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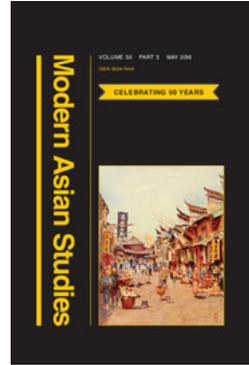
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# *Feng Youlan and Dialectical/Historical Materialism, 1930s–1950s\**

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## **Abstract**

This article explores the acceptance of Marxism by a non-Marxist Chinese philosopher, Feng Youlan, before and after 1949. Previous studies have largely focused on establishment intellectuals in the study of Marxism and intellectuals in China, and this article seeks to fill the lacuna on the intellectual potential Marxism offered to non-Communist intellectuals in China. This article finds that for Feng Youlan, a non-Marxist Chinese intellectual, Marxism was able to provide meaningful venues for his attempt to modernize Chinese knowledge and transform Chinese culture. A Marxist emphasis on universal rules governing all human societies on the same stage of development, Marxist presentist approaches to history, and most of all, a Marxist emphasis on praxis, aided Chinese intellectuals like Feng in constructing new approaches to learning the Chinese past. The Marxist emphasis on praxis helped deepen the discussion of experience, a concept central to a reconstruction of Confucian learning in modern China, after the Communist takeover of China in 1949. Eventually the state monopoly of the definition of Marxist praxis stifled the spontaneous search for a new understanding of experience in Communist China. Nonetheless, Marxism had a transformative and lasting impact on modern Chinese scholarship, as seen from the example of Feng Youlan.

## **Introduction**

Marxist dialectical and historical materialism had a tremendous impact on both Chinese Communists and many non-Communists,

\* I want to thank Arif Dirlik and Heidi Ross for suggestions for improvement on earlier versions of this article, and the two anonymous reviewers for their very constructive advice on revision. This article was first presented at a colloquium at Indiana University East Asian Studies Center in November 2011. I thank the participants at the colloquium for their comments. The research and writing of this article was funded by a New Frontiers research fellowship from Indiana University.

like Feng Youlan (1895–1990). An examination of how Marxist dialectical and historical materialism influenced the writings of Feng, professor of Chinese philosophy at Tsinghua University (1928–1952) and Peking University (1952–1990), in various ways before and after 1949 is very useful in understanding the extent of Marxist dialectical and historical materialist influence in China before and after the Communist takeover, which helps to better understand how Marxism was accepted in general and how the Chinese Communist regime established their legitimacy in China. Previous studies have largely focused on establishment intellectuals,<sup>1</sup> and this article seeks to fill the lacuna on the intellectual potential Marxism offered to the non-Communist intellectuals in China. To a great extent, to Feng as well as many other Chinese intellectuals, Marxism provided intellectual tools that were not accessible to them earlier and enabled them to conceptualize and articulate Chinese modernization in a way that they would never have been able to otherwise. Marxism provided a platform of universal comparison that had not been available before, and a focus on the present that enabled one to build a freer connection with the past and more freely select elements of the past to service the present. On the other hand, Marxist emphasis on praxis—practices in the here and now dealing with problems at hand—proved to be both a liberating force giving Chinese intellectuals the freedom to create new criteria, standards, and goals in scholarship, and a restraining force when, under Communism, these intellectuals were required to focus only on the present as defined by the Communist party, which became the exclusive criterion of scholarship from the 1950s onwards.

### **Dialectical and historical materialism as a bridge between cultural specificity and universalism**

A central appeal of dialectical materialism was how it enabled Feng to get beyond the confines of a comparison between mental attitudes or

<sup>1</sup> For instance, Merle Goldman, Timothy Cheek, and Carol Lee Hamrin (1987), *China's Intellectuals and the State: In Search of a New Relationship* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press); Merle Goldman (1981), *China's Intellectuals: Advise and Dissent* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press); Joshua Fogel (1987), *Ai Su-ch'i's Contribution to the Development of Chinese Marxism* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press); Timothy Cheek (1997), *Propaganda and Culture in Mao's China: Deng Tuo and the Intelligentsia* (Oxford: Clarendon Press); Vera Schwarcz (1992), *The Time for Telling Truth Is Running Out: Conversations with Zhang Shenfu* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press); and Mary Mazur (2009), *Wu Han, Historian, Son of China's Times* (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books).

outlooks on life. Feng entered Peking University as a philosophy major in 1915, graduated in 1918, went to study in the United States in 1919, and received a PhD in philosophy under John Dewey at Columbia University in 1923. Before Feng's contact with Marxism to find a universal approach to understanding cultures through focusing on human intentions. Feng was initially attracted to the writings of Henri Bergson, for whom humans evolved in the development of their mind energy.<sup>2</sup> Feng deliberately dodged the debate heating up in China concerning China's deficiency in science and technology. He shrewdly detected that the focus of the comparison was not an understanding of the differences between Chinese and Western cultures, but the superiority of one over the other. It was this psychological disposition that influenced Chinese comparisons of the Chinese and the Western. In this approach Feng came under the influence of William James (1842–1910), who argued that reality was what a person acknowledges as the result of his/her psychological disposition at the time. In other words, the aspect of reality that one perceives is directly pertinent to one's emotional and active life.<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, what one attends to, according to James, under certain limits is controlled by one's will, and one's conscious will determines at least in part the internal nature of one's worlds through one's focus and attention and the 'indexical perspectives of here and there, now and then, myself and others'.<sup>4</sup> Thus, James argued that reality was the aspect of reality that one wanted to see.

This 'will to believe' was applied by Feng in his approaches to Chinese and Western cultures to first reduce the differences between them to a matter of subjective opinions and then use this relativism of truth—truth as subject to its beholder—to better facilitate the communication between Chinese and Western cultures. If Chinese culture was proven superior, Feng wrote in an article for the Chinese journal *Xueyi* (*The art of study*) in New York City in 1922, the Chinese would have the confidence to move on and learn new things. But if Chinese culture was proven inferior to Western culture, the Chinese

<sup>2</sup> Feng Youlan (1921), Bogenen de zhexuefangfa (Bergson's philosophical methods), *Xinchao*, 3(1). Reprinted in Feng Youlan (1992), *Sansongtang quanji* (*The complete works of the master of the Three Pine House*), v.11 (Kaifeng: Henan remin chubanshe), pp. 20–26.

<sup>3</sup> William James (1981), *Principles of Psychology*, vols. 1 & II (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press), p. 924. Quoted in Richard Gale (1991), Pragmatism versus mysticism, the divided life of William James, *Philosophical Perspectives*, 5: p. 245.

<sup>4</sup> Gale, Pragmatism versus mysticism, p. 245.

would be intimidated by Western culture and cling defensively to Chinese culture. So, in order to actually change things for the better, Feng said, why not adopt William James's 'will to believe'—simply to believe that Chinese culture was on a par with Western culture, if not superior to it—if that was the only thing that could boost Chinese self-confidence, since there was no theoretical evidence to the contrary.<sup>5</sup>

Because of his cultural relativism from early on, Feng never joined his fellow compatriots who demarcated Chinese and Western cultures into science on the one hand and metaphysics or cultivation on the other. He never participated in the science–metaphysics debate.<sup>6</sup> That said, nor did he ever try to adopt an evolutionary and historical approach to analysing Chinese history, because even though that would put China on the same path of cultural development as the West, it would place China on a lower level of evolution than Western countries.

Feng most often opted for a Chinese–Western comparison of mental attitudes, reflected in views towards nature, society, and other issues in life. Reducing Chinese and Western cultural differences to a matter of mental attitudes allowed for the idea of option: the differences were a matter of individual choices rather than external, unbridgeable cultural chasms. Thus, in several writings Feng adopted William James's classification of philosophers in history into tender-minded—those who tended to be idealistic, intellectualistic, and rational—and the tough-minded—those who tended to be empirical, sensationalistic, and sceptical.<sup>7</sup> James's division of philosophers into tender-minded and tough-minded was influenced by his studies of psychology to begin with, and the classification itself implied a subjective need to believe in higher principles or transcendental truths by those classified as tender-minded philosophers. The subjective will continued to be an important denominator in Feng's study of beliefs and cultures. Feng praised Henri Bergson's championship of human evolution in their mind energy and intuition, arguing that through pure intellectual reasoning and logic following Plato

<sup>5</sup> Feng Youlan (1922), *Lunbijiaodongxi* (On comparing China and the West), in Feng, *Sansongtang quanji*, v.11, pp. 54–59.

<sup>6</sup> Such demarcation did appear from time to time in his later writings in the 1930s, especially in his emphasis on a level of mysticism in Chinese thinking of the universe versus a more logical approach to the universe by the West, but consistently throughout his life, Feng sought to compare Chinese and Western cultures more along similar lines, for example metaphysical lines, than polar opposite ones.

<sup>7</sup> Feng, *Bogesen de zhexuefangfa*, pp. 8–9.

and Zeno there would never be real progress in human reasoning, because pure logic would dissect the world into still frames instead of capturing the dynamics of change. Even scientific inventions, Feng argued, came from intuition rather than logic.<sup>8</sup> It was obvious that Feng's subordination of science and logic to intuition was due to the underdevelopment of both of the former in China. In an article published in English in 1922, titled 'Why China Has No Science', Feng argued that China did not have science not because it was not capable, but because the Chinese were not interested in it. The Western distinction between humans and nature, and Christianity's emphasis on human insufficiency, which produced the need for self-fulfillment through external endeavours, led Europeans to the knowledge and conquest of nature, but these were absent from Chinese culture. From the quest for knowledge came the Western discovery and development of science. However, in China people endeavoured for thousands of years to achieve greater happiness of the mind and harmony with nature, meaning there was no motivation to seek external knowledge, such as science. This was Feng's defence of Chinese culture: that it was not inferior, just different, a different direction of development.<sup>9</sup>

Feng's early intellectual trajectory was seeking to relativize the cultural differences between China and the West. One early contemporary Chinese influence on Feng was a young lecturer of philosophy at Peking University, Liang Shuming. Liang differed greatly from Feng in his intellectual approaches, especially in his separation of Chinese, Western, and Indian civilizations into three separate and self-contained groups. Significantly, though, Liang's index of difference of these three civilizations was their attitudes towards nature, rendering the cultural differences those of choice rather than externally imposed barriers of communication. Liang was able to situate the three on an even playing field instead of placing Western civilizations a few pegs higher than Chinese or Indian ones. Liang was a Buddhist believer turned Confucian and also heavily influenced by Bergson's idea of the power of intuition or mind energy. Liang gave his famous lectures on the East and West and their cultures (Chinese, Indian, and Western) in 1920,<sup>10</sup> which Feng started reading

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., pp. 8–19.

<sup>9</sup> Feng Youlan (Yu-lan Fung) (1922), Why China has no science: an interpretation of the history and consequences of Chinese philosophy, *International Journal of Ethics*, 32(3): pp. 237–263.

<sup>10</sup> For an in-depth discussion of Liang, see Guy Alitto (1986), *The Last Confucian: Liang Shuming and the Chinese Dilemma of Modernity* (Berkeley, California: University

in December 1920 from transcripts published in *The Peking University Daily* posted to him from China. Liang's concern was not whether to introduce Western learning or not, as he was consistent in his belief in introducing Western science and democracy,<sup>11</sup> but to justify the place of Confucian learning in the future of modern Chinese culture. His way of introducing Western learning and preserving Chinese learning—which to him were diametrically different—was to bifurcate them and put them into different time frames. Instead of relegating Chinese and Indian or Eastern learnings to the historical past, as many Chinese scholars had done, he situated them in the future, as something to be preserved and adopted in due time by the whole world.<sup>12</sup> Liang provided for Feng a role model to discuss Chinese and Western cultures on an even plane, with Chinese culture even slightly more elevated than Western culture. Feng resonated with Liang especially because Liang's focus on intentions and intuition in his description of Chinese culture mirrored what Feng felt strongly about China. For Liang, Westerners were too aggressive and utilitarian, while Indians were overly withdrawn into their inner world. They each represented the early and final stages in human civilization while the latter waxed and waned. China represented world civilization at its prime, hence the perfect balance and harmony of intentions and emotions among the Chinese. Intentions were also Feng's criteria to compare and contrast world civilizations. The difference was that while Liang provided a platform for an equitable but compartmentalized treatment of Chinese and Western cultures, Feng extended that equity through situating Chinese and Western cultures on the same plane, so that the different intentions and emotions did not stand for different stages of civilizational developments, but simply manifestations of specific cultures. Feng even allowed Chinese thinkers to be put in the same category as some Western philosophers based on their outlook on life.

In his PhD thesis on a comparative study of different attitudes towards life among ancient and modern philosophers around the world, Feng tried to create a universal framework for the

of California Press). For a specific discussion of Liang's religious views, see Thierry Meynard (2010), *The Religious Philosophy of Liang Shuming: The Hidden Buddhist* (Leiden: Brill).

<sup>11</sup> Chen Lai (2006), Liang Shuming zaoqi de dongxi wenhuaguan (Liang Shuming's early views on East West cultures), in Chen Lai, *Chuantong yu xiandai renwenzhuyi de shiye* (*Tradition and present: a humanist's view*) (Beijing: Peking University Press), pp. 102–103.

<sup>12</sup> Chen, Liang Shuming zaoqi de dongxi wenhuaguan, pp. 110–115.

study of philosophies across different cultures. Feng divided these philosophers—ranging from the Daoists, Plato, Schopenhauer, Yang Zhu, Decartes, Bacon, and Fichte, to Confucius, neo-Confucians (900s–1600s), Aristotle, Hegel, and twentieth-century Chinese and Western thinkers—into three groups: those that considered the present relationship between humans and nature to be perfect, those that believed human civilization was taking man further and further away from happiness, and those who believed that humans needed to further progress in order to reach a more perfect state of being. Feng assigned the Confucians, neo-Confucians, and Aristotle to the first group, the Chinese Daoists, Plato, Schopenhauer, and the Buddhists, to the second group, and modern Western philosophers such as Bacon and Descartes to the last group.<sup>13</sup> And by discussing all cultures along the same categories, he tried to show that all peoples were the same in their thinking.<sup>14</sup> Feng continued the emphasis on subjective intentions and William James's tender-minded versus tough-minded dichotomy of philosophers and succeeded in drawing parallels between Chinese and Western philosophers where their attitudes towards humans and nature were similar.

In the Chinese translation of his PhD thesis, 'A Comparative Study of Life Ideals', published in China in 1925, Feng added two chapters in response to John Dewey's questions on his dissertation: whether these schools of thought could develop from one to another, or whether they were just parallel to one another. Feng said he had not planned to answer that question in his thesis; all he wanted to do then was to sort out the philosophies in the world and classify them according to certain rules, and to create a universal framework for all philosophers in the world.<sup>15</sup> The two added chapters in the Chinese translation of his thesis, titled 'A Philosophy of Life', were not a direct answer to Dewey's questions, but they went beyond a parallel listing of philosophies in the world and specified Feng's preference.<sup>16</sup> In these two chapters

<sup>13</sup> Feng Youlan (1926), *Rensheng zhexue* (人生哲学) (*Philosophy of life*), in Feng Youlan, *Sansongtang quanji*, v.1: (Kaifeng: Henan renmin, 1985), pp. 346–547. This is the Chinese translation of his PhD thesis (Columbia University, 1923), with some expansion but basically in keeping with his main ideas in his thesis from chapters 1 to 11. Chapters 12 and 13 were new chapters added in the Chinese translation.

<sup>14</sup> Feng Youlan (1959), *Sishinian de huigu* (四十年的回顾) (*Reflection on the past forty years*) (Beijing: Kexue chubanshe), pp. 6–10.

<sup>15</sup> Feng Youlan (1981), *Sansongtang zixu* (三松堂自序) (*Self-preface by the master of the House of Three Pines*), in Feng, *Sansongtang quanji*, v.1, pp. 190–196.

<sup>16</sup> Feng, *Sansongtang zixu*, p. 196.

Feng tried to achieve a compromise between belief and rationality, the larger universe and individual human lives, and the universality of rules and the relativism of truth.<sup>17</sup> It is here that one sees the influence of pragmatism and new realism, two schools of thinking that influenced Feng's PhD advisers.<sup>18</sup> Feng pointed out the importance of objective criteria as a corrective to the limitations of various schools of thought. On the other hand, criteria were not absolute and one needed to keep one's mind open and use rationality and reasoning to get to know more and more about the world.<sup>19</sup> This certainly was an attempt to go beyond intentions in the analysis of philosophies around the world, but it remained vague as to how to go about identifying objective criteria and how to temper criteria with experience.

Thus by 1926, even though Feng was trying to establish a more universal approach to philosophy, it remained vague at best. On the other hand, the approach to philosophy through intentions was not sufficient to explain why certain types of outlooks on life were more prevalent in certain countries than others. For instance, Feng said, in China there was a greater emphasis on Daoism, which negated the importance of this world, compared with the West, where there was more emphasis on humanism and working on a better world.<sup>20</sup> Intentions alone would not explain such trends, if they were true.

In the late 1920s to early 1930s, Chinese philosophers attempted a more universal approach to philosophy. Influenced by the trend in Western philosophical development that emphasized logic in lieu of metaphysics, and seeking to build a universal core from all philosophies, logic became a natural choice for many Chinese philosophers in their attempt to link Chinese and Western thought. The intellectual influence of logic at the department of National

<sup>17</sup> Feng, *Rensheng zhexue*, chaps 12–13, in Feng, *Sansongtang quanji*, v.1, pp. 508–547.

<sup>18</sup> For Feng's influence from New Realism, see Xiaoqing Diana Lin (2014), Creating modern Chinese metaphysics: Feng Youlan and New Realism, *Modern China*, 40(1): pp. 40–73.

<sup>19</sup> Feng, *Rensheng zhexue*, chaps 12–13.

<sup>20</sup> Feng, *Sansongtang zixu*, p. 194. When Feng made this comment in his memoir written in 1986, he seemed to quite forget that he included Plato and most pre-modern European thinkers in the group of those who held a negative attitude on life, while Confucians in China were included in his group of those who had a positive attitude towards this world. The comment quoted here was probably directed towards modern European thinking versus Chinese thinking on the eve of the Opium War. But even so it would be a gross generalization, and a very biased one at that.

Tsinghua University, where Feng taught from 1928 to 1952,<sup>21</sup> and the spread of logical analysis in Chinese intellectual circles<sup>22</sup> also prompted Feng to discover developments in logic in Chinese philosophy. In his two-volume *History of Chinese Philosophy* (1931, 1934; hereafter *History*), Feng wrote a largely teleological history of Chinese philosophy—of how Chinese philosophy failed to develop beyond an ethical quest for the meaning of life and grasp logical reasoning. The first volume of his history dealt with the development of various schools of philosophy in early Chinese history, and the second volume largely focused on the development of Confucian learning into orthodoxy. Despite the fact that during the Song Dynasty (960–1276) Confucian learning developed a metaphysical level of reasoning, because its champions, like Zhu Xi (1130–1200), ultimately wanted philosophy to serve the purpose of providing meaning for life, ethical elements always dominated Chinese metaphysical quests, and real philosophical or logical reasoning failed to develop in Chinese philosophy.<sup>23</sup>

China's historical failure to develop logical analysis led Feng to search for the bits and pieces of logical or metaphysical writings in Chinese history that had the potential to be developed into more fully fledged logical analysis. For instance, in the second volume of *History*, in Chapter Five on the development of neo-Daoism, Feng gave examples of Wang Bi (Wang Pi, 王弼; 226–249 AD), or Guo Xiang (Kuo Hsian, 郭象; 252–312 AD), Chinese philosophers from the Three Kingdoms Era to the Western Jin Dynasty, when Daoism and Buddhism both influenced Confucian scholars to a higher level of metaphysical reasoning.<sup>24</sup> In the English edition of his *History*, which Feng co-translated with Derk Bodde of the University of Pennsylvania when Feng went to the university as a visiting scholar in 1947, Feng rewrote the second and third sections in Chapter Five, Volume Two, to add greater length to Chinese metaphysics, especially that of Wang Bi, a neo-Daoist often known as one of the most metaphysical

<sup>21</sup> See Xiaoqing Diana Lin (2012), *Developing the Academic Discipline of Chinese Philosophy: The Departments of Philosophy at Peking, Tsinghua, and Yenching Universities (1910s–1930s)*, in John Makeham (ed.), *Learning to Emulate the Wise: The Genesis of Chinese Philosophy as an Academic Discipline in Early Twentieth Century China* (Hong Kong: Chinese University of Hong Kong Press), pp. 131–165.

<sup>22</sup> See Joachim Kurtz (2011), *The Discovery of Chinese Logic* (Leiden and Boston: Brill).

<sup>23</sup> Feng Youlan (1934), *Zhongguo zhexueshi (History of Chinese Philosophy)*, v.2, in Feng Youlan, *Sansongtang quanji*, v.3 (Zhengzhou: Henan renminchubanshe, 1989).

<sup>24</sup> Feng Youlan (1931), *Zhongguo zhexueshi*, v.1, in Feng Youlan, *Sansongtang quanji*, v.2 (Zhengzhou: Henan renminchubanshe, 1988), pp. 82–107.

thinkers in Chinese history. In one of the rewritten sections on Wang Bi, titled 'Name Principles' (名理), Feng was especially interested in delineating Wang's concepts of 'being' (*you*, 有) and 'non-being' (*wu*, 无), by which Wang did not mean existence and non-existence, but rather limited existence (being) and infinite existence (non-being). Because infinite existence could not be experienced as such, it was metaphysical and above the phenomenal world.<sup>25</sup> Another example of distinguishing names and analysing principles was Chapter Nine of Volume One, where the theories of the school of names or dialecticians were discussed, such as Kung-sun Lung's 'a white horse is not a horse' (*baima feima*, 白马非马), which Feng used to illustrate the extent of a logical analysis of principles through a differentiation of terms without regard for actual facts, so that a white horse, logically speaking, did not fall into the category of a horse.<sup>26</sup>

These logical/metaphysical analyses in Feng's *History* were examples of how China did develop some logical or metaphysical traditions in history, but such discussions, as Feng pointed out, were subsumed or completely overshadowed by philosophical discussions of the meaning of life, which led Chinese philosophy to an ethical rather than a logical/metaphysical direction. While earnestly trying to build more logic into a new Chinese philosophy, Feng was also faced with the dilemma of the lack of universal logical or metaphysical categories that could on the one hand enable a Chinese philosophy along logical/metaphysical lines and on the other hand not completely lose sight of traditional Chinese philosophy. His previous tools, the discussion of human intentions, were not sufficient in building such a universal framework. Marxism enlightened Feng to the realization that countries on the same stages of social development would share many similar elements in their cultures.<sup>27</sup> This would be according to the Marxist materialist argument that superstructures (cultures, ideas) were determined by the level of economic development in a given society.

Feng expressed only a cursive interest in Marxism by the late 1920s. By 1924, Feng insisted that human thinking was an autonomous force separate from society. Commenting on Marxist materialism,

<sup>25</sup> Feng Youlan (Fung Yu-lan) and Derk Bodde (1952), *History of Chinese Philosophy*, v.2 (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press 1983), pp. 175–189.

<sup>26</sup> Feng, *Zhongguo zhhexueshi*, v.1, pp. 183–210.

<sup>27</sup> Feng Youlan (1950), Xinlixue de ziwojiantao, (A self-criticism of my *New Philosophy of Principles*), *Remin ribao* (*People's Daily*), 11 October.

Feng said despite the popularity of Marxist materialism in China, human desires, ideas, and the pursuit of happiness must precede economic phenomena and activities, because without human beings the universe would very much remain in a primordial form without economic activities.<sup>28</sup> By the late 1930s, the Marxist framework of universal truth and individual voluntarism apparently had a significant impact on Feng and steered him towards searching for universal truth not in Western-defined logic, but in logical/metaphysical meaning in traditional Chinese concepts. The next section examines how Feng's intellectual transition came about.

### Marxism and a universal framework of philosophy

The late 1920s was a time when many Chinese intellectuals actively discussed Marxism in an attempt to apply it to an understanding of contemporary Chinese society. A heated debate over how to define Chinese society largely came as a result of the split between the Chinese Nationalists and Communists in 1927. Both the Communists and left-wing Nationalists unhappy with Chiang Kai-shek's white terror tried to find a solution to the future of Marxism in China through identifying which social stage China was on at the time. For left-wing Chinese Nationalists like Tao Xisheng (Hsi-sheng), China was dominated by a feudal social and economic system that 'ranged from military-bureaucratic localism to patriarchal family organization and to the dominance of Confucian thought, itself a product of the feudal period'. Native merchants in this society had to subsist in a symbiotic relationship with the landlords and bureaucrats, who in turn served the imperialists.<sup>29</sup> For the Communists, they came to a very similar conclusion as the left-wing Nationalists in terms of their definition of China's social stage of development, but they held a very different opinion towards the landlords, who, instead of being victims of imperialism, actively cooperated with the imperialists and exploited the Chinese.<sup>30</sup> The ultimate goal of such social analysis was to see what approach the left-wing should take towards

<sup>28</sup> Feng Youlan (1924), *Yizhong renshengguan* (一种人生观) (*A view on life*), in Feng, *Sansongtang quanji*, v.1, p. 576.

<sup>29</sup> Arif Dirlik (1978), *Revolution and History: The Origins of Marxist Historiography in China, 1919–1937* (Berkeley: University of California Press), pp. 74–75.

<sup>30</sup> Dirlik, *Revolution and History*, p. 83.

Chinese society. Both the Nationalist and Communist approaches to Chinese society and imperialism ruled out the possibility of a democratic revolution in China led by the capitalists/bourgeoisie. For the Nationalists, the capitalists were forever suppressed by the alliance of the political bureaucrats and the imperialists, and for the Chinese Communists, the rural landlords, allied with the imperialists, would maintain a predominant hold on Chinese society, resulting in a strengthened semi-feudal, semi-colonial society. To the Communists, this was a call for action of the proletariat-led revolution and justification for skipping the historical stage of capitalist democracy and moving directly into socialism. Therefore, the application of the term imperialism implied that capitalism would not provide a viable political future for China.

The social history debate was joined by many Chinese scholars, and the discussion was deep and nuanced. One important outcome of the debate was that it allowed Chinese scholars to build new conceptual frameworks to examine Chinese society and discuss which form Chinese politics should take. Such frameworks and approaches were not based on history or tradition, or a division of Chinese versus foreign cultures, but were very much based on what was relevant for guiding the immediate present. It was this insistence on present action that allowed Chinese Marxists who employed historical materialism to transcend the tradition and the present, and China and the West, for a more universal discussion of politics and society. To quote Arif Dirlik:

The insistence on the present as a new beginning implies more than a simple recognition that the present, defined by a historically unprecedented contradiction, contains the past only as a dialectical moment. It signifies not simply a denial of the hegemony of the past over the present, but a denial of the culturalist hegemony of the West which, in portraying the native present as a prisoner of the native past, parochializes not simply the native culture of the past but its very present.<sup>31</sup>

Feng Youlan was keenly aware of this transformation in historical approaches. As quoted by Dirlik, in 1935 Feng summarized the process of history writing in three stages, the first of which was *xingu* (信古, belief in antiquity), referring to those who took ancient traditions to be historical truth; it typified the attitude of traditionalists, whether of the 'Old Text' or the 'New Text' variety, who relied on the

<sup>31</sup> Arif Dirlik (1987), Culturalism as hegemonic ideology and liberating practice, *Cultural Critique*, 6: pp. 41–42.

authority of ancients in their historical interpretations. The second was *yigu* (疑古, doubting antiquity), denoting those who disbelieved everything contained in the old records; this attitude plainly characterized post-May-Fourth historians. Using Hegelian categories, Feng observed that the latter trend stood as an antithesis to the former. Their synthesis had produced the latest trend that dominated the historical outlook of the 1930s, ‘explanation of antiquity’ (*shigu*, 释古). The explanation of antiquity neither believed nor disbelieved ancient traditions but held that it was possible ‘to catch glimpses of parts of the reality of ancient society’ through those traditions.<sup>32</sup>

It was against this background that materialism began to influence Feng’s thinking in various ways. Materialism, however, did not impart to Feng a materialist outlook on life. Although Feng started to give a materialist explanation of history in various places, it was never consistent. Marxist materialism had its greatest impact on Feng where it freed him from seeking universality through human intentions to avoid confronting China’s lack of scientific reasoning or comparable material development to the West. Marxism allowed Feng equanimity in a direct comparison between Chinese and Western cultures because, according to Marxism, countries on the same stages of social development would share many similar elements in their cultures. This would be according to the Marxist materialist argument that superstructures (cultures, ideas) were determined by the level of economic development in a given society. As Feng mentioned in a later work, *Xinlixue* (*New Philosophy of Principle*), despite their differences, they were all societies that followed universal norms. Feng used a traditional Chinese saying *tianbubian, daoyibubian* (天不变, 道亦不变; heaven stays constant, so does the Way), to explain how such universal rules transcended space and time.<sup>33</sup> Feng sought to demonstrate in his subsequent work that universal norms guided both Chinese and Western cultural and social developments.

Before 1933, Feng approached Marxist materialism in a very eclectic fashion in his two-volume *History*, where he was able to employ social analyses and make the generalization that periods of rapid transformation of Chinese thinking were due to social changes. One such period was during China’s transition from the Spring-Autumn era

<sup>32</sup> Dirlik, *Revolution and History*, pp. 256–268.

<sup>33</sup> Feng Youlan (1938), *Xinlixue* (*New philosophy of principle*), in Feng Youlan, *Sansongtang quanji*, v.4, Tu Youguang (ed.) (Zhengzhou: Henan renmin, 1986), p. 116.

to the Qin and Han Dynasties, when social, economic, and political systems were undergoing rapid transformations; another period of time was during China's interactions with the Western countries in the nineteenth century and beyond, again accompanied by rapid social, economic, and political changes in China.<sup>34</sup> Marxism enlightened Feng to the realization that countries on the same stages of social development would share many similar elements in their cultures.<sup>35</sup>

Feng Youlan had an epiphany while sojourning in England and travelling in Europe during his sabbatical after five years of service at Tsinghua University from September 1933 to September 1934. Feng stayed in the United Kingdom from September 1933 to May 1934, reading at the British Museum and giving lectures at 17 universities including London, Cambridge, Oxford, Liverpool, Manchester, Leeds, Birmingham, Glasgow, and Edinburgh in March and April of 1934. Feng was most impressed by the layers of tradition from different eras in English society, from form of address (for example, the use of 'Esquire' in writing), to the varied styles of architecture and instructional format of British universities, from Hadrian's Wall in England, to the royal family and their public appearances. If the juxtaposition of the past and the present in England was an enlightening experience for him, his later travel in Europe only confirmed ideas already in formation; travelling from one European country to another, going through customs, changing currency, adapting to a new language as he passed the border of one country into another evoked for Feng a comparison between Europe and China during the Warring State era. Feng wondered:

If we look for a parallel in Chinese history, we can say that Europe is a land partitioned into a number of local states. Going to Europe was like going back in time to China's Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods (770–221 BC). Imagine taking a train trip then . . . In less than one day you pass through eight 'states'. From this you can see what a remarkable thing the unification of China was. China unified itself two thousand years earlier than Europe. This is a unique feature of China's history, both a strong point and a drawback. It seems to me that this is one reason feudalism persisted for so long in China. In a huge country like China, economic development

<sup>34</sup> Feng, *Zhongguo zhhexueshi*, v.1, pp. 20, 23–33. Feng, *Sishinian de huigu*, p. 23; Chen Feng (2003), *Ershi shiji sanshi niandai feng youlan sixiangde weiwushi quxiang* (Feng Youlan's materialistic approaches and tendencies in the 1930s), *Shixue yuekan*, 1: 81–86.

<sup>35</sup> Feng Youlan (1950), *Xinlixue de ziwojiantao* (A self-criticism of my *New philosophy of principles*), *Remin ribao*, 11 October.

is bound to be unequal in different regions. But since it is a unified country, the economically backward areas often hold back the more developed areas.<sup>36</sup>

This comparison between China and Europe, history and present, enlightened Feng to the realization that cross-cultural and trans-historical comparisons were possible. China's unification preceded that of Europe by over 2,000 years. It was both an advantage and a disadvantage. A large country like China had great regional disparities, and the more backward regions would drag down the more advanced ones such as Canton and Fujian. If left alone, the latter could have developed capitalism early on, but the unified, feudal Chinese government blocked that development. Feng had been reading the works of Marx and Engels while at the British Museum; here Feng was able to explain the dialectical relationship between centralized and decentralized rule in Chinese history. Hence, Feng concluded that the centralized Chinese government in history served as a feudal superstructure based on the feudal economy of inland China and suppressed attempts to reform the superstructures in economically developed provinces like Guangdong and Fujian. Although China's unification helped with early Chinese development, it delayed China's further advancement in the modern era.<sup>37</sup>

Marxism allowed Feng to make comparisons and contrasts between China and the West, the past and the present, by going beyond the apparent differences and applying uniform principles such as forces of production and superstructure. Marxism examined history horizontally, dividing countries into different types and allowing a comparison between the specific types or characteristics of a society with more general and universal social characteristics.<sup>38</sup> This was in contrast to social Darwinism, which inspired a comparison between China and Western countries by situating China and the West at different points on the same evolutionary path. Even though Darwin never set out to prove that evolution would lead to progress, the connection between Westernization and progress was the chief motivation for Chinese reformers and revolutionaries in their transformation of China based on the introduction of many

<sup>36</sup> Feng Youlan (2000), *The Hall of Three Pines: An Account of My Life*, Denis Mair (trans.) (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press), pp. 94–95.

<sup>37</sup> Feng, *Sansongtang zixu*, pp. 76–85.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 240–241.

Western practices, from politics to culture.<sup>39</sup> The drawback of the social Darwinist approach to fit China into the global framework was that China would appear to be lagging behind the Western countries in stages of social development for a very long time. Social Darwinism inspired a more defensive response from Feng, who had earlier reduced differences between countries to the will of individuals and subjective intentions. Thus, in China, because people endeavoured to achieve greater mental happiness and harmony with nature, there was no motivation to seek external knowledge such as science.<sup>40</sup> Marxist dialectical materialism, on the other hand, was powerful in reducing all social activities into some universal and fundamental forces at work.

Even though Feng came into contact with Marxism in the late 1920s through the publications of the heated history debates in China, and Marxism did lead him to more consciously situating ideas in their social context, which was reflected in a series of articles he published and in *History*, his European trip in 1933 to 1934 was when he self-consciously sought more universal comparisons between Chinese and Western societies. Even though he was temporarily thwarted in his attempts to preach historical materialism in 1934, Marxist dialectical and historical materialism was incorporated into his intellectual framework.

Feng took a detour to the Soviet Union during the last leg of his European trip before going back to China in September 1934, staying in the Soviet Union for one month and seven days. He went at the invitation of a Soviet Sinologist, Alexei Ivanovich Ivanov (1878–1937), touring five Soviet cities and coming away with a very favourable impression of the Soviet Union, even though neither of the two could have known that Ivanov would be executed as a spy by Stalin just three years later. When Feng went back to China, he tried to apply historical materialism in his discussion of contemporary change. He gave a speech on his impressions of the Soviet Union at Tsinghua University on 23 October 1934, followed by a talk on historical materialism and the evolution of society from capitalist to socialist societies to Peking University students on 25 November 1934. Feng's public discussions

<sup>39</sup> There is extensive literature on the introduction and reception of Darwin in China. For my summary here I have primarily drawn upon James Pusey (1983), *China and Charles Darwin* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press); and James Pusey (2009), Global Darwin: revolutionary road, *Nature*, 462: pp. 162–163.

<sup>40</sup> Feng, Why China has no science.

of socialism led to his arrest by the Nationalist government on 28 November when he was detained overnight and had to write an account of his European trip.<sup>41</sup> This was a turning point for Feng, who never openly preached politics again under the republican government. On the other hand, it did not stop him from using Marxist historical and dialectical materialism as a framework for his later work. In a way, his *New Philosophy of Principle*—the first in his six-volume *Purity Descends, Primacy Ascends: Six Books*, where Feng delineated a heuristic structure for universal philosophy based on Chinese concepts—would not have been possible without Marxist materialism, which was what enabled Feng to integrate China into world societies.

Situating Chinese society in the framework of global societies enabled Feng to relativize ideas and stages of Chinese development. Marxist historical materialism treats each historical stage as transient and as preparation for the next stage, which allowed Feng much more equanimity in delineating the limitations of thought in Chinese history, correlating them to the limitations of social forces of production. Following Marxist social forces' determinism over the superstructure, Feng argued that with the modernization of social forces Chinese thinking would also be updated. Subsequent to *New Philosophy of Principle*, in his *Xinshilun (New Treatise on Practical Affairs, or China's Path to Freedom)*, Feng reminded his audience that at every social stage the particular social practices were associated with the larger, underlying rules. When the social mode of production changed, these social values would change as well. Therefore, Confucian values such as kinship ties and filial piety were explained as suitable to a particular time in social development: the pre-industrial stage. Before the Industrial Revolution, most work was done in the family, be it farming, craftsmanship, or manufacturing. After the Industrial Revolution, production costs had risen so high that it was not enough for a family to invest all it had in a family business. Hence, mass production came into being, alongside the separation of production from the family. In this context, Feng treated Confucian values such as loyalty and filial piety as conditional and specific to the social modes of production of the time. Thus, filial piety would lose its importance in society. Similarly, female subjugation to men would also subside once

<sup>41</sup> Cai Zhongde (ed.) (1993), *Feng Youlan xiansheng nianpu chubian (A preliminary chronology of Mr Feng Youlan)*, in Feng Youlan, *Sansongtang quanji*, v.15 (Zhengzhou: Henan renmin, 2000), pp. 159–163.

mass production started and women moved from household work to social work.<sup>42</sup>

Dismissing the need for an active introduction of new values with a belief in teleological social progress, Feng focused on redefining self-cultivation as rational practices suitable for modern life. In *Xinshixun* (*New Treatise on the Way of Life*) and *Xinyuanren* (*New Treatise on the Nature of Man*), Feng delineated steps in the development of moral experience, a central theme in Chinese history. In *New Treatise on the Way of Life*, Feng used the traditional Chinese terms *zhong* (忠, loyalty/conscientiousness), and *shu* (恕, tolerance/forgiveness/altruism), as criteria for guiding daily practice: do not do to others what one would not do to oneself. Principles like this could be called the golden mean (*zhongyong*, 中庸), to be observed on all occasions dealing with success or failure and a variety of other events, including life and death.<sup>43</sup> *Zhong* and *shu* here became universal rules—to Deng Lianhe, they constituted a combination of traditional ethics (*daode lixing*, 道德理性) and a practical application of rationality (*shijiande lizhi lixing*, 实践的理智理性), in effect opening up an area of rationality that went beyond just ethical terms. This contrasted with Chinese philosophers in history, who were constantly pitting heavenly moral rules against human desires.<sup>44</sup> In *New Treatise on the Nature of Man*,<sup>45</sup> Feng delineated four stages of human experiential development, from a natural state of self-unawareness, to the stage of functional utilitarianism, when one would work hard to achieve the goals one designed for oneself in life, to the stage of ethical behaviour, where one would measure goals in life against ethical conduct, and finally, to when one would reach a stage of total enlightenment (*juejie*, 觉解), where one would self-consciously align with heaven and earth and the universe.<sup>46</sup> As with the concepts of *zhong* and *shu* in *New Treatise*

<sup>42</sup> Feng Youlan (1939), *Xinshilun* (*A new treatise on practical affairs*), chaps 4–6, in Feng, *Sansongtang quanji*, v.4, pp. 252–288.

<sup>43</sup> Feng Youlan (1940), *Xinshixun* (*New treatise on the way of life*), in Feng, *Sansongtang quanji*, v.4, pp. 369–510.

<sup>44</sup> Deng Lianhe (2008), Feng youlan xinshixun zhongguo chuantong daode guanniande lixinghua zhuanhuan (Feng Youlan's rationalization of traditional Chinese concepts through his *New treatise on the way of life*), *Nanjing shehui kexue*, 2: 36–41.

<sup>45</sup> Feng Youlan (1942), *Xinyuanren* (*A new treatise on the nature of man*), in Feng, *Sansongtang quanji*, v.4, pp. 511–697.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

on the *Way of Life*, the four stages of human development in *New Treatise on the Nature of Man* were treated as objective, universal stages of human development, with *juejie*, or total enlightenment, the highest, universal stage of human experience. To Chen Lai, *New Treatise on the Way of Life* and *New Treatise on the Nature of Man* were written for different audiences: the former for the average person, and the latter for the more educated, with loftier goals in life. *New Treatise on the Way of Life* taught people moral/ethical rules that would help them to refrain from unnecessary hazards in life, and thus these rules were ultimately self-serving, whereas *New Treatise on the Nature of Man* guided one to go beyond a mere abidance by moral rules towards a voluntary self-alignment with the universe.<sup>47</sup> Both were aimed at improving the moral experience and self-cultivation but approached the subject through universal principles adapted from traditional Chinese ideas and values guiding such development.

The rational constructs Feng built were not quite logical structures, but they neutralized and depersonalized traditional Chinese ethical values, where *zhong*/loyalty historically referred to a position taken by an individual towards figures of authority, and *shu*/tolerance an attitude towards one's peers or juniors. In Feng's new rational system, *zhong* and *shu* were no longer moral observations to perpetuate a social hierarchy, but rather daily practices towards everyone as new social norms in a modern society. For Feng, Marxism inspired him to develop a more universal—and impersonal—framework out of particular Chinese moral and ethical practices, even though it was a framework that was more metaphysical than logical. At a time when Feng felt China needed new social values and practices to build a modern society beyond individual moral cultivation, Marxism lent the framework of objective and universal principles. When he wrote *New Philosophy of Principle* in 1938, while developing his philosophical framework, especially at the beginning, Feng was concerned with the logical integrity of his philosophy. But the demand for internal consistency of logic did not easily square with the immediate social relevance of theory. Although Feng's ultimate concern was to develop a new philosophy of human experience, there was very little direct discussion of social experience in that book.<sup>48</sup> In Feng's subsequent philosophical works, published from 1939 to the 1940s, as discussed above, there

<sup>47</sup> Chen Lai (2006), Shengxian zhihou de rensheng zhuxun (Pursuit of life's goals after attaining sagehood), *Zhexue yanjiu*, 2: pp. 43–44.

<sup>48</sup> See Lin, Creating modern Chinese metaphysics, pp. 40–73.

was more direct—and extensive—discussion of social rules. Most of these rules were taken from traditional Chinese concepts, and little justification was present for the logical consistencies of these rules. Concern was turned from a greater emphasis on the internal consistency of the logical structure to the universal and reasonable social rules and how they would help improve Chinese society. At least this was Feng's social agenda: to modernize and free Confucian practices from particularistic social relationships and turn them into more uniform and universal rules that would serve a society that called for greater social integration rather than reinforcement of social hierarchy and horizontal development of various social sectors. At the personal level, Feng's idea of sagehood still remained the highest aspiration of an educated Chinese person, as discussed above.

The actual impact of Feng's social agenda, though, was that, against a national trend to oust Confucian values, Feng was updating and adapting the latter to a modern society. This defence and development of Confucian values and experiences, however, did not go without notice or opposition. In fact, Marxist historians attacked Feng for not really being Marxist in his dialectical materialism. Feng's argument that unwelcome Confucian values would naturally recede to the background once new social practices replaced old ones following economic development invited much criticism from many circles, including Hu Sheng, a Chinese Marxist critic. Hu criticized Feng for believing in the omnipotent power of technology to solve all social problems. The transformation of social relationships, for example through the May Fourth Movement, could not be accomplished by a technological transformation of society, Hu argued, and ignoring the wrong social relationships would simply perpetuate them.<sup>49</sup> Feng was absorbing mainly the universal and teleological aspects of Marxism. He did not realize that a radical social transformation awaited him and, instead of focusing on the transcendental values, he would be required to develop new values, from the bottom up, so to speak, in Communist China, where social values must reflect correctly on the new socialist Chinese society.

<sup>49</sup> Hu Sheng (1943), Ping Feng Youlan zhu xinshilun (On Feng Youlan's *New treatise on practical affairs*), in Hu Sheng, *Lixing yu ziyou (Rationality and freedom)* (Shanghai: Huaxia, 1946), pp.176–190.

### **Developing working-class identification and a dialectic materialist outlook: Feng Youlan in the 1950s**

Feng's borrowing from Marxist historical and dialectical materialism could have made him believe that he had something in common with the Communists when the latter took over China in 1949. That assumption was both right and wrong. On the one hand, Chinese Marxists called for a much greater interaction with society than Feng ever did. Praxis always constituted a very prominent part of Marxism in its application in Russia and China. Dirlik argued that Lenin highlighted praxis in the present and liberated it from the confines of external conditions through relocating the dialectic between theory and revolutionary activity from a social and historical context in Marxist theory to the consciousness of the revolutionary.<sup>50</sup> Influenced by Lenin, Mao also took up a proactive approach to consciousness as an agent of change. Ideas, therefore, determined social reality; or, rather, ideas for social change determined what constituted or should constitute social reality. The existence of ideas was to bring about social change. Ideas could be, and should be, rendered meaningful only by action. The criteria to evaluate ideas would be how they turned out in actual practice—not just any practice, but the desired social outcome of the Communist Party.

This same approach was held towards Marxist theory. The introduction of Marxist Communism to China was fraught with adaptations in order to reconcile the Marxist structure to Chinese conditions, a practice at once liberating the Chinese from their traditions and alienating them from their subjectivity and past.<sup>51</sup> It was not surprising that Mao judged Marxist categories not as theories to observe, but as practicable ideas whose value was to be gleaned through their social outcome. For example, for Mao, a 'relation of production' per se did not exist in the objective world. Only specific relations of production within actual social formations existed. Mao treated Marx's categories as analytical conceptualizations of a complex pre-existing reality that did not determine this reality, but

<sup>50</sup> Arif Dirlik (1983), *The predicament of Marxist revolutionary consciousness: Mao Zedong, Antonio Gramsci, and the reformulation of Marxist revolutionary theory*, *Modern China*, 9(2): p. 192.

<sup>51</sup> Arif Dirlik (1997), *Modernism and antimodernism in Mao Zedong's Marxism*, in Arif Dirlik, Paul Healy, and Nick Knight (eds), *Critical Perspectives on Mao Zedong's Thought* (New Jersey: Humanities Press International), pp. 72–76.

merely helped to understand and change it.<sup>52</sup> Marxism, in other words, provided ideas, rationale, and concepts that would help transform the existing society and build a new one.

This emphasis on how the meaning of ideas was to be determined by praxis was reflected in a very selective approach towards the use of class and class struggle on the part of the Chinese Communists, concepts that Mao selected to engineer a reconfiguration of power in society. Precisely because of his keen awareness of the huge gap between the material bases of Marxism and China's economic reality, Mao focused on class distinction and class struggle upon the political rather than the material bases of social classes. From his first class analysis in 1926, Mao was more interested in analysing class in terms of a hierarchy of power, and especially in terms of relations of exploitation. Mao's concept of class was centred around social mobilization. To Mao, every instance of class analysis was social analysis designed to identify the dimensions of conflict in society for the guidance of revolutionary activity and policy.<sup>53</sup>

Mao's insistence on finding the meaning of theory in social praxis seemed to be in stark contrast to Feng's championship of the autonomy of moral development in his *New Philosophy of Principle*.<sup>54</sup> However, Feng did try to reach out more directly to social reform through the modern adaptation of particularistic Confucian values into more impersonal and universal social rules, as discussed above. In fact, in his development of the new social rules to be observed in his *New Treatise on the Way of Life*, he got close to one of the key issues the Communist Party sought to deal with: redefining the meaning of ideas which were now to derive only from certain types of social outcomes. Social classification of intellectuals after 1950 was an important way for the Communist Party to use class as a leverage to mobilize the intellectuals and reshape their views of knowledge. Defining the intellectuals as mental workers between the antagonistic classes of capitalists and workers, the Chinese Communist Party used thought reform and other activities to consolidate their control at the local

<sup>52</sup> Richard Levy (1997), Mao, Marx, political economy and the Chinese revolution: Good questions, poor answers, in Dirlik et al. (eds), *Critical Perspectives on Mao Zedong's Thought*, p. 157.

<sup>53</sup> Dirlik, The predicament of Marxist revolutionary consciousness, pp. 196–197.

<sup>54</sup> One recently published monograph on Feng called his philosophy 'metaphorical metaphysics'. See Derong Chen (2011), *Metaphorical Metaphysics in Chinese History: Illustrated with Feng Youlan's New Metaphysics* (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books).

level.<sup>55</sup> Thought reform that took place around 1951–1952 focused on the transformation of the intellectuals in the educational and cultural realms, as various political campaigns had already targeted other social groups. The act itself simply reified those who had received high school education or above working in the educational and cultural fields as intellectuals who needed transformation from groups traditionally considered elite to a social class amenable to Communist rule so that these people would contribute to the socialist reconstruction of China.<sup>56</sup> The homogenization of intellectuals into a social class also helped pave the way for the requirement of some uniform definition of knowledge among them. Besides self-criticism, one of the common venues of thought reform was participation in the land reform movement in the early 1950s. Expected to be a transformative experience, land reform ‘seemed to promise a final reconciliation by offering an opportunity to side with the masses in the critical moment of agrarian revolution’.<sup>57</sup> And perhaps it is not an exaggeration to say that, steeped in land reform, the intellectuals would learn from personal experience the Communist belief that the meaning of knowledge was to be derived from praxis.

The connection between classification of intellectuals and social control became an important part of intellectual activities in China in the 1950s. Classes were assigned either a materialist or idealist outlook. The working classes were associated with materialism, and the non-working, exploiting classes with idealism. The association of the working classes with materialism was because of their motivation for social change and because they represented the superior means of production. The resulting social change would rebuild social relationships and restore a proper relationship to the working class and their work. Whereas working-class materialism manifested in concrete, revolutionary activities, the non-working classes, on the other hand, would want to maintain the status quo and resist change. Since Marxists believed in the inevitability of social change due to social and economic developments, to them the non-working classes would want not to face social change and would instead shield

<sup>55</sup> Eddy U (2007), The making of Chinese intellectuals: representations and organization in the Thought Reform Campaign, *The China Quarterly*, 192: pp. 971–989, especially 972, 977.

<sup>56</sup> U, The making of Chinese intellectuals, pp. 971–989.

<sup>57</sup> Brian James DeMare (2009), Casting (off) their stinking airs: Chinese intellectuals and land reform, *The China Journal*, 67: pp. 109–130.

themselves in a self-fabricated and idealized reality. Even though this dichotomy between the materialist and idealist stances and their associations with the exploited and exploiting classes was teleological, it was practiced as materialism because its reasoning was linked to considerations of the material reality, and it became the Communist government's rationale to justify a push for a working-class outlook.

Reflected in political campaigns to transform the intellectuals, intellectual culture and thought from the Nationalist era were denounced as feudal and/or bourgeois. In a speech made at the joint meeting between the Chinese Literature and Art Society Presiding Committee (Zhongguo wenxue yishujie lianhehui zhuxituan, 中国文学艺术界联合会主席团) and Chinese Writers' Association Presiding Committee (Zhongguo zuojia xiehui zhuxituan, 中国作家协会主席团) in 1954, Guo Moruo (郭沫若), chairman of the Chinese Literature and Art Society, argued that criticism of bourgeois idealism was an ideological struggle between Marxism and idealism, a continuation of the thought reform movement which started after the Communist takeover, and a cultural mobilization of China's transition to socialism.<sup>58</sup> This was part of the larger movement to bring down any and all non-materialistic intellectual thought that ran against the specific goals of the Chinese government, including education in nationalism and science, the eradication of feudalism and capitalism, and the popularization of education and the idea of serving the people.<sup>59</sup> This movement first started in the criticism of Hu Shi, arguably the most influential Chinese intellectual in the first half of the twentieth century, in his introduction of Western perspectives on many areas of Chinese history and contemporary Chinese society. Hu, who was then residing in Taiwan, was attacked because politically he advocated gradual reform and libertarianism, which ran against the Communist ideas of class struggle and social revolutions. Hu, an advocate of experimentalism in politics and scholarship, was attacked as an idealist who ignored social reality in politics and scholarship, and whose intellectual and political positions were therefore erroneous.<sup>60</sup> As part of the sub-movement in the anti-Hu movement, there was widespread intellectual criticism, including the criticism of the film

<sup>58</sup> Guo Moruo (1954), Sandian jianyi (Three suggestions), *Renmin ribao*, 9 December.

<sup>59</sup> Li Fangxiang (2007), Xiandai xueshu pipan dui makesi zhuyi zhongguohua de shuangchong yingxiang (The double impact of contemporary intellectual criticism on the Sincization of Marxism), *Dangdai zhongguoshi yanjiu*, 14 (6): pp. 85–86.

<sup>60</sup> Li, Xiandai xueshu pipan, pp. 85–92.

*Wuxunzhuan* (武训传, *The Story of Wu Xun*) (1950), the story of a beggar in the Qing Dynasty (1644–1911), who, after becoming rich, set up schools for the poor. *Wuxunzhuan* was criticized for burying the theme of class struggles between the rich and the poor.

There was also extensive criticism of Feng Youlan and his colleagues for holding an idealist approach in their scholarship. Criticism of Feng started as early as 1950, with articles appearing in the *People's Daily* (*Remin ribao*) and *Guangming Daily*, both mouthpieces of the Chinese Communist Party; the contributors were largely his colleagues. Although Feng and his colleague Jin Yuelin (金岳霖), who was also criticized for similar reasons, hugged and cried over it in early 1952,<sup>61</sup> Feng started a long string of self-criticism essays as early as 1950 concerning his alienation between general rules and specific practices in his *New Philosophy of Principles*, a symptom of idealism.

Feng realized that there was an inherent conflict between his self-expectations as a scholar and what the Communist Party expected of intellectuals, a dilemma shared by many Chinese intellectuals at the time.<sup>62</sup> After all, in Feng's philosophy of the 1930s to 1940s, he did contextualize ideas in social and economic conditions from time to time. His *New Treatise on the Way of Life* (1940) focused on the desired social effect his new social norms would achieve, and his six works of philosophy completed in the war years (1938–1946) were his solutions to China's revitalization from different approaches. In principle, Feng did not resist a materialist approach to society as one intellectual perspective, or assessing knowledge by its social impact, which he had been doing. The Communist call on the intellectuals to transform themselves through the experience of land reform and thought reform so they would be able to draw new knowledge from their experience was appealing to Feng. From January to March 1950, Feng participated in the land reform in the Beijing suburbs. Part of his job was to help with the classification of the class backgrounds of the peasants and participate in the redistribution of farm tools of those classified as landlords. Feng described moments of great uncertainty,

<sup>61</sup> Cai (ed.), *Feng Youlan xiansheng nianpu chubian*, p. 397.

<sup>62</sup> See, for instance, Arif Dirlik (1977), The problem of class viewpoint versus historicism in Chinese historiography, *Modern China*, 3(4): pp. 465–488. Arif Dirlik (2011), The triumph of the modern: Marxism and Chinese social history, in idem, *Culture and History in Postrevolutionary China: The Perspective of Global Modernity* (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press), pp. 77–90. Clifford Edmunds (1987), The politics of historiography: Jian Bozan's historicism, in Goldman et al. (eds), *China's Intellectuals and the State*, pp. 65–106.

since he came from a landlord family. He also cringed, at least initially, at the need to openly show his identification with the poor peasants. But Feng was quick to realize that such experience expanded his intellectual understanding of epistemology and the role experience played in human understanding of the world. In the past Feng avoided identifying with any particular group because, as a philosopher, he wanted to avoid a narrow self-identification.<sup>63</sup> The experience of participating in land reform, on the other hand, greatly expanded his intellectual horizon. As he stated himself:

After I participated in this kind of work, I really felt China had undergone a revolution. [In the past, w]hen I just stayed in Beijing, I had only seen political changes, which I often confused with ‘dynastic changes’ and ‘rise and fall in office’.<sup>64</sup>

Land reform helped to deepen Feng’s intellectual/conceptual framework. It led Feng to the epiphany that universals were encapsulated in specific entities. In the land reform movement, each landlord and peasant was different, yet they had something in common with those who were grouped into the same class.<sup>65</sup> In other words, class distinguished people’s cognitive positions, Feng argued, because traditional Chinese literati were alienated from work and the working people, and since they did not live in the midst of work, they would not acknowledge productivity as the most basic form of activity in human experience. Therefore their discussion of the relationship between action and knowledge would be from an ethical, rather than practical, point of view.<sup>66</sup> A social class background, in other words, provided a certain type of experience. Feng made this clearer in another 1951 article, stating that because he was not from a working-class background, his previous writings all focused on the internal dynamics of Chinese thinking, not their social conditions and class backgrounds.<sup>67</sup>

<sup>63</sup> Feng Youlan (1950), *Yinian xuexide zongjie* (A summary of this year’s studies), in Feng Youlan, *Sansongtang quanji*, v.13 (Kaifeng: Henan renmin, 1994), pp. 885–889.

<sup>64</sup> Feng Youlan (1950), *Canjia tugai de shouhuo* (My rewards for participation in the land reform), in Feng, *Sansongtang quanji*, v.13, pp. 890–892.

<sup>65</sup> Feng, *Canjia tugai de shouhuo*, p. 897.

<sup>66</sup> Feng Youlan (1951), *Shijianlun malie zhuyidi fazhan yu zhongguo zhexue chuantong wenti di jieju* (On Practice: the development of Marxist thought and solution to practical problems in China), in Feng, *Sansongtang quanji*, v.13, p. 18.

<sup>67</sup> Feng Youlan (1951), *Xuexi shijianlun de shouhuo* (Reaping the reward of studying On Practice), in Feng, *Sansongtang quanji*, v.13, p. 32.

Although Feng's interpretation of experience here followed the Chinese Communist lines of class analysis, his professional habit as a philosopher turned class lines as a political movement to a more metaphysical discussion of how experience derived from class stances would lead to different understandings of things. For him, it was a cognitive issue, as well as a political one. Feng argued that traditional Chinese thinkers failed to link theory and practice because they belonged to the literati class and looked down on labour and the labouring class; Mao, on the other hand, represented the working class, hence his ability to integrate theory/ideas with practice. And only Mao, who participated in both thinking and practice, was in a position to exercise dialectical materialism, drawing ideas from practice and implementing ideas derived from practice back into practice.<sup>68</sup> Feng was praising Mao for the ability to exercise a dialectical interchange between ideas and practice, learning from practice and using that learning to guide future practice, and he was certainly fawning over Mao here. But his argument ran along two parallel lines: one was that knowledge derived from experience, and the other was that working-class-based experience was authentic experience. Some variations of the former were practiced by Feng before the Communist takeover, and the latter was what Chinese scholars were all compelled to do after the Communist takeover. In Feng's early 1950s writing, he tended to practice the former, and applied Marxist materialism, or even class analysis, to develop a new perspective on life that made a working-class stance the starting point, and not the end, of an intellectual argument.

Just as the experience of land reform did not transform Feng to completely side with the peasants in his views, but allowed him to derive some new philosophical insight through his experience of land reform as discussed above, so class analysis as a Communist policy failed to make Feng reduce his judgements to the level of working-class experience. Bringing in the social contexts, rather than focusing on the intrinsic connection of ideas, Feng argued, would help with a better understanding of specific causes of the ideas. This was true in scholarly studies, such as in the revival of Daoism in the Wei and Jin Dynasties, the revival of Confucian learning in the Song Dynasty, social changes that caused their revivals, and the historical and social significance

<sup>68</sup> Feng Youlan (1951), *Shijianlun, maliezhuyi difazhan yu zhongguo zhexue chuantong wentidi jiejué* (On Practice as a further development of Marxism and solution to traditional problems in Chinese philosophy), in Feng, *Sansongtang quanji*, v.13, pp. 7–28.

that these revivals connote.<sup>69</sup> In his discussion of the Korean War, Feng approached the war (1950–53) through an intellectual analysis of the universals of Chinese people fighting wars in Korea, the particulars of the different class backgrounds of the Chinese who fought in Korea in history, and the different reactions of Chinese people towards the war based on their different class backgrounds. For one thing, the Chinese landlord class would want to see South Korea win the Korean War with American help, which might help Taiwan fight back to mainland China and restore Nationalist rule. Therefore class distinctions did connote different levels and kinds of truths.<sup>70</sup> Such fundamentally different truths could not be grasped through mere observations. Just from the surface of it, the Korean War of 1950 could easily be perceived as another war China got involved in in Korea after the Sino-Japanese War of 1894–95, which China fought to prevent a Japanese takeover of Korea, then a tributary state to China. In reality, however, Feng said that, unlike in 1894, China was not going to occupy Korea. In fact there was nothing China would gain from the war in 1950. This was something that capitalists would not be able to understand because, their life revolved around doing business and making profit. In a socialist society, all individuals worked for the common good.<sup>71</sup> Class stances, therefore, dictated specific positions one would take in life. Class distinctions would connote the presence or absence of a certain type of experience, and the experiences of a ruling class in a given society would underlie the rationale and operations of that society. Feng's style of writing in those cases was not polemical but didactic, bent on bringing to light the many facets one could examine about the concept of the Korean War: from the point of view of Chinese wars in Korea led by a government representing either the ruling class or working class, and perceptions of the war from either the capitalists or working-class Chinese people, demonstrating the contrasting results of these different approaches and the usefulness of a class analysis in obtaining knowledge of something. Yet even his comments on the Korean War did not confine Feng's thought to class configurations during the war. He used the Korean War as a starting point, again

<sup>69</sup> Feng, *Xuexi shijianlun de shouhuo*, pp. 29–34.

<sup>70</sup> Feng Youlan (1951), *Duiyu gongchandangde renshi dizhuanbian* (Changes in my views of the Chinese Communist Party), in Feng, *Sansongtang quanji*, v.13, pp. 936–937.

<sup>71</sup> Feng Youlan (1951), *Kangmei yuanchao duiyu wode qishi* (What fighting America to support North Korea has taught me), in Feng, *Sansongtang quanji*, v.13, pp. 926–929.

to compare and contrast between universals and particulars. Korean War, in this case, was a semi-universal, since it happened multiple times in history, and this Korean War was a particular, since it differed from previous Korean Wars that China had been involved in in that this time Chinese soldiers represented a working-class government to save another working-class government, so unlike in the previous Korean Wars, China did not intend to dominate Korea. If land reform provided a new range of experiences that enabled Feng to come up with new philosophical insights, by the Korean War Feng was used to treating class as a source of experience that provided new intellectual perspectives leading to new philosophical analyses.

Feng was quick to translate this new intellectual understanding into an intellectual response to his many critics, Communist or non-Communist, who answered the Communist call for adjustment to working-class stances and who criticized Feng for the idealist position in his writings prior to 1949. Against the criticisms of colleagues such as Wang Yao (王瑶), Wang Zisong (汪子嵩), acquaintances such as Mao Mingjia,<sup>72</sup> and leftist establishment intellectuals like Guan Feng (关锋), Feng was quick to combine his own experience of land reform with proper class identification and Marxist materialism. In a self-criticism published in the *People's Daily* in October, 1950, Feng tried to assert a switch to materialism by seeing a new, complementary relationship between 'universals' and 'specifics', in comparison with his previous practice of contrasting the universals and specifics in his writings of the 1930s–1940s. Furthermore, because in his criticism of Feng, Mao Mingjia associated Feng's *New Philosophy of Principles* with the ideology of the passive intellectuals who despaired of the future but were too weak to see reform actively, Feng also acknowledged his deficiency of a class stance in that work.<sup>73</sup> In other words, Feng wanted to demonstrate that land reform and thought reform had been transformative experiences for him and now he was capable of viewing things from a working class position. However, his self-criticism largely remained the criticism of his 'older self'. Feng's 'new self' accepted class analysis, but only as a new dimension of experience and a part of his philosophical framework of 'universals' and 'particulars'.

<sup>72</sup> Mao Mingjia (1950), Duiyu xinlixue sixiang de pipan (Criticism of *New philosophy of principles*), *Guangming ribao*, 8 October.

<sup>73</sup> Feng Youlan (1950), Xinlixue de ziwo jiantao (A self-criticism of *New philosophy of principles*), *Renmin ribao*, 11 October. Mao Mingjia (1950), Cong ziwo piping dao dui xinlixue sixiangde piping (From Feng's Self-criticism to criticism against *New philosophy of principles*), *Guangming ribao*, 6 August.

### The Double Hundred Campaign and Feng's argument for an 'abstract inheritance'

By 1957, however, the emphasis on working-class identification was briefly overtaken by a reexamination of the current interpretation of Marxist materialism in Chinese intellectual circles. The international background was the convention of the Twentieth Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in 1956, when Khrushchev denounced Stalin's iconic worship of individual leaders and dogmatism in socialist doctrines. Against the alignment along working-class lines in China from 1950 to 1956, the Soviet move unleashed a torrent of discussions in Chinese intellectual circles regarding issues such as working-class identification and the goals of the Chinese Communist Party after socialism was firmly established in the country. The Soviet influence was also felt at the Eighth Congress of the Chinese Communist Party held in 1956, which resolved to shift emphasis from class identification to social construction, making clear that the major problem facing China was no longer the antagonism between the working class and the capitalist class, but that between the shortage of economic and cultural products and increasing demands for them. This change of direction led to Premier Zhou Enlai's speech that the intellectuals had already been by and large converted to the working class.<sup>74</sup> Zhou's words could be taken to mean that the class identification phase of China's socialism was over for the Chinese intellectuals.

Against that background, the Chinese intellectuals wanted a re-evaluation of the interpretations of Marxism in China. In January 1957, a symposium on philosophy and Chinese tradition was held by the Department of Philosophy at Peking University. Over 100 philosophers from various Chinese universities and research centres attended. The conference took place in the wake of extensive discussions of interpretation of materialism by Andrei Alexandrovich Zhdanov, who had a strong influence on Soviet ideas of Marxism in the 1940s. Zhdanov interpreted history as a battle between materialism and idealism, where materialism always beat idealism.<sup>75</sup> The Zhdanov doctrine had been the orthodox interpretation of

<sup>74</sup> Zhang Yixing (2007), Wushi nianqiande nachang zhexue zhengming (The philosophy debate of 50 years ago), *Zhexue yanjiu*, 1: 56.

<sup>75</sup> Liang Zhixue and Chen Xia (2007), Lun duilimian de tongyi he douzheng, dui zhongguo zhexueshi zuotanhui de fansi (On the unification and struggle between

Marxism in China. A focus of the discussion was whether Zhdanov's argument that world history was a battle between materialism and idealism could be adequately applied to the study of Chinese history. Many panel participants pointed out that the discussion would fail to distinguish between the degrees of idealism between different landlords in Chinese history. Furthermore, if the reactionary classes usually represented the backward, idealistic philosophical theories, and Chinese philosophy largely came from those classes, there would be very little to inherit from Chinese history.<sup>76</sup> In other words, there was broad questioning of linking class with a particular intellectual outlook.

Although Feng Youlan wrote a self-criticism along class lines and denounced his writing as idealist and complying with the exploiting class in 1956,<sup>77</sup> in 1957 he came to argue that many elements from Chinese tradition, even though they had originated from the exploiting classes, might still be heritable. To understand Feng's new position, it is important to note that while Feng had criticized the alienation between theory and praxis in Chinese history, he had never denounced Chinese historical thinking *per se*. And although Feng complied with a class stance, he did not see authentic experience as exclusively coming from working-class positions. Rather, identifying with the working class and with practical work provided Feng with a broader understanding of knowledge production.

In the more relaxed political atmosphere of early 1957, Feng wrote several articles on inheritance of the Chinese historical past. One thing Feng had not given up on in Communist China was the metaphysical domain he had upheld in the 1930s–40s. Here, he was going back to his earlier, pre-1949 position on upholding Confucian values as universals. On 7 January 1957, one year after the Twentieth Communist Congress of the Soviet Union, Feng published an article titled 'On the inheritance of China's philosophical legacy' (*Zhongguo zhexue yichan di jicheng wenti*, 中国哲学遗产底继承问题) in the *Guangming Daily*. He argued that many writings in Chinese history could be inherited if one ignored the particular meaning of these

antagonistic sides: reflections on the symposium on the history of Chinese philosophy of 1957), *Wenhua sikao*, 7: 4–10.

<sup>76</sup> Liang and Chen, *Lun duilimian de tongyi he douzheng*, p. 5.

<sup>77</sup> Feng Youlan (1956), *Guoqu zhexueshi gongzuodi ziwo pipan* (A self-criticism of my previous work in the history of philosophy), in Feng Youlan, *Sansongtang quanji*, 2nd edn, v.14 (Zhengzhou, Henan remin, 2000), pp. 932–953.

writings in their historical context and extracted their more universal meanings to apply to the present. For instance, the Chinese saying *tianxia weigong* (天下为公, all under heaven for the public) historically referred to China and the world in the Chinese imagination at the time of the Warring States Era (circa 475–221 BC) when the Book of Rites (*lijì*, 礼记) was written. A literal translation of the sentence would be: all under heaven should serve the public good. But heaven meant only central China and the Chinese imagination of the world over 2,000 years ago. The sentence would still be meaningful in the present, except the interpretation of heaven would mean a better understanding of the world. Similarly, a sentence by Mencius, *ren jie keyi wei yaoshun* (人皆可以为尧舜), literally meant ‘everyone could aspire to be a Yao (尧; circa 2356–2255 BC, a legendary emperor in Chinese history) or a Shun (舜; circa 2200–2100 BC, a legendary emperor who succeeded Emperor Yao), and attain sagehood’. Because Mencius defined sagehood as reaching the optimal in one’s own social station, sagehood meant people obeyed their social stations: masters would be good masters, and slaves would be good slaves. This would be very different from the later interpretation of sagehood by Wang Yangming, in which it meant conscience (*liangzhi*, 良知) inherent in human nature. This interpretation would lead to a more egalitarian interpretation of humans when being a Yao or a Shun meant the development and exercise of one’s inner conscience rather than following the prescribed rules of one’s social station.<sup>78</sup> Feng further argued that Marxism was based on this abstraction of philosophical ideas from other sources, for example Hegelian idealism. Marxist dialecticism was extracted from Hegel’s description of the development of the absolute idea. Marx adopted the idea of development, not the Hegelian absolutism of the idea.<sup>79</sup>

This was subsequently called abstract inheritance (*chouxiang jicheng fa*, 抽象继承法) in meetings criticizing Feng from 1957 on. The term ‘abstract inheritance’ probably first started with an article of the same title ‘Cong Feng youlan xiansheng de chouxiang jichengfa kantade zhexue guandian’ (从冯友兰先生的抽象继承法看他的哲学观点, An observation of Mr Feng Youlan’s philosophical views from his method of abstract inheritance), published by a Wu Chuanqi (吴传启) in

<sup>78</sup> Feng Youlan (1957), *Zhongguo zhexue yichande jicheng wenti* (On the inheritance of China’s philosophical legacy), in Feng Youlan, *Sansongtang quanji*, v.12 (Zhengzhou: Henan remin, 1992), pp. 98–101.

<sup>79</sup> Feng, *Zhongguo zhexue yichande jicheng wenti*, p. 103.

the second issue of *Zhexueyanjiu* (哲学研究, *Philosophical research*) in 1958.<sup>80</sup> The most famous criticism of abstract inheritance was from Hu Sheng, who worked for the Chinese Central Propaganda Bureau (Zhongxuanbu, 中宣部) in the 1950s. Hu wrote a long treatise in which he described dialectical materialism as the progressive approach to understanding social development—based on the idea that society changed all the time and a reliance on ideas would fail to note the social changes. Thus a dialectical and materialist view taking into account social change was the correct approach to society. On the other hand, Hu Sheng pointed out that it did not necessarily mean peasants and other working-class people held a materialist view in history; in fact they were often believers in religion and other ideas. Although in general, the progressive social classes used dialectical materialism to guide their views on change, and the reactionary classes used idealism for their guidance, Marxism, to Hu, called for a specific examination of the war between materialism and idealism. Even though elements of materialism and idealism might impact upon one another, for Hu Sheng, the problem with idealism was it would stifle thinking and lead to blind faith because there was nothing external to verify or disprove it. Hu championed a focus on specifics in determining how to inherit from the historical past.<sup>81</sup> Here, Hu did not bind materialism to the working classes, but pointed out the importance of rooting one's observation in experience and external reality, which provided for a much wider range of reality than was allowed by the definition of the working-class experience.

On the same two days, 29 and 30 March 1957, the *People's Daily* that published Hu's criticism of Feng also serialized Feng's rebuttal. Against Hu's criticism that Feng just abstracted more universal themes from Chinese history instead of inspecting each historical instance in its specific context and against the specific context of the Chinese present, Feng said his was not mere abstraction, but inheritance of a universal concept that could be related to present-day ideas, such as the ancient Chinese concept of *qi* (气). In ancient times *qi* was regarded as a material force, but this would be very different from the definition of the materialism of the world today. Therefore inheritance of the concept of *qi* would be very different

<sup>80</sup> Yang Haiwen (2001), Chouxiang jichengfa de lishi mingyun (The historical fate of 'Abstract Inheritance'), *Shehui kexue luntan*, 7: 32.

<sup>81</sup> Hu Sheng (1957), Guanyu zhexueshi deyanjiu (On the study of history of philosophy), *Remin ribao*, 29–30 March.

from the ancient idea of *qi*. There would be the universal element of materialism in *qi*, but the specific manifestation of this materialism differed from ancient times to the present.<sup>82</sup> By now he had abandoned his position on *qi* as a metaphysical force held in his *New Philosophy of Principle*. He was not even trying to be logically defensible in his definition of *qi* as both a universal concept and as an embodiment of materialism. Nonetheless Feng insisted on the existence of a level of universal principles which was not completely subject to the approval of materialism and class analysis.

Despite his adherence to Marxist materialism, Hu's criticism of Feng remained intellectual, and his argument that social changes could be better fathomed by a direct examination of society rather than ideas in history was more about approaches to knowledge and the philosophical significance of experience rather than political positioning. Despite that, as critics like Zheng Jiadong pointed out, the method of abstract inheritance itself might not be the most effective way to introduce the past to the present, since the abstracted principles rather than specific instances lacked the immediacy and vividness that would move and influence the present.<sup>83</sup> Perhaps Feng just wanted a broader inclusion of history.<sup>84</sup> It is intriguing, though, that Feng would direct fire to himself by completely bypassing an examination of the social circumstances in his call to inherit the past. His stance is better understood, however, against a background in which increasing numbers of intellectuals called for a disconnection between class and authentic experience or progressive thinking. Feng just went a step further: for the Communists, class stood for the right kind of experience which would lead to the right kind of knowledge; if Feng did not agree with that position, he would just bypass a discussion of experience altogether so as to bypass the Communist equation between a correct class stance and correct experience and knowledge.

Another conference on Chinese philosophy was held at Peking University from the 10 to 14 May as a sequel to the January meeting. There was heated discussion on classifying history along material or idealist lines, but the general atmosphere was open. Many pointed out that it would be too simplistic to characterize a philosopher

<sup>82</sup> Feng Youlan (1957), *Zailun zhongguo zhexue yichan di jicheng wenti* (Another treatise on inheriting the legacy of Chinese philosophy), *Remin ribao*, 29–30 March.

<sup>83</sup> Zheng Jiadong (2001), *Xueshu yu zhengzhi zhijian Feng youlan yu zhongguo makesi zhuyi* (Between scholarship and politics Feng Youlan and Chinese Marxism) (Taipei: Shuiniu chubanshe), pp. 213–223.

<sup>84</sup> Yang, Chouxiang *jichengfa de lishi mingyun*, p. 33.

as a materialist or an idealist, as both tendencies could exist in the same person in different aspects of his views. Like in other things, a dialectical approach needed to be applied to the study of Chinese philosophical thinking, recognizing that materialist and idealist thinking were not absolute and one could change to the other as circumstances changed. There was great emphasis on treating each Chinese philosopher in their specific social context instead of labelling them with universal categories. For instance, the writings of Wang Yangming and of Berkeley, although both emphasizing the importance of inner knowledge, differed in their levels of emotions. Wang's idea of conscience had a high level of empathy, which was absent in Berkeley. There was also heated discussion over how to implement a class analysis in traditional Chinese philosophy, and whether a mere adherence to materialism or idealism was too simplistic in the process. Feng Youlan actually presided over the May conference.<sup>85</sup> The views that arrived at the conference were representative of intellectuals nationwide during the Rectification Campaign that started on 1 May 1957, when Mao called on them to air criticism of the Party to avoid the kind of political unrest that had shaken Poland and Hungary in 1956. There was widespread scepticism of Communist rule among university professors, many of whom had found the political campaigns of the Communist Party, including the 1956 campaign against hidden counter-revolutionaries, heavy handed, as they involved many intellectuals as well as other social groups.<sup>86</sup> The conference approached concepts of class, materialism, and idealism with nuance. And the general atmosphere corroborated Feng's efforts to be freed from the constraints of an equation between working-class experience and true knowledge.

### **Materialism, working-class identification, and the Great Leap Forward**

Unfortunately, the theoretical subtlety of Hu Sheng and the sophisticated discussion of Marxist materialism in China in the two

<sup>85</sup> Guanyu zhongguo zhexueshi gongzuo huiyi zhong taolunde yixie wenti (Some problems discussed at the working conference of the history of Chinese philosophy) (1957), *Zhexue yanjiu*, 3: 141–146.

<sup>86</sup> Eddy U (2013), Intellectuals and alternative socialist paths in the early Mao years, *The China Journal*, 70: 1–23.

philosophy conferences held at Peking University in 1957 were soon inundated by the fury of the anti-Rightist movement. Surprised by the volume of criticism against the Communist Party in the Rectification Campaign in spring 1957, by summer 1957 Mao started the anti-Rightist campaign, labelling those not adhering to a materialist interpretation of history and the present 'Rightists'. Of course, many Rightists were so labelled because of their personal animosity with individual Communist party members or leaders, but in theory the labelling was along a strict adherence to Marxist materialism. That tightening of the intellectual rope, so to speak, was the result of Mao's hardening his interpretation of Marxist historical materialism. According to Paul Healy, in his post-1955 writings, Mao 'identified the productive forces as ontologically privileged with respect to the relations of production and the superstructure, as determining the character of these other levels, and as constituting the primary causal locus of social development'.<sup>87</sup> This was in accordance with Mao's speeding up the socialist construction, from establishment of cooperatives in the countryside (1955), to the nationalization of private factories and companies in the cities (1955–1956), and ultimately to the establishment of the People's Communes in 1958 during the Great Leap Forward. Social transformation needed a tightened control of working-class identification and identification with the proper 'productive forces' in order to facilitate the transformation of China from private to state ownership of things. Social transformation was accompanied by greater emphasis on uniformity in the realm of scholarship also in accordance with Marxism materialism and identification with the productive forces—the working class. The goals of social control and social transformation dictated that Mao would tighten up control of the intellectuals and leave them less space for intellectual debates and free inferences.

Although Feng Youlan was not put in jail or even labelled a Rightist—probably thanks to a conversation he had with Mao in March 1957, when Mao encouraged him to engage in the Hundred Schools debate<sup>88</sup>—from the summer of 1957 onwards, when the Anti-Rightist movement came into full force, Feng was subject to greater criticism from many respectable colleagues such as Hou Wailu (侯外庐), Wang Zisong (汪子嵩), and Zhang Qizhi (张岂之) from

<sup>87</sup> Paul Healy (1997), A paragon of Marxist orthodoxy, in Dirlik, Healy, and Knight (eds), *Critical Perspectives on Mao Zedong's Thought*, p. 127.

<sup>88</sup> Yang, Chouxiang jichengfa de lishi mingyun, pp. 32–33.

Peking University,<sup>89</sup> and Communist party theoreticians such as Guan Feng (关锋). Feng (冯) made public in the *Guangming Daily* his opinion that ideas continued to be important and colleges and universities must cultivate people who studied theory and knew how to do research.<sup>90</sup> For his unyielding attitude, Feng often received vehement attacks on works he published in the 1930s–1940s. Feng's *A New Treatise on the Nature of Man* was attacked by Wang Zisong and Guan Feng in early 1959 for attempting to skip class analysis in the discussion of a universal ethical realm. Their criticism of Feng was a strict judgement of Feng's writings not by their content, but by the potential social consequences these writings would have on society. Wang Zisong, for instance, argued that Feng's failure to situate his discussion in specific societies meant that even when France was invaded by Germany and China by Japan during the Second World World, Feng would still call on people to ignore the social reality.<sup>91</sup> Guan called the four stages or milestones in Feng's human trajectory of development the stage of complete self-unawareness, the utilitarian stage, the ethical stage, and, finally, the sagely stage with transcendence of all earthly concerns—a mental concoction which, if it contained any truth from the reality, infinitely exaggerated such truth. Guan went on to say that it was a very negative stance because it taught people in semi-feudal and semi-colonial China to be contented with the status quo as part of their unification with heaven and earth and their surroundings.<sup>92</sup> The value of knowledge here was completely based on its social impact.

By mid 1958 Feng had already pronounced that he had given up on the idea of 'abstract inheritance', and denounced himself for ignoring the issue of class and class struggle. Feng was fully aware that the criticism against him was not just intellectual, but was directed at his attempt to expand his intellectual framework beyond what would presumably originate from working-class experience. By now Feng had learned to comply by assessing the ideas and values he wanted to champion in a specific social context. Feng self-consciously examined his 'abstract inheritance' concept by plotting a slogan from the French revolution in a different context: the Rightists in China, he suggested,

<sup>89</sup> Cai (ed.), *Feng Youlan xiansheng nianpu chubian*, pp. 449–451.

<sup>90</sup> Feng Youlan (1958), *Shuli yige duilimian* (Playing the devil's advocate), *Guangming ribao*, 8 June.

<sup>91</sup> Wang Zisong (1959), *Feng Youlan de zhexue shi weishei fuwude* (Who does Feng Youlan's philosophy serve), *Zhexue yanjiu*, 1: 19, 32–36.

<sup>92</sup> Guan Feng (1959), *Jielu xinyuanren de yuanxing* (Reveal the true nature of *A new treatise on the nature of man*), *Zhexue yanjiu*, 2: 18–35.

could launch an attack on the Communist Party of China with ideas of ‘I would rather die than live without freedom’ (*buzhiyou wuningsi*, 不自由勿宁死).<sup>93</sup> And in early 1959, Feng published a comprehensive self-criticism of his works for ignoring class struggle and actually facilitating the exploiting classes by teaching people to obey authority while they were being exploited.<sup>94</sup> However, when Guan Feng and Wang Zisong launched their attack on *A New Treatise on the Nature of Man*, Feng still wrote a rebuttal in 1959, which, while acknowledging his agreement with Wang and Guan’s views in their respective articles, mentioned, in the form of a call for open discussion, that epistemology should not be completely cast aside, and some ideas might still be treated as categories within the realm of epistemology and used without respect to classes. Feng gave the example of Mao’s addressing the Chinese people as the ‘country of six hundred million with many Yaos and Shuns’ (*liuyi shenzhou jin shunyao*, 六亿神州尽舜尧). Mao, Feng argued, was certainly not glorifying the Yao and Shun, sages in Chinese history, but was just borrowing these terms to describe a China where people lived happily with high moral standards.<sup>95</sup> To that, Guan Feng wrote a rebuttal arguing that Feng’s ideas of the human epistemological stages in his *A New Treatise of the Nature of Man* and in his other works were all subjective, a product of Feng’s mind, and they were simply abstracted from epistemological approaches in Chinese history without paying attention to specific societies and social classes which all determined how people viewed things.<sup>96</sup>

Feng was never quite silenced, despite relentless attacks from Guan Feng and others, or the external environment of the anti-Rightist movement, when an estimated 550,000 were persecuted in ways ranging from demotion to exile on labour camps and, occasionally, executions. Guan’s rebuttal to Feng’s questioning of his criticism in May 1959, as summarized above, was not fundamentally different from his criticism of Feng in February 1959, the major difference being that in the earlier article, Guan denounced Feng’s *A New Treatise on the*

<sup>93</sup> Feng Youlan (1958), Pipan wode chouxiang jichengfa (Self-criticism of my ‘abstract inheritance’), *Zhexue yanjiu*, 5. Reprinted in Feng, *Sansongtang quanji*, v.14, pp. 954–964.

<sup>94</sup> Feng Youlan (1959), Xinlixue de yuanxing (The truth about my system of new philosophy), *Zhexue yanjiu*, 1: 38–49.

<sup>95</sup> Feng Youlan (1959), Zhiyi he qingjiao (Questions and consultations), *Zhexue yanjiu*, 3: 8–13.

<sup>96</sup> Guan Feng (1959), Da fengyoulan xiansheng (A response to Mr. Feng Youlan), *Xinjianshe*, 5: 50–58.

*Nature of Man* as idealistic, while in the May article, Guan denounced the whole system of Feng's philosophy as idealistic. The attack was not intellectually lethal enough to stop Feng, as the nature of the argument was no different from the criticisms of idealism that Feng had been subject to in the early 1950s. This explains why Feng would again raise doubts and alternative ideas to revitalize history in an attempt to dissociate history and ideas in history from an exclusive discussion of working-class experience in 1960 and beyond.

In conclusion, Feng Youlan's approach to Marxist historical and dialectical materialism was indicative of how Marxism was exercised by non-Marxist Chinese intellectuals before and after the Communist takeover in 1949. In the 1930s and 1940s, Marxism provided for non-Marxists like Feng a path to universal comparability of societies at the same stage of development. Marxist teleology, and the Marxist privileging of revolutionary praxis over theory, especially in the case of Chinese Marxists, enabled Chinese scholars like Feng to more readily step away from the constraints of tradition and dominant Western theories in search of a system of universal rules that would point to a new future for China, based not on a natural progression of the present but a desirable construct. Feng's world system, as represented in his *New Philosophy of Principle* and later works in the 1940s, was teleological. Historicism was used largely to facilitate the construction and presentation of a new, metaphysical outlook on life based on many concepts appropriated from Confucian learning. Materialism and social stages, initially, were less relevant to Feng as he was mostly attracted by the freedom of judgement Marxism unleashed in him, and the possibility of comparative studies of society also revealed by Marxism. One influence from Marxism, however, was the emphasis on the social impact, in contrast to internal consistency, of knowledge, which was shown in several of Feng's writings from 1939 to 1946, most notably in his *New Treatise on the Way of Life* (1940).

This eclectic usage of Marxism was brought to an abrupt stop around 1950, when Marxist materialism became identified with the working-class experience, and many Chinese intellectuals like Feng were sent to assist with land reform and social classification in the countryside to both help with the political movements of social control and to obtain a transformative experience that would change the locus of knowledge from content to social impact. The Communist definition of knowledge emphasized praxis and made clear content should never be judged in separation from context, a trend which only increased in the mid 1950s and reached its climax after 1958. This emphasis

on praxis accorded with the Communist policy of transforming China from a country of private property to state ownership and socialism, which culminated in the Great Leap Forward in 1958. As time went on, the Communist government tightened intellectuals' working-class identification in the social outcome of their scholarship as the basis for Communist-approved knowledge. The identification between Marxist materialism and a working-class stance, arbitrary to start with, called for greater adherence after 1955 to serve as the Communist regime's tool of mobilization.

If the Chinese Communist government had not completely identified materialism with working-class outlook or experience, it might have won the support of many Chinese intellectuals.<sup>97</sup> Communism in China juggled with two conflicting goals: judging knowledge with social outcome, so that knowledge would promote a certain social outcome; and linking knowledge to a working-class point of view for political mobilization. The former, despite its utilitarian nature, had some bearing on traditional Chinese notions of praxis. The latter not only proved overly constraining, but deprived traditionally elitist groups of people, such as the Chinese intellectuals, of any room for decision making.

The tragedy of Jian Bozan, an established historian at Peking University who chose to end his own life in the Cultural Revolution due to persecution, was a typical example of an intellectual who wanted to follow the Marxist call on praxis but did not want to follow the Communist class analysis. Jian believed in Communism, but also historicism. When he refused to reduce historicism to class and class struggles, he was denounced.<sup>98</sup> Another historian, Fan Wenlan, who managed to come out of the Cultural Revolution intact because Mao treated him as a friend for his application of Mao's interpretation of Chinese social stages in a nationalist treatment of Chinese history,<sup>99</sup> was an exception rather than the rule. As Jian, Feng, and so many other Chinese intellectuals testified, progressive ideas were not always embodied by the working class in history. So, a true understanding of

<sup>97</sup> In his 'The problem of class viewpoint versus historicism in Chinese historiography', Dirlik also argues that if the political movements had not pushed the Chinese intellectuals to completely identify Chinese history with Marxist theory at the cost of historicism, they might have moved closer to that goal.

<sup>98</sup> Clifford Edmunds (1987), *The politics of historiography: Jian Bozan's Historicism*, in Goldman et al. (eds), *China's Intellectuals and the State*, pp. 65–106

<sup>99</sup> Huaiyin Li (2010), *Between tradition and revolution: Fan Wenlan and the origins of the Marxist historiography in modern China*, *Modern China*, 36(3): pp. 269–301.

the past would not follow a class analysis, but rather a more historical approach.

Marxist dialectical materialism, without reducing materialism to a pure class analysis and without its teleological goals, could have been a more productive force to help transform the Confucian value system and the interpretation of praxis. As such it would have ranked with praxis-oriented Western philosophies like experimentalism and pragmatism, except with a greater focus on structure.<sup>100</sup> Further, it resembles French intellectual historians' switch from treating ideas as autonomous to contextualizing them in their social environs in the twentieth century.<sup>101</sup> The latter were not trying to reduce ideas to action, but rather to untangle the ideological and power relationship in theory and ideas, and better reveal the social dynamics behind them. Though greatly different in intention and methods, both the French intellectual historians in question and Chinese Marxists were characterized by their tendency to judge ideas by their social impact, where the meaning of ideas was tied to their interpretation, or consumption, to borrow the words of Roger Chartier in his description of twentieth-century French intellectual history.<sup>102</sup>

The French intellectual historians could be called a precursor to the New Historicists of the 1970s and 1980s, who, in the words of H. Aram Veiser, combatted 'empty formalism' and 'evolved a method of describing culture in action'.<sup>103</sup> New Historical writings strove to be 'freed of' the 'old chains of causal explanation',<sup>104</sup> the existent forms and narratives, and along with them, existent and accepted representations of power. Just because it focuses so much on freeing itself from established lenses on history and society, in its extreme form, New Historicism reduces texts and every form of historical narratives to action, the bare bones of forces that shaped the composition of the historical narratives. While Alan Liu is critical of this extreme form of history writing, he continues to emphasize

<sup>100</sup> Dirlik suggests modification of Marxism into a critical theory like any other modern social sciences theory. See his *The triumph of the modern*, pp. 91–95.

<sup>101</sup> Roger Cartier (1982), *Intellectual history or social history? The French trajectories*, in Dominick LaCapra (ed.), *Modern European Intellectual History: Reappraisals and New Perspectives* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press), p. 17.

<sup>102</sup> Chartier, *Intellectual history or social history?*, p. 36.

<sup>103</sup> H. Aram Veiser (1989), Introduction, in idem (ed.), *The New Historicism* (New York: Taylor and Francis), p. xi.

<sup>104</sup> Alan Liu (1989), *The power of formalism: the New Historicism*, in *ELH*, 56 (4): p. 734.

the importance of this focus on action to avoid entanglements in old ideologies.<sup>105</sup> Unsurprisingly, one of the influences on the formation of New Historicism was Marxism.

Marxist materialism, especially as implemented in the first 30 years in Communist China, by rooting knowledge in social praxis, broke down the barriers of clans and professional autonomy across China in the 1950s. While Feng was interested in a logical approach to knowledge in his early years, he never returned to that stance after 1949, as one of the outcomes of going through the Communist political campaigns was to never stress any internal structure of knowledge that was autonomous from the external social impact of knowledge. After 1949 even the study of logic had to have some nationalistic bearing on society. Logic was perceived by some Communist philosophers as a universal human tendency to react to their existential conditions; therefore, a Chinese variation of logic must exist.<sup>106</sup> Again the focus was that logic, like other forms of knowledge, should first and foremost derive its value not from within, but from its social circumstances. The Communist Chinese equation between praxis and class stance not only built up a close connection between knowledge and social outcome, but also created a population that was politically highly mobilized and responded to policy changes as the Communists signalled changes of direction through redefining social classes and their tasks. This political mobilization and association between Marxist materialism and social classes declined somewhat after China opened up to the West after 1978, but the Marxist focus on judging knowledge by its social impact still renders future political mobilizations through definitions of knowledge possible. The Marxist political and social mobilization of the Chinese society served narrowly conceived political outcomes at very high human prices. Marxist materialism may work best when not serving as a tool for policy implementation. It could then serve as a heuristic tool to provide a macroscopic view of the interactions of knowledge and the different social forces, provided knowledge is allowed a degree of autonomy.

<sup>105</sup> Liu, *The power of formalism*, p. 757.

<sup>106</sup> Kurtz, *The Discovery of Chinese Logic*, pp. 357–360.