

# Robert E. Allinson: *The Philosophical Influences of Mao Zedong. Notations, Reflections and Insights*

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This book is not merely a history of Mao's thought, as it presents a philosophical inquest on its development. It is also a philosophical reflection on the state of contemporary Chinese society and culture employing Mao's philosophical keys. What Allinson provides is a completely new narrative of the so-called Great Helmsman's intellectual profile and all of 20th Chinese culture. This is the right book at the right moment for understanding China's incredible growth and deep contradictions, but also the new Chinese diplomatic impatience towards unequal treatment on the international stage. Mao's most unacceptable and dramatic decisions find a new coherency that, in this case, contradicts the thesis of the "banality of evil". Allinson shows an excellent capacity to freely reflect with the thinker without lessening the tragic consequences of his political decisions. As the author states: "Mao represents a unique mixture between Plato's philosopher king and Plato's tyrant of the Republic" (p. 100).

The author is a well-known comparative philosopher who researched and taught for decades at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. He is currently a Professor at the Soka University of America (California), and has continuously published on both Chinese authors (see his *Chuang-Tzu for Spiritual Transformation: An Analysis of the Inner Chapters (1989)*) and global philosophy, maintaining a coherent interest in intercultural dialogue and human life. This monograph is equally inserted in his personal philosophical journey. Mao is indeed an intercultural philosopher, thoroughly educated in Western and Chinese philosophies, able to create his own view thanks to extremely diverse sources.

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*The Philosophical Influences of Mao Zedong* is divided into eight chapters that create an argumentative spiral reminiscent of Heidegger's writing method. The first is an introduction where the theses that will guide the whole book are explained. Here the author emphasizes the role of the early training of Mao in both Western and Chinese philosophies at university, and the impact of these studies on his later writings, which are improperly classified as simply Marxist. Allinson suggests that Mao's thought "was a break with both traditional Chinese philosophy and Western philosophy and went beyond doctrinaire Marxism" (p. 19). Secondly, the author claims that the capitalist turn of post-Mao China and contemporary individualistic and paternalistic use and abuse of Confucianism should be understood through Mao's philosophy. In the second chapter, we can see Mao engaged with classical Western philosophers and 20th century figures who strongly impacted Chinese philosophy, such as Bertrand Russell, R. H. Tawney, and John Dewey. The third chapter is devoted to the impact of Paulsen's *A System of Ethics*, a critical interpretation of Western ethics from the perspective of voluntarist philosophy. Mao carefully annotated his own copy, and the author closely analysed these notes which are rich in profound cross-cultural reflections. In the fourth chapter, Allinson returns circularly to the question of sources. Mao is engaged with the ethical discourses of Aristotle, Confucius, Mencius, Zhuangzi, and Nietzsche. However, the central argument is included in the fifth and sixth chapters, where the logic behind Mao's view of human destiny is exposed. Allinson convincingly argues that the dialectic system of Mao's thought is not derived from Hegelianism and Marxism, but the dialectic of the complementary opposites of the *Yijing*. The seventh chapter situates Mao at the crossroad of Western and Chinese philosophies, and insists on the unavoidable impact of Chinese classical thought and literature on Mao throughout his life. The last chapter closes the spiral and adopts Mao's philosophical dialectic to interpret contemporary Chinese contradictions.

This book clearly shows the limits of Western understanding of Mao's intellectual depth, which is well beyond that of an ideologue or dictator. This limited vision not only does injustice to Mao Zedong, something that could be of considerable importance in our era, but, most importantly, prevents us from a correct understanding of the role he still plays in contemporary culture. The omnipresence of his image is not only an unavoidable reliquary ritual of socialist China, but a door that we can open to understanding the Chinese political vision better. The return to the classics and the capitalist conversion of China could be understood through his philosophical perspective.

During his studies at university, Mao created his own philosophy of individualism. "The only goal of human being is to realize the self. Self-realization means to develop fully both our physical and spiritual capabilities to the highest" (p. 48).

In this view, centred on the individual, what is the place of society? Society exists for the sake of the individual that exists first. The individual actualizes the self in moral actions because this brings happiness. Mao finds parallels in Aristotle's ethics and in a forced interpretation of Confucius. As he states: "I think that the theories of our Confucian scholars are based on egoism, as ... can be seen in 'He who first cultivates himself may afterward bring peace to the world'" (p. 70). Allinson well explains that the distance between the understanding of the self of Confucius and that of Mao is considerable. Mao sees the self as the ego (i.e., the overall potential of the human being), while for Confucius the self is the moral self, formed through sincere reflection and self-rectification. For the latter, the love of society beyond filial piety is a natural moral development, not the actualization of the full potential of an individual human being. If this egoistic understanding of Confucius is evidently a misinterpretation, it is equally pivotal in establishing Mao's philosophy of the self and his relationship with classical thought. He does more or less the same with Mencius and Zhuangzi. Allinson remarks that "it was Mao's amalgamation of Chinese Confucianism and Paulsen's voluntarism that paved the way, not only for Mao's thought, but also for Mao's personal development" (p. 98). This path between East and West produced his view of the will as the key aspect of human behaviour, and drove his political mission.

A further element inherited from Chinese philosophy, which likely constitutes the most original aspect of Mao's thought, is the dialectical system of the *Yijing*. While Hegelian dialectics is based on opposites that are antagonists (each is absorbed by its opposite), Chinese dialectics of the *yin* and *yang* is based on their interrelation and integration that creates movement, the only effective principle of change. This is life. Allinson argues that one of Mao's most famous Marxist texts, "On Contradiction", is intrinsically based on the *yin-yang* model, because the opposition never dissolves. There is no synthesis. Therefore, there is an endless struggle in the realization of a communist society. The struggle is rooted in the relationship between individualism and society. The interior struggle between the actualization of my potential and the limits imposed from outside is unsolvable. In this respect, Mao distances himself from Chinese philosophy. He proposes a philosophy of disharmony, of endless struggle. While traditional Chinese dialectics is a quest for a utopic harmony (that does not last long), he asserts the inefficacy of such harmony. Mao is neither traditionally Chinese nor Hegelian (or post-Hegelian), and this is also one of the points of discord with Stalin. In opposition to the threefold dialectic system derived from Hegel and inherited by Marx and Engels, Stalin proposed a fourfold dialectic of contradiction. Mao replied: "I think there is only one basic law—the law of contradiction" (p. 130) that is both affirmation and negation. No synthesis, only struggle.

Allinson is correct in claiming that Mao's dialectics of struggle provides a helpful instrument to understand contemporary China. As he argues: "Mao did not consider that communism would become the final victor. In this regard, he would not have been surprised by the current victory of capitalism, (in his eyes), in the form of SCC [i.e., Socialism with Chinese Characteristics] over pure communism in his native China" (p. 137). Individualism, Confucianism, and capitalism (as a moment of struggle), which are categories of today's Chinese identity, can thus be traced back to the philosophy of the founder of the PRC.

In this book Allinson provides an excellent and compelling investigation that enriches our understanding of both Mao Zedong and China. However, in our opinion the author should have explained the complete marginalization of the influence of Marx and Engel's philosophy on Mao within this work. Of all the philosophers with whom Mao engaged, the fathers of communism are absent. We find two fascinating paths from Aristotle to Paulsen, from Confucius to Zhuangzi, which are narrated in a scholarly manner. However, we might ask what about the Marxist depiction of the individual and society? It is undoubtedly true that Mao projected his youthful vision on his mature Marxist philosophy, but this line seems underrepresented in chapter 6. Allinson focuses his attention on what is less known of Mao's philosophy and on his non-political thought, and, perhaps, this is a possible answer to this marginalization.

This monograph also has the merit of providing a vivid portrait of a young Chinese educated man of the 1920s, full of contradictions and ambitions. In that regard, it contributes to breaking the classical description of the simplistic opposition between the May 4 modernists and the "traditionalist" thinkers. The intellectual barricades are thus dissolved. What emerges is an epoch full of fascinating contradictions and constant struggle. Mao is neither a Chinese traditionalist nor a Westernized thinker. If this is true for him, it is also true for each of the thinkers of that period. Western thought was certainly an unavoidable standard, but it was put in dialogue with Chinese thought and criticized by most of such thinkers. Mao's intellectual endeavour is less different from that of contemporary thinkers such as Mou Zongsan, Tang Junyi, Lu Xun, etc., than we might think. They all made use of Western thought to complete their visions of what China was and should become. While the results were clearly different, each of them bents Western thought to their own purposes, and Western thinkers and politicians are often unaware of this. Therefore, this book provides another valuable key for understanding contemporary China. Today, the country presents a mixture of Western free market capitalism and controlled capitalism with socialist rhetoric, urban hedonistic individualism and a Confucian revival of Chinese values, exploitation of natural resources next to holistic ecologism, and so on. The paternalistic view of

the actual irrationality and incapability of a country still in the process of modernization, democratization, and Westernization (reminiscent of Hegel's dialectics) is completely outdated. Mao was perhaps right: the only effective hermeneutic key (at least for understanding China) is the law of contradiction that entails endless struggle.

## References

Allinson E., Robert. 1989. *Chuang-Tzu for Spiritual Transformation: An Analysis of the Inner Chapters*. Albany: State University of New York Press.