

# Mao's Dao and the Core Curriculum on Western Thought

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*Editors' Note: Last year, in response to the publication of Chang and Halliday's Mao: The Unknown Story, we called on readers to respond with their views on the controversy surrounding that work and on how, if at all, the book affected their teaching. We were pleased to see that one of the liveliest panels at the 2007 Conference was entitled "The Mao Controversy." Stephen Herschler and Jinxing Chen (see following article) were two of the panelists, and we are grateful to them for allowing us to publish their presentations and keep the discussion moving forward.*

Introducing university students to Asia at Oglethorpe presents a particular challenge as our four-year core curriculum, a sequence of nine courses required of all students over and above any of their major requirement, significantly reduces students' opportunity to 'discover' the wonders of Asia through serendipitous course selection. Yet, as all students must take core classes, I have found that this challenge can, dialectically, be turned into an advantage: by including Asian texts in core courses, we have the opportunity to expand the horizons of a broad spectrum of students.

I teach the sophomore core course in which students read the works of influential Western thinkers, including Smith, Tocqueville, Durkheim, Weber, Nietzsche, and Marx, so as to consider different conceptualizations of 'Human Nature and the Social Order.' I add to the course's core texts, Mao Zedong's essay 'On Contradiction' as I find it serves not only to clarify Marx's ideas, it also enriches the course by introducing elements of a non-Western philosophical tradition. Yet teaching Mao poses particular pedagogical and political challenges.

Teaching Marx to American students is no easy task. Although I emphasize his historical importance as well as the respect his ideas hold in much of the world, most students consider him irrelevant and his turgid writing style all but impenetrable. I guide them through some of Marx's main

concepts, including teleological history, stages, classes, revolution, means of production, relations of production, etc.



*Mao at his desk in Yan'an where he wrote "On Contradiction"*

Our course readings, however, provide no clear sense of one of the course's main themes: what accounts for change. For Marx, of course, it is Dialectical Materialism.

## Mao on Marx

Mao's 'On Contradiction' serves admirably in giving students a sense of the propulsive force driving history. Students are grateful for the essay's clear organization and writing style. Since most of these students know nothing about China, I emphasize that they should scan paragraphs in which Mao applies general theoretical insights to historical specifics. Fortunately, Mao places his general points at the start of each section.

Part of the utility of 'On Contradiction' lies in its distilling a complex idea into a term that students more readily understand. 'The dialectic' means nothing to students;

'contradiction,' however, does. Students are amused and intrigued to hear that at the individual level, perhaps they are not 'conflicted' but rather 'contradicted' and, moreover, that Mao would see personal development and life itself as dependent on contradictions.

'Contradiction' also serves as a conceptually effective contrast to the views of the course's other thinkers. For example, Mao's critique of 'mechanical materialism' and 'vulgar evolutionism' can be readily related to Adam Smith's incrementalist view of progress involving an inexorable march to 'universal opulence' (or

Mao's lauding of 'struggle' can be contrasted with Smith's depiction of the 'angry man' in *Theory of Moral Sentiments*). Mao's idea that contradiction is vital for life itself contrasts effectively with Durkheim's premise that society has a collective purpose. And, of course, it fuels the debate with Weber's polemic against historical materialism in *The Protestant Ethic*.

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### The Dao and Mao

Yet Mao does far more than simply ‘translate’ Marx. Stuart Schram and others have referred to Mao’s ‘Sinicized Marxism,’ one evincing traits of traditional Chinese philosophical thinking. This is where and how Mao makes an Asian contribution to the core curriculum. I have found Chenshan Tian’s work *Chinese Dialectics* useful in tracing the relationship between correlative thinking and Mao’s

conception of the dialectic. Tian’s argument is too nuanced for the course, but I can relate his ideas to aspects and symbols of Asian philosophy with which students are familiar. If dialectics is a ‘dao’ and, as Tian writes, “a yin and a yang is what we call ‘dao’,” then the ubiquitous yin-yang symbol (indeed, often at least one student in the class either is either adorned or tattooed with it) becomes a useful graphic representation of the dialectic—with the vital addition of struggle, of course. Hence, I supplement the Marxist unit of the course with a mini-lecture on Daoist thought, a topic that students hold in much higher esteem than Marxism.

While a background in Marxism is imperative to understanding Mao, Mao does stand as a theorist in his own right. Mao’s infusion of Marxist dialectics with correlative thinking shifts the Marxist view of historical development in subtle yet significant ways. Two changes in particular have been much noted by scholars. First, Mao breaks with a pure materialism by avowing that sometimes the social superstructure can play a revolutionary role in transforming the economic base—hence the Great Leap Forward. Second, Mao challenges the idea that antagonistic relations between a duality will transform into non-antagonistic relations

after the Revolution by emphasizing the violent struggle between a couplet’s counterparts—hence the Cultural Revolution. These revisions to quotidian Marxist ideas prove pedagogically useful

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as students have to debate, in essays if not in class itself, such issues as whether economics always drives society or whether progress is possible without struggle and even violence.

Thus, Mao contributes to the core curriculum in part by clarifying Marx’s ideas, and doing so through terms that students more readily comprehend. Mao also engages with and expands the core’s philosophical terrain by including a significant, distinctive mode of thinking that lies largely outside the purview of the Western philosophical tradition, concurrently enriching and problematizing Western conceptualizations of human nature and the social order.

### The Mao Controversy

Yet the ASIANetwork panel on the Mao Controversy indicates some difficulties in teaching Mao over and beyond such logistical and pedagogical difficulties as finding room for him in an already full syllabus or providing students with sufficient background to understand the basics of Daoist philosophy or Chinese history.

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Mao’s ideas are intellectually interesting and pedagogically useful. At the same time, they have been responsible for tremendous pain and destruction. Mao makes strikingly clear that our ideas have consequences. While I argue throughout

the course that the ideas we study have shaped the world we live in and the ways we understand ourselves, no other thinker in the course has been in a position to implement their ideas so fully and directly. In this respect, relative to the other theorists we read in the class, Mao is an outlier.

To achieve true pedagogical ‘balance’ in the class, I could present relatively pure examples of how the ideas of each theorist have been implemented. That would prove extremely difficult in practice, however, as those who have used the ideas of Smith or Weber, for example, invariably have done so selectively and under circumstances very different from those in which the ideas were originally crafted. No tidy comparative cases present themselves.

Another way to attempt to address the issue in a ‘fair and equitable’ way is to explicitly debate throughout the term the impact of these philosophers’ ideas as they have been applied to the world. For example, supplementing neo-liberalism as a proxy for Smithian economics and modernization theory as a proxy for Weber’s rationalization, one might explore the constructive and destructive impact of these theories when implemented. Here too, of course, the line between the theory and the consequences is still more tenuous than is true for Mao and Mao Zedong Thought. It might help somewhat to have a particular case or set of cases to focus upon so that students better appreciate how each theory provides its own particular way of analyzing and evaluating the world.

Perhaps the utility in using Mao’s thought for the course includes the very cognitive discomfort he generates. ‘Human Nature and the Social Order’ should challenge the assumptions of the students as well as my own. Even if Mao conceded the Great Leap Forward to be a mistake, he might well dismiss those lamenting his political campaigns for inducing ‘pain and destruction.’ Had he foreseen China following the path of ‘reform and opening’ upon his death, he may well have determined Chinese society to be wracked with revolution-threatening antagonisms requiring even greater and more violent struggle to resolve. Mao might say the problem is not with Mao Thought, either in theory or in practice, but rather with my bourgeois, Rightist thinking—a thought provoking assertion, for students and teacher alike.