

RESEARCH ARTICLE

The struggle for memory: Jian Bozan on historical materialism

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Abstract

This paper offers a first analysis of the philosophy of history developed by Jian Bozan (1898–1968), the author of China’s earliest comprehensive exposition of historical materialism. Despite his central importance for the establishment of professional historical studies in PRC, the existing studies neglect Jian’s original contribution to the development of Chinese Marxism and his pre-war works in general, focusing solely on his participation in the debate over the relation between history and theory in the 1960s. The paper seeks to fill this lacuna by providing a critical account of Jian Bozan’s understanding of historical laws, progress, the stages of history, human freedom and the class struggle. Jian’s synthesis of historicism and historical materialism, which at a time was seen as an alternative to the Maoist view of history, was officially condemned during the Cultural Revolution and led to his premature death. However, this paper demonstrates that, following the public rehabilitation of the thought of Jian Bozan in 1978, it was his system that had an important impact on the historiography in Dengist China. Furthermore, the paper argues that Jian’s approach to historical materialism brought many novelties in relation to the preceding Sino-Marxist views of history.

Key words: Chinese Marxism; cultural revolution; historical materialism; historicism; Jian Bozan

The struggle of man against power
is the struggle of memory against forgetting
– Milan Kundera

Introduction

It will not be an exaggeration to say that the global influence of Maoism and the vitality of Chinese communism do not translate into more widespread awareness of those Chinese Marxists who creatively developed historical materialism. One of them is undoubtedly Jian Bozan 翦伯赞 (1898–1968), a figure almost unknown outside the circles of the historians of PRC, who devoted his philosophical and historical activity – and ultimately also his own life – to the task of synthesizing historical materialism and historicism. One of the reasons for the neglect his contribution has fallen into is that at a certain time his philosophy of history could have been seen as a viable alternative to Mao’s standpoint. The paper demonstrates, however, that along with turning away from the heritage of the Cultural Revolution, Jian Bozan’s programme also had a profound impact upon post-1978 Chinese historiography. Furthermore, the paper argues that Jian’s approach to historical materialism introduced a significant novelty in relation to the views of history that had been developed within Marxist philosophy in China.

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This notwithstanding, there still exists a significant discrepancy between the number of studies on Jian Bozan and other Chinese Marxist thinkers (not to mention Mao), such as Li Dazhao,¹ Ai Siqi,² or Li Da,³ whose thought has been discussed in monograph form, whereas to date no academic articles that analyse the philosophy of Jian Bozan have been published in English. His views are not mentioned in the most voluminous Western histories of Chinese philosophy⁴ or even in the surveys of Chinese Marxism.⁵ The only Western studies of his theoretical approach, of which there are three in total,⁶ are solely concerned with his participation in the debate over the relation between history and theory in the 1960s and do not touch upon his own understanding of historical materialism, which had already been set out before the outbreak of World War II. In other words, although discussing his approach to the relation between historicism and historical materialism, they misleadingly treat the latter as something given and in toto inherited from Western Marxists, rather than treat it as a body of thought that was creatively reinterpreted by Jian. In this way, the following paper fills this surprising lacuna in the studies of contemporary Chinese thought and provides Western readers with a critical, wide-ranging account of Jian Bozan's philosophy of history.

Jian Bozan: life and works

All the tensions and limitations characterizing the development of historical materialism in China were reflected, if not tragically embodied, in the life and works of Jian Bozan. At a personal level, as a scholar of Uyghur descent, he wanted to find a place for both Marxist materialism and the cultural heritage related to his ethnic identity,⁷ as in the case of another prominent Marxist historian, who was himself of Hui origin, namely Bai Shouyi 白寿彝 (1909–2000).⁸ At a professional level, Jian Bozan wanted to combine his aspirations for being an original Marxist thinker with holding the offices of the dean of the faculty of history and vice-president of Peking University throughout the 1950s. Finally, at a theoretical level, Jian strove to reconcile the scientific requirements of academic historical studies with all the philosophical baggage that came with historical materialism. His desire to preserve the historical heritage of imperial China was unwavering in the face of the newly emerging (and also constantly volatile) challenges of Communism, and under the pressure of subsequent criticism during the Cultural Revolution his efforts were to ultimately cost him his life.

Jian Bozan was born on 14 April 1898, to his Uyghur family in Taoyuan, Hunan province (200 km from Mao's birthplace).⁹ Jian traced the origins of his unusual surname to the fourteenth century, when Zhu Yuanzhang, the founder of the Ming dynasty, sent several thousand Uyghur warriors to suppress the Miao rebellion in southern China. In recognition of his merits, one of the Uyghur generals was given the surname "Jian" (which means "to eradicate") and married Princess Duyi. In 1372, he was enfeoffed with the Taoyuan county and from that year onwards, his family, along with other descendants of the resettled Uyghurs, lived in this area. Bozan's father, Jian Kuiwu 翦奎午 (1874–

¹Meisner 1967.

²Fogel 1987.

³Knight 1998.

⁴De Bary and Lufrano 2000; Cua 2003; Bo Mou 2009.

⁵Knight 2005; Tian 2005.

⁶Dirlirk 1977; Edmunds 1987; Weigelin-Schwiedrzik 1996.

⁷As a sinicized descendant of Uyghurs who received a classical Chinese education, Jian never referred to Uyghur documents in his historical records of Northwest China (see Chen 2008, p. 58) and nothing suggests that he read in Uyghur, nor that he practiced the Muslim faith. He also did not pay particular attention to the Uyghur question in Qing China, as he interpreted the conquest of Dzungaria mostly in terms of reinforcing imperialism and viewed the Dungan Revolt as a part of anti-Qing peasant uprising (JBZ, vol. 9, 2007, pp. 716, 796–97). On the contrary, he wrote few essays on the origins of ethnic minorities living in the Tarim Basin and was clearly proud of his ethnic roots, as testified by his genealogical essay *My Clan, My Hometown*, at the end of which Jian strongly criticizes Chiang Kai-shek's Han-nationalism and considers China a multi-ethnic state (Su 2004, p. 26).

⁸Van den Stock 2019, pp. 184–92.

⁹All the information about the life of Jian Bozan is presented based on Zhang 1998.

1950), was an accomplished mathematician who passed the imperial examination at the county level (so-called *xiucai*) and a landowner of circa 130 acres of inherited land, therefore he could afford to have his son educated in the capital. As Su Min argues, both facts could have influenced the thought of Jian Bozan: his tendency towards preserving the distinctiveness of given nations within socialist system, as well as his rather charitable evaluation of the historical role of feudal landlords.¹⁰

In his youth, Jian Bozan attended the prominent Changde First Middle School (Hunan). In 1916, he was admitted to a legal college in Beijing, which he afterwards changed for an economic college in Wuchang. In 1919, Jian participated in the anti-imperialist student protests that gave rise to the May Fourth Movement; in the same year, he completed his graduate thesis on the history of China's currency system. After his return to the south of China, Jian took additional courses in commodity science and worked as an English teacher. Between 1924 and 1926, he studied economics at the University of California and became acquainted with most of Marx's writings and other Marxist classics, which already at that time made him a sworn Marxist. He returned to Beijing to join anti-imperialist demonstrations and witnessed the 18 March Massacre. In 1927, he joined the Kuomintang, which he left after a year due to its treatment of the Communists. Thereafter, he focused on academic work that resulted in the publication of the *Recent Capitalist Economy of the World* (*Zuijin zhi shijie ziben zhuyi jingji* 最近之世界資本主義經濟, 1931–1932). In 1934, along with Qin Zhen 覃振 (1885–1947), the deputy head of the Judicial House whom he served as a secretary, Jian Bozan set off on a journey around over twenty Asian, African, American and European countries.¹¹ Having seen with his own eyes the contemporaneous political situation in the world, in 1937 Jian Bozan secretly joined the Chinese Communist Party. Under the shadow of the outbreak of the anti-Japanese war, in 1938 Jian Bozan published *A Course in the Philosophy of History* (*Lishi zhexue jiaocheng* 歷史哲學教程), China's first comprehensive exposition of historical materialism along with its application to Chinese history.¹²

Throughout the 1940s, Jian Bozan combined his political activity (under the direct supervision of Zhou Enlai) with academic work, publishing the first two volumes of his most important historical work, *An Outline of Chinese History* (*Zhongguo shigang* 中國史綱),¹³ two out of three volumes of the *Treatises on Chinese History* (*Zhongguo shi lunji* 中國史論集), and the *Historical Materials and Historical Studies* (*Shiliao yu shixue* 史料與史學). After the founding of the People's Republic of China, Jian was promoted in Party structures and in 1952 he was appointed the Dean of the Faculty of History at Peking University and soon thereafter also its new vice-president. At that time, Jian used his influence to establish the Central Institute for Nationalities (*Zhongyang minzu xueyuan* 中央民族學院), which later became Minzu University of China, and edited new book series devoted to the history of non-Chinese minorities of PRC,¹⁴ thus becoming a father of modern Chinese ethnic history.

This notwithstanding, Jian's streak of successes came to an end after less than a decade. After the launch of Great Leap Forward campaign in 1958, he became a target of the radical leftists who accused him of insufficient usage of the class criterion and making scant references to Maoist thought, which only intensified during the period of Cultural Revolution. In December 1965, during the Hangzhou conference, Mao himself condemned Jian's idea that feudal landlords made concessions towards the peasants.¹⁵ Following this criticism, in April 1996, in the paper *Studying history for the sake of*

¹⁰Su 2004, p. 6.

¹¹I.e., Vietnam, Singapore, Sri Lanka, Egypt, France, Italy, Netherlands, Belgium, Germany, Poland, Czechia, Austria, Switzerland, and USA. Jian was particularly fascinated with the monuments of ancient Egypt and Rome.

¹²The study was divided into six chapters: "Introduction" (*Xulun*), "Law-conformity of historical development" (*Lishi fazhan de hefazexing*), "Interrelatedness of history" (*Lishi de guanlianxing*), "Practicality of history" (*Lishi de shijianxing*), "Adaptability of history" (*Lishi de shiyixing*), and "On problems of the historical development of China's social conditions" (*Guanyu Zhongguo shehui xingshi fazhan shi wenti*). Jian's basic points of reference were the writings of Marx, Engels, Lenin, and Plekhanov, treated in their entirety.

¹³For an English translation see Jian *et al.* 1981.

¹⁴*Zhongguo shaoshu minzu shike congkan* 中国少数民族史料丛刊 and *Lidai gezu zhuanji huipian* 历代各族传记汇编.

¹⁵MZDW 1968, vol. 5, pp. 246–47.

revolution (*Wei geming er yanjiu lishi* 为革命而研究历史), published by Qi Benyu 戚本禹 (1931–2016) in the political journal *Red Flag* (*Hongqi* 红旗), Jian Bozan was accused of opposing the theory of class struggle, denigrating peasant revolutions, praising emperors and kings and applauding conciliatory policies.¹⁶ Qi's attack was soon accompanied by other ultra-leftists, who tried to outdo each other in demonstrating the “anti-socialist,” “anti-party,” and “counter-revolutionary” character of Jian's writings. As Antoon De Baets estimates, in 1966 Jian was subjected to more than forty attacks in a dozen different newspapers and journals.¹⁷ Tortured by the radicals, on 18 December 1968, Jian Bozan and his wife committed suicide by overdosing on sleeping pills. Ten years later, with the rise of the Dengist era, Jian Bozan was officially rehabilitated, while his ideas in the philosophy of history became one of the benchmarks of the new historiography in PRC, although the awareness of his contribution to the development of Marxist philosophy in China will no longer match the respect it enjoyed in the 1940s and 1950s.

The task of the philosophy of history

The publicity that accompanied the publication of *A Course in the Philosophy of History* and its annual rereleases did not presage the later fate of the system outlined therein. Also Jian Bozan himself had quite high regard for his own work in the philosophy of history: not only did he perceive *A Course...* as the first Chinese handbook of historical materialism, but also considered it to be the first Chinese treatise on the *genuine* philosophy of history that avoids both metaphysical schematism and derivative compilation of quotes from Marxists. By virtue of escaping these two equally essentialist extremes, Jian aimed at portraying his account as a scientific analysis of the laws of historical development that emerge out of regularities of historical changes themselves: “the task of the philosophy of history is to understand the regularity (*guilüxing* 规律性) of the development and transformations of given stages in the history of human societies out of intricate and complex historical events, and there is no ‘correct’ philosophy that may act as a research tool.”¹⁸ In other words, the *real* task of the philosophy of history is to let history speak, rather than make it fit into the Procrustean bed of one's imagination in the name of an ill-conceived quest for originality. Such a definition of the philosophy of history is definitely close to that of Marx, who not only criticized imposing “general historico-philosophical theories” upon concrete historical events or a top-to-bottom application of abstract, ready-made schemes to particular historical conditions, but also restricted his interpretation of history to explanations of particular historical epochs.¹⁹

This belittling of one's own role in the process of (re-)constructing the philosophy of history was, however, just another rhetorical tool, for Jian had no doubt that history speaks in a very concrete way, which had been discovered once and for all by Marx. For instance, Jian states that history consists of the social and economic results of long-standing conflicts, but he rejects the evolutionist account of history “precisely because history itself is not in the nature of a peaceful, evolutionary, spontaneous and natural movement,”²⁰ so in a way it is one person's word against another's. This point indeed seems non-negotiable as for Jian the task of the philosophy of history is not only to underline the class character of the past, but also to guide current struggles by highlighting historical necessities revolutionary activism has to conform to and “point out to its future” (*zhishi jianglai* 指示将来). It has to motivate people towards ensuring its achievement by proving its inevitability, mostly by showing that “the last and decisive historical victory is not historically contingent, but historically necessary.”²¹ This means that already at that point Jian was himself faced with a classic Marxist dilemma: given that the future course of history is necessary and inevitable (or at least that the

¹⁶Munro 1980, p. 330.

¹⁷De Baets 2011, p. 54.

¹⁸JBZ, vol. 6, 2007, p. 8.

¹⁹See Ware 2019, pp. 42, 66, 128.

²⁰JBZ, vol. 6, 2007, p. 34.

²¹JBZ, vol. 6, 2007, pp. 33–34, 195.

upcoming of communism has such characteristics), what is the point of calling for the help of concrete people and motivating them to participate in the revolution?

Sweeping this element of fatalism to one side, Jian Bozan maintains that his approach stands in stark contrast to hitherto known views of history. The theology of history, as represented by the thought of St. Augustine in the West and the concept of the Mandate of Heaven in China, gave an entire historical initiative to God (or Heaven), treating people as merely means in his hand, and thereby legitimized the exploitation of the people. Eventually, it led to the claim that the thus sanctified order is perennial, which, in Jian's eyes, is a theme also used by the fascists who wear their infamous armband – "Gott mit uns." The subsequent metaphysics of history, Jian continues, "only substituted God with other eternal truths," arguing that all history is a process of the realization of ideas.²² Not only Hegelian, but also the entire Chinese philosophy of history (including its modern phase from Wei Yuan up to Hu Shi) is, to Jian, entirely idealistic.²³ By imposing external, metaphysical laws of thought upon "living" history, historical idealists "de-realize" (*fei xianshi* 非現實) the latter, being unable to explain all the contraventions of allegedly universal order, such as working-class revolution, which goes against the supposed final triumph of reason proclaimed by the capitalists and the inexorable march of will heralded by the fascists. Moreover, this shows that all historical idealisms with their concepts of eternal and universal order have to rest upon an idealist ontology, whereas, as Jian reminds us, "in truth, all beings (...) exist only within the confines of the necessities of historical development."²⁴

As early as in 1940, Jian argued that strong elements of historical idealism are also present in the thought of then-influential Hu Shi 胡適 (1891–1962). Most of these arguments were repeated during the hate campaign against Hu Shi in the 1950s²⁵ and had its direct relationship with Hu's critique of Marxism and the Chinese Communist Party.²⁶ According to Hu Shi's "experimentalism" (*shiyan zhuyi* 實驗主義),²⁷ history is freely created by the people without the constraint of any laws, at least if one does not count the psychological ones. Accordingly, Hu Shi does not believe in any qualitative breakthroughs in history, but instead subscribes to, as Jian puts it, an "old-fashioned evolutionism" that advocates quantitative changes "drop by drop." As a result, he tends to understand cause-and-effect relationships in history as external to its parts and isolated from each other. Hence, not surprisingly, he is inclined towards overemphasizing the role of contingent individuals, which is the classic element of all historical idealisms, Jian triumphantly concludes.²⁸ It is evident, although, that Jian's polemics with Hu Shi were aimed at overdrawing the thought of the latter and therefore also the promotion of his own philosophy of history centred around the concept of historical laws. The idea that the historical process is nothing but a collective name for particular forms of historical practice was common for both Jian Bozan and Hu Shi (and was not also probably far from Marx's own understanding of history).

Historical laws and progress

Jian Bozan stresses that in contradistinction to the metaphysical equating of the laws of history with absolute, immutable principles, historical materialism understands them as "abstracted, synthesized, and examined practice" (*bei chouxiangelede, bei zonghelede, bei sikaolede shijian* 被抽象了的、

²²JBZ, vol. 6, 2007, pp. 39–40.

²³Cf. JBZ, vol. 4, 2007, p. 485; vol. 6, 2007, pp. 81–86. Just like Li Dazhao, Jian Bozan showed no interest in searching for indigenous Chinese antecedents of modern historical materialism, despite their presence in the Chinese tradition, cf. Rogacz 2020, pp. 126–39.

²⁴JBZ, vol. 6, 2007, pp. 115–20.

²⁵JBZ, vol. 5, 2007, pp. 11–14.

²⁶Cf. Hu 1941.

²⁷In his article, "Experimentalism" published in *New Youth* (*Xin Qingnian*) on 15 April 1919, Hu Shi describes differences between James's pragmatism (*shiji zhuyi* 實際主義) and Dewey's instrumentalism (*gongju zhuyi* 工具主義) and characterizes the latter as "experimentalism" (*shiyan zhuyi*), namely an epistemology based on "the laboratory attitude of mind" and subscribes himself to that position, see HSWJ, vol. 2, 1998, pp. 208–48.

²⁸JBZ, vol. 3, 2007, pp. 23–34.

被综合了的、被思考了的实践)。²⁹ On the contrary, Jian claims no less firmly that, first, all these laws are necessary and only brought into effect in a contingent way (the point frequently stressed by Lenin, to whom Jian refers, and with regards to their necessity, even more by Stalin). Second, all these laws are general (*yibande* 一般的), which means that they have to be applicable to all the stages of historical development³⁰:

Hence, historical research not only searches for general laws, but also explores specific circumstances, namely not only abstracts generalities from multifaceted and particular histories, but proceeds to understanding these particularities from within their general nature. At the same time it has to dialectically take into account the specific laws of given times and areas of history. And although such specificity is quite often subordinated to a general law, it genuinely constitutes the crucial moment in the structure of the concrete content of the histories of individual nations.³¹

Jian's concern with the reciprocal relation between the general and the particular was different from the attitude of Mao, who in *Problems of Strategy in China's Revolutionary War* (1936) claimed that since "each historical stage has its special characteristics, the laws of war also have their own characteristics, and they cannot be mechanically applied to another stage."³² As a result, for Mao the laws describing Soviet revolutionary war cannot be freely applied to the unique Chinese historical experience, and this point was certainly ancillary to his political agenda during the Sino-Soviet split. Jian's dialectical approach implies, in turn, that various particularities do not challenge the very application of general laws. Jian does not explain, however, how it is possible for a necessary and strictly general law to be induced from a finite set of instances. The statement that historical specificities are "quite often" subordinated to general laws also suggests that there are some particularities that are beyond the reach of laws, which seriously questions the generality of the latter. This key inconsistency, already visible in Jian's view on the task of the philosophy of history, will also influence other parts of his thought, including his later answer to the challenge of historicism.

Another problem Jian had to face was the relation between the necessity of historical laws and the freedom of individuals acting in history. As he admits, historical materialism cannot mechanically impose some impersonal laws on the people, but instead has to "dialectically" acknowledge "the creative role of the subjective factor" in history. No "scientific socialist" can deny that history has been created by the people, namely by the oppressed masses *and* their leaders. However, the latter led the people due to the efficient recognition of the objective conditions of a given time. In other words, prominent individuals always function within the given limits of their class, the level of the development of productive forces, and so forth, so that none of them can possibly counteract historical laws. Following the Plekhanovist solution to this problem, Jian Bozan states that although these laws and stages are necessary, the emergence of certain individuals is basically contingent. If it were not for, say, Napoleon or Lenin (or Mao), some other leader would have appeared, and the same inexorable processes would have happened. On the contrary, it cannot be ruled out that without these men all the changes would not have occurred just as quickly, just as all prominent individuals are capable of stunting them.³³ Such a solution to the problem of historical agency was in line with the arguments of Qu Qiubai,³⁴ but was later ignored by Mao, whose radically anti-individualistic approach culminated during the Cultural Revolution.

²⁹JBZ, vol. 6, 2007, p. 54.

³⁰JBZ, vol. 4, 2007, p. 363; vol. 6, 2007, p. 54–56.

³¹所以歷史的研究不僅在探求一般法則，而且探求特殊形勢，即是說不僅在從多樣性的具體歷史中抽出其一般性，而且還要從其一般性中去認識其特殊性。即同時必須辯證地估計到各個時代和各個地域之歷史的特殊法則。雖然這種特殊性，又經常地從屬於一般法則，但特殊性卻又正是個別民族歷史的具體內容的構成之重要契機；JBZ, vol. 6, 2007, pp. 54–55.

³²MZDJ, vol. 5, 1983, p. 87.

³³JBZ, vol. 6, 2007, pp. 11, 21–26, 79.

³⁴See Knight 2005, pp. 54–58.

A dialectical rethinking of the basic categories of historical materialism also extended to Jian's reflection on the nature of historical movements, which brought a significant novelty in relation to the previous Sino-Marxist philosophy. According to Jian Bozan, each historical movement consists dialectically of two moments: the progressive and the conservative one. The former is stronger at the beginning, whereas the latter is incremental towards the end. To put it simply, every progressive movement has to eventually slow down. "Any reaction in history does not manifest its reactivity in the beginning, but reversely, it is often hidden behind the posture of a revolution and exposes its reactionary character only with getting close to its (complete) denouement."³⁵ Peasant uprisings in imperial China, for instance, were historically permissible precisely because all of them ended in the same way: in spite of the progressive (and from the economic viewpoint, also necessary) anti-feudalist reasons, the closer to the end of a rebellion, the more reactionary attitudes were coming to the fore, so that in the end the peasants, deluded with a promise of a better future, supported their leader in the founding of a new (supposedly unprecedented) dynasty, whereas, in fact, such a leader merely gave his name to nothing but a "crew change" within the stratum of landlords. At the end of the day, however, each transformation of the modes of production, along with the subsequent changes in the domain of politics and culture, further the historical objectives.³⁶ Hence, Jian Bozan openly accedes to the spiral scheme of historical development: the cycles initiated by temporary retrogressions that are ultimately inscribed into the line of progress. Importantly, Jian justifies this model with reference to Chinese history, but then notes that "it has to be pointed out that historical development as such does not adopt the cyclical trajectory (...), but eternally follows the spiral pattern that never returns to its point of departure."³⁷ Surprisingly, Jian does not refer to Lenin's idea of "a development, so to speak, that proceeds in spirals, not in a straight line; a development by leaps, catastrophes, and revolutions."³⁸

Jian built his certainty in this regard on the trust in dialectics, which equipped him with the knowledge of the rules governing the historical dynamics itself. In accordance with the law of the transformation of quantity into quality, Jian holds that it is only after exceeding some degree of the progressive potential that a qualitative "leap" (*feiyue* 飛躍) is possible. From the viewpoint of dialectics, such a leap can be explained as the negation of negation that unfolds the contradictions (*maodun* 矛盾) of a thing. In terms of social reality, the unveiling of inner contradictions eventually takes on the shape of revolution.³⁹ Importantly, this passage was independent from Mao, whom Jian never quotes in the entire 1938 edition of *A Course in the Philosophy of History*. Naturally, he referred to Mao's *On Contradiction* in a similar discussion from his essay *On how to investigate Chinese history* of 1950,⁴⁰ but even then that went against the fact that Mao never agreed with the law of double negation. Interestingly, the relative absence of the quotes from Chairman Mao in Jian's later works also applies to the points and ideas they shared, such as the spiral scheme of history.⁴¹

Stages of history and their actors

This, however, did not exhaust Jian's interest in peasant rebellions, which were instructive for yet another reason. As Jian argues, every type of revolution: the anti-slavery Christian revolution, the anti-Christian French revolution, the Taiping rebellion, etc., was of a folksy (*renmin* 人民) nature. However, it was only the Soviet revolution that had unprecedentedly established a socialist society actually governed by the people. That is why both the Russian and Chinese (republican) revolutions were fuelled by the support of the masses, and if it had not been for the fascist governments, they would have already spread to the whole world. Indeed, Jian Bozan sees 1938 as a decisive, critical

³⁵JBZ, vol. 6, 2007, p. 16.

³⁶JBZ, vol. 6, 2007, p. 16–17.

³⁷JBZ, vol. 4, 2007, pp. 487–88.

³⁸Lenin 1970, p. 12.

³⁹JBZ, vol. 6, 2007, p. 163.

⁴⁰JBZ, vol. 4, 2007, p. 491.

⁴¹MZDW 1968, vol. 3, p. 227.

moment in world history that would determine the exact time of the arrival of socialism. The latter was to have concluded the course of history that began with primitive classless societies and went through subsequent stages of class societies (slave society, feudalism and capitalism).⁴² In opposition to the fascist, antagonistic understanding of nationality, socialism was to bring about a global union of nations. Quoting the textual “evidence” from Marx, Engels, Lenin and Stalin,⁴³ Jian Bozan argues that Marxism by no means proclaims a simple disappearance of nations. On the contrary, it opts for their fundamental transformation in the socialist age, with regard to both internal and external relations. It is because as an element of the superstructure, nationality reflects the current mode of production. “From the Marxist viewpoint, states in class societies imprison the people of given nations, and only the socialist states shall become the families for these nations,” Jian writes, and then adds: “if we put the question of national assimilation in a historical framework, we can then observe the historical process of the development of international relations from the formation of nations through their assimilation up to their fusion, and the fusion of nations will be, in point of fact, their fade-away.”⁴⁴ Jian’s position in the controversy over the national question was therefore stretched between Luxemburgian antinationalism and national communism, but at the same time slightly closer to the former, especially given the fact that both Marx and Engels envisioned the future as consisting of separate (and not merged) communist nations.⁴⁵

What is quite interesting is that in these passages and throughout *A Course*, Jian tends to equate (both in logical and chronological terms) socialism with communism, as he does not interpret the latter as replacing the former. Similar idea is to be found in Mao’s writings from the 1940s,⁴⁶ but it was soon rejected in favour of the Leninist twofold periodization of the post-capitalist future. In this sense, Jian Bozan once again recovered the pre-Leninist shape of the materialist conception of history, as Marx thought of the proletarian state rule in terms of a (short) period of transition rather than yet another historical epoch.⁴⁷ In the case of Jian Bozan, this may be at least partially explained by his disinterest in any detailed depictions of the future utopia. Jian’s pregnant silence may have resulted from the fact that he tried – as a professional historian – to focus on the interpretation of historical past and not to cross the boundaries of general declarations, namely the basic directions stemming from the resource of past events.

This does not, however, end Jian’s struggles with the commonly recognized sequence of the modes of production. As a practicing historian of imperial China, Jian refutes the concept of the Asiatic mode of production as an “undialectic” concession based on external, geographical criterion. In his eyes, its particular danger lies in questioning the general nature of the laws of historical materialism, not to mention its monism: “it is correct to explain, on the one hand, the general nature of the historical development of the productive forces and class relations, and to examine, on the other hand, Eastern history as a circle within world history, but to posit on that basis the existence of ‘the Asiatic mode of production,’ which in fact does not possess any unique characteristics (*tezheng*) in the scale of the concrete social history of mankind – this completely ignores [the fact that] the history of Eastern societies has quite a few particularities (*teshuxing*) within its general course.”⁴⁸ Accordingly, Jian believes that the idea of the Asiatic mode of production, shared by Marx, Engels, Plekhanov and

⁴²JBZ, vol. 6, 2007, pp. 12–14, 75, 98, 106.

⁴³From Marx: the preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* and his writings on India; from Engels: *Anti-Dühring*, the *Civil War in Switzerland*, and the preface to the English translation of the first volume of *Capital*; from both – the *Communist Manifesto*; from Lenin – *Critical Remarks on the National Question*; from Stalin – *Marxism and the National Question*.

⁴⁴JBZ, vol. 4, 2007, pp. 444–46, 449.

⁴⁵Ware 2019, pp. 116–19, 133–35. Later Mao was inclined towards believing that nations and families as social units will disappear in the communist future, see Schram 1974, pp. 115–16.

⁴⁶MZDJ, vol. 7, 1983, pp. 96–98.

⁴⁷For a detailed analysis of these differences see Ware 2019, pp. 185–95, 205–06.

⁴⁸一面從生產方法以及階級關係去說明歷史發展之一般性，另一面把東方史作為世界是之一環去研究，這是正確的。但因而肯定亞細亞生產方法，在人類社會的具體歷史過程中，並沒有具備獨特的特徵，這是完全忽略了東方社會在歷史的一般過程中具有不少的特殊性；JBZ, vol. 6, 2007, p. 60.

Lenin, did not result from the scarcity of sources, but primarily from misrepresenting Asian economics. But, eventually all Jian wants to say in this regard is that all these thinkers were not Marxist enough. As he argues, there cannot be two historical stages at the same time, so there is only one *general* mode of production at a time (e.g. the ancient one), which is then exemplified in historically *specific* modes of production, such as the ancient Chinese, Greek, Roman, etc. In contrast to the mechanistic (and dualist) perspective, as represented especially by Plekhanov, such a dialectical approach to the relation between the general and the specific helps reaffirm historical materialism as “conclusion abstracted from particular historical facts” rather than just another imputed historico-philosophical scheme.⁴⁹

A dialectical mindset is also required when approaching Marxism’s central issue of the influence of the superstructure upon the economic base. Since individuals are capable of either delaying or accelerating changes (within the boundaries of historical laws), historical materialism has to recognize the reciprocal relation between “objective circumstances” and “subjective power.” Just as a true dialectics of unity does not separate the principles (*yuanli* 原理) of social history from historical facts (*shishi* 史實), so it cannot mechanistically treat the role of humans as a mere outer “skin” of some inanimate structure. This mutual influence is possible precisely because “the subjective life is a result of objectification, a product of history,” which, in turn, with time objectifies itself, thus becoming – as ideology – an element of the objective, external environment delimiting social activity. Only by admitting this two-way relationship could one obtain a holistic view of history that demonstrates the “interrelatedness” (*guanlianxing* 關聯性) of time and space, objective circumstances and subjective factors.⁵⁰ Already on the basis of materialist ontology it is clear that the human spirit (*renlei jingshen* 人類精神) cannot be opposed to nature, for it is nature’s most complex product and its own part. The dualist opposition between the thing and consciousness is the heritage of idealism, particularly that of Kant, and by no means was it shared by Marx, Jian insists. How could then Marx believe that history starts with men subduing nature yet omit men’s main instrument of such subjugation? This argument could have been taken from Li Da, who already in 1921 warned against the “Kantianization” (*Kangdehua*) of Marxism, and especially of its philosophy of history.⁵¹ In principle, Marx never (mechanistically) isolated ideas from the objective conditions of social development, but showed that – and how – there are no ideas that would not be of class nature, and this, as Jian reminds, is the proper meaning of the statement about the dependence of the superstructure upon its economic base.⁵²

Classes in history

However, despite all the importance of the class dimension of history – and this is a point Jian Bozan had already emphasized in *A Course* – one cannot effectively explain history solely on the basis of the class criterion, for there is a series of other (economic, geographical, etc.) factors that have to be properly recognized, not only for the sake of historical credibility, but even “in order to understand the class dimension of a given period of history.” Certainly, from a general perspective, the meaning of, say, the relation of all feudal lords to the peasants cannot be explained otherwise than with reference to the characteristics of feudalism, but within this general framework, “from the perspective of particular historical conditions,” there are various historical situations resulting from non-class determinants. A true historical materialist has to know that historical necessities are realized in different ways and

⁴⁹JBZ, vol. 3, 2007, p. 397; vol. 6, 2007, pp. 59–61, 69–72.

⁵⁰JBZ, vol. 6, 2007, pp. 76, 79–80, 95. It is remarkable how much Jian’s language resembles here that of Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130–1200): the idea that the principle (*li* 理) of history is inseparable from concrete events (*shi* 事); the concept of one principle expressed in many changing, material manifestations; avoiding fatalism by introducing the subjective power of measuring the objective circumstances, and finally holism in understanding historical agency, along with the metaphor of “outer skin,” cf. Rogacz 2020, pp. 122–25.

⁵¹Knight 1998, pp. 66, 188, 211.

⁵²JBZ, vol. 6, 2007, pp. 111–12, 127–28.

circumstances, which requires the process of “dialectically combining the general with the particular,” instead of the formalist and fatalist approach represented either by metaphysicians or “vulgar naturalists,” among whom Jian counts the proponents of the “wrong concept” of permanent revolution, *buduan geming* 不斷革命⁵³ (a remark which, for obvious reasons, was never repeated in his post-1949 works). In other words, Marxist historians should prove that there is no conflict between historical materialism and historicism, and it was this intention that guided the later reflection and activity of Jian Bozan.

This theoretical problem was brought to the forefront of Jian’s scholarship, along with the politicization of academic histories, after the launch of Great Leap Forward campaign in 1958, which then only intensified during the period from 1958 to 1964. Academic historians were expected to depict nothing but the class conflict through the ages, and particularly – to eulogize the labouring masses and to take account of their role in history at the cost of condemned villains, whose first and main fault was their class affiliation. The radicals went even further and postulated erasing all the mentions of the feudal (ruling-class) culture, including the reign titles, and to make a new, anonymous socio-economic history with the proletariat as its only driving force. Ultimately, being obliged to legitimize current policies and mobilize the people, historians turned into yet more propagandists of the state.

As a Marxist thinker, Jian Bozan never denied the need for placing historiography in proper relation to political challenges, which directly stems from its class character. This does not mean, although, as he points out, that historians are expected to search for instances of contemporary policies in ancient or medieval times, for that not only violates the principles of historicism, but also misrepresents the function of political factors in historical studies. In contrast to politics, the (Marxist) theory through the prism of which particular events are to be interpreted is general and not restricted to a particular given state and its changing resolutions, for it is also “universal and not limited to any time and place.” Furthermore, politics does not explain reality, but merely tells us what to do: “theory implies fundamentality (*yuanzhexing* 原則性), it is to explain ‘why’; politics is concrete, its task is to stipulate what should be done, and what not, within a determined period of time.” Therefore, the only way proletarians could benefit from historical studies is that the latter provides them with historical experience of both conquerors and the defeated, as well as with knowledge of laws and tendencies governing history. Suffice it to say, Jian concludes, such knowledge is invaluable for all those who want to succeed in revolution and building socialism.⁵⁴ Hence, recent attempts at showing that Jian Bozan’s philosophy of history is close to postmodernism due to a belief in “the political unconscious” that structures the narrative⁵⁵ are rather inaccurate. The theory Jian has in mind is historical materialism, which he sees not only as a universal (*pubian* 普遍), but also once explicitly formulated truth (*zhenli* 真理). In fact, Jian’s approach is much closer to the traditional view represented by Sima Qian 司馬遷 (145–86 BC) and Liu Zhiji 劉知幾 (661–721), who believed that moral lessons could be based only on a truthful record, and it is no coincidence that Jian devoted two extensive chapters to them in his 1947 book *Historical Materials and Historical Studies*. In the end, Jian Bozan was most absorbed not by the relationship between normative politics and descriptive historical science, but by the relation of historical facts to the theory used to evaluate them within the scope of science.

Historical materialism and historicism

Throughout the 1960s, Jian Bozan held that historical figures cannot be strictly judged by contemporary standards, for they should be evaluated according to the conditions and context of their times. Cognately, no prominent individuals should be modernized and idealized, as in the case of the peasant uprisings erroneously labelled as the proletarian ones.⁵⁶ The historian is not a bard, Jian writes, and his

⁵³Quotes in the passage come from: JBZ, vol. 6, 2007, pp. 55–56.

⁵⁴JBZ, vol. 4, 2007, pp. 420–22.

⁵⁵Li 2003.

⁵⁶JBZ, vol. 4, 2007, pp. 335–39, 391.

task is not to celebrate the heroes of the past, but to give an account of the course of events. For the same reasons, historians cannot omit the impact of culture, religion included, no matter which class stood behind it. It is the theory of historical materialism itself that is the only reliable interpretative key for all historical sources (something Jian Bozan never called into doubt), which requires taking into account all the concrete facts, with no “arbitrariness” (*wudian* 武断), “insinuations” (*yingshe* 影射), “speculations” (*konghua* 空话), “false analogies” (*fuhui* 附会) or “doctrinarism” (*jiaotiao zhuyi* 教条主义).⁵⁷ Hence, as Clifford Edmunds correctly observes, Jian Bozan’s historicism was built on three core premises: (1) the principle of context and empathy, (2) the idea of comprehensiveness and (3) the empirical inclination.⁵⁸ Jian, thus, seems to exhort the Marxists: to acknowledge the facts (3), and all the facts (2), from their own perspective (1), since that shall only strengthen and reconfirm their theory. Or more openly: as Jian postulates, Marxists have to combine their class viewpoint with historicism (*lishi zhuyi* 历史主义), otherwise they will “adopt a nihilist (*xuwu zhuyi* 虚无主义) attitude towards their own history”; in turn, historicism without the principles of historical materialism simply justifies the status quo (“speaks in defence of outmoded things”) and exposes itself as mere objectivism (*keguan zhuyi* 客观主义). And just as one cannot act in a revolutionary manner without first agreeing with science, it follows that if historicism is abandoned, it is no longer Marxism.⁵⁹

Accordingly, Jian Bozan often repeats that historians should gather up and analyse as many relevant sources as possible, with the proviso that they do not confine themselves to narrating events, but also aim at explaining “why” they have happened. And it is also true that the more abundant the historical sources are, the more reliable are the conclusions based on them. Referring to early historicism of Mao, according to which Chinese Marxists should synthesize the heritage “from Confucius to Sun Yat-sen,” Jian claims that proletarian historians should not be afraid of examining the classical sources and histories of emperors, for these are rather the bourgeoisie historians who deliberately misinterpret the materials.⁶⁰ In his essay *History and Theory* (*Shi yu lun* 史与论) of 1962, Jian argues that the difference between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie does not rest upon which side takes the historical sources into account (why then should proletarians be deprived of the knowledge of the history they have made?), but rather on the choice of standpoint (*lichang* 立场) from which these sources are being interpreted. In fact, the very process of selecting and arranging the sources is always guided by more or less realized theoretical criteria. In the case of the bourgeoisie, this is both their class standpoint, as well as their theoretical viewpoint, namely historical idealism, to which proletarians have to respond with their class and theoretical viewpoint of historical materialism.

Jian admits, however, that the approach of “leading history with theory” (*yi lun dai shi* 以论带史), which he originally supported, has to be corrected, for two major reasons. First, such a directive might suggest that historians should start with theory rather than concrete facts, which, in practice, means that they are already in possession of the conclusions that should rather emerge out of the narrative of particular events (“the correct method is to let the reader get the conclusion intended by the author out of the narrative of historical facts”). The “*yi lun dai shi*” approach rectifies the theory, which should be instead understood as nothing but a “guiding principle” (*zhidao yuanze* 指导原则) of historical research. Second, such a strategy misrepresents Marxism, which served Marx and Engels as an analytical tool and interpretative framework rather than a ready-made repertory of knowledge about all possible matters. “The [categories] of Marxism are derived from an analysis of society and history; the doctrinaires do not employ these rules and schemes to analyse (*fenxi* 分析) concrete facts, but instead they substitute the facts with these rules and schemes.”⁶¹ For these reasons, Jian ultimately calls for “combining history with theory” (*shi-lun jiehe* 史论结合), or “a unity of views and sources”

⁵⁷JBZ, vol. 4, 2007, pp. 398–03.

⁵⁸Edmunds 1987, pp. 75–81.

⁵⁹JBZ, vol. 4, 2007, pp. 422–28, 466–67.

⁶⁰JBZ, vol. 4, 2007, pp. 379, 403, 430, 471, 489–90.

⁶¹JBZ, vol. 4, 2007, pp. 408–11.

(*guandian yu shike de tongyi* 观点与史料的统一). For the sake of clarity, it is necessary to emphasize that Jian Bozan was not the only participant of the debate on the relation between history and philosophy who called for combining these two perspectives. Lin Ganquan (林甘泉, 1931–2017), for instance, argued that in Marxism both viewpoints are completely unified: if the class viewpoint is applied correctly, historicism will follow automatically, but this meant to him that the class viewpoint alone is sufficient to comprehend history.⁶² Jian Bozan's stance, in contrast, opted for a full compatibility of historical materialism with autonomously historical criteria.

Nevertheless, no matter how eagerly Jian appealed for combining history with theory, given his strong, almost inductive empiricism on the one hand and his no less determined allegiance to Marxism as an interpretative key for all historical events on the other, the ultimate result of his reconciliatory efforts is much more complicated. The nuanced nature of Jian's solution was accurately diagnosed by Jiang Dachun 蒋大椿 (b. 1940), one of the later participants of the debate. Commenting upon Jiang's interpretation, Susanne Weigelin-Schwiedrzik writes:

On the level of *weltanschauung*, *shi* means *shixue* in the sense of history as an academic discipline, and *lun* means theory in the sense of Marxist philosophy, or better, historical materialism. Marxist philosophy is the guiding principle of history as an academic discipline, and in this sense the slogan "theory takes the lead over data and material" is correct. But on the level of research, *shi* stands for historical data, and *lun* for interpretations or evaluations. In this context, Wu Han's slogan that "interpretation emerges from data" is adequate (as Jiang Dachun puts it), because the knowledge of what happened in the past is to be the result of research and not its precondition. Finally, on the level of presentation, *shi* and *lun* have to be combined, meaning that historical material and theoretical concepts as well as interpretations and explanations have to be integrated into one text. Jian Bozan's slogan of combining data and theory is directed at this level and leaves enough freedom to choose whatever kind of combination is adequate.⁶³

The importance of this interpretation also lies in demonstrating that since the relation between theoretical concepts and historical data *within* historical studies constitutes a second-order structure predetermined by the general relationship of historical materialism to the discipline of history, Jian Bozan's standpoint in the debate should be framed within his understanding of historical materialism and the philosophy of history that was formulated 20 years prior to the beginning of the *shi-lun* debate.

Jian Bozan's impact on post-1978 Chinese historiography

In spite of the solemn condemnation of Jian's synthesis by the radical historians, it is difficult to convincingly demonstrate that a multi-layered approach combining historical materialism with historicism is incompatible with the orthodox Marxism. Hence, it is not surprising that as early as 1978 Jian Bozan was cleared of all charges and publicly rehabilitated, whereas his criticism of radical historians became officially accepted by the Party. In the September issue of the *Historical Research* (*Lishi yanjiu*) journal of 1978, Li Honglin 李洪林 (1925–2016) published a paper attacking Qi Benyu and defending Jian Bozan, which opened a series of similar, commemorative papers. Li Honglin's article perfectly exemplifies the transformations that took place in the decade between 1968 and 1978: it was Qi Benyu who was accused of opposing the essence of Marxism and the attack on its historicist, and therefore also scientific, dimension; whereas Jian Bozan was portrayed as a martyr of communism and a victim of the Gang of Four. Mao's role in the condemnation of Jian is, in turn, deliberately ignored, while Jian Bozan himself is presented as the actual continuator of Mao's thought. After all, it was Mao who had declared during the Yan'an period that "we are Marxist historicists (*Makesi zhuyi de lishi zhuyizhe*) and we should not cut ourselves off from

⁶²Dirlik 1977, p. 471.

⁶³Weigelin-Schwiedrzik 1996, pp. 83–84; cf. Jiang 1982.

history.”⁶⁴ In fact, in his defence of combining historicism with Marxism, Li went even further than Jian, arguing that “in the entirety of history it is only the proletariat whose outlook is not limited by any selfish interests, therefore it views history in the most correct way.”⁶⁵

As a result, Jian’s synthesis of historicism and historical materialism had a profound impact upon historical research in the Dengist era. As Clifford Edmunds observes,

Although the term *historicism* had not regained its former status as a major slogan in post-Mao historiography, perhaps because it is still too closely identified with earlier political controversies, the methodological and interpretative principles associated with the concept have been widely advanced (...) Deng Xiaoping’s dictum of “seeking truth from facts,” when applied to historical scholarship, clearly parallels the empirical, inductive methodology of Jian Bozan’s *historicism*.⁶⁶

It is also clear that although the radicalization of the class struggle and the call for permanent revolution entailed the black-and-white fractionalizing of history into friends and enemies represented by the radical historians during the Cultural Revolution, Jian Bozan’s fusion of historical materialism and historicism, as well as his formerly enunciated dialectics of general necessities realized in historically specific (*teshuxingde*) situations, corresponded with the project of “socialism with Chinese characteristics” (*jiuyou Zhongguo tese shehui zhuyi*). There is no doubt that what appears as a mere adaptation of universal political doctrine to the particular conditions found in China is somehow built on the idea of the distinctiveness of China’s historical experience, which requires a reconciliatory solution to the problem of its most efficient path towards communism. Of course, as Dirlik aptly notes, “there is no account in this representation of how a ‘socialism with Chinese characteristics’ will link up with the historical progress of other societies”⁶⁷ and this leads to another point that was always stressed by Jian Bozan: the need for acknowledging the historical distinctiveness of respective nations and ethnic minorities (*minzu*). It is no coincidence that it was none other than Jian Bozan who coined the term ‘historical nihilism’ (*lishi xuwu zhuyi*), the dizzying career of which could be observed starting from the 1990s up to its presence in the current discourse of prominent PRC officials (Xi Jinping included). Certainly, the term is used mostly as an insult to all those who are sceptical towards the “Chinese distinctiveness of socialism” and the “leading role of the Party,” but its meaning in the academic discourse is in substance identical to that assigned to it by Jian Bozan, namely: the rejection of tradition, classical culture and national heritage in the name of misunderstood, “doctrinary” allegiance to Marxist theory. What is more, one of the first academic papers written by Party officials on the concept of historical nihilism refers to the concept of the continuousness (连续性 *liánxùxìng*) of history,⁶⁸ once formulated in Jian Bozan’s *Course*. This testifies to the (often unrecognized) influence of Jian’s philosophy of history upon contemporary Chinese historical studies.

As a result, the importance of Jian Bozan’s historiographical thought did not diminish, but actually increased in the twenty-first century, as evidenced most of all by the publication of his complete works in 2007. One of the main impulses for the renewed interest in Jian’s thought was the commemorative congress organized at Peking University in April 1998 on the occasion of the centenary of Jian Bozan’s birth, which was attended by over 200 prominent historians from China and other Asian countries, and was followed by the publication of the *Festschrift for Jian Bozan*.⁶⁹ The main organizer of this congress and the leading promoter of Jian’s thought is his direct disciple and a professor of history at Beida, Zhang Chuanxi (张传玺, b. 1927), known in the West mostly as the co-editor of the four-volume *History of Chinese Civilisation*.⁷⁰ Zhang argues that Jian’s influence on the so-called New

⁶⁴Cf. MZDJ, vol. 6, 1983, p. 260.

⁶⁵Li 1978, pp. 27–31.

⁶⁶Edmunds 1987, pp. 95–96.

⁶⁷Dirlik 2005, p. 234.

⁶⁸Kong 1989.

⁶⁹Zang 1998.

⁷⁰Yuan et al. 2012.

Historiography in PRC (which is essentially different from Liang Qichao's programme of *Xin Shixue*) is fourfold. First, both in his historiography and throughout *A Course*, Jian Bozan defended the rationality of historical materialism as an interpretative and analytical tool of historical studies. Second, no one before him had realized the programme of Marxist historiography in China in such a comprehensive manner, which only inspired later syntheses. Third, it was only after the contributions of Jian Bozan that ethnic history became an indispensable part of modern historical research in PRC. Finally, it was Jian who demonstrated that a true historical materialism cannot ignore historical facts and cannot simply follow the guidelines of the current propaganda; and it was these efforts that, despite the initial dissent of the radical leftists, ultimately won the autonomous status of historical studies in China.⁷¹ Of course, the second point is rather debatable, particularly due to its deliberate underestimation of Guo Moruo's historiography. The last one, in turn, could be justified only in retrospect, and with a very specific understanding of "autonomy," which even then seems to result rather from major political transformations than shifts within academia itself. This notwithstanding, the ideological impact is measured precisely by such retrospective references, and since the indebtedness of the New Historiography to Jian Bozan is so commonly recognized, and all the references are indeed to be found in his thought, then this influence should be assessed highly. The question arises as to whether Jian's influence upon historical materialism and the Chinese Marxist philosophy in general measures up to his historiographical legacy.

Jian Bozan's influence on the development of Chinese Marxism

In terms of its overall theoretical impact and ideological overtone, Jian Bozan's approach to historical materialism, including the nuanced dialectics of general necessities realized in historically specific situations, provided a solid theoretical justification for the project of "socialism with Chinese characteristics," which cannot be considered irrelevant in the context of the official rehabilitation of his thought. Of course, Jian was not first to come up with the idea of Sinicization of Marxism, yet whereas Mao believed that it is only the Chinese people that are capable of accelerating the inexorable march towards the communist future, Jian would have rather come out in favour of an accommodating approach, seeking a compromise between "the principles" and "historical facts." Significantly, it was also Jian Bozan who, in contraposition to Mao (fatefully for Jian himself), believed that in spite of their reactionary standpoint from the viewpoint of their times, in the grand scheme of things capitalist owners play their irreplaceable role in the progress towards the ultimate goal of social development. Such an approach assertively supports the suspension of all "permanent revolutions" and the permission to *temporarily* follow the paths of capitalism with clear awareness (in the back of one's mind) of the *ultimate* goal of this process. In other words, historicism, with its call for empathetic recognition of the specific circumstances of a given time, serves rather as an excuse than a hastening. In his recent critique of the China model, Xu Jilin identifies historicism as the core concept standing behind China's distinctive path towards further modernization. As Xu believes, historicism is currently being employed as a mode of resistance against Western universalism, which is still built upon "a Hegelian-style view of historical goals, an inevitable fate that awaited all non-Western nations in the contemporary world, which was to evolve from tradition to modernity, so as to achieve the same homogenized status as universalized Western countries."⁷² And although Xu does not refer to Jian Bozan, it is noteworthy that the historicist philosophy of the latter was systematically targeted at all Hegelian-like, speculative views of history as early as 1938.

Accordingly, Jian Bozan's contribution to the development of Chinese Marxism is recognized mostly in terms of the "de-metaphysicization" of historical materialism and the preceding Sino-Marxist views of history in general. Papers included in the special issue of the Chinese *Journal of Historical Theory and History of Historiography*, which was published on the occasion of the 70th anniversary of the first edition of *Lizhi*

⁷¹Zhang 1999. All these points are developed in Zhang's book, *Jian Bozan: A New Historian*, cf. Zhang 2006.

⁷²Xu 2018, p. 71.

zhexue jiaocheng, interpret the thought of Jian Bozan precisely in this spirit. One of the contributors, Li Hongyan (李洪岩, b. 1963), points out that Jian Bozan's influence on contemporary Chinese philosophy of history is actually twofold: on the one hand, it contributed to the rejection of futile, metaphysical speculations about history amongst Chinese Marxists, whereas on the other hand, it also distanced Marxist theory from purely formalist accounts of history (which are now typical of analytical philosophy of historiography), showing that it is possible to build a scientific, general theory of historical process.⁷³ Of course, despite all the intentions of Li and other interpreters of Jian's thought, his philosophy of history, centred around the category of necessary historical laws, cannot be completely separated from its genuinely metaphysical core. At the same time, however, a clear departure from the speculative views of history could be observed in all post-1978 Chinese Marxism, and even if Jian Bozan was not the only initiator of this tendency, he was one of the first representatives of this new intellectual trend, and for some time past also its face. It has also been demonstrated that Jian Bozan's scholarship informed the leading, empirically-oriented Marxist theoreticians of the 1980s, such as Hou Wailu (侯外庐, 1903–1987).⁷⁴

Most importantly, Jian Bozan's contribution consists of presenting the first Chinese comprehensive exposition of historical materialism that abandoned the strategy including numerous quotations and borrowings from the classics of Marxism in favour of relying on the independent credibility of the arguments put forward. Certainly, Jian's reinterpretation of the concept of historical laws, progress, stages of history and the impact of individuals upon the course of economic development, as well as his lifelong desire to reconcile historicism with historical materialism, and ultimately – history with philosophy, was motivated by nothing but an ambition to defend Marxism inside and outside historical research. At the same time, Jian believed that such an apologetics requires significant “corrections” of Marxian thought and he did not conceal that he “creatively develops Marxism (*chuangzaoxingde fazhan Makesi zhuyi* 创造性地发展马克思主义).”⁷⁵ Throughout *A Course in the Philosophy of History*, Jian translates the basic philosophical ideas of Marxism into such neutrally sounding concepts as the “interrelatedness” (*guanlianxing*) of history, its “adaptability” (*shiyingxing* 适应性), “practicality” (*shijianxing* 实践性) and “law-conformity” (*hefazexing* 合法性), making them accessible interpretative tools for both philosophers and historians. In this sense, if it were not for his frequent forays into the domain of dialectics, he could have easily been recognized as one of the pioneers of analytical Marxism.

In his writings, Jian Bozan did not escape from accepting the ideas that were also typical for other Sino-Marxist thinkers, such as the spiral scheme of historical development or the concept of the mutual relation between the base and the superstructure. Yet, given his anti-speculative mindset, Jian Bozan took a different approach to their justification. Although Mao explained the mutual influence of the base and the superstructure by saying that “in the last analysis” material influences outbalance the mental ones, and that the cases of momentary, mental influences on the base result from qualitative breakthroughs culminating the gradual development of inner contradictions,⁷⁶ Jian Bozan generally avoided (with few exceptions) such quantitative images and language, undermining the very idea of a contrast between consciousness and things as inherited from idealist philosophy. In his approach to the concept of historical laws and individual freedoms, Jian did not share Mao's anti-individualist sentiment and his faith that their “objective necessity” of these laws for all societies “does not hinge on the intentions of individuals.”⁷⁷ Finally, Jian's anti-metaphysical attitude is clearly seen in the fact that in opposition to the preceding Sino-Marxist philosophers of history, Jian tried to refrain from adopting any specific concept or detailed vision of history besides the basic directions stemming from the general course of events, in contrast to, for instance, Li Dazhao's vision of Great Unity (*datong*)⁷⁸ or Mao's image of “permanent revolution.” Such teleological views of historical

⁷³Li 2008.

⁷⁴Zhang 1989. On Jian's impact upon other Chinese Marxists in the 1960s and 1970s see Wang 2000.

⁷⁵JBZ, vol. 4, 2007, p. 411.

⁷⁶MZDX, vol. 1, 1961, pp. 307–08.

⁷⁷Mao, 1977, p. 33.

⁷⁸Cf. Lu 2011.

future, once welcomed as the ideas lacking in the denounced Chinese tradition, were now marginalized by Jian Bozan as a problematic inheritance from Western Marxism.

This was strictly connected with the fact that unlike Mao, whose reading of Marxist thought relied almost exclusively on the writings of Lenin and Stalin, Jian Bozan frequently referred to the works of Marx himself and tried to “recover” the pre-Leninist shape of Marxism for Chinese Communists. The concept of the “iron laws of history,” detailed descriptions of the post-capitalist future along with its division into two epochs, belief in the disappearance of nations in the future, and the dismissal of the historical influence of either culture or individuals – these are the ideas that were rejected by Jian Bozan and Marx, yet shared by many Marxist theoreticians. Most importantly, from a meta-philosophical point of view, both Marx and Jian (and, to a slighter degree, also Engels) thought of the Marxist theory in terms of a tool rather than a doctrine and considered it essentially open to the development of facts (in distinct places and times).

Last but not least, to have the full picture of Jian’s thought, it is necessary to read his advocacy of studying history on its own terms also as a defence of the value of tradition, including the classical heritage of China. His essay *Culture and Dao* (*Wen yu Dao* 文与道), written on the threshold of Cultural Revolution in a deliberately archaized language, full of references to Confucius, concludes with the declaration that “without learning the classical works and examining the decrees of a hundred kings, there is no historical scholarship.”⁷⁹ It was, therefore, not only adherence to the genuine function of Marxism, but also true fidelity to tradition, in the name of which he was ultimately willing to sacrifice his own life. This re-evaluation of tradition was one of the turning points in the developments of Chinese Marxism and certainly helped to open it up to the contemporary dialogue with Confucian thought.

Conclusion

The paper discusses the novel approach to historical materialism developed by the Chinese Marxist philosopher and historian, Jian Bozan. It shows that despite the common omission of his oeuvre in the Western studies of Chinese Marxism, and contemporary Chinese thought in general, the ideas of Jian Bozan heavily influenced both post-1978 historiography and the Sino-Marxist philosophy of history. It argues that Jian’s synthesis of historicism and historical materialism, his dialectics of general necessities realized in historically specific situations, the inductive methodology, and the defence of the historical distinctiveness of ethnic minorities (contrasted with the approach called “historical nihilism”) had a profound impact upon the so-called New Historiography in PRC, which did not diminish, but only increased in the twenty-first century. Jian Bozan’s contribution to the development of Chinese Marxism, in turn, consists mostly of the “de-metaphysicization” of historical materialism, the historicist suspension of the validity of allegedly universal historical schemes, his scepticism regarding speculative visions of future, and his reinterpretation of crucial categories of Marxism to the form of universally translatable, analytical tools of historical research, which was also aimed at recovering the pre-Leninist shape of Marxism. For these reasons alone, the thought of Jian Bozan deserves its proper recognition in contemporary Asian studies.

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