

Herman Gorter and the Origins of Marxism in China

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Abstract Until 1921, the texts on Marxism aimed at reaching the Chinese Communist movement were dominated by an economic determinist interpretation of the materialist conception of history. Many Chinese converts to Marxism considered that belief in “orthodox” Marxism necessitated belief in its economic determinism. In 1921, with the publication in China of the famous Dutch Marxist Herman Gorter’s *An Explanation of the Materialist Conception of History*, it became evident that there were alternatives to economic determinism which could also claim to be “orthodox” Marxism. Gorter’s flexible and multifaceted perspective on Marxism allowed that many factors can influence “historical evolution,” and that they can interact in ways specific to particular historical contexts. Gorter emphasized the political and ideological struggles of the working class as central to the success of revolution. He nevertheless insisted, following Engels, that the economic factor was ultimately dominant. Gorter’s ideas were well received by Chinese Marxists, particularly his Chinese translator Li Da who amplified the influence of Gorter’s Marxism in his own prolific essays on the materialist conception of history. It is possible that Mao Zedong was influenced by Gorter’s ideas, either directly or indirectly via the writings of Li Da, and the evidence for this is evaluated.

Keywords Herman Gorter, Li Da, Mao Zedong, Marxism, communism, China

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For more than 80 years, Marxism has been a major intellectual and ideological force in China. While its impact in China has declined substantially in the decades since the implementation of Deng Xiaoping’s economic reforms, Marxism has not, either within the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) or Chinese society, been entirely superannuated. Contemporary popular culture (the “culture of the masses”) in China still owes much to the influence of the revolutionary cultural forms popularized by the CCP during its revolutionary phase, an era during which there was no doubt that Marxism constituted a revolutionary ideology.¹ And within the Party after 1978, legitimization of the

broad sweep of economic and social reform has continued to be sought through the logic and terminology of Marxism, however unconvincing this might appear to be.² Indeed, the CCP's ability to defend the seemingly indefensible from a Marxist perspective underlines only too clearly the wide diversity of positions on economic and social theory that exist within the Marxist theoretical tradition. Just as Mao Zedong could seek theoretical support from Marxism for his revolutionary socialist policies, so too have Deng and his successors sought and found in Marxism justification for their turn to capitalism.³

The diversity of theoretical currents within the Marxist tradition is exemplified particularly by the widely differing perspectives on the roles of the economic base and politico-ideological superstructure in historical change. The conventional Marxist interpretation—one that gained widespread currency during the heyday of the Second International—was that the economic base of society possessed absolute causal dominance. Other social realms—political and legal institutions and ideologies, cultural practices and beliefs, including religions—were regarded as superstructural insofar as their emergence, continued existence, and change are dependent on developments within the economic base; they possess little if any capacity to initiate or even accelerate social and economic change. If anything, the superstructure merely reflects its economic base. Support for this supposedly orthodox Marxist perspective has been drawn from the celebrated formulation in Marx's "Preface" to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*. Here Marx refers to the economic structure of society as "the real foundation," changes which lead "sooner or later to the transformation of the whole immense superstructure."⁴ But was Marx intending to imply that the superstructure—the realm of political organization and ideas—was incapable of initiating historical change, or at least possessing a reactive influence on the economic base, either to impede or facilitate impulses for change emanating from within it? From the economic determinist point of view, the answer is decidedly in the affirmative. However, even this position has given rise to a range of theoretical perspectives, which have in turn been an influence on political struggles among competing Marxist parties and factions. At one extreme, technological determinism has argued that the development and deployment of the instruments of labor (the technologies of production) are the basis from which historical change flows.⁵ A broader economic view goes beyond technological determinism to include the human element: what the laborer intends to produce is central to the process of production, and this allows the

possibility that human, labor-directed, consciousness is an integral dimension of the economic structure of society and capable of contributing to its dynamic nature.⁶ What these perspectives share is a belief that the economic realm is *the* determinant element in historical change.

However, another interpretation of Marx's materialist conception of history is possible. Marx's friend and collaborator, Frederick Engels asserted (after Marx was safely dead and could not contradict him) that the "the economic situation is the basis, but the various components of the superstructure ... also exercise their influence upon the course of the historical struggles and in many cases determine their *form* in particular." For Engels, and for many subsequent Marxists, the "economic situation" is the "*ultimately* determining element in history," but it is not the "*only* determining one."⁷ While Engels's attempted clarification introduced to the materialist conception of history the possibility of a flexible and contingent reading of particular historical situations, one that allowed the possibility of the influence of the superstructure on historical change, it still represented an abstract representation of the relationship between the economic and noneconomic realms. For those charged with the responsibility of actually deciphering historical contexts and determining the possibility of political action and ideological influence, the notion of superstructural effectivity remained an abstract formulation. Nevertheless, Engels's position did allow the utility of political action and ideological persuasion in pursuit of revolutionary change, and attracted supporters within the European revolutionary movements and beyond.

What then is an appropriate reading of Marxism's theory of social change, the materialist conception of history? For those coming to Marxism afresh, as the early converts to Marxism in China did in the late 1910s and early 1920s, the question was of great concern. How were they to know what Marxism stood for? In what ways should it influence their thinking and political behavior? The answers to these questions were not readily forthcoming, for there was initially a dearth of appropriate Marxist texts in Chinese, and answers had to be sought in languages accessible to those who assumed the task of translation for the early communist movement in China. It is no coincidence that many of the early Marxist texts on the materialist conception of history translated into Chinese came from Japanese works (either documents written by Japanese Marxists or Japanese translations of European or Russian texts).⁸ Many young Chinese lived and studied in Japan during the 1910s and 1920s, and were fluent in Japanese, and the body of Marxist texts

available in Japanese was the obvious source of information about the history of European socialism and Marxist theory.⁹ Consequently, the array of texts chosen for translation into Chinese was limited, and already filtered through the selection of texts for translation by Japanese translators. It was a somewhat haphazard process. Information about Marxist theory and socialist movements and politics in Europe and the Soviet Union reached the Chinese audience in piecemeal fashion; there was no orderly, systematic introduction of approved Marxist texts.¹⁰

However, it is clear that, among the very early texts of Marxism to reach China (that is, up to mid-1920), the economic determinist perspective of the materialist conception of history was dominant, and accepted by many early Chinese Marxists and interested on-lookers as the valid interpretation of the Marxist theory of social change.¹¹ For some, this was sufficient reason to give Marxism a wide berth; for others, it suggested the need for a critical engagement with Marxism in order to dilute its focus on the economic realm and to bolster the role of consciousness and political action in historical development and change. Li Dazhao, for example, accepted that Marxism did constitute an economic determinist interpretation of history. As Dirlik points out, Li's "premise that economic change was the cause of all intellectual change represented the extent of the materialist content of his analysis."¹² For Li, the Marxist theory of history consequently lacked sufficient emphasis on the role ethics played in historical change.¹³ His interpolation of this dimension into his own brand of Marxism was premised on a misperception that Marxist social theory did not allow the possibility of interpretations other than economic determinism, and that an "unorthodox" response was required if Marxism was to speak to the idealistic aspirations and activist inclinations of radical May Fourth intellectuals. The possibility that there was another perspective on Marxist theory—one more dialectical and flexible in its acceptance of the influence on history of political action and consciousness, and widely regarded in Europe as an orthodox reading of Marxism—was not initially apparent to them.¹⁴ Foreign texts that reflected this current in Marxist theory (whether European or Japanese), and which drew on Engels's flexible and multifaceted approach to the materialist conception of history, only began to be published in China from 1921, and only then were radical Chinese intellectuals furnished the possibility of choice between different interpretations of Marxism, each having some claim to the status of orthodoxy.

It is the introduction to China and influence of this latter reading of Marxism's materialist conception of history that is the focus of this article.

One of the most influential of the translated texts of this perspective on the materialist conception of history was Herman Gorter's *An Explanation of the Materialist Conception of History*. While this was one of the seminal texts of Marxism in China, its contents and influence have not been explored in any Western accounts of the origins of Marxism in China. In this article, I evaluate Gorter's understanding of the materialist conception of history, and demonstrate the dialectical manner in which he understood the respective roles of the economic base and politico-ideological superstructure. I then examine the writings on Marxist theory from the early 1920s by Li Da (Gorter's translator, on whom Gorter had a significant influence). I will also briefly evaluate the circumstantial and conceptual evidence for a link between Gorter's Marxism and the Marxism of Mao Zedong. It was through Mao's endorsement of a reading of the materialist conception of history not dissimilar to Gorter's that this tendency in Marxist theory came to be enshrined within the CCP as "orthodox" Marxism. The enormous significance of this ideological turn justifies exploring the possibility that it was from Gorter's Marxism, directly or filtered through the writings of Li Da, that Mao gained his perception of the dynamic role of politics and ideology in historical change.

This exercise demonstrates how a distinctive current in European Marxist theory, one sanctioned by Engels's flexible understanding of the materialist conception of history, entered the vocabulary of Marxism in China and was elaborated and defended as the legitimate reading of Marxism. Gorter's Marxism thus serves as a novel way of thinking about the variety of theoretical influences on the early communist movement in China, and serves to problematize the flag of orthodoxy raised by Chinese adherents of the economic determinist reading of Marxism, and by many Western commentators on the history of Marxism in China.

Who was Herman Gorter?¹⁵

Born in the Netherlands in 1864,¹⁶ Gorter first came to prominence through his poetry.¹⁷ His poem "May" was an ode to nature written in a form of language not seen before, and was met by literary acclaim.¹⁸ In the 1880s, Gorter established a literary movement of radical young poets, but became dissatisfied with the possibilities of literature effecting social change. He turned to philosophy, studying Spinoza and Kant, but converted to Marxism when he read Marx's *Capital*. Gorter's subsequent political and theoretical

career as a Marxist was characterized by a stubborn unwillingness to compromise what he believed to be the unassailable principles of Marxism, particularly its focus on the historical role of the industrial working class and its (supposed) rejection of tactics based on the institutions of bourgeois democracy. He thus rejected the use of parliament as a tactic in class struggle, and was violently opposed to Marxists seeking election to parliament, even as a tactical move. This tactic would lead to opportunism and careerism, with the interests of the working class being compromised for the interests of their supposedly revolutionary leaders. The interests of the working class were paramount, he argued, and could only be prosecuted through unwavering adherence to the institutions, particularly trade unions, that grew organically out of the experiences and struggles of the working class.

This apparently purist stance led him into some classic confrontations with the organizations to which he belonged and with leading figures in international communism. In 1909, he quit the Dutch Social Democratic Labor Party (SDAP), along with a number of his radical colleagues, on the grounds that the leaders of the SDAP were dampening down the class struggle in order to prosecute a parliamentary strategy, and were thus guilty of treachery to the working class that they claimed to represent. Gorter joined the more radical Social Democratic Party, and he worked within this until its leaders too sought election to parliament, and lobbied on behalf of the allied cause in the First World War. Gorter believed that only a world revolution could serve the interests of the working class, and that imperialism had to be fought wherever it appeared; it was irrelevant which side won the war. He thus adopted a characteristically uncompromising internationalist stance.

While Gorter supported the Russian Revolution of 1917, he recognized that the vastness of Russia's peasantry, with its attachment to private property, would lead to the isolation and eventual defeat of the Russian working class if the proletariat of other countries did not come to its support. Gorter was thus critical of Lenin's tactic of seeking united fronts, firstly with the peasantry, but also with other classes that might support, in the short term and for their own interests, the Bolshevik Party. He was also extremely critical of Lenin's willingness to compromise his long-term political beliefs in order to gain an advantage during the twists and turns of political struggle. This criticism by Gorter and like-minded communists, particularly in Germany and the Netherlands, prompted Lenin to write (in 1920) his cele-

brated critique “‘Left-wing’ Communism—An Infantile Disorder.” Lenin here castigated the unwillingness of members of the “left wing” to compromise their principles, regardless of the needs of the political struggle. Lenin argued that such compromises, including the use of the parliamentary tactic and class alliances, were not opportunistic as long as they conformed to the long-term interests of the industrial proletariat. To adopt a totally uncompromising stance in political struggle would, he argued, lead to isolation and ultimately defeat.¹⁹

Gorter was incensed by Lenin’s attack, and wrote a lengthy rejoinder.²⁰ His “Open Letter to Comrade Lenin” (1920) rejected Lenin’s critique on the grounds that Lenin misunderstood the situation in Europe, extrapolating from conditions in Russia that, Gorter felt, were irrelevant to the revolutionary struggle in Europe. Gorter scoffed at the possibility of peasant support for the revolutionary movement in Western Europe. This was dismissed as a total misunderstanding on Lenin’s part of the actual class conditions in Europe; the working class in Europe “stands alone,” and had to rely on its own force and resolve. Gorter also rejected Lenin’s notion of leadership of the revolutionary movement, which could lead, and in fact had led, to a separation of leadership from the mass of the working class. In Europe, the labor movement continued to be led by leaders, from the era of the Second International, only too willing (in Gorter’s view) to sell out their followers on the grounds of the need to compromise in order to advance the cause. This opportunist leadership did untold harm to the revolutionary movement in Western Europe, and led to a compromise with capitalism and its political forces and institutions, particularly parliament. What was needed was leadership that was organically connected to the working class and would act only in its interests, rejecting any compromise that weakened its revolutionary organization and resolve.

As a result of his uncompromising stance, Gorter (as well as his colleagues on the “left”) were expelled from the Comintern (Third International), and he left the Dutch Communist Party (which he had joined in 1918) and formed a dissident communist group. For the rest of his life (he died in 1927), Gorter continued to believe in the ultimate triumph of communism, but never resiled from the view that communism had to be brought into being by the industrial working class. This class alone incorporated the historical perspective, ideals, and organizational ability that would ensure both the victory of communism and its purity as an ideal social system.

Gorter's *An Explanation of the Materialist Conception of History*

Given Gorter's uncompromising "left" position, one might suspect that his understanding of Marxist theory would tend towards a reading of history that stressed the economic dimensions of the materialist conception of history. After all, his political stance in the European socialist movement was premised on the absolute priority of industrial capitalism and the class relations that this had engendered. In particular, Gorter was committed absolutely to the cause of the industrial working class, perceiving in it and it alone the agent of a world revolution that would lead to communism. This theoretical orientation suggests the implacable character of the forces of production, generating the impulse to capitalism on whose economic foundation would be built the movement for and ultimately the eventuality of communism. Such a view, communicated to the nascent communist movement in China, might well have served as a chilling reminder that Marxism, in its non-Leninist guise, was of little relevance to Chinese conditions in which feudalism rather than capitalism constituted the dominant mode of production. Yet, Gorter's interpretation of the materialist conception of history clearly struck a chord with his Chinese audience, and the reason no doubt was his recognition of the role of human consciousness within the dynamic process of development of the forces of production, and the economic base generally. Moreover, even within his seemingly economic reading of history, verging in places on technological determinism, a pronounced role is retained for ideological and political struggle.

Two of Herman Gorter's works were translated into Chinese. The translator of both was Li Da, who was an influential theorist to the early communist movement, and perhaps the most significant translator of works on Marxism and socialism into Chinese, throughout the 1920s and into the early 1930s. Li translated both texts by Gorter while studying in Japan, although both were eventually published in China in 1921. The first and more significant, *Der Historische Materialismus, für Arbeiter erklärt*, was given the Chinese title *Weiwushiguan jieshuo* (*An explanation of the materialist conception of history*). This book, published originally in German translation in 1909,²¹ focuses directly on the ensemble of theories and concepts that combined constitute the materialist conception of history. Li Da translated this book, of 14 chapters and 60,000 words, from the Japanese translation which was, according to Li, incomplete. His own translation compared the German

and Japanese texts to ensure that the Chinese translation was complete. Because his own knowledge of German was (in his own words) “not so good,” he obtained the assistance of his friend Li Hanjun when he ran into difficulties with the German language.²²

While *An Explanation of the Materialist Conception of History* commences with a brief discussion of the distinction between historical and philosophical materialism,²³ its primary purpose was not an exposition of Marxist philosophy, but an elaboration of the materialist conception of history comprehensible to the Dutch working class. Gorter argues that philosophical materialism perceives matter as eternal, spirit emerging on the basis of matter. Philosophical materialism deals with the origins of thought, while the materialist conception of history deals with the reasons for the changes in human thought, and it is the latter with which he is concerned in this book. The materialist conception of history “explains how the mental is dependent on social conditions.”²⁴ But what are “social conditions”? They are constituted of the forces of production and the relations of production, and the contradiction between the two. The materialist conception of history consequently perceives class divisions and inequality as the major factors shaping human consciousness, and thus shaping history.²⁵

According to Gorter, the materialist conception of history contains three major tenets. First, the technologies of labor, namely the forces of production, constitute the basis of society. The forces of production determine the relations of production; that is, the forces of production determine, in the process of production, the mutually opposed relations of humans. The relations of production are, in a society divided into classes, at the same time society’s property relations. The relations between humans are therefore necessarily class relations, not individual relations. Second, the technologies of production continually develop, and as there is continual change in the forces of production, so too is there continual change in class and property relations. This change is subsequently mirrored in human consciousness, in the realms of morals, religion, politics, law, philosophy, and art and literature. Third, when new technologies of production have emerged and progressed to a certain point, they come into conflict with the old technologies of production within the forces of production and with society’s property relations. It is this contradiction, generated initially by the development of new technologies of labor, which generates the impulse for qualitative, revolutionary change.²⁶ Ultimately, the new technologies of production prevail.

In elaborating these tenets, Gorter stresses that the labor process is the source of thought, politics, law, in short, the human spirit; but it is important to recognize too, he suggests, that *conscious* human labor is at the basis of the process of production, for it is this which allows humans to create inventions and to progress. Human spirit is thus part of the process of production.²⁷ Humans are animals with the capacity for thought, but human thought operates within the boundaries established by the relations of production and property relations. Gorter points out that the forces of production and relations of production are material, and so too in its own way is spirit; what he denies is that spirit can exist independently of its material context. Spirit gives rise to new science, new techniques of production, but these do not arise from spirit as an independent entity, but as something which has evolved from society itself. Nevertheless, humans are creative animals and their consciousness is part of the process of creation.²⁸

While Gorter apparently sets out from a rather mechanistic and determinist premise (the labor process determines thought), he proceeds to qualify this by insisting that the materialist conception of history does *not* incorporate the proposition that a certain sort of production will automatically give rise to a certain sort of thought; it cannot simplistically and mechanistically show that “a certain form of the forces of production will produce a particular form of ideology.” Other factors, he suggests, intervene to influence this process, and these factors vary from one society to another, and these too must be investigated. An important factor singled out by Gorter is nationality. The history of a nation’s politics, as well as its climatic and geographical conditions, influence production and thought. The various aspects of society are interdependent and influence each other. Consequently, politics may influence economics, customs influence politics, and the arts influence science; by the same token, economics influences politics, politics influences customs, and science influences the arts. There is mutual interaction and reaction.²⁹ The question of the relationship between the productive forces and the realm of ideology is thus extremely complex, and the forces of production do not directly produce consciousness. The political history of a nation, and its climatic and geographical conditions, along with technology, influence the methods and consciousness (*sixiang*) of production. Each factor must thus be studied, and its relationship to other factors determined. All manner of things combine to create a “totality,” for politics, economics, customs, technology, and science “all mutually influence each other.” There is influence of one thing on another, and counterinfluence; there is also the

residual influence of the mental and spiritual life of previous eras. There are “many other motive forces” in the evolution of society besides the forces of production; all of these influence historical evolution. The materialist conception of history consequently does not insist that there is one form of “historical evolution,” regardless of particular historical contexts or problems. Nevertheless, while Gorter allows the possibility of a multifaceted approach within the materialist conception of history, he continues to insist that “the *original* motive force for these things was labor; the course along which spirit flows is the relations of production.”³⁰

For Gorter, then, the basic premise of the materialist conception of history—that the labor process determines thought—does not preclude the possibility that thought, once created, can have an influence on the course of history. By perceiving production as *conscious* human production, Gorter in effect perceives thought as an integral element of the forces of production. Humans are creative, and their capacity to reflect critically on their productive activities and formulate ideas that will improve the techniques of production represents a major factor in the initiation of historical change. Moreover, Gorter argues that the political and ideological struggles of the working class are of enormous historical significance, for the human element in history can be quite decisive. As he asserts, “we do not make history *how we please*—But ... *we do make it*.”³¹ Indeed, Gorter argues that the ideological struggle is of even greater significance than the political struggle. Only when the working class has thought through how to overcome the ruling class, will it be able to grasp political power. To do this, it must “first reject the old ways of traditional thinking derived from the state and education”; the worker “must first change himself internally to become a reincarnated (*zhuan-sheng*) person.”³² As Smart observes, “Gorter believed that [a] new society could only be created by a new, self-conscious and self-responsible man.”³³

These are most interesting propositions, not only in their own right, but also in terms of the perceptions that early Chinese communists must have gained on reading them. For here is a major text by a prominent left-wing European Marxist, a text endorsed by Karl Kautsky (who wrote the “Preface” to Gorter’s book), insisting that Marxism’s theory of history is not a mechanistic doctrine that invariably seeks an economic explanation to all historical contexts. The economic realm is of immense historical significance, and Gorter clearly perceived the technological dimension of the forces of production as the ultimately determining factor; but it was not the only causally significant factor. Many factors contribute to the process of historical evolution.

Human consciousness (both within the forces of production and the superstructure) must be recognized as a force for change; it is not merely a passive reflection of developments in the forces of production. Moreover, the various dimensions of society are interrelated and there is interaction between them. Gorter makes it quite clear that in the context of the struggle waged by the European proletariat, political and ideological struggles were of immense significance; it was not just a matter of passively awaiting for the onset of socialism. While the technological dynamo at the economic heart of industrial capitalism—the factory—made possible the socialist society of the future, the workers within the factory had to transform their outlook to allow recognition of the system of exploitation under which they labored. Only thus could they engage effectively in the historical struggle to wrest power from the ruling class; the thinking of the working class, and their political organization and action, inevitably had a material bearing on the outcome of the struggle.³⁴

The second text by Gorter translated into Chinese was an article, again translated by Li Da and published in 1921, on the materialist conception of history's views on religion.³⁵ For the most part, Gorter provides a conventional Marxist explanation. Religion came into being as a result of human inability to explain the natural and social worlds, and answers were sought in supernatural beings, often residing in things. As human control over nature changed and developed, so too did forms of consciousness—ways of thinking about and explaining the world—and religion consequently changed. Gorter provides examples of religious change that accompanied general changes in social attitudes resulting from transformations in economic patterns of production. He points to the rise of capitalism, which created a general ethos based on independent individuals; Protestant religions, such as Lutheranism and Calvinism, emerged and incorporated these values into their doctrines.

In this respect, religion appears as a reflection of society. But at the same time, its gods and prescriptions come to dominate human thinking and conduct. It is only with the rise of industrial capitalism and the emergence of the working class that a scientific explanation of religion and its role in society becomes possible. The working class comes to recognize it has no need of religion, and atheism becomes common within its ranks. Interestingly, Gorter argues that belief in religion is a personal matter, and should not be subject to political prescription. The view of the SDP (to which he then belonged) was that the socialization of the means of production (and thus the elimination of

class exploitation) would have the effect of diminishing the attractiveness of religion and the hold it exercised over people's thinking. There was thus no need for compulsion to prevent religious belief; it would die away of its own accord.

Gorter talks of class struggle—to overthrow capitalism and to achieve a society in which religion will wither and disappear—as essential, and he endorsed the struggles of an increasingly class-conscious and militant working class. In this respect, his views on religion and its demise reflected his general views on the materialist conception of history in which class struggle—growing out of the lived experiences of the working class's exploitation and oppression—occupied a central position.

Gorter's *An Explanation of the Materialist Conception of History* and the Marxism of Li Da

Of the various dimensions of Gorter's perspective on the materialist conception of history, perhaps the most important for his readers in China was his recognition that historical contexts are different; one could not assume that the various forces underpinning and contributing to "historical evolution" in one historical context would be the same in another. The variability of historical contexts required a methodology that allowed insights into the causes and course of development in any particular context, insights which could function as the basis for political strategy. Chinese readers were no doubt relieved to note that the materialist conception of history was not a one-size-fits-all theory, and they could assume, on the basis of reading *An Explanation of the Materialist Conception of History*, that Marxist theory provided "a methodology to investigate things, a methodology to investigate the world."³⁶ Indeed, Gorter's flexible interpretation of the materialist conception of history retained the notion of ultimate economic determination while allowing a diversity of causes that interact differently in different contexts. His recognition that ideological and political factors could play a role in "historical evolution" was in stark contrast to those interpretations of the materialist conception of history that stressed only the economic realm and particularly the technologies of production, excluding the various dimensions of the superstructure as merely reflections of the economic base. His insistence that the ideological and political struggles of the European working class were central to the possibility of its victory was clearly founded on an economic reading of the historical condition of European capitalism and

the situation of the working class within it; struggle within the realm of the superstructure was thus legitimately within the sphere of the materialist conception of history. Those in China in the early 1920s embarking on the arduous and at times perilous path of revolutionary struggle were heartened to know that their own efforts in the various superstructural realms were not in vain, and indeed were sanctioned by Marxist theory.³⁷ The establishment and routine operation of political organizations, the formulation of strategies and tactics for political struggle, the creation and dissemination of revolutionary propaganda, the development of revolutionary cultural forms and practices, and the generation of a coherent ideological perspective for the nascent CCP—all of these required acceptance that superstructural activities and struggles were sanctioned by the materialist conception of history. Gorter's Marxism thus spoke directly and convincingly to the theoretical and ideological needs of the early Marxist movement in China. It is no wonder, then, that Gorter's *An Explanation of the Materialist Conception of History* was so popular. The reaction of its translator, Li Da, is indicative of this positive reaction. He remarked, in his translator's "Preface" that besides adding the word "fine" (*hao*), "I could not say another word of praise (*zanmei*) [for this book]."³⁸ Chinese readers clearly warmly received the book, for it was republished in China 14 times by 1932. This indicates that the influence of Gorter's interpretation of Marxist theory was extended to a subsequent generation of Chinese Marxists.³⁹

The position articulated by Gorter is reminiscent of the flexible and dialectical position on the materialist conception of history enunciated by Engels in his letter to Bloch of September 1890, and referred to above. Indeed, the similarity of his interpretation of the materialist conception of history to Engels's perspective has not been lost on Chinese scholars of the early history of Marxism in China, nor the implications of this for its subsequent history.⁴⁰ Gorter rejected a mechanistic, economic, determinist view of history; he accepted that politics, ideology, and other factors not normally associated with the economic foundation of society played a role in history and, in particular, the history of the future, as he saw it: the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism and the establishment of a socialist society.

Li Da, the translator of Gorter, inevitably absorbed this flexible and dialectical view of the materialist conception of history, and he proceeded to elaborate it in his own writings on the materialist conception of history of the early 1920s. Gorter's interpretation of Marxist theory was thus amplified through the prolific writings of Li who was one of the early Chinese communist move-

ment's most effective theorists and propagandists.⁴¹ A few examples drawn from his writings of the early 1920s will serve to indicate the influence of this approach to the materialist conception of history on Li and through him on the Chinese communist movement as a whole. In his first major essay on Marxist theory, "Makesi huanyuan" (Marx restored, 1921), Li explicitly rejected a mechanistic Marxist approach that disallowed consciousness as a factor in historical development. Rather, human spirit and consciousness were integral to the struggle of the proletariat. The oppression of the proletariat by capitalism develops, sooner or later, a class consciousness amongst the proletariat; on the basis of this class consciousness emerges a "class mentality," and it is only with the appearance of this that class organization and a class movement are possible. Li thus perceived no contradiction between a theoretical perspective grounded in a materialist conception of the underlying impulses leading to historical change—particularly those relating to the economic base of society—which also incorporated a role for conscious political action. The latter, Li believed, could be a significant factor in the eventual overthrow of capitalism and the establishment of a socialist society. There was thus no necessary tension between an economic and political reading of Marxist theory; as Li points out, Marxism is a "complete theory" that could encompass both of these dimensions of social change.⁴²

Similarly, in "Marxist theory and China," written in mid-1923 just prior to his departure from the CCP, Li was to provide a more elaborate, but similarly dialectical, view of the materialist conception of history.⁴³ Li commences his interpretation by quoting (in Chinese translation) the famous passage from Marx's "Preface" to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*: "At a certain stage of development, the material productive forces of society come into conflict with the existing relations of production.... Then begins an era of social revolution. The changes in the economic foundation lead sooner or later to the transformation of the whole immense superstructure." What does this passage imply, particularly for those desiring to bring about an "era of revolution"? Li responds that the revolution results from the proletariat employing political revolution to seize political power. The historical appearance of the class conditions characteristic of capitalism, and the development of working-class consciousness amongst the proletariat, are to be explained, in line with Marx's perspective, by reference to the emergence of industrial capitalism and the concentration of ownership in the hands of the capitalist class. But the concentration of ownership is accompanied by the concentration of the working class, and increasing conflict between the proletariat and

capitalists. As class struggle develops, so too does the consciousness of the working class, which becomes a vital ingredient in the unfolding and eventual success of the political revolution waged by the proletariat. Thus, although changes in political organization and consciousness follow changes in the economic base, political change can occur more quickly and have more immediate effect than changes within the economic base. The political revolution could thus facilitate and lead to the eventual occurrence of the social revolution, although the conditions that led to the social revolution (particularly the development of the forces and relations of production characteristic of capitalism) are essential for the political revolution to be able to exert the effect it does. Li insists that this is a valid reading of Marxist social theory.⁴⁴

Here again, as in his other early writings on Marxist social theory, Li demonstrates that his understanding of the materialist conception of history was premised on recognition of the importance to historical development of long-term social and economic factors; on the other hand, however, he also recognized that, on the basis of the development of these factors, political factors such as the organization and will of the proletariat could become historically significant, and indeed, could lead to the victory (or failure, if inadequate) of the political revolution. Without the necessary social and economic conditions, the political revolution had no chance of succeeding; but without political revolution, no revolution could occur, regardless of how propitious the social and economic context might appear. Human intervention—in the form of political organization and consciousness—could thus be decisive.

One should not take from Li's acceptance of political and ideological struggle as a valid dimension of the materialist conception of history the suggestion that he introduced to Marxism in China an invariably superstructural reading of historical change. Nothing could be further from the truth. Li was cognizant of the economic dimension of Marx's philosophy of history, and agreed with it. He had studied Volume I of *Capital* while in Japan, and had translated into Chinese Karl Kautsky's *The Economic Doctrines of Karl Marx* (1887, published in China in 1921), which follows the general outline of *Capital* in its explanation of Marx's political economy.⁴⁵ This was to be only the first of a number of books on Marxist economics and political economy that Li Da was to translate into Chinese, and in none of his translator's prefaces to these volumes is there any suggestion that he held reservations about this approach.⁴⁶ On the contrary, he clearly accepted Kautsky's assertion that Marx had, through the employment of his characteristic political economy,

been able to unravel the natural laws of motion of capitalism; Marx's political economy was thus premised on a scientific approach. Moreover, in the mid-1930s, Li was to publish a very sizeable volume on Marxist economics that demonstrated that his commitment to the economic dimension of the materialist conception of history had not abated, either with the passage of time or his departure from the CCP.⁴⁷

Li accepted that the materialist conception of history contained different dimensions between which there was dynamic tension. It was this tension—a theoretical tension that mirrored the tensions inherent in a social world constructed on classes—that gave to Marxist social theory a conceptual edge over its theoretical rivals. The challenge for those who employed it was to use it, as Gorter had advocated, as “a methodology to investigate things, a methodology to investigate the world.” Li Da accepted this injunction, and accepted its corollary implication: that the social world is complex, and the factors that constitute it interact in complex ways that do not always conform to the neat patterns suggested by the broad sweep of history. The roles of the political and ideological realms in “historical evolution” had to be determined through investigation of the world, but it could be accepted, as both Gorter and Li clearly did, that these realms could be, and had to be, exploited to achieve goals suggested as possible by the historical evolution of the economic base.

Mao Zedong on the materialist conception of history

One can detect in Mao Zedong's writings of the 1920s and 1930s a perspective that resonates with Gorter's flexible and dialectical position on the materialist conception of history. It is possible that Mao had either read the book or excerpts of it, or discussed its contents with Li Da. The evidence is, however, circumstantial. We know that Mao had begun to collect and read books and articles on Marxism even prior to the establishment of the CCP in 1921. These included works on the materialist conception of history (some of them translated by Li Da), such as the *Communist Manifesto*, Kirkup's *History of Socialism*, Kautsky's *Class Struggle*, Marx's *Wage Labour and Capital*, Kawakami Hajime's *Marx's Materialist Conception of History*, and *Outline of Marx's Materialist Conception of History* (which had been edited by the Japanese journal *Socialist Study* and serialized in Chinese translation in *Chen bao* in May and June 1919).⁴⁸ Mao also, through his involvement with the Cultural Book Society (established in Changsha in 1920) and the New

People's Study Society, was in a position to monitor the books that became available on Marxist theory. The Cultural Book Society was, by April 1921, selling some 160 book titles, many of them foreign works in Chinese translation (among them many works on Marxist theory), and distributing newspapers (such as *Chen bao* [Morning post]) and magazines (such as *Shaonian Zhongguo* [Young China]) in which translations of essays and extracts on Marxist theory regularly appeared, including in the latter journal Gorter's "The materialist conception of history's view of religion," translated by Li Da, and published in 1921.⁴⁹ According to Chinese scholars, Mao was an avid reader of works on Marxism that he sold and recommended through the Cultural Book Society and New People's Study Society, and which were compulsory reading for the Marxist Study Society in Changsha in which he participated.⁵⁰

There is thus evidence to suggest that Mao was aware of Gorter's perspective on the materialist conception of history; he had access to a large number of books and periodicals on Marxist theory, and was actively studying the materialist conception of history before and after the publication in China of Gorter's book and essay. This suggestion is strengthened by the close personal relationship between Mao and Li Da. In November 1922, Mao invited Li to take up the position of principal of the Self-Study University (*Zixiu daxue*) which Mao had established in Changsha,⁵¹ and to be the editor of the university's journal *Xin shidai* (New age), in which Mao himself subsequently published an essay.⁵² Mao introduced Li to the university as "the Director of the Party's Propaganda Department, whose understanding of Marxism-Leninism is profound, and who has come specifically to help everyone study Marxism-Leninism."⁵³ Li subsequently lectured on the materialist conception of history, the theory of surplus value, and scientific socialism; he also compiled an anthology of teaching materials entitled *An Explanation of Marxist Terminology*. During this period, Li and Mao were, according to Chinese biographies of Li, constantly in each other's company, and discussed Marxism and problems of the Chinese Revolution. The two revolutionaries formed a "militant friendship."⁵⁴ It is thus feasible that Mao became familiar with Gorter's views on the materialist conception of history through his association with Li Da. At the very least, Mao knew well Li's views on Marxist social theory, and these had been influenced by Gorter's Marxism, as we saw above.

Perhaps more important than evidence suggesting the possibility of his familiarity with Gorter's Marxism, and his personal relationship with Li Da,

is Mao's own elaboration of the materialist conception of history, which clearly reflects the dialectical and flexible approach endorsed by Gorter and Li. We know that Mao was familiar with and had committed himself to the materialist conception of history by January 1921. He commented in a letter to his friend Cai Hesen, "The materialist conception of history is the philosophical basis of our Party; it is factual, unlike rationalism which cannot be substantiated and is easily undermined."⁵⁵ But what did Mao understand by the materialist conception of history? Of one thing we can be certain: Mao accepted implicitly (and perhaps instinctively) Gorter's view that the materialist conception of history represents "a methodology to investigate things, a methodology to investigate the world." Mao repeatedly revealed, throughout the 1920s and 1930s, his predilection for detailed investigation of local conditions. This is reflected in his well-known injunction—"no investigation, no right to speak"⁵⁶—and his detailed rural investigations.⁵⁷ It is clear that Mao regarded Marxist theory as incorporating a methodology that, appropriately applied, could reveal the nature of particular local contexts.

Mao also made apparent his tendency towards an activist reading of the materialist conception of history, for his writings and deeds invariably reveal a revolutionary temper dedicated to the acceleration of the historical process in the direction of national liberation and communism. Yet, this activist inclination was tempered (at least during the pre-1949 period) by a judicious recognition of the overriding significance of the economic factor in historical change, and the need to wage political, ideological and military struggles within the framework and possibilities revealed by analysis of the economic forces at work in history. How did Mao articulate the respective role of the economic base and politico-ideological superstructure; and to what extent does this reveal a congruence between his views on the materialist conception of history and those of Gorter and Li Da?

Without doubt, the most important source of Mao's views is "On Contradiction," written in August 1937. This essay, written as part of Mao's more extensive "Lecture Notes on Dialectical Materialism," contained reference to the core issue canvassed by both Gorter and Li: the causal relationship between the economic base and the superstructure in the process of historical change. Mao accepted the materialist premise of Marxism that "human knowledge is subject to the limitations of historical conditions."⁵⁸ However, Mao was concerned to ensure that this Marxist premise did not constitute a theoretical straitjacket to revolutionary action; the last thing he wanted was a theory that endorsed passivity on the grounds of economic

determinism and historical inevitability. He was thus intent on elaborating a position that, while retaining its materialist ontological premise, allowed that human thought and political action could play a role in historical change. Mao's understanding of the relationship between economic foundation and superstructure reserved for the superstructure a qualified capacity to initiate or facilitate historical change. He did not accept that the economic structure of society, while in Marx's famous term "the real foundation," was the sole agent of historical change, or that human consciousness and political institutions played no historical role.

Mao approached the relationship between the economic base and political and ideological superstructure in a particular way, one best categorized as a form of complex economism, for it retained the general notion of economic determination of historical change. The most complete statement of his theoretical position appears in two passages in the 1937 version of "On Contradiction." In the first of these, Mao endorsed Marx and Engels's identification of the key contradictions whose struggle and resolution underpin the process of historical change:

When Marx and Engels applied the law of the unity of contradictions to the study of the socio-historical process, they discovered *the basic cause* of social development to be the contradiction between the productive forces and the relations of production, the contradiction of class struggle, and the resultant (*you zhexie maodun suo chanshengde*) contradiction between the economic base and its superstructure (politics, ideology).⁵⁹

Mao then moved to determine how, within the relationship of the principal and non-principal aspects of these contradictions and their mutual change, humans and their political and ideological institutions, and their consciousness, are able to play a role in historical change:

I regard all principal and non-principal positions of the aspects of a contradiction as involved in this mutual change.

Some people think that this is not true of certain contradictions. For instance, in the contradiction between the productive forces and the relations of production, the productive forces are the principal aspect; in the contradiction between theory and practice, practice is the principal aspect; in the contradiction between the economic base and the superstructure, the economic base is the principal aspect; and there is no change in their respective positions. It should be realized that *under normal conditions*, and viewed from a materialist point of view, they really are

unchanging and absolute things; however, there are *historically many particular situations* in which they do change. The productive forces, practice, and the economic base generally play the principal and decisive role; whoever denies this is not a materialist. But it must also be admitted that sometimes such aspects as the relations of production, theory, and the superstructure in turn manifest themselves in the principal and decisive role. When it is impossible for the productive forces to develop without a change in the relations of production, then the change in the relations of production plays the principal and decisive role.... When the superstructure (politics, culture, etc.) obstructs the development of the economic base, political and cultural changes become principal and decisive. Are we going against materialism when we say this? No. The reason is that we recognize that in the general development of history the material determines the mental. We also—and indeed must—recognize the reaction of the mental on material things. This does not go against materialism; on the contrary, it avoids mechanical materialism and firmly upholds dialectical materialism.⁶⁰

Mao argues here that the forces of production are “under normal conditions” the determining influence in the relationship between the forces of production and relations of production; similarly, the economic base is the determining influence in the relationship between the economic base and superstructure. Mao insists, however, that this conventional materialist formula for understanding social change does not preclude the possibility of reciprocal influence of the relations of production on the productive forces and of the superstructure on the economic base. The relations of production and superstructure are not passive reflections of the forces of production and economic base respectively. Indeed, in “historically particular situations” they can become “principal and decisive.”

What does Mao mean by this? The obvious point is that Mao’s attribution of a “principal and decisive” role to the superstructure and relations of production, both realms involving humans and their consciousness and struggles, is carefully qualified, and is far from the egregiously “voluntarist” position sometimes attributed to him.⁶¹ Mao makes it abundantly clear that “under normal conditions” the superstructure and relations of production are *not* “principal and decisive,” and that in order to comprehend the nature of a society during such “normal conditions” (*yiban qingxing*), one must examine the economic base, and within it, the forces of production; it is these that “generally play the principal and decisive role.” In other words, for the most part, a conventional materialist interpretation is sufficient to disclose the workings of history.

Mao's position does not, therefore, signify a theoretical shift to an invariably superstructural reading of history. Rather, Mao believed that the superstructure becomes "principal and decisive" in obstructing and then facilitating impulses for change generated within the economic base. While it might sometimes take on a principal and decisive role, this could only occur in "historically particular situations" in which the economic base had created a context in which the superstructure could assume an enhanced capacity for resolution of contradictions generated by the economic base. As Mao points out in the first quote earlier, the contradiction between economic base and superstructure is a result of the major contradiction within the economic base itself.

Mao thus believed that the contradictions and consequent impulses for change generated within the economic base were inevitably reflected within the superstructure, and the struggle between these reflected contradictions within the superstructure could exercise a materially significant influence on the outcome of historical struggles, at least in the short term. Consequently, the superstructure mattered as an arena for struggle and change. Mao was convinced that it was Marxism's belief in the capacity for struggle within the superstructure (in the arenas of politics, ideology, and culture) to facilitate historical change in the direction of communism that prevented its deterministic tendencies from crossing the threshold into fatalism, with its implied invitation to passivity. Mao recognized that the influence of the superstructure, and of human action within it, was limited. The superstructure could not autonomously create its historical context; not only was its influence historically limited in a temporal sense, it perforce operated within a historical context whose characteristics were initially created by the economic base and the productive forces. Consequently, while Mao's understanding of Marxism incorporated a flexible and dialectical perspective on social change, one in which activities within the superstructure could exert an influence, his theoretical position retained the notion of ultimate economic determination. As he pointed out,

In the contradiction between the social character of production and the private character of ownership can be seen the contradiction between the forces and relations of production, and this is the fundamental contradiction. From this fundamental contradiction emerge all other contradictions, because this fundamental contradiction determines the development of capitalism.⁶²

Mao underscored this position by stating that "in the contradiction between economic base and superstructure, the economic base is dominant."⁶³

While the influence of Gorter is not explicitly acknowledged in Mao's writings on Marxist philosophy and theory of 1937, it is clear that he had assumed a theoretical stance on the relationship between economic base and superstructure not dissimilar from Gorter's. Moreover, Li Da's reading of Marxist theory and philosophy continued as a significant influence on Mao.⁶⁴ He engaged with Li's writings on Marxist economic theory and philosophy throughout the 1930s, and it is clear in these that Li had never resiled from the theoretical position assumed by Gorter in his *An Explanation of the Materialist Conception of History*.⁶⁵ Both Gorter and Li acknowledged the possibility, indeed desirability, of political and ideological struggle; both insisted on a flexible, dialectical perception of the historical process in which many factors came into play, factors that may vary from society to society; both, however, insisted that economic forces remained ultimately paramount in "historical evolution." The resemblance between their views on the materialist conception of history and Mao's position is too great to be entirely coincidental, although one should not press the influence of Gorter and Li Da too far, for Mao was, by 1937, subject to other influences within the Marxist tradition that also endorsed the role of the superstructure within a materialist framework. Of these, the influence of the Soviet Union's "New Philosophy" was dominant.⁶⁶ At the very least, we can conclude that Mao's perspective resonates with the theoretical current in Marxist theory that had entered the discursive field of Chinese Marxism with the translation and publication in China in 1921 of Gorter's book and essay on the materialist conception of history. The Marxism of Gorter, which drew on Engels's flexible and dialectical elaboration of the materialist conception of history, was a major influence on Li Da, and quite possibly, either directly or indirectly, an influence on the Marxism of Mao Zedong.

Conclusion

The introduction of Marxism to China constituted a fragmentary and rather haphazard process, one in which different possible interpretations of the materialist conception of history become available at different moments in the early history of the Chinese communist movement. Prior to 1921, the dominant view of Marxism to enter China was that of economic determinism, and this generated various intellectual responses, encompassing acceptance, revision or rejection. For many in the early Chinese communist movement, conversion to Marxism implied endorsement of its (supposed)

economic determinism, but this represented a challenge to those converts drawn to a more activist approach than that sanctioned by this supposedly “orthodox” reading of Marxism. The possibility of alternative readings of Marxism that recognized some influence on history of politics and ideology, and which could also be regarded as “orthodox” readings of Marxism, was not initially apparent. It was only with the publication in 1921 of Herman Gorter’s *An Explanation of the Materialist Conception of History*, which articulated this latter theoretical tendency, that ideological choice *within* Marxism—between a range of possible “orthodoxies”—became a possibility. Gorter’s reading of the materialist conception of history was securely founded on an economic reading of “historical evolution,” and he paid particular emphasis to the historical role played by technological change within the forces of production. However, Gorter at the same time recognized the very significant role that human consciousness—within both the economic base and superstructure—could play in influencing the direction and tempo of historical change. Moreover, Gorter accepted that numerous historical forces operate within the complex process of “historical evolution,” and that these interact with and influence each other in various, sometimes unpredictable, ways; to determine this interaction of forces, one had to employ the materialist conception of history as “a methodology to investigate the world.” Perhaps most important, Gorter sanctioned—indeed strongly encouraged—political and ideological struggles based on a materialist reading of particular historical contexts; for humans did “*make* history,” he insisted, and to passively await the emergence of communism had nothing to do with Marxism.

The current of Marxist theory represented by Gorter’s Marxism, which in turn drew on Engels’s reading of the materialist conception of history, entered the vocabulary and conceptual repertoire of Marxism in China via the translations of Li Da, one of the early communist movement’s most prolific and influential theorists. Not only was Gorter’s elaboration of the materialist conception of history significant in its own right, its influence was amplified through Li’s writings on Marxist theory of the early 1920s. Through his essays in such influential journals as *Xin qingnian* (New youth) and *The Communist*, Li’s reading of the materialist conception of history presented a large and growing audience with an alternative reading of Marxism to that of a mechanistic economic determinism. His endorsement not only reinforced the possibility of theoretical choice within Marxism, but endorsed too the validity of political and ideological struggle within an “orthodox” Marxism. For Li very loudly proclaimed to his readers the status of “ortho-

doxy” for this rendition of Marxism, while rejecting economic determinism as little more than a variant of fatalism, and having nothing to do with Marxism. And it is quite clear that one of his most politically precocious readers, Mao Zedong, likewise rejected a mechanistically economic determinist version of Marxism. The young Mao stood foursquare in the tradition of Marxism represented by Gorter’s and Li’s Marxism, which accepted the possibility that struggles in the superstructure—in the realms of politics, ideology, and culture—could influence the character and pace of change, as long as based on a materialist reading of particular historical contexts. For the promise at the core of “orthodox” Marxism was the realization of communism through struggle predicated on a clear-headed appreciation of the potentialities and limitations of objective circumstances.

Gorter’s brand of Marxism was thus accepted and acted upon by influential Chinese Marxists as “orthodox” Marxism. That this was so serves to problematize the common response by many Western commentaries to this current within Chinese Marxism. For its ideological opposite—economic determinism—is frequently invoked as the indisputable standard of “orthodoxy” by which Marxism in China is evaluated.⁶⁷ The Marxism of the young Mao and Chinese intellectuals such as Li Da is thus inevitably tarred with the brush of heterodoxy, and their (supposed) distance from mainstream “orthodox” European Marxism highlighted. Yet, if one of the major influences on this tendency of Marxism in China was a current within European Marxism endorsed by no less an “orthodox” Marxist than Karl Kautsky,⁶⁸ one that drew on Engels’s reading of the materialist conception of history, can such a judgment be considered appropriate? At the very least, recognition of the various currents within Marxism that entered China during the early 1920s should be accompanied by a parallel recognition that each had some claim to “orthodoxy,” and that an invariably economic determinist reading of Marxism may not be the appropriate benchmark by which to evaluate the claims of those Marxists in China who chose political and ideological struggle as the appropriate tactic for the revolutionary years that lay ahead.

Notes

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¹ See Liu Kang, *Globalization and Cultural Trends in China* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2004), chapter 3.

² Recent statements by Hu Jintao suggest something of a revival of interest in Marxist theory at the highest level of the CCP. See, for example, "Hu Jintao Calls for Upholding Marxism," 28 April 2004, <<http://www.idpc.org.cn/english/events/040428.htm>>, accessed 9 March 2005; Paul Lin, "Hu Jintao Is Starting to Show His True Colours," 19 February 2005, <<http://www.asianresearch.org/articles/2524.html>>, accessed 9 March 2005.

³ For analysis and critique of post-Mao Chinese Marxism, see Colin Mackerras, "Chinese Marxism since Mao," in *Marxism in Asia*, ed. Colin Mackerras and Nick Knight (London: Croom Helm, 1985), 124–50; Bill Brugger, ed., *Chinese Marxism in Flux, 1978–84* (London: Croom Helm, 1985); Bill Brugger and David Kelly, *Chinese Marxism in the Post-Mao Era* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990); and Arif Dirlik and Maurice Meisner, eds, *Marxism and the Chinese Experience: Issues in Contemporary Chinese Socialism* (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1989).

⁴ Karl Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1971), 20–1.

⁵ See G. A. Cohen, *Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978).

⁶ See, for example, George Plekhanov, *In Defence of Materialism: The Development of the Monist View of History* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1947); for a broadly based critique of these positions, see Derek Sayer, *The Violence of Abstraction: The Analytic Foundations of Historical Materialism* (Cambridge: Basil Blackwell, 1987).

⁷ Engels's letter to Joseph Bloch of September 1890. Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Selected Letters* (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1977), 75. Emphases in original.

⁸ For further discussion of the reliance of the early communist movement in China on the translations of Marxist texts from Japanese, see Arif Dirlik, *Revolution and History: Origins of Marxist Historiography in China, 1919–1937* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), 20–4; Arif Dirlik, *The Origins of Chinese Communism* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 21; and Nick Knight, *Li Da and Marxist Philosophy in China* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1996), 51–4.

⁹ Li Yu-ning, *The Introduction of Socialism into China* (New York and London: Columbia University Press, 1971), 108–10.

¹⁰ Dirlik correctly argues that "knowledge of Marxist theory [among Chinese intellectuals during the early 1920s] was derived largely from a spotty selection of primary and secondary, especially Japanese, sources." See Dirlik, *The Origins of Chinese Communism*, 2.

¹¹ The early translation in 1919 and subsequent widespread use of Karl Kautsky's interpretation of Marxist economics undoubtedly reinforced this view. Similarly, the translation into Chinese of a number of essays by the famous Japanese intellectual Kawakami Hajime concerning his economic interpretations of the materialist conception reinforced this tendency. See Dirlik, *The Origins of Chinese Communism*, 98–107; Gail Lee Bernstein, *Japanese Marxist: A Portrait of Kawakami Hajime, 1879–1946* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1976); and Michael Y. L. Luk, *The Origins of Chinese Bolshevism: An Ideology in the Making, 1920–1928* (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1990).

¹² Dirlik, *Revolution and History*, 27, see also 31.

¹³ Maurice Meisner, *Li Ta-chao and the Origins of Chinese Marxism* (New York: Atheneum, 1973).

¹⁴ There were, as Dirlik observes, some muted voices raised in support of a more flexi-

ble, less economically deterministic, interpretation of the materialist conception of history, but these made little or no headway against the dominant reading of Marxist theory that entered China up to 1921. See Dirlik, *The Origins of Chinese Communism*, 111–3.

¹⁵ Prior to the First World War, Gorter was a familiar figure and theorist in world communism. As Theodore Draper remarks, “Pannekoek and Gorter were familiar names to many American Socialists when Lenin and Trotsky were virtually unknown.” *The Roots of American Communism* (New York: Viking Press, 1957), 65–6, quoted in John Gerber, “The Formation of Pannekoek’s Marxism,” in *Pannekoek and the Workers’ Councils*, ed. Serge Bricianer (Saint Louis, MO: Telos Press, 1978), 1, note 1.

¹⁶ Another Dutch Marxist influential in the early history of the CCP was Hendricus Sneevliet (alias Maring), who played a prominent role in the establishment of the First United Front between the CCP and Guomindang. Sneevliet, unlike Gorter, remained within the mainstream Leninist branch of the Communist movement, and acted as a Comintern agent in China. For information on Sneevliet, see Michael Williams, “Sneevliet and the Birth of Asian Communism,” *New Left Review* (September/October 1980): 123; also Tony Saich, *Origins of the First United Front in China: The Role of Sneevliet (alias Maring)* (Leiden and New York: E. J. Brill, 1991).

¹⁷ The following biographical information is drawn from the following sources: H. Canne Meijer’s “Obituary,” <<http://www.geocities.com/cordobakaf/obit.html>>, accessed 12 May 2003; Bricianer, *Pannekoek and the Workers’ Councils*; and D. A. Smart, ed., *Pannekoek and Gorter’s Marxism* (London: Pluto Press, 1978).

¹⁸ In 1912, well after his conversion to Marxism, Gorter wrote a massive poem, of 500 pages, called “Pan”, which eulogized the history of the working class, and portraying the factory as the institution that would bring victory to the revolution.

¹⁹ Vladimir I. Lenin, *Selected Works* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1964), 3, 292–374, particularly 324–32, 373–4.

²⁰ Herman Gorter, “Open Letter to Comrade Lenin: A Reply to ‘Left-wing’ Communism, an Infantile Disorder,” <<http://www.left-dis.nl/uk/openO.htm>>, accessed 14 July 2004.

²¹ Gorter wrote the original of *Der Historische Materialismus* in Dutch, and it was published in Amsterdam in 1908. It was translated into German by Anna, the wife of his friend and political comrade, Anton Pannekoek, and published in Stuttgart in 1909. See Smart, ed., *Pannekoek and Gorter’s Marxism*.

²² Herman Gorter, *Weiwushiguan jieshuo* (An explanation of the materialist conception of history) (Shanghai: Zhonghua shuju, 1921), translator’s Preface, appendix, 7–8.

²³ It was thus the first translation of a Marxist text to incorporate any consideration of the purely philosophical dimensions of Marxism. However, an effective introduction of Marxist philosophy in China would have to wait until Qu Qiubai’s elaboration of it in 1923. See Nick Knight, “The Dilemma of Determinism: Qu Qiubai and the Origins of Marxist Philosophy in China,” *China Information* 13, no. 4 (1999): 1–26.

²⁴ Gorter, *Weiwushiguan jieshuo*, 4.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 1–10.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 14–15.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 38

²⁸ Gorter develops this point in considerable detail, providing examples of the discoveries made by various societies throughout history. *Ibid.*, 40–5.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 124–6.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 133–4. Emphasis added.

³¹ Quoted in Smart, ed., *Pannekoek and Gorter's Marxism*, 12. Emphasis in original.

³² Gorter, *Weiwushiguan jieshuo*, 1.

³³ Smart, ed., *Pannekoek and Gorter's Marxism*, 12.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 4.

³⁵ Herman Gorter, "Weiwushiguan de zongjiaoguan" (The materialist conception of history's view of religion), transl. Li Da, *Shaonian Zhongguo* 2, no. 11 (1921): 36–46.

³⁶ Gorter, *Weiwushiguan jieshuo*, 1.

³⁷ Indeed, as we will see, the theoretical position endorsed by Gorter was echoed very quickly in the voluminous writings of Li Da, Gorter's translator. Gorter's views, mediated through Li's interpretation, were thus magnified in their impact. See Knight, *Li Da and Marxist Philosophy in China*, chapters 3 and 4.

³⁸ Gorter, *Weiwushiguan jieshuo*, translator's "Preface," appendix, 7–8.

³⁹ Wang Jionghua, *Li Da yu Makesizhuyi zai Zhongguo* (Li Da and Marxist philosophy in China) (Hubei: Huazhong ligong daxue chubanshe, 1988), 33.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 37.

⁴¹ Luk has referred to Li Da as a theorist "of first-rate importance." See Luk, *The Origins of Chinese Bolshevism*, 59; see also Knight, *Li Da and Marxist Philosophy in China*, chapters 3 and 4.

⁴² *Li Da wenji* (Collected writings of Li Da) (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 1981–1988), 1, 30–9.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 91–104.

⁴⁴ Li quotes from the *Communist Manifesto*, *Critique of the Gotha Programme*, and Marx's writing for the *Neue Rheinische Zeitung* to support his interpretation.

⁴⁵ Karl Kautsky, *Makesi jingji xueshuo* (The economic doctrines of Karl Marx), transl. Li Da (n.p.: Zhonghua shudian, 1921). See Wang Jionghua, *Li Da yu makesizhuyi zhexue zai Zhongguo*, 27, for analysis of the influence of this text in China.

⁴⁶ See Knight, *Li Da and Marxist Philosophy in China*, 146, note 18, for a list of the books on economics and political economy translated into Chinese by Li Da.

⁴⁷ Li Da, *Jingjixue dagang* (An outline of economic theory) (Wuhan: Wuhan daxue chubanshe, 1985).

⁴⁸ Li Yongtai, "Mao Zedong tongzhi dui zhexue de xuexi he changdao" (The study of philosophy by Mao Zedong and his philosophical initiatives), *Xinan shifan xuexyuan xuebao*, no. 2 (1985): 9–16. A translation of this source appears in *The Philosophical Thought of Mao Zedong: Studies from China, 1981–1989*, Chinese Studies on Philosophy, ed. Nick Knight (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1992), 96–116.

⁴⁹ For a list of some of the titles sold by the Cultural Book Society, see Stuart Schram, ed., *Mao's Road to Power, Revolutionary Writings 1912–1949—Volume II, National Revolution and Social Revolution, December 1920–June 1927* (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1994), 54–5. See also Li Rui, *Mao Zedong zaonian dushu shenghuo* (Mao Zedong's life as a reader in his early years) (Liaoning: Liaoning renmin chubanshe, 1992), 259–60.

⁵⁰ Li Yongtai, "Mao Zedong tongzhi dui zhexue de xuexi he changdao."

⁵¹ See Schram, ed., *Mao's Road to Power, Revolutionary Writings 1912–1949—Volume II*, 88–98.

⁵² The first issue of *Xin shidai* (15 April 1923) carried the essay by Mao "Waili, junfa yu geming" (External forces, the warlords, and revolution). See *Mao Zedong wenji* (Collected writings of Mao Zedong) (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 1993), 10–14.

⁵³ Sun Qinan and Li Zhizhen, *Mao Zedong yu mingren* (Mao Zedong and the famous) (Jiangsu: Jiangsu renmin chubanshe, 1993), 316.

⁵⁴ Li Da wenji, 9.

⁵⁵ *Mao Zedong shuxin xuanji* (Selected letters of Mao Zedong) (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 1983), 15–6. For a slightly different translation, see Schram, ed., *Mao's Road to Power: Revolutionary Writings 1912–1949: Volume II*, 35.

⁵⁶ See Stuart R. Schram, ed., and Nancy J. Hodes, associate ed., *Mao's Road to Power: Revolutionary Writings 1912–1949—Volume III, From the Jinggangshan to the Establishment of the Jiangxi Soviets, July 1927–December 1930* (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1995), 419–26.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 296–418, 594–655, 658–66, 691–3. Also, Mao Zedong, *Report from Xunwu*, transl., with introduction and notes by Roger R. Thomson (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990). These translations are of Mao Zedong, *Mao Zedong nongcun diaocha wenji* (Mao Zedong's collected rural investigations) (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 1982).

⁵⁸ Takeuchi Minoru, ed., *Mao Zedong ji VI* (Collected writings of Mao Zedong) (Tokyo: Hokubosha, 1970–2), 294; Takeuchi Minoru, ed., *Mao Zedong ji bujuan V* (Supplements to collected writings of Mao Zedong) (Tokyo: Sososha, 1983–6), 216; Nick Knight, ed., *Mao Zedong on Dialectical Materialism: Writings on Philosophy, 1937* (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1990), 116–7.

⁵⁹ Takeuchi, ed., *Mao Zedong ji bujuan V*, 257–8; Knight, ed., *Mao Zedong on Dialectical Materialism*, 177. Emphasis added.

⁶⁰ Takeuchi, ed., *Mao Zedong ji bujuan V*, 264; Knight, ed., *Mao Zedong on Dialectical Materialism*, 185–6. Emphasis added.

⁶¹ See, for example, Stuart R. Schram, *The Thought of Mao Tse-tung* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 5, 17, 54–5, 67, 96, 113, 168, and 200; Maurice Meisner, *Marxism, Maoism and Utopianism* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1982); Maurice Meisner, *Mao's China and after: A History of the People's Republic* (New York: The Free Press, 1977, 1986); Benjamin I. Schwartz, *Chinese Communism and the Rise of Mao* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1951); and Lucien W. Pye, *Mao Tse-tung: The Man in the Leader* (New York: Basic Books, 1976), 117. Pye asserts that Mao “grew up to turn Marxism on its head by glorifying voluntarism and human willpower in the historical process.”

⁶² *Mao Zedong zhexue pizhuji* (Philosophical annotations of Mao Zedong) (Beijing: Zhongyang wenxian chubanshe, 1988), 67.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 87–90.

⁶⁴ See Knight, *Li Da and Marxist Philosophy in China*, chapter 6.

⁶⁵ Mao claimed to have read Li's *Jingjixue dagang* (Elements of economics, 1935) “three and a half times.” See Li Da, *Jingjixue dagang*, 1. It is possible that Mao had read Li Da's *Elements of Sociology* (1935/1937), at the time he wrote “On Contradiction,” but he definitely had read it by February 1938. See Knight, *Li Da and Marxist Philosophy in China*, chapter 6. The second half of Li's *Elements of Sociology* discusses the materialist conception of history, the economic structure of society, the political structure of society, and social consciousness. For the 1937 edition of *Elements of Sociology* see *Li Da wenji* Volume 2.

⁶⁶ It may well be that the New Philosophy's perspective on the historical role of the superstructure and consciousness reinforced the perspective that Mao had absorbed from Li Da, and perhaps from Gorter. In this regard, it is not entirely coincidental that one of the two major Chinese theorists of the New Philosophy was Li Da (the other was Ai Siqi). On the influence of the New Philosophy on Mao, see Nick Knight, “The Laws of Dialectical Materialism in Mao Zedong's Thought: The Question of ‘Orthodoxy,’” in *Critical*

Perspectives on Mao Zedong's Thought, ed. Arif Dirlik, Paul Healy, and Nick Knight (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1997), 84–116; Nick Knight, "Soviet Philosophy and Mao Zedong's 'Sinification of Marxism,'" *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 20, no. 1 (1990): 89–109; and Knight, ed., *Mao Zedong on Dialectical Materialism*, Introduction.

⁶⁷ See note 61, and Luk, *The Origins of Chinese Bolshevism*.

⁶⁸ On the orthodoxy of Kautsky's Marxism and his struggle with "revisionism," see Gary P. Steenson, *Karl Kautsky, 1854–1938: Marxism in the Classical Years* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1978, 1991), chapter 4; and Leszek Kolakowski, *Main Currents of Marxism: Its Rise, Growth, and Dissolution—Volume II, The Golden Age* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), chapter 2.

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