sup>181</sup>

In the early fifties, when Mao prepared the official edition of his *Selected Works*, he apparently felt that the textbook had made unnecessary concessions to the (Asiatic) idea of China's stagnation. In any case, for his earlier statement that feudal China "remained basically unchanged" he substituted "she remained slow (*ch'ih-huan*) in her development."<sup>182</sup> In the following sub-chapter he added a whole new sentence: "As China's feudal society developed its commodity economy and so carried within itself the embryo of capitalism, China would of herself have developed into a capitalist society even if there had been no influence of foreign capitalism."<sup>183</sup> And the next sentence: "The penetration of foreign capitalism played an important role in disintegrating China's social economy"<sup>184</sup> now reads: "The penetration of foreign capitalism *accelerated* this development."<sup>185</sup>

Thus the recently adjusted version of the textbook presents China's "feudal" society as slowly—but definitely—moving toward capitalism, even though it developed "neither new productive forces, nor new relations of production."

By pressing the history of China more completely into Stalin's (and the post-October Lenin's) unilinear scheme of development, Mao substantially helped the Moscow ideocrats to bury the Marxist view of the Asiatic mode of production—and of China.

<sup>180</sup> Mao Tse-tung, *Hsüan-chi* (Ta-chung ed.), p. 165; italics added.

<sup>181</sup> *Ibid.* p. 159; cf. Mao, SW, III, p. 76.

<sup>182</sup> Mao, SW III, p. 74. The official translation has "she remained sluggish."

<sup>183</sup> *Ibid.* p. 77.

<sup>184</sup> Mao Tse-tung, *Hsüan-chi* (Ta-chung ed.), p. 161.

<sup>185</sup> Mao, SW, III, p. 77; italics added.