



Between Marxism and Nationalism: Chinese historiography and the Soviet influence, 1949–1963

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The Chinese practice of Marxist historical writing represents a dynamic interaction between nationalism and transnationalism. On the one hand, Chinese Marxists were attracted to the Soviet experience in applying Marxism to historical study, especially during the 1950s and the early 1960s, for the latter provided a seemingly much needed theoretical guidance. On the other hand, they attempted to circumscribe the Soviet influence in order to strike a balance between history and theory, the foreign and the indigenous, and the national and the transnational. In so doing, they turned their practice of Marxism into an interpretive, hermeneutic process, in which the temporal distance between the Marxist text and China's historical experience became recognized.

This article examines the formation of Marxist historical writing in the People's Republic of China of the 1950s and early 1960s and its Russian nexus. In terms of China's relationship with the Soviet Union, this period had particular importance. While Marxism came to China through Russia as early as the 1920s, it was during this time period that Soviet historiography had a direct influence—it was regarded as a model of Marxist historical writing by Chinese historians. To evaluate and examine the reception of Soviet historiography by Chinese historians provides us with an opportunity to see the extent to which Marxism was accepted in China and the rationale for the Chinese to model their practice of Marxism on the Soviet model.

Moreover, this study aims to interrogate the Chinese experience of Marxism by revealing its underlying, dynamic interaction between nationalism and transnationalism. I will analyze the process of how Chinese Marxists, acting on their nationalist impulse, negotiated with Marxism, a transnational ideology, and appropriated it to consolidate their position on the one hand and circumscribe the Soviet dominance on the other. In other words, while previous studies have shown us the

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1. On the Soviet influence on China, see Ronald F. Price, 'Convergence or copying: China and the Soviet Union', and Leo A. Orleans, 'Soviet influence on China's higher education', both in Ruth Hayhoe and Marianne Bastid, eds, *China's Education and the Industrialized World: Studies in Cultural Transfer* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1987), pp. 158–183, 184–198. There have not been many recent works, English and Chinese alike, on the Russian studies

nationalist characteristic of Chinese Marxism,¹ few have looked into it from a cross-cultural perspective and thereby situated it in a transnational context.² Existing scholarship helps us to understand that historical writing is a politically sensitive and risky undertaking in the PRC and that changes in historical interpretation often relate to the power struggle of political factions inside the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).³ But we have not seen closely how the struggle reflected the intrinsic problem in the relationship between Chinese Marxists and their Russian teachers and how this problem affected the success of Chinese Marxist historiography as a whole.

There are two ways for us to gauge the Russian historiographical influence in the PRC. One is to look at the extent to which Chinese historians appreciated the Russian accomplishment in historical writing. The other is to compare main topics in Chinese and Russian historical writings and see how these topics paralleled each other.⁴ While paying attention to both issues, I have focused my study on examining the second. I will analyze two of the five major discussions that occurred in the Chinese historical circle during this period to offer a case study about the Soviet influence in Chinese historiography.⁵ These five discussions, known to be 'the five golden flowers' (*wuduo jinhua*), represent serious attempts made by Chinese historians to apply Marxism to studying and interpreting the course of their national history and the problems they encountered therein.⁶

'To bring about jade with borrowed stone'

After the founding of the PRC in 1949, due to the Chinese government's 'lean to

Footnote 1 continued

of Chinese history. A general survey of the subject is found in Gilbert Rozman, ed., *Soviet Studies of Premodern China* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1984) and E. Stuart Kirby, *Russian Studies of China* (Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Littlefield, 1975). Also V. N. Nikiforov, 'The study of Chinese history in the USSR', *Soviet Studies in History* VIII(2), (Fall 1969), pp. 143–166.

2. In his recent article, Prasenjit Duara has analyzed the interaction between nationalism and transnationalism in the Asian context. However, as his article focuses on the period between 1900 and 1945, he has not yet dealt with the problem in Communist China. See Prasenjit Duara, 'Transnationalism and the predicament of sovereignty: China, 1900–1945', *American Historical Review* 102(4), (October 1997), pp. 1030–1051.

3. For example, in Jonathan Unger, ed., *Using the Past to Serve the Present: Historiography and Politics in Contemporary China* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1993), many authors offered case studies about the political risks that PRC historians faced in writing history.

4. The major themes of Russian Marxist historiography during this period are discussed in Cyril E. Black, *Rewriting Russian History: Soviet Interpretations of Russia's Past* (New York: Vintage Books, 1962).

5. Interestingly, these two questions also feature important aspects of Russian Marxist historiography. See Leo Yaresh, 'The problem of periodization', Alexander Vucinich, 'The first Russian state', and Leo Yaresh, 'The formation of the great Russian state', all in Cyril E. Black, *Rewriting Russian History: Soviet Interpretations of Russia's Past*, pp. 34–76, 123–140, and 191–215, respectively.

6. The other three are: the role of Chinese peasant wars in Chinese history; the incipient of capitalism in traditional China; and landownership in feudal China. A survey of the Chinese Marxist historiography during this period is in Albert Feuerwerker, 'China's history in Marxian dress', in Albert Feuerwerker, ed., *History in Communist China* (Cambridge MA: The MIT Press, 1968), pp. 14–44. Other works on Chinese Marxist historiography in the PRC are James P. Harrison, *The Communists and Chinese Peasant Rebellions: A Study in the Rewriting of Chinese History* (New York: Atheneum, 1969); Arif Dirlik, 'Mirror to revolution: early Marxist images of Chinese history', *Journal of Asian Studies* 33(2), (1974), pp. 193–223, and 'The problem of class viewpoint versus historicism in Chinese historiography', *Modern China* 3(4), (October 1977), pp. 465–488; and *Using the Past to Serve the Present*.

one side' policy, the Russo-China relationship entered a honeymoon period. Chinese historians demonstrated an overt enthusiasm for translating Russian works, which included those that dealt with actual history and those that addressed theoretical issues important for historical study. While some historians had learned Marxism before, for instance, Guo Moruo in Japan and Fan Wenlan in Yanan, many others were exposed to Marxian historiography for the first time through these translations.

The center of historical research in China was the Institute of Historical Research (*lishi yanjiu suo*), located in the Chinese Academy of Science (*zhongguo kexue yuan*) in Beijing. It was placed under the auspices of the Department of Philosophy and Social Sciences and staffed mostly with the best-known Marxist historians. The Institute was divided into three offices, each assigned with different periods in history: ancient (e.g. Qin and Han Dynasties); medieval (Tang and Song Dynasties); and modern (Ming, Qing Dynasties). As the President of the Academy, Guo Moruo, a prominent figure in modern China noted first for his romanticist poems and later for his study of ancient history, headed the First Office. Chen Yuan, a would-be Marxist historian who joined the CCP later in the period, was the head of the Second Office and Fan Wenlan, a veteran revolutionary who joined the Communists during World War II, directed the Third Office in modern history.

The Institute was responsible for initiating research projects and discussions, joined by history professors from major universities throughout the country. Since 1954, the Institute has been sponsoring the journal *Lishi yanjiu* (Historical Research), which remains to this day the leading historical journal in the PRC. During the 1950s and 1960s, the journal was the main organ for publishing works and leading discussions on Marxist historiography. When a discussion reached its end, the journal editors selected major essays and published them in a single volume, summarizing its outcome. In the 1950s, as the Soviet Union sent its advisors to China, Russian historians also frequented the Institute and China's major universities. Russian historiography became a convenient example for the Chinese to develop Marxist interpretations of Chinese history.

In July 1954, 7 months after the journal *Lishi yanjiu* was introduced, Chinese historians published a journal of translation, entitled *Lishi wenti yicong* (Translations on Historical Questions), which had started with an informal newsletter at the People's University, a school designed specifically for training the Communist cadre. The *Lishi wenti yicong* during this period was the main source of information about the state of art in Soviet historiography. Some of the translations that appeared in the journal were also edited into books for their thematic importance. A book of this kind was entitled *Fengjian shehui lishi yiwen ji* (A Translated Anthology on the History of Feudal Society), edited by Shang Yue, a leading Marxist historian at the People's University. In his preface, Shang stated that the Russian historians' works on Russian feudal society had an exemplary value to the discussion of the periodization in Chinese history.

In addition to translating the works of Soviet historians, Chinese historians showed a great enthusiasm for studying the works of Lenin and Stalin. Stalin's *Marx and Historical Materialism* and *Marxism on Nation and Colonies*, for

example, were regarded as classical interpretations of Marxism in history. In these books, Stalin discussed the implication of Marxism in the study of history, especially the history of non-European nations. In the meantime, some Soviet Communist Party doctrines, such as the *History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (Bolsheviks): Short Course*, translated into Chinese by the Russians, also became available to Chinese historians. Since most Chinese historians at the time were still novices to Marxist teachings, they found Stalin's dogmatic and simplistic interpretation of Marxism very attractive. In the *History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (Bolsheviks): Short Course*, for example, Stalin gave a definitive yet dogmatic description of the five phases in the social development of human history. These five stages were alluded to originally by Marx himself in his *Preface to A Critique of Political Economics*, albeit in a more nebulous manner. Consequently, Stalin's explication, rather than Marx's original, became more frequently cited by Chinese historians in their discussions on the 'Asiatic mode of production' and the periodization of Chinese history. Likewise, in discussing the formation of the Han nation, Stalin's definition of 'nation', given in his *Marxism in Linguistics*, also became a theoretical guideline.

Thus, in this period, Chinese historians were highly interested in Russian Marxist historiography. For Chinese Marxists, the Soviet interpretation of world history was useful and applicable to the study of China's past, for many of them believed that Marxism represented a universal truth. From these Russian works they were eager to find a 'common ground' in Marxist historiography that was true to the histories of all nations. Their translation of the Russian studies of feudalism in Europe suggested this intention. Chinese historians were not only interested in the Marxian framework of historical interpretation expounded by the Russians, they also respected Russian historians-cum-sinologists' works on Chinese history and regarded them as exemplary models. As we shall see later, many discussions were started with the translation of a Russian work and the Russian author received support from his/her Chinese colleagues.

But this interest in Soviet historiography does not amount to a 'Russianization' in Chinese historiography. The fact that during this period, despite the strong presence of Russian historiography, Chinese historians were engaged in discussions and debates suggests that they were not obsequious toward the Russian model. Many historians, including some well-known Marxists, were eager to present their own findings along the guidelines of Marxism, even if what they found were not in agreement with those put forth by their Russian colleagues. They were inspired by Russian works, but ultimately they searched for their own place in Marxist historiography. Their intention was 'to bring out jade with borrowed stone' (*tashan zhi shi, keyi gong yu*), as described in this favorite maxim used by Chinese scholars to justify their use of something valuable but foreign. To find the Chinese 'jade', therefore, was their final goal.

There were two reasons why there was an intention to find the Chinese 'jade'. First, most Chinese Marxists were first and foremost nationalists. They were attracted to the universal claim of Marxism that outlined the course of world history along definitive and progressive lines. In light of this claim, Chinese history acquired its meaning and obtained its position in world history. Thus Marxism,

especially Marxian historiography, was used to promote the nationalist sentiment that accounted for the Communist victory. Considering that the triumph of the Chinese Revolution was achieved in the context of a fierce struggle of national defense against Japan's invasion, it is plausible to say that the Revolution benefited from the nationalist sentiment in the populace. In fact, this close affinity between nationalism and Marxism was inherent in the Communist movement in China. The Communist Party of China, for instance, was established in the wake of the May Fourth Movement, which was a patriotic upheaval in response to Japan's territorial demand at the Versailles conference after World War I. In the 1930s, when Japan escalated its military aggression in China, the Communist movement gained its momentum by recruiting many young and patriotic intellectuals. Some of these intellectuals, such as Fan Wenlan, later became leading figures in the Chinese historical community in the 1950s. For these young patriots, Marxian historiography helped to justify their participation in the Communist movement. They were eager to see China move from a lower stage to a higher stage, or from the semi-feudal and semi-colonial stage to the stage of socialism. Following the Marxian historical framework, they attempted to reinterpret Chinese history and make sense of the present.

Second, the nationalist ingredient in Chinese Marxist historiography influenced historians to pay close attention to national characteristics of Chinese history. For them, these characteristics not only embodied the reality of history—Chinese history had its unique course of development—but were also sources of the Chinese national pride that was still in a state of recovery from China's military defeats in the nineteenth century. Compared to their Russian counterparts, Chinese historians, equipped with a better knowledge, were more sensitive to the differences between history and theory and therefore were more reluctant to tailor the course of Chinese history simply by fitting it with the Marxian framework.

As a result, Chinese Marxists often differed from their Russian partners in interpreting Chinese history. When Russian historians emphasized the peculiar features of Chinese history, Chinese Marxists tended to take an opposite position in order to stress the similarity between Chinese and European history, for this similarity was essential to their intention of applying Marxism. Chinese Marxists felt uncomfortable with a hypothesis that the Chinese past had followed a different path, hence incompatible with the Marxian theory of history. For them, such hypotheses undermined the magnitude of the Chinese Revolution.

Conversely, however, Chinese Marxists often refused to overlook the distinctive features of China's past: its long and continuous dynastic rules, its delayed development of capitalism, its agrarian economic tradition, and so forth. Chinese Marxists complained at times about the Russian interpretation of Chinese history because it appeared not only 'foreign' but also Eurocentric. In the following, we will examine this nationalist influence in the Chinese acceptance of Soviet historiography. If the 'periodization' (*fenqi wenti*) discussion represented an effort by historians to seek a Marxist interpretation of Chinese history, the debate on the formation of Chinese nation showed their differences in looking at the 'uniqueness' of China's past vis-a-vis the Marxian scheme of world history.

Nation in ancient China?

The discussion on the formation of the Han nation occurred when the Russian sinologist G. V. Efimov of Leningrad University published his article 'On the formation of the Chinese nation' in 1953. Following Stalin's definition of the four characteristics of a nation (common language, common territory, common economic life, and common psychology based on a common culture), Efimov argued that the Han people, the main inhabitant of China proper that constitutes more than 90% of the country's population, did not become a nation until the turn of the twentieth century after the Western intrusion. Efimov acknowledged that China, from its remote past, had developed its common language, common territory, and common culture, but he did not believe that there was a common economic life. This absence inhibited the people from forming a nation. For Efimov, only when China began to expose itself to capitalism did the Chinese nation take shape. 'The destruction of feudalism and the growth of capitalism', Efimov posited, 'marked the beginning of the process of national formation. In the case of China, the development of a new and bourgeois relation [of production] began with the incursion of foreign capitalism'. He used examples in modern Chinese history to support his point that the introduction of capitalism in China not only helped the people to form their own nation, but evoked many changes to the culture and the language.⁷

But to some Chinese Marxists, such as Fan Wenlan, this Marxist approach was not impressive, but awkward and arbitrary, for Efimov's analysis of the Chinese nation was based on his dogmatic application of Stalin's definition. After Efimov's article was translated into Chinese in 1954, Fan Wenlan voiced a different opinion. While giving his article a humble title, 'Preliminary discussions on the reasons why China has been a unified state since the Qin and Han dynasties', Fan argued forcefully that the very reason that China for most of its history since the Qin Dynasty (221–215 BC) has been a unified country was that the Han nation had long been formed. 'From the Northern Song Dynasty, economic connections in the whole country was strengthened which made the national unity even more stable.'⁸ Fan believed that the Han nation was formed as early as the third century BC, and hence disagreed with Efimov's viewpoint that there had not been a nationwide economic connection before capitalism in China. However, Fan was unable to challenge Stalin's definition of nation, the starting point of Efimov's argumentation. What he did in his article was present a different set of historical data to show that Han China had long been made into a nation even according to Stalin's criteria.

Although Fan was unable to modify Stalin's definition, he sought help elsewhere. He found that both Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels had made comments on nation. Besides Marx and Engels, Stalin himself also talked about nation a few times and what he said was not always consistent. By comparing different remarks on nation, Fan managed to show that there were different kinds of nations that existed in

7. 'K voprosy ob obrazovanii Kitaiskoi natsii', (On the formation of the Chinese nation) *Voprosy istorii* 10, (1953), pp. 65–78. The Chinese translation is entitled 'Lun zhongguo minzu de xingcheng', *Han minzu xingcheng wenti taolunji* (Discussions on the formation of the Han nation) (Beijing: Sanlian shudian, 1957), pp. 228–254 (the quotation is on p. 228).

8. *Lishi yanjiu* 3, (1954), pp. 15–25, quoted in *Han minzu xingcheng wenti taolunji*, p. 1.

history. On a different occasion, Stalin admitted that 'There were a variety of nations in the world. There were some nations that were developed in the rise of capitalism, when bourgeoisie united nation and made it a unity in order to break away from feudalism. These were so-called "modern" nations'. By quoting Stalin, Fan argued that the Han people could form a non-bourgeois nation before capitalism, namely 'a unique nation formed under unique social conditions'.⁹

A legitimate concern for dogmatic application of Marxism (in this case, Stalinism), Fan's article reflects his intention to reconcile nationalism with Marxism, history and theory. For Fan, what impaired Efimov's theory was that he only looked at the part the bourgeois class played in forming the Chinese nation but failed to see that in China bourgeoisie never had a significant role in history. 'If bourgeoisie did exist in China', Fan contended, 'in the last hundred years and if it was the leading class of the nation, it would be impossible to explain why it gave up its leading position and was led by the proletarian class in both [the courses] of modern and contemporary Chinese history'. By drawing attention to factors other than the bourgeois class, Fan demonstrated the uniqueness of Chinese history and the peculiar nature of the Chinese Communist Revolution.

In sum, the Han nation had been formed in the Qin-Han period. In the last hundred years it was strengthened on its original base. But it was not transformed to become a bourgeois nation. [Instead], under the leadership of the Chinese proletarian class and the CCP, it is gradually becoming a socialist nation.¹⁰

Thus, what motivated Fan to argue with his Russian colleague was both political and academic. As a historian schooled by traditional learning before turning to Marxism, Fan refused to accept Efimov's theory which implied that China had a long and ill-developed past.

However, Fan's nationalist approach was not agreed by all but precipitated heated debates. Many of his critics defended Efimov's position and noted that Fan's source material could only be used to prove that China had long established a unified autocratic political unity, but not a fully fledged nation. In mounting their criticisms, they also noted Fan's nationalist sentiment. Wei Mingjing, for example, pointed out:

We all know that there are many who shared Fan's point of view. Some historians published books and articles arguing that in China nation had been formed long before capitalism. Fan's theory on the formation of the Han nation thus represents a tendency of thoughts. ... There are even some who act upon nationalist sentiment as if [supporting] the fact that China had not formed the nation earlier would hurt our national pride.¹¹

Wei here is very candid and direct, but he appears to have missed the underlying

9. Stalin's words are from 'Marxism and the National Question', quoted in *Han minzu xingcheng wenti taolunji*, p. 5. In his article 'China's history in Marxian dress', Albert Feuerwerker noticed the nationalist sentiment in the discussion. While I agree with his observation that this sentiment was manifest in their attack on Western imperialism for halting the growth of Chinese nation, I tend to see that the whole discussion was motivated by nationalism. Albert Feuerwerker, ed., *History in Communist China*, pp. 21-26.

10. *Han minzu xingcheng wenti taolunji*, pp. 14-15.

11. 'Lun minzu de dingyi ji minzu de shizhi' (On the definition and the nature of a nation), *Ibid.*, p. 132.

political connotation in Fan's argument. As a revolutionary veteran, Fan participated in the revolution, whose victory, as said earlier, was due as much to Marxist teaching as to the influence of Chinese nationalism. The fact of the matter is that the Marxists who succeeded in making the revolution in China were not those who had followed the Soviet model. When Fan questioned Efimov's article on the formation of the Chinese nation, he probably remembered his own experience and the failure of the Soviet Comintern in directing the early Chinese Communists. The implication of Fan's theory is this: if the Communist triumph in China proves that there were special elements to be considered in applying Marxism and the Soviet experience, why is the case of making Chinese Marxist historiography any different? Mao Zedong once said

No political party can possibly lead a great revolutionary movement to victory unless it possesses revolutionary theory and a knowledge of history and has a profound grasp of the practical movement.¹²

Interestingly, what can be done in making a revolution may not be done in dealing with a seemingly academic question. Fan lacked Mao's authority in the historical community. He is no different from other Chinese Marxists in that when they practiced Marxism, they were facing an intrinsic dilemma. Although they were aware of the peculiar nature of Chinese history and society, they could not emphasize this peculiarity to a degree that they would be accused of anti-Marxism. Of course, no one knows where the degree is and how far they can go, for it often depends on conditions of which academics have no control, such as the party's policy, individual leaders' comments, and the status of Russo-China relations.

What happened to Fan later in the discussion indicates that he probably went too far at the time. After his article was published, the Third Office of the Institute of Historical Research, of which Fan was the head, held a conference in October 1954 discussing his and Efimov's works. While many appreciated Fan's pioneering effort to draw attention to the question, they disagreed with Fan's basic points in his argument. In the discussion, some actually pointed out Fan's dilemma: while stressing that China was a unique nation, he still followed Stalin's criteria and failed to develop his own.¹³ The fact of course is that Fan could not do anything with Stalin's theory, given the latter's status as a 'big brother' to Chinese leaders. Thus, Fan's inability to challenge the theoretical foundation of his Soviet counterpart becomes his Achilles' heel.

His critics seemed to be well aware of this. Zeng Wenjing wrote in the beginning of his article that 'About the formation and development of a nation, Marxism and Leninism have made definitive conclusions'. He quoted from Marx and Engels to Lenin and Stalin, especially Stalin's statement that 'there was no, could not be, nation prior to capitalism'. Having devoted the entire first two parts of his article to citing the 'orthodox' views of Marxism, Zeng then turned to Fan's work, only to compare it with Lu Simian's similar statement, who was not a Marxist. This

12. 'The role of the Chinese Communist Party in the national war', *Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-tung* (Beijing: Foreign Language Press, 1966), p. 4.

13. See Cai Meibiao, 'Han minzu xingcheng de wenti' (The question of the formation of the Han nation), *Han minzu xingcheng wenti taolunji*, p. 40.

proved very damaging to Fan; he was now portrayed as a non-Marxist. Zeng asked Fan a series of questions: if the Han nation was formed in the Qin–Han period and was unique, ‘what kind of social system sustained this “nation”? What was the leading force of this “nation”? How to evaluate this “unique nation”? And could the fate of this “nation” link with that of feudalism? Could the landlord class become the leading class and was this “nation” a landlord nation?’¹⁴ By asking these questions, Zeng implied that Fan was advocating a feudal China and favoring the landlord leadership of the nation.

Fortunately, Fan’s other opponents did not approve of Zeng’s harsh rhetoric and political indictment. Yang Zejun, for instance, acknowledged that Fan ‘indeed pointed out a few essential characteristics of modern Chinese society. These characteristics existed and had left traces in the appearance of the Han nation’, although he believed that Fan’s analysis was ‘lopsided’ and ‘incomplete’ for Fan only emphasized the differences between Chinese and European society while overlooking their similarities. Like Fan’s colleagues at the Third Office of the Historical Institute, Yang stated that Fan confused a unified political authority with a national unity. Since political unification was also seen in other countries, such as in fifteenth-century Russia, China was not unique, nor did China’s early unification create unique social conditions for forming the Han nation earlier than others.¹⁵

Dismantling Fan’s theory aside, Yang also pointed out flaws in Efimov’s work. For example, Efimov’s statement that the Beijing dialect was adopted as the national language as early as the Zhou Dynasty (1066–221 BC) was not true, for the Beijing area did not wield any political influence over other regions at the time. Yang, too, disliked Efimov’s emphasis on the Western influence in forming the Chinese nation. For Yang, the process of shaping the Chinese nation actually began in the sixteenth century, given the emergence of capitalist elements in the economy. The intrusion of Western capitalism only accelerated its pace. ‘The development of Chinese capitalism’, Yang concluded, ‘should be divided into two periods. The first was between the late sixteenth to the late nineteenth century. The second was from the late nineteenth century to the late 1940s’. The capitalism in the first period was at a primitive stage and in the second period, it was integrated with world capitalism. As the growth of Chinese capitalism was interrupted by foreign invasions, China became a semi-colonial and semi-feudal society, which resulted in a ‘special path’ for the growth of the Chinese nation.¹⁶ However, Yang did not think that this ‘particularity’ (*teshuxing*) had undermined the ‘universality’ (*pubi-anxing*) of Marxism. He carefully distinguished his own argument from Fan’s by attributing Fan’s ‘fallacy’ to the influence of nationalism. Fan’s dilemma, Yang claimed, lay in the fact that he tried to compromise nationalism with Marxism.¹⁷

14. ‘Lun Han minzu de xingcheng’ (On the formation of the Han nation), *Ibid.*, pp. 17–38. In the original text, these questions can be read in the present tense, which has a serious political implication: Fan could be understood as believing that contemporary China was still a landlord nation.

15. ‘Guanyu Han minzu xingcheng wenti de yixie yijian’ (Some opinions in regard to the formation of the Han nation), *Ibid.*, pp. 84–97.

16. *Ibid.*, pp. 97–117.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 92.

While caught in a no-win situation, Fan still seemed able to assemble a few supporters. Zhang Guanying, for example, supported Fan by emphasizing the difference between Chinese and European feudal societies. He examined Stalin's analysis of European feudalism and extracted elements to show the uniquenesses in both societies. Unlike the Middle Ages in Europe where the dominant economy was serfdom, or the 'feudal lord economy' (*lingzhu jingji*), China had the landlord economy (*dizhu jingji*). 'The differences between the two were undeniable', Zhang argued. In contrast to Europe, where the Middle Ages were brought to an end by capitalism, China had become a unified country long before capitalism. Thus, China was able to form a nation based on the landlord economy and an autocratic government.¹⁸ In a word, Zhang developed Fan's theory about the uniqueness of Chinese history and argued that what was true in Europe might not be true in China, but like Fan, he could not disregard Stalin's criteria of nation.

To be sure, Fan and his followers faced an inherent problem in pursuing a nationalist Marxist historiography, but their endeavor suggests that Chinese Marxists were never completely subservient to the Soviet historiographical influence. As historians, they felt it necessary to acknowledge basic historical facts. They had to modify, sometimes disagree with, the Soviet interpretation of Marxism in order to cover the obvious discrepancy between what actually happened in the past and what was supposed to happen but failed to. Ultimately, of course, they had difficulty challenging the inborn problem in the Marxian historical framework, namely, its Eurocentrism. As Fan Wenlan described the 'peculiar' development of the Chinese nation, his fellow Marxists blamed Western imperialism for interrupting its 'normal' growth. Both these terms, 'peculiar' and 'normal', only made sense when they were situated in the context of the Marxian interpretation of European civilization.¹⁹

Periodization: politics and history

Like the debates on the Han nation, it was the Russian historians' work that sparked the discussion on periodization during this period, but Russian periodization did not gain much support from the Chinese historians' community, especially in the late 1950s when historians in China, along with other intellectuals, were encouraged to express their opinions in the Hundred Flower Movement. Many participants challenged the Russian point of view and opposed its emphasis on the peculiarity of Chinese history. Buoyed by nationalist sentiment, Chinese historians were eager to prove that China's past did not represent a deviated course of history; it was rather a suitable past for their current pursuit of socialism.

Discussions on periodizing Chinese history had occurred before, such as in the

18. 'Guanyu Han minzu heshi xingcheng de yixie wenti de shangque' (Some critical opinions regarding the questions on when China formed its nation), *Ibid.*, pp. 205–227.

19. Zeng Wenjing, for example, explains that because of Western aggression, China became a semi-colonial country. 'In such a country, capitalism could not develop freely, which thwarted the further development of the Han nation to its highest stage.' *Ibid.*, p. 33.

'Chinese Social History Controversy' of the 1930s.²⁰ Most Chinese Marxist historians, both in the 1930s and this time, argued vigorously that like all other societies, especially European society, China went through a similar process of social development and experienced the same social phases in history. To Chinese Marxists, working out a plausible historical periodization was paramount to the making of Marxist historiography. If historians established the fact that the evolution of Chinese history followed the Marxian path of social development, they also proved the applicability of Marxism in the study of history. Moreover, a correct periodization of Chinese history had a significant political implication: if China experienced such social stages as primitive communism, slavery, feudalism, and capitalism in the past, as suggested by Marx,²¹ it legitimized the Communists' seizure of power in the twentieth century. Albert Feuerwerker has analyzed the importance of this historiographical issue:

The pressure to settle this question finally (and the other periodization problems as well) therefore probably stems as much from the Communist party leadership, who are anxious lest any looseness at the beginning of the developmental paradigm raise doubts about its completion, as it does from the historians themselves.²²

To accept the Marxian scheme of social development is one thing, to use it to explain the evolution of Chinese history is quite another. Tao Xisheng and Guo Moruo, two early Marxist converts, started the 1930s debate when they attempted to adopt the Marxian theory in studying Chinese history. Their successes seemed to be limited. As noted by Arif Dirlik, Tao and Guo both modified their original positions when exposed more to Marxist literature later on.²³ The debate in the 1930s revolved around two questions: how to understand the nature of the Shang and Zhou Dynasties, or when did the transition of slavery to feudalism occur in ancient China, and how to explain the nature of contemporary Chinese society? The underlying issue in both questions is this: if Marxism was applicable to China, how could it be applied to explaining the 'peculiar' features of Chinese history?

While the whole problem caused originally by Marx's limited knowledge of Asian history, which led him to adopt the Hegelian term 'Asiatic' to describe the production mode of Asian society, Chinese Marxists had to wrestle with it largely from their own part, namely to adjust historical facts (*shi*) to the theory (*lun*), rather

20. There have been plenty of works on the 'social history controversy'; see Wang Lixi and Lu Qingqing, eds, *Zhongguo shehuishi di lunzhan* (Controversy on the Social History of China) (Shanghai: 1936); He Ganzhi, *Zhongguo shehui shi wenti lunzhan* (Controversy on the Problem of Chinese Social History) (Shanghai: 1937); Arif Dirlik, *Revolution and History: Origins of Marxist Historiography in China, 1919–1937* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978); Mechthild Leutner, *Geschichtsschreibung zwischen Politik und Wissenschaft: Zur Herausbildung der chinesischen marxistischen Geschichtswissenschaft in den 30er und 40er Jahren* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1982); and Wu An-chia, 'Revolution and history: on the causes of the controversy over the social history of China (1931–33)', *Chinese Studies in History* XI(3), (Spring 1988), pp. 77–96.

21. Karl Marx proclaimed in his *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* that: 'In broad outlines Asiatic, ancient, feudal, and modern bourgeois modes of production can be designated as progressive epochs in the economic formation of society'. 'Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*', *Early Writings* (New York: Vintage Books, 1975), p. 426.

22. 'China's history in Marxian dress', *History in Communist China*, p. 28.

23. *Revolution and History*, Part II, especially pp. 95–228.

than vice versa. In fact, the relationship between *shi* and *lun* is one of the most intricate questions in Chinese Marxist historiography. To a great extent, this '*shi-lun*' question characterizes Chinese Marxist historiography.²⁴ It shows how Chinese Marxists are riven with the theory to which they would like to subscribe and the reality in the past that seems unsuitable for the former. To be sure, the ideal scenario is when facts match the theory, or '*shi lun jiehe*', but this rarely happens, given the ambiguity of Marx's own description of Asian history.

Central to the periodization discussions in both the 1930s and the 1950s was how to understand Marx's definition of the 'Asiatic mode of production', which preceded slavery in his 'broad outlines'. Then, was Chinese history in the last two millennia more backward than ancient Greece and Rome? Moreover, the discussion was introduced against the background of the late 1920s when the CCP failed to organize successful urban uprisings, following the Comintern's order. Soviet Marxist theoreticians such as L. Mad'iar proposed the theory of 'Asiatic society' to explain the lean future of the Chinese Communist Revolution and emphasized the difference between Chinese and European society.²⁵ According to Mad'iar, this 'Asiatic society' theory referred to a stagnated period in Asian history that extended from post-primitive to pre-capitalist societies, different from the successive social movement from slavery to feudalism in Europe. This difference prevented the CCP from making a genuine Communist Revolution.

For Chinese Marxists, the approval of the 'Asiatic society' theory had a disastrous consequence: it watered down the significance of Chinese Communist movement in which they actively participated. Thus, there were both historical and political reasons for them to reject it. After the founding of the PRC, the question in regard to the nature of Chinese society was far from solved, but lingered on in spite of the Communist victory. The majority of historians complied to Mao's statement that from the mid-nineteenth century, China became a semi-feudal and semi-colonial society until the Communist victory, but they were far from unanimous in periodizing Chinese history. Harold Kahn and Albert Feuerwerker explain:

When the slave period ended, how long, if at all, the embarrassing (because unclassical and somehow second-class) stage of the Asiatic mode of production lasted, when the modern period begins—are questions more amenable to exegetical than historical solution.²⁶

Thus, the transition from slavery to feudalism in ancient China came to the fore in the 1950s discussion. There appeared about five different opinions regarding the

24. Almost all Marxist historians in China face this problem and thus share their opinions. They propose different ways to address the problem. Some (Jian Bozan) prefer '*yi lun dai shi*' (theory leads over facts), some (Wu Han) like '*lun cong shi chu*' (theory drawn from facts), and some believe '*shi lun jiehe*' (combining theory and facts). See Jiang Dachun, 'Lun yu shi de guanxi kaocha' (An observation of the relationship between theory and facts), *Lishi yanjiu* 4, (1982), pp. 21–26. Also Susanne Weigelin-Schwiedrzik, 'Party historiography', *Using the Past to Serve the Present*, pp. 151–173; and her article 'On "*shi*" and "*lun*": toward a typology of historiography in the PRC', *History and Theory* 35(4), (1996), pp. 74–95.

25. L. Mad'iar's main works are on Chinese agricultural economy: *Ekonomika sel'skogo khoziaistva v Kitae* (Moscow, 1928) and *Ocherki po ekonomike Kitaia* (Moscow, 1930).

26. 'The ideology of scholarship', *History in Communist China*, p. 10.

occurrence of the transition, of which Guo Moruo's argument that feudalism took place in the Warring States period (5th Century BC) and Fan Wenlan's in the Western Zhou Dynasty (11th Century BC) reached prominence and paled others into insignificance. Interestingly, neither represented the Russia position, which was presented by Shang Yue at the People's University. Shang and his colleagues argued that feudalism did not occur in China until the later Eastern Han period (3rd Century or later).²⁷ Compared with the discussion on the Han nation, the periodization discussion, lasting almost the entire period, showed that the participants gradually gained more room in interpreting the Marxist canon. Chinese Marxists had slowly come out of the phantom of the Soviet influence and began to make an autonomous voice in Marxist historiography.

All the same, as said earlier, the discussion itself was initiated by the Russians. L. V. Simonovskaia, a prominent Russian sinologist, published her article entitled 'The question on how to periodize ancient Chinese history' (*Zhongguo gudaishi de hua jieduan wenti*) in the *Xin Jianshe* (New construction) in March 1951. Drawing on the 'Asiatic society' theory, Simonovskaia argued that the adoption of Chinese feudalism occurred in a much later period, around the Han Dynasty (206 BC–220 AD).²⁸ Despite Shang Yue's support, however, this periodization did not exert much influence in the Chinese historians' circle, which was in marked contrast to the 1930s discussion when Chinese Marxists had yielded 'the field to the new historical "orthodoxy" from the Soviet Union'.²⁹ In his textbook *Zhongguo lishi gangyao* (Outline History of China), which he edited and published in the midst of the discussion, Shang actually decided not to elaborate on his viewpoint regarding the periodization question.³⁰ Zhou Gucheng, another Soviet supporter, also recalled that when he discussed the matter with a Russian historian who visited Shanghai where Zhou worked, the latter was very surprised to learn that Zhou, too, believed that feudalism began in the Han Dynasty. He said to Zhou that in his entire trip he only met one person (probably Shang Yue) other than Zhou who held the same opinion.³¹

As the Russians represented only a minority opinion in the discussion, many participants took sides with either Guo Moruo or Fan Wenlan. Guo and Fan held different opinions about the nature of the Western Zhou Dynasty. As Guo stated that Zhou remained in slavery, Fan contended that it had evolved into feudalism.

27. See Shang Yue, 'Xianqin shengchan xingtai zhi tantao' (A tentative discussion on the production mode in the pre-Qin period), *Zhongguo gudaishi fenqi wenti taolunji* (Collected Essays on the Periodization Question in Ancient Chinese History) (Beijing: Sanlian shudian, 1957), pp. 328–371. Wang Zhonglao's article 'Guanyu Zhongguo nuli shehui de waijie ji fengjian guanxi de xingcheng wenti' (On the disintegration of slave society and the emergence of feudal production relation in China) *Ibid.*, pp. 400–511.

28. Simonovskaia's article 'Voprosy periodizatsii drevnei istorii Kitaia' appeared originally in *Vestnik drevnei istorii* 1 (1950), along with T. V. Stepugina's 'K voprosu o sotsial'no-ekonomicheskikh otnosheniakh v Kitae v XIV–XII vv. do n. e.', *Vestnik drevnei istorii* 2 (1950). They both proposed to reopen the discussion for they supported their fellow historian V. V. Struve's view that feudalism did not occur in China until the first century AD. Compare this with the article by Nikiforov, 'The study of Chinese history in the USSR', p. 149.

29. A. Dirlik, *Revolution and History*, p. 182.

30. See his preface to *Zhongguo lishi gangyao* (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 1954), p. 1.

31. See Zhou's 'Zhongguo nuli shehuilun' (On Chinese slave society), *Zhongguo de nulizhi yu fengjianzhi fenqi wenti lunwen xuanji* (Selected Essays on the Periodization of the Slave and Feudal Eras in China) (Beijing: Sanlian shudian, 1956), p. 67.

Guo based his theory on evidence found in his study of bronze and oracle-bone inscriptions. He argued that slavery existed in ancient China and lasted from the Shang to the Zhou Dynasties.³² By proving the existence of Chinese slavery, he attested to the applicability of the Marxian social theory. In his *Nulizhi shidai* (The Age of Slavery), a main contribution to the disputation of the 1950s, Guo claimed:

It is an indisputable fact today that the Chinese modes of production experienced the development from primitive communism, slavery, and feudalism to this stage.³³

Guo also disagreed with the 'Asiatic society' theory advanced by the Russians. He used the archaeological findings from Anyang, a capital of the Shang, to show that there were a number of people buried alive in the royal tombs, whom he suspected were slaves. He then supplemented his theory by using the oracle-bone inscriptions and believed that some inscriptions provided written proof of the slave class in the Shang.³⁴

While the material evidence helped Guo to find traces of slavery in ancient China, it did not help him to explain the transition from slavery to serfdom, which occurred—in his opinion—in the late Zhou Dynasty. In fact, in the royal tombs of the Qin and Han Dynasties there were also corpses of a similar kind. Did slavery exist in that period as well? Guo did not think so,³⁵ but he needed more evidence. He acknowledged that 'my evidence was not complete and my analysis was also rudimentary'. Since he failed to find the archaeological evidence for the transition, he analyzed written texts to look for reasons, which ranged from economic condition and developments of commerce and trade to social ideology, in order to support his periodization that in China, slavery existed in the Shang and ended in the late Zhou Dynasty.³⁶

For his critics, Guo Moruo was inconsistent in using source material, hence weakening his theory. Indeed, many found that Guo interpreted his sources, especially the written ones, liberally. Wang Yuzhe and Yang Xiangkui, two specialists in the study of ancient history, offered different readings of the sources originally used by Guo in illustrating his theory.³⁷ Their criticism revealed a major problem in the entire discussion on the periodization question. Many discussants developed different theories on periodization, particularly with regard to the transition from slavery to feudalism, but these differences occurred simply because the participants disagreed with one another in interpreting the sources. In other words, the discussion did not prompt people to expand their study, but tied them down to a few source materials that were already well-known in the field.

32. See Guo's *Zhongguo gudai shehui yanjiu* (A Study of Ancient Chinese Society) (Shanghai, 1930) and *Shi pipan shu* (Ten Critiques) (Chongqing, 1945), although in the first book Guo had argued that the Shang was still a primitive communist society.

33. *Nulizhi shidai* (Shanghai, 1952), p. 1.

34. *Ibid.*, pp. 4–12.

35. Guo thought that slavery ended before Qin in China because this periodization was alluded to by Mao Zedong. On a few occasions, especially in his *The Chinese Revolution and the Chinese Communist Party*, Mao had said that feudalism in China began in the Qin–Han period and lasted for about 3000 years.

36. *Nulizhi shidai*, pp. 24–27.

37. Wang Yuzhe, 'Liang zhou shehui xingtai de tantao' (An investigation of the Western and Eastern societies) and Yang Xiangkui, 'Guanyu Xizhou de shehui xingzhi wenti' (On the nature of Western Zhou society), *Zhongguo de nulizhi yu fengjianzhi*, pp. 262–276 and 311–330.

Fan Wenlan's analysis of Chinese feudalism was made into the backbone of his multi-volume work *Zhongguo tongshi jianbian* (A Short General History of China). Indeed, some of the sources employed by Guo were used by Fan to buttress an entirely different argument. For example, both historians selected passages from the *Shijing* (Book of Odes) that described the working people as evidence to determine the nature of the Zhou society. As Guo regarded them as slaves, Fan treated them as serfs. The problem arose partly because the descriptions, written in the form of poetry, were not precise and hence were open to different interpretations.³⁸ Besides this difference in interpreting the *Shijing*, Fan used other written sources to show that after the founding of the Zhou Dynasty, the ruler practiced enfeoffment (*fengjian*) and established the patriarchal system (*zongfa zhidu*) whereby the Zhou royal family assumed land ownership across the country. Thus, Fan concluded that the Zhou political and economic system embodied the 'feudal land ownership', which was the main feature of feudalism, according to Stalin's theory. By contrast, Guo held that it was during the Warring States period when iron was introduced to the people that feudalism took its roots. Since the change of tool types, again according to Stalin, often indicated the change of the nature of a society, Guo and his supporters believed that by then the sprout of feudalism had cropped up.³⁹

While the periodization discussion had a paramount political implication, it did not go anywhere because the participants were bogged down in source interpretation. Both sides clung on to one or two Marxist doctrines and looked for corresponding evidence, but refused to acknowledge any validity in the other's theory. Historically speaking, this discussion 'is unsolvable except on completely arbitrary grounds, and thus makes little positive contribution to the revaluation of the past'.⁴⁰ Deplorable as it was that so much energy was wasted on some minor details, the discussion hardly ended until 1964 when most of the historians were sent to the countryside to participate in the 'Four Cleanups' (*Siqing*) Movement, one of the many political campaigns orchestrated by the party to re-educate the intellectuals.

Conclusion

The above two discussions suggest that because of the Russian influence, Chinese Marxist historiography began in the PRC as an intercultural discourse. We observe

38. The best analysis on this matter is in Yang Xiangkui's article cited in the last note. Guo himself also wrote an article criticizing Fan's interpretation of these poems, 'Guanyu nuli yu nongnu de jiuge' (The problems regarding serf and slave), *Nulizhi shidai* pp. 106–126.

39. Fan's analysis of the question is in his preface to the *Zhongguo tongshi jianbian* (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, revised ed. 1964), pp. 33–48. Guo's discussion on the use of iron tools is in his *Nulizhi shidai*, pp. 19–20. Wu Dakun, Guo's supporter, provides his analysis on how Stalin's remarks on feudalism should be understood 'appropriately' in order to solve the problem. 'Yu Fan Wenlan tongzhi lun huafen zhongguo nuli shehui yu fengjian shehui de biaoizhun wenti' (A discussion with Comrade Fan Wenlan on the criteria in the periodization of Chinese slave and feudal society), *Zhongguo de nulizhi yu fengjianzhi* ..., pp. 116–129. Fan's main supporter Shu Shizheng, however, emphasizes that the best criterion is to judge the society by its production relation. *Zhongguo de fengjian shehui jiqi fenqi* (Chinese Feudal Society and its Periodization) (Shanghai, 1957), pp. 1–42.

40. Albert Feuerwerker, 'China's history in Marxian dress', *History in Communist China* p. 31. Feuerwerker does point out that it appeared that Guo's group achieved an upper hand later in the discussion.

a high interest from the Chinese side in Russian historiography, suggesting that Marxism, despite its ecumenical claim, is tied to a particular foreign experience to the Chinese recipients. Exemplary and hegemonic as it appears to be, this experience also presents itself with visible weaknesses, resulting mostly from its dogmatic approach. With a better knowledge, Chinese Marxists easily detect the problems contained in the Russian model as well as in the Marxian historical framework. This detection results in a dissatisfaction that leads them to challenge the coercive, hegemonic power of the Russian model in this intercultural communication. Rather than simply accepting the Russian interpretation of Chinese history, Chinese Marxists interpreted the Russian model and thereby effected a 'counter-movement', to borrow Hans-Georg Gadamer's term on hermeneutics.⁴¹ The Chinese practice of Marxist historiography is hence an interpretive, hermeneutic process, in which they acknowledge the temporal distance, instead of the supposed affinity, between the Marxist text, disguised in the form of Russian historiography, and China's historical experience.

The Marxists' social commitment, stemming from the nationalist impulse, also urges them to acknowledge this distance between theory and history. On this matter, Soviet historians' works seem to have contributed problems rather than solutions. In the discussion on the Han nation, the Russians took a rigid application of Stalin's definition, refusing to take 'peculiar' elements in Chinese history into consideration, yet in the discussion on periodizing Chinese history, they became more conciliatory. Adopting the 'ancient Orient' perspective, or the 'Asiatic society' theory, the Russians acknowledged unique features of Chinese history, acknowledging its dissimilar path in social evolution. In both times, they failed either to impress or to please their Chinese counterparts, but hurt their nationalist feelings, for, in the eyes of Chinese Marxists, the Russians only wanted to show that Russia followed a standard path of social evolution and that the Russian Communist Revolution was more legitimate than the Chinese Revolution. This nationalist sensitivity suggests that Chinese Marxist historiography is indeed a nationalist interpretation of Marxism.

As we have discussed previously, this nationalist approach to Marxism contains its intrinsic problems. In their endeavor to interpret and appropriate the Russian Marxist model, Chinese Marxists encountered many difficulties in making it useful for their nationalist commitment. Given the perceived distance between Marxist theory and Chinese history, shown by Marx's ambiguity and Stalin's arbitrariness on the one hand and some distinctive features of Chinese history on the other, they can have only two options: one is to find the sources that fit with the theory and the other is to modify the theory to mesh with the facts. Both, of course, required much interpretive maneuvering, causing confusion in understanding the history of China as well as the teachings of Marxism.

Ultimately, historiography is dictated by history. Towards the end of this period, or the late 1950s and early 1960s, when the ideological rift between the two countries became more and more obvious and known to the public, nationalist sentiment obtained the upper hand. Chinese historians became increasingly critical

41. Cf. John Brenkman, *Culture and Domination* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985).

of the Soviet approach to Marxist historiography, especially its Eurocentrism, as we observed to some extent from the periodization discussion. Zhou Gucheng, for instance, stated that 'up to the present all text-books of world history, both progressive and non-progressive, have been Eurocentric'.⁴² He condemned both the works of Western and Russian historians. Amid the warnings against Eurocentrism, the historians who specialized in early Chinese history argued that compared to European history China's past, either slavery or feudalism, was no less 'classic' but indeed more 'classic', given its extensiveness, longevity, and regularity. Once Chinese Marxists were freed from the domination of Soviet culture, they felt less constrained in applying Marxism to serving the goal of Chinese nationalism. The nationalist approach they now openly advocated became a continuum of their efforts to search for the Chinese 'jade' with borrowed 'stone', whether it was from Russia (Stalin), Germany (Marx), or, for that matter, anywhere else.

42. Quoted in R. V. Vyatkin and S. L. Tikhvinsky, 'Some questions of historical science in the Chinese People's Republic', *History in Communist China* p. 335. Zhou's works were published in 1961 and became one of the targets for the Russian attacks on the 'openly nationalistic and racist views' of the Chinese in the article. For the Chinese historians' view of world history in the period, see Dorothea Martin, *The Making of a Sino-Marxist World View: Perceptions and Interpretations of World History in the People's Republic of China* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1990).