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## Contradiction and Juche, Philosophical Deviations from Traditional Dialectical Materialism by Kim Il Sung and Mao Zedong Necessitated by Socio-Political Conditions

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*Contradiction and Juche*, Philosophical Deviations from Traditional Dialectical Materialism by  
Kim Il Sung and Mao Zedong Necessitated by Socio-Political Conditions

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“Workers of the World, Unite!”<sup>1</sup> *but how?* For the centuries since the passing of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, practitioners of dialectical materialism and its resultant philosophies have been faced with the dilemma of interpretation and application of philosophical principles to legitimate revolution, or substantial reform. For some revolutionaries, the words of Marx and Engels are held to be the supreme word, and all action is justified within the pages of *Capital*. For others, Marx and his cadre were merely the authors of some guidelines written before the time of modern finance Capital, nullifying most of the theories’ implications on praxis. Within the ideological battleground of East Asia during the rise of Communism in the early to mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century, two cases stand out from the rest, both in their sophistication and diverging opinions on the role of dialectical materialism in governance, Mao Zedong’s People’s Republic of China, and Kim Il Sung’s Democratic People’s Republic of Korea. These two statesmen faced unique conditions in their given efforts to legitimize their rule: with the Chinese Communist Party contesting with other ruling governments on the mainland and fighting off imperial invaders, and with the Workers’ Party of Korea battling an imperialist empire both on the Korean Peninsula and within its own government. To allow for the utilization of Marxist philosophy in the nontraditional environments of both conditions, the two practitioners created what will be defined as “governing frameworks”, or systems for interpreting/reappropriating theory to explain conditions and solutions for building Communism in their nations. This work will attempt to attribute the deviations from the traditional Marxist dialectic in the given cases to their governing philosophies, and thus their geopolitical conditions.

### **I: Hegel, Lenin, and Marx as the Forebearers of the Materialist Dialectic**

Vladimir Lenin once definitively stated, “it is impossible completely to understand Marx’s *Capital*, and especially its first chapter, without having thoroughly studied and understood the whole of Hegel’s *Logic*.”<sup>2</sup> While the term ‘Dialectical Materialism’ was not institutionalized until Stalin’s efforts to formalize it as the state philosophy of the Soviet Union, the framework itself can be traced to the German idealist philosopher Georg Wilhelm Hegel, who himself reappropriated relevant Aristotelian dialectic philosophy.<sup>3</sup> While himself an unabashed idealist who shamelessly thought of his theories as merely explanations of theological fact, Hegel is undoubtedly the greatest influence on Karl Marx when he crafted what would later be termed the Materialist Dialectic, an answer to the idealist “opium” of Hegelianism while retaining the revised elements of the dialectic method reapplied to materialist conditions. The mere existence of a link between the two philosophers does not negate their substantial differences, and contradictions, in the two resultant philosophical frameworks; the suggestiveness of both philosophers, their legacies, and their successors make the likening of the two a controversial statement, regardless of factuality. To quote Dr. Sidney Hook, a scholar of Dialectical Materialism, “No two names are at once so suggestive of both agreement and opposition as are the names Hegel and Marx. To conjoin them is not so much to express a relationship as to raise a problem—one of the most challenging problems in the history of thought. How did there develop from what was ostensibly the most conservative system of philosophy in western European tradition, the revolutionary ideology of the greatest mass

<sup>1</sup> Engels, Friedrich and Marx, Karl. 2017 [1948] *The Communist Manifesto*. Delaware: Millennium Publications.

<sup>2</sup> Glaberman, Martin. 1968. “Mao as a Dialectician” *International Philosophical Quarterly* 8 (1):94-112. *PhilPapers* (September 20, 2021).

<sup>3</sup> Engels, Friedrich. 1892. *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*. London: Swan Sonnenschein & Co.

movement since Christianity?”<sup>4</sup> While this closing question is directly relevant to Marxist dialectics, its many implications, not its direct answers, are the subject of this work; the melding of the two frameworks left ample space for contradictory interpretations and chronologies, and these contradictions serve as the principal deviations from materialist dialectics within Mao and Kim’s governing philosophies due to their circumstantial needs as statesmen.

Before the Vietnam War, the two haunting *spectres* of Communism in East Asia were the People’s Republic of China, and the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, both geographically (and politically) situated under the wing of the vast Eurasian hegemon, the USSR. At their helms were some of the most prominent figures of Marxist politics to date, particularly founding leaders Mao Zedong of the PRC and Kim Il Sung of the DPRK. These two, whose deviance from materialist orthodoxy will be catalogued in this work, both began and continued their political legacies under the red banner of Communism, with material and philosophical aid from the USSR, from the time of Vladimir Lenin through the dissolution under Mikhail Gorbachev. “Armed with Marxist-Leninist theory and ideology, the Communist Party of China has brought a new style of work to the Chinese people”;<sup>5</sup> a philosophical contemporary of the Soviet dialectic, Mao made no mistakes in asserting the founding fathers of his ideology, while being sure to note its implementation in China. “We must by all means bring the lines and strategic and tactical policies of the Party home to all its membership and arm the entire Party with the scientific Marxist-Leninist theory and throughgoing revolutionary ideas.”<sup>6</sup> In the opening chapter of the foundational text creating the WPK, Kim Il Sung, who cites his preceding thinkers far less than Mao, makes explicit where the DPRK turns for inspiration. It is not worth repeating the simple fact both thinkers are Communist in tradition; this has been discussed at greater length in far more intensive volumes. Questions rather arise from which philosophical frameworks are parroted or abandoned by the two, and more importantly, why?

There are stark commonalities between the language of the two statesmen, largely stemming from their contemporaneity, and more importantly, their nations’ revolutionary and anti-imperialist circumstances. Rather than following exclusively in Marxist tradition, it is critical to note both Mao and Kim referred to their parties, the CCP and the WPK, as ‘*Marxist-Leninist*’; but what does this distinction mean? Is it justified only by their position after the revolutions of 1917? Or the language of the quickly Stalinizing Soviet Union? Both likely play a role in the choice to use the ‘-*Leninist*’ suffix; however neither fully encapsulates the necessity of Vladimir Lenin’s revisions of traditional Marxist thought, particularly in the field of historical materialism. To better understand the Leninist inclusion, it may be helpful to divide the great statesman’s philosophy into three relevant facets, all notable continuations of the materialist dialectic. The first of these being “Lenin the State-Builder,” best embraced by the PRC under Mao. By embodying primarily *State and Revolution* perhaps more than any other Communist text, Mao found dialectic elements best related to the formation and continuation of an internal factional movement, all while abetting external threats [ideologically and militarily]. These dialectic interactions in society, of both social and material spheres, would instigate his philosophy of

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<sup>4</sup> Hook, Sidney. 1966. *From Hegel to Marx: Studies in the Intellectual Development of Karl Marx*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press. pp. 15

<sup>5</sup> Mao, Zedong. 1945. On Coalition Government. In *Selected Works of Mao Tse-tung* (pp. 278-285, Vol. 3). Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1967. pp. 314

<sup>6</sup> Kim, (7) On the establishment of the Workers' Party of North Korea and the question of founding the Workers' Party of South Korea

contradiction, a purely Maoist framework contributing to materialist dialectics, and enshrining the *-Maoist* suffix onto many factional Leninist movements, thus the common acronym *MLM* [Marxist-Leninist-Maoist]. The second relevant facet could be termed “Lenin the Anti-Colonialist”, best supported in his magnum opus *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism*, which added a minor epoch of Marxist history onto the chronology of historical materialism, which to date stands as the single-largest revision of the historical materialist timeline since Marx defined them as: primitive Communism, ancient mode of production, feudal mode of production, Capitalist mode of production, and Communist mode of production [within which there are two substages, the highest stage, and the lowest stage; the phraseology and trajectory of this partition allowed for Lenin’s stage-based modification of the historical timeline in 1917.]<sup>7</sup> Through a weaponization of Marxism against the international *imperialist* bourgeoisie, Kim Il Sung could draw decisive and lethal lines within his own country, and the global community, during the DPRK’s struggle for freedom.

A third facet of Lenin exists as an arch between the two thinkers, consisting of the bulk of the shared philosophy between the two governments; “Lenin as the Principal Actor of Praxis,” narrated best in Lenin’s version of *What is to be Done?*, and found through the above two volumes. Prior to Lenin, the furthest trial available to Marxists and Marx himself was found in the Paris Commune, a short-lived but politically unprecedented test of socialist theory. While not a full-scale revolution, the brief occupation consisted of such an unexpected application of theory that many contemporaries spent the rest of their careers analyzing its rise and fall. Apart from this trial, Marx’s certainty of a German socialist workers’ revolution was not materialized in his lifetime, nor was there any workers’ uprising in a hyper industrialized Capitalist country. While several contemporary left scholars saw this absence of an uprising as the failure of Marxist theory, Vladimir Lenin’s scholarship of Marxism as an antidote to Tsarist oppression and ineptitude proved to revive hopes of a socialist project in Europe. Rather than draft elaborate philosophical frameworks like the Marxists before him, Lenin’s greatest achievement, and that which binds him to Mao and Kim, is his *praxis*, his application of such theory with *action*. American scholar Dr. Neil Harding emphasized the role of Lenin’s *praxis* in the context of prior scholars: “As an instinctive politician, as a practitioner of revolution [Lenin] is incomparable. As a theorist of Marxism, however, he is inconsistent, unorthodox and vacillating and by these tokens comparatively unimportant... Lenin, in this gloss, is pre-eminently a practitioner, not a theorist of revolution.”<sup>8</sup> Why, then, study a “comparatively unimportant” philosopher of Marxism? Such *praxis* separates him from the preceding theorists in the Marxist tradition, “Lenin, it seems, made the Russian revolution, created the Communist International, directed all his policies with one aim in view, the elevation of Vladimir Ilich (sic.) Ulyanov as the paragon of the revolutionary world.”<sup>9</sup>

The commonalities between shared frameworks, eclipsing in Leninism, are not to suggest these two governing philosophies are compatible; rather they seem to borrow from separate socialist traditions altogether. While both are categorized as broadly Communist and considered some of the few states to carry out radical left economic policy at scale, the similarities between the two governing philosophies seem to exhaust themselves quicker than one may be led to

<sup>7</sup> Marx, Karl. 1867. *Capital. Volume I: The Process of Production of Capital*. Hamburg: Verlag von Otto Meisner

<sup>8</sup> Harding, Neil. 1978. *Lenin’s Political Thought, Volume I, Theory and Practice in the Democratic Revolution*. New York: St. Martin’s Press. pp.1

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid* pp. 3

assume. Perhaps the greatest difference, which will be principally explored in the following sections, is the adherence or deviation from materialism, specifically orthodox Marxist or even Marxist-Leninist dialectical materialism. The three foundational thinkers of the dialectic explored above, Hegel, Marx/Engels, and Lenin, have sizeable gaps between their assertions, leaving ample “wobble room” for Mao and Kim to adopt and dismiss as they please. While both considered themselves to be working in the tradition of these philosophers, their differing applications of their theories present a stark reality; Mao and Kim do not espouse the same “Marx”, and certainly not the same brand of dialectical materialism.

### II.a. Mao’s State-Building Socialism, a Governing Framework of Materialism

“The case of Mao, however, is not an ordinary one. His importance as a political figure and his impact on history are unquestioned. The question of the nature of his philosophy, therefore, assumes a significance that cannot be dismissed on the basis of purely scholarly criteria.”<sup>10</sup> For a sizeable portion of the last century, western scholarship has overwhelmingly ignored the seriousness of Mao as a philosopher. Arguments against his credibility as a practitioner of political philosophy have ranged from his cult of personality leadership style to his leftist supposedly faulty ideology of Communism. These assertions fail to recognize the unprecedented and lasting impact Mao holds in international revolutionary movements. Whether a western scholar views Mao’s intricate network of philosophies as “valid” has positively no impact on the millions of people actively living under, or taking part in, revolutionary movements in the Maoist tradition. In order to make the most of this paper’s assertions, one must see the utility in Dr. Martin Glaberman’s statement at the beginning of this paragraph; just because western scholarly criteria dismisses it, its legacies as the foundational agrarian revolutionary movement are not magically erased. Through the publication of *Quotations from the Chairman Mao Tse-Tung* (known in the West colloquially and perhaps diminutively as the *Little Red Book*) and through the Cultural Revolution’s public education initiatives, Mao’s time as chairman of the CCP stands as one of the most widespread public engagements with a sophisticated political philosophy in the history of modern governance, Communist or not. If we are to take Mao seriously as a skilled political philosopher, or at least an important one, then it must now be analyzed whether or not he was a materialist dialectician, and where his deviations lie.

Mao’s unique position as the primary agent of internal organization in a time of such disarray grants him an extraordinary set of political needs. With the Republic of China driven to Taiwan, but still causing a crisis of authority in the mainland; with the landlord class and feudal lords still holding a great deal of economic and social power; with China being an agricultural, feudal society far unlike the workshops of Berlin which Marx described; the only thing clear about Mao’s political inheritance was the improbability of available helpful Communist theory, that is from orthodox dialectical materialism. Mao’s unique set of needs compromised what will be labeled a “Governing Philosophy,” or a framework of philosophical solutions based on the conditions of the state. For Mao’s PRC, this Governing Philosophy can be labeled ‘State-Building Socialism,’ a framework with the intention of constructing a stable and powerful regional hegemon from a tiered, bifurcated society in disarray after Japanese and European imperial conquest.

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<sup>10</sup> Glaberman, Martin. 1968. “*Mao as a Dialectician*” *International Philosophical Quarterly* 8 (1):94-112. *PhilPapers* (September 20, 2021). pp.1

Those who lived through, or studied, the Cold War era are likely to be familiar with the term “Sino-Soviet Split,” a label for the growing independence of Maoist philosophy and foreign relations from that of Stalinist and Khrushchevian Soviet primacy. To some extent both the works discussed here by Mao, and that of Kim in the following section, are reflections of the given states diverging from the hegemony of the Soviet Union; however, this is more the case with Mao, as he attempted to construct a state from within. The existence of the landlord class and traditional cultural hierarchies within Chinese society threatened any real proletarian movement from occurring from within. The “petty bourgeoisie”, as Marx would describe them, held consequential power, and prevented any true egalitarian movement or armed liberation of proletarian peoples. On top of this, the material interactions within the PRC were destabilizing and imperialistic, with resources flowing out and material flowing to non-state actors within China; the very strings holding the Chinese economy together were inherently upsetting to the prospects of a state in the socialist tradition. Internal hierarchy was of a far higher concern to Mao than it was to Lenin; although he decapitated [politically] the powerful Tsar and his nobility, Lenin did not have to deal with an ancient league of trusted, culturally dominant oligarchs who were not connected or organized in any legitimate power order. How would Mao decide who, and what, was proletarian? How could one even begin to follow Leninist tradition in a nation whose political structure did not resemble Lenin’s? Mao would have to invent a new variation of the dialectic, one which he called *Contradiction*. To unpack Mao’s deviations or additions to the dialectic it is critical to study two of his works in particular, *On Contradiction*, and *On Practice*; these two philosophical pamphlets have been recognized to consist of the bulk of Mao’s contributions to Dialectical Materialism,<sup>11</sup> and provide ample material to draw comparisons, and diversions, from Hegel, Marx, and Lenin.

The first, *On Contradiction*, can be seen as the peak of Mao’s contributions to the dialectic, and will be the subject of analysis in this section. His rebranding of the term “dialectic” to mean “contradiction” has implications on materialist philosophy, more particularly on material relations within China. The second work, *On Practice*, shows a much more Leninist face of Mao, as it could be just as well titled *On Praxis*. Rather than focus on philosophical intricacies here, Mao redirects materialism as an inciting force, one which forces the public to act rather than calculate, and one which punishes those who stall and dissent.

It is worth noting that at this point, in 1937, the People’s Republic of China had not yet been proclaimed, and Mao was in a temporary arrangement with the Kuomintang [KMT] and Chiang Kai-Shek, his main opponents, to defeat the supposedly common enemy, the imperial Japanese. Following the defeat of the Japanese Empire in 1945, the second decisive phase of the Chinese Civil War would occur, seeing through the victory of the People’s Liberation Army under the banner of the Chinese Communist Party [CCP]. In 1949, the People’s Republic of China would be proclaimed with more or less the same state apparatus that is left today. These details are worth recalling, as both *On Practice* and *On Contradiction* were written in a time where the future existence of a Chinese socialist project was very much still up for debate. While the CCP held considerable territory under the Chinese Soviet Republic (1931-1937), it would pale in comparison to the majority of Mainland China enjoyed by the PRC upon its establishment. The philosophies espoused in these pamphlets can thus be seen as instructions for

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid

the establishment of a socialist state in China, their emphases being the largest hurdles to progress.

## II. b. *On Contradiction*; Contradiction as Maoist Hyper-Materialism

“The law of contradiction in things, that is, the law of the unity of opposites, is the basic law of materialist dialectics,”<sup>12</sup> this is the opening sentence of *On Contradiction*, an essay meant to be delivered orally as a lecture to the Anti-Japanese Military and Political College in Yanan in August of 1937, but later seriously revised and entered into his definitive *Selected Works*<sup>13</sup>. When even looking through the section headers or peering at the italics, a scholar of Marx should instantly be alerted to the similarities the essay bears to an often little-cited pamphlet by foundational dialectical materialist Friedrich Engels, *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*. In the manners used by Mao, contradiction is a phraseology borrowed by Engels in his work on materialist philosophy;<sup>14</sup> it is Mao, however, who turns such contradiction as a verb into a proper noun in his pamphlet. By the end of this essay, contradiction is turned from a point of materialist conflict in the works of Engels to the title of a violently materialist political philosophy which served as the underpinnings of Mao’s efforts to state-build. At the end of the introductory section, Mao makes clear his aims of the pamphlet: “Deborin's idealism has exerted a very bad influence in the Chinese Communist Party, and it cannot be said that the dogmatist thinking in our Party is unrelated to the approach of that school. Our present study of philosophy should therefore have the eradication of dogmatist thinking as its main objective.”<sup>15</sup>

*On Contradiction*’s first section, “*The Two World Outlooks*” outlines the differences between “metaphysical conceptions” and “dialectical conceptions”, an ode to the more orthodox stance Mao will take on traditional Marxist philosophy, and a parallel to Engels’ dismissal of reactionaries. Within the metaphysical camp, one may argue “all the different kinds of things in the universe and all their characteristics have been the same ever since they first came into being,”<sup>16</sup> thus their systems and classes, socially and physically, are considered immutable and not capable of restructuring or historical progress. Mao points out the helpfulness of Hegel in constructing a dialectical conception, but ultimately lumps him and his followers into the idealist camp. An interesting line is then drawn between the followers of dialectics and those of “mechanical materialism”, one which reaches deep into Marxist orthodoxy to combine Engels’ analysis of “bourgeoisie philosophers” and Marx’s analysis, and opposition to, reactionaries. Mao explains there are philosophers and practitioners, even in the materialist tradition, who have written at great length about “mechanical materialism”, from the great European thinkers of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, all the way back to Taoism and the ancient Chinese. Thus, a parallel to Engels is constructed separately from the reattribution of the word “contradiction”, the identification of reactionary philosophers, even the helpful ones. Within the first of three chapters of *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*, Engels tracks the history of dialectic and static philosophy from the Greeks to Rosseau and Hegel, identifying a similar narrative towards his past and contemporary French philosophers as Mao has done for European philosophy, they are reactionary agents of

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<sup>12</sup> Mao, *On Contradiction* pp. 1

<sup>13</sup> Marxists Internet Archive, *On Contradiction*

<sup>14</sup> Frederick Engels, “*Dialectics. Quantity and Quality*”, Anti-Duhring, Eng. ed., FLPH, Moscow, 1959, p. 166.

<sup>15</sup> Mao, *On Contradiction* pp. 1

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid* pp. 2



the bourgeoisie.<sup>17</sup> Why must they be viewed as agents of the bourgeoisie in the eyes of both Mao and Kim?

This distinction is the primary takeaway from the first section of *Contradiction*. Mao is clearly drawing lines in the sand where not even the Soviets were willing to. But why? Why would Mao be intent on cutting off potential comrades, materialist ones at that, during a time when the CCP did not even have complete control of the mainland? This becomes one of the first points in support of “State-Building Socialism” as the primary governing framework of the CCP, drawing lines in the fragmented classes of China to point out clear enemies within a grey area, and most importantly activate revolutionary thought. On these philosophical opponents, Mao states “The metaphysical or vulgar evolutionist world outlook sees things as isolated, static and one-sided;”<sup>18</sup> this seems like a simple philosophical difference, for one faction to classify certain objects or concepts as immutable and another to see them as dynamic. At face value, this assertion may then be mistaken as an aggressive attack on a minor feature, but Mao soon reveals his anger with such a static outlook: “They contend that a thing can only keep on repeating itself as the same kind of thing and cannot change into anything different. In their opinion, Capitalist exploitation, Capitalist competition, the individualist ideology of Capitalist society, and so on, can all be found in ancient slave society, or even in primitive society, and will exist for ever unchanged... In China, there was the metaphysical thinking exemplified in the saying ‘Heaven changeth not, likewise the Tao changeth not’, and it was supported by the decadent feudal ruling classes for a long time. Mechanical materialism and vulgar evolutionism, which were imported from Europe in the last hundred years, are supported by the bourgeoisie<sup>19</sup>”. Not just is the upholding of a static, metaphysical view of material and culture a framework choice, it acts to uphold the Capitalist notion of production and disincentivizes change.

“Nature is the proof of dialectics”<sup>20</sup> remarks Engels in the beginning of his second chapter of *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*, a concept which is reinforced to the highest degree by the second chapter of *On Contradiction*. In an almost parallel manner, Mao cites the same examples as Engels for the natural contradictions and dialectics within nature: in matter, in mathematics, in evolution, in astronomy and physics.<sup>21</sup> Beginning with conceptions of nature, Mao is able to define man’s understanding of society, class, and himself as the material to which he exposed. The material interactions of a person thus become man’s “common essence.”<sup>22</sup> Understanding one’s lot in society is a constant back and forth between the “particular” and the “universal”, piecing together individual dialectic interactions between the contradictions in things from personal experience to universal function. Immediately, Mao applies this materialist logic to the social classes acting within China, arguing that the dogmatists and the bourgeoisie are “lazy bones.”<sup>23</sup>

The ultimate application of such contradiction for Mao is the clashing of the classes and social groups in China, which erupts out of materialist structures causing differences in the “common essence” of beings. Harkening back to *Capital*, Mao aligns his thoughts with classical

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<sup>17</sup> Engels, Friedrich. 1892. *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*. London: Swan Sonnenschein & Co. *Scientific* pp. 26

<sup>18</sup> Mao, *On Contradiction* pp. 2

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>20</sup> Engels, *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific* pp. 31

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid* pp. 32; Mao, *On Contradiction* pp. 6, pp. 8; Engels, *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific* pp. 32, 33-34

<sup>22</sup> Mao, *On Contradiction* pp. 9

<sup>23</sup> *ibid*

dialectical materialism in stating, “Marx first analyses the simplest, most ordinary and fundamental, most common and everyday relation of bourgeois (commodity) society, a relation encountered billions of times, viz. the exchange of commodities. In this very simple phenomenon (in this ‘cell’ of bourgeois society) analysis reveals all the contradictions (or the germs of all the contradictions) of modern society. The subsequent exposition shows us the development (both growth and movement) of these contradictions and of this society in the [summation] of its individual parts, from its beginning to its end.”<sup>24</sup> Such movement of course was in opposition to the theories held by the “dogmatists” within prior Soviet philosophy and the CCP itself, being misled by the metaphysical philosophers of Europe. Such capability for imprint on the “essence” of the citizen from the bourgeois economic interactions of course has implications for China’s particular situation, the most clear historical case coming from the elimination of the landlords.

“The change of old China into New China also involves a change in the relation between the old feudal forces and the new popular forces within the country. The old feudal landlord class will be overthrown, and from being the ruler it will change into being the ruled; and this class, too, will gradually die out. From being the ruled the people, led by the proletariat, will become the rulers. Thereupon, the nature of Chinese society will change and the old, semi-colonial and semi-feudal society will change into a new democratic society.”<sup>25</sup> Through applying Marxist theory, Mao identifies the landlord class as agents of the bourgeoisie, even further the dialectic opponent of the tenant-peasant<sup>26</sup>. Utilizing the principles of contradiction in the materialist sense, if Mao were to state-build with socialism, eliminating the “tenant-peasant”, or the oppressed proletariat with no personal property, would be the elimination of the landlord class. This is, in its essence, the crux of Mao’s philosophy regarding the future of China, “without landlords, there would be no tenant-peasants; without tenant-peasants, there would be no landlords. Without the bourgeoisie, there would be no proletariat; without the proletariat, there would be no bourgeoisie. Without imperialist oppression of nations, there would be no colonies or semi-colonies; without colonies or semicolonies (sic.), there would be no imperialist oppression of nations.”<sup>27</sup> In order to build a socialist state and undermine the “running dogs” of imperialism and Capitalism, one must analyze the contradictions (dialectics, in Marxist terms) within material interactions both particular and universal, and advocate for their removal. Further, the way to change the identity of the citizens of a new China would be to eliminate the chains which bind them, and thus define them. With the negative flow of material, and the millions of instances of contradiction in material to the proletariat, they are defined only by their oppression. The peasant is only a peasant because he serves the lord of the land. Eliminate the lord of the land, argues Mao, and you free the peasant. This same argument, of course, applies to the proletarians of the industrial centers in Beijing, there a more direct application of Marxist theory against the Capitalist can be taken.

The principles of Maoist contradiction are to a great degree China-specific in comparison to Engels’ conception of dialectic relationships. Where Engels and Marx were attempting to describe a general economic theorem through observation and calculation, Mao adapted to draw hard lines between classes and social groups in a fractured anarchic proto-state. To ensure the possibility of a future PRC, Mao needed to provide justification for the clear polarization of

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid pp. 7

<sup>25</sup> Ibid pp. 19

<sup>26</sup> Ibid pp. 21

<sup>27</sup> Ibid

Chinese society where all that existed was blurry lines. Were artisans/craftsmen to be considered as petty bourgeoisie as Marx recommended?<sup>28</sup> Were the feudal peasants in the vast Chinese countryside to be considered proletarians despite the lack of a clear Capitalist structure in the agricultural societies? Would it be wise to take the same route Kim would take in abandoning Marxist materialist tradition and embracing Leninist theories of revolution in an agricultural society? One may begin to see Mao's tactics as he carefully describes how classes can become aligned together if their contradictions do not equate to antagonisms when analyzing the success of the Soviet Union through a dialectic lens: "there is a difference between workers and peasants and this very difference is a contradiction, although, unlike the contradiction between labour and Capital, it will not become intensified into antagonism or assume the form of class struggle; the workers and the peasants have established a firm alliance in the course of socialist construction and are gradually resolving this contradiction in the course of the advance from socialism to Communism."<sup>29</sup>

Essential to a Marxist understanding of Dialectical Materialism is an understanding and a situation within the chronology of historical materialism. One of the most revolutionary assumptions of the Marxist chronology is the belief in an inevitable revolution necessitated by dialectic relationships; the progression of epoch advancement past Capitalism [or imperialism, as amended by the Marxist-Leninists, which Mao considers himself] enters a society into a socialist epoch, or a lapse in the Capitalist governing structure giving way to the possibility of proletarian revolution. This broad implication of dialectical materialism is one of Mao's central motivators and is essential to the "state-building" portion of "state building socialism", taking advantage of the possibilities of the fall of imperialism due to proletarian struggle by way of dialectics (contradiction). "Look at China, for instance. Imperialism occupies the principal position in the contradiction in which China has been reduced to a semi-colony, it oppresses the Chinese people, and China has been changed from an independent country into a semi-colonial one. But this state of affairs will inevitably change; in the struggle between the two sides, the power of the Chinese people which is growing under the leadership of the proletariat will inevitably change China from a semi-colony into an independent country, whereas imperialism will be overthrown and old China will inevitably change into New China."<sup>30</sup> The inevitability which Mao describes here is a reflection of the radicality of Marxist materialism, that even without external intervention, the individuals within a state, in this case Mao and his allied classes, would overthrow the oppressive class structure and throw the society into a socialist stage of development. Embracing this radicality is not only an energizing sentiment to commit Chinese proletarians to join forces with Mao, it also signals that Mao believes the Marxist historiography can be upheld with the Leninist inclusion of Imperialism. This argument against the nullification of the epochs of historical materialism would have been a shocking take for the Communists of the world at the time, who were still reconciling advancements in finance Capital with the assumptions of Marx being proletarian movements only in Capitalist Europe could succeed in revolution. Within the final pages of *On Contradiction*, Mao gives an excellent recounting of the Marxist chronology relative to China, retrofitting a system which was supposed to end in Capitalism to include the Leninist addition of Imperialism as the launching point for socialism.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>28</sup> Engels, Friedrich and Marx, Karl. 2017 [1948]. *The Communist Manifesto*. Delaware: Millennium Publications.

<sup>29</sup> Mao, *On Contradiction* pp. 7

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid* pp. 18-19

<sup>31</sup> Lenin, Vladimir Ilyich. 1917. *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism*. New York: International Publishers

### III. Kim Il Sung and the Case for Korean Idealism; “Ethnic Anti-Colonialism” as a Koreanized Continuation of the Dialectic

“It is important in our work to grasp revolutionary truth, Marxist-Leninist truth, and apply it correctly to the actual conditions of our country. There can be no set principle that we must follow the Soviet pattern. Some advocate the Soviet way and others the Chinese, **but it is not high time to work out our own?** ... Both in revolutionary struggle and in construction work, we should firmly adhere to Marxist-Leninist principles, applying them in a creative manner to suit the specific conditions of our country and our national characteristics.”<sup>32</sup> Within the 1955 speech *On eliminating dogmatism and formalism and establishing Juche in Ideological Work*, Kim Il Sung sets off on the most daring and unprecedented move by an Asian Communist statesman to date, the creation of an ethnic framework born out of Marxism-Leninism. Prior to the utterance of *Juche* in this speech, the word had never been used before in Korean political life, but overnight it led a new purge towards a purely Korean, ethnic-based socialism which would differ in its core from the *Contradiction* philosophies of Mao. Throughout the speech, an *ideal* centric approach to Korean identity is explored, one which is not altogether separate from the Mao-Engels description of a metaphysical framework. Utilizing the governing framework of “Ethnic Anti-Colonialism”, *Juche* sought to combat imperialism both on the peninsula and abroad, purge the “dogmatists” within the party, and raise the “ethnic stock” of *Juche* through a mass-propaganda campaign to be embraced in all sectors of public life.<sup>33</sup>

“The U.S. imperialists scorched our land, slaughtered our innocent people en masse, and are still occupying the southern half of our country. They are our sworn enemy, aren't they?”<sup>34</sup> Perhaps the most striking facet of North Korean philosophy during the early years of Kim Il Sung's leadership was the vehement anti-imperialist rhetoric espoused by the government of the DPRK towards the Japanese first, then the United States and its allies. Describing the “Anti-Japanese Struggle” [World War II in Korea], Kim recalls the heroism showed by the Korean youth and armed forces in combatting, and ultimately defeating the Japanese.<sup>35</sup> While this example was used to express anti-colonial sentiment, it also served to introduce a new kind of imperialism into the Korean Peninsula, the United States and the western Capitalists, who are “compelled to disperse [their] forces all over the world” in defense of their imperial dominance.<sup>36</sup> This introduces one of the core national goals of the “Ethnic Anti-Colonial” struggle, the eradication of the imperialists, and the continuation of the anti-imperialist struggle.

As one could imagine, this is where the -Leninist suffix in Marxist-Leninist comes in handy, as the epoch of imperialism has come to the Korean Peninsula during the Anti-Japanese Struggle and during the Korean War, which is still technically underway to this date. One of the clearest commitments to anti-imperialist action is Kim's argument that the correct application of Marxism-Leninism will lead to the successful reunification of the South and the North, either by peaceful propaganda or through warfare. The first of these two options argues that the success of the DPRK will be so contagious for the Korean peoples that all of the rightful “Ethnic Stock” of Korea will be excited to rejoin under one government, necessitating no militaristic advance past

<sup>32</sup> Sung, Kim Il. 1971. “*On Eliminating Dogmatism and Formalism and Establishing Juche in Ideological Work*.” In Kim Il Sung: Selected Works, Vol. I. Pyongyang: Foreign Languages Publishing House pp. 8

<sup>33</sup> Ibid pp. 12

<sup>34</sup> Ibid pp. 6

<sup>35</sup> Ibid pp. 3

<sup>36</sup> Ibid pp. 15

the armistice line.<sup>37</sup> While not directly supported by Marxist text, this application of Marxism-Leninism can be applied as a semi-faithful interpretation of a democratic workers' movement in the South, which exists in a late-stage Capitalist economic structure under imperial powers. In the eyes of Kim's "Marx", the south consists of ethnic Koreans which "have nothing to lose but their chains", as Marx famously quipped in the Communist Manifesto.

The second option for the liberation of the Korean peoples presents an interesting problem for the Leninist addition to historical materialism, armed liberation of a proletarian peoples. "If the Imperialists were to unleash a war on a world-wide scale, we would have no alternative but to fight, and it would be quite possible for us to fight and defeat the U.S. imperialists in Korea by our own strength."<sup>38</sup> The traditional Marxist theories of revolution present Capitalist structures which necessitate the proletarian class to revolt in each case, against a clearly defined bourgeoisie and their allies, but Leninism's global network of finance Capital complicates the issue of "liberation". Is an armed, *Marxist-Leninist* state to interfere militarily in another state's economic progress to liberate them? Within the case of Mao, this is not necessarily the same issue, the enemies within the Chinese revolutionary struggle could hardly be considered full-fledged states, and even in cases of enemy governments, such as Tibet, they were not considered connected to the global enemy of imperialist finance capital; merely they were categorized as still having allegiance to feudal or primitive government structures multiple stages behind socialist progress within the Marxist epochs of historical materialism. While seeming like a trivial issue, this anti-imperialist war, in which armed states of Capitalism were fighting armed states of socialism, was a controversial one in the socialist bloc. Kim's assessment of the situation on pages 10-13 of *On the Elimination of Dogmatism...* present a breakthrough in Asian Marxism Leninism which is presented to be an assumed logical next step: socialist states have an obligation to liberate non-socialist Capitalist regions. How Kim supports this revolutionary claim pushes the Korean socialists in an entirely different direction than that of the Russian or Chinese socialists, as it concerns entirely the ethnic roots of the Koreans, which demand an altogether different form of Marxism; Communism, argues Kim, must be achieved only through "digesting and assimilating it" rather than "swallowing it whole," which has made comrades wholly "unable to display revolutionary initiative."<sup>39</sup> The only way to show "fidelity" to Marxism-Leninism in the eyes of Kim is to use it only "as a guide to action and a creative theory."<sup>40</sup> This statement, while reasonable to most, marks a significant split in the Korean brand of socialism from that of China or Russia; it is the beginning of a realignment of the Leninist dialectic in Korea. While Russia and China are "fraternal parties" to be treated with respect and pride, as the Soviets are the assistant "liberators" of the Koreans, they impede the progress of Korean socialism and are sometimes on the opposite pole dialectically to the achievement of *Juche* in the North;<sup>41</sup> after all, "all ideological work must be subordinated to the interests of the Korean revolution."<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid pp. 12

<sup>38</sup> Ibid pp. 13

<sup>39</sup> Ibid pp. 7

<sup>40</sup> Ibid pp. 9

<sup>41</sup> Ibid

<sup>42</sup> Ibid pp. 2

“Man is the master of everything and decides everything.”<sup>43</sup> A phrase used by Kim Jong Il, son of Kim Il Sung and the Kim Dynasty, describes the Korean approach to the next phase of development of the Korean people. While Mao’s *On Contradiction* marked the beginning of a massive material realignment in China, resulting in the removal of entire economic classes in society, the shift in Korea marked a philosophical one, one in which man, not material, was the center of liberation. For the Chinese Communists, Marxist materialism was a near-perfect answer to the issues felt by the Chinese proletariat and their allies; material and external conditions were the “alone the criterion of truth” of man’s social practice.<sup>44</sup> For Kim, utilizing Marxism to that extent was dogmatic, and will actually cause “the negation of Korean history.”<sup>45</sup> Instead of utilizing materialism from the Marxist dialectic, Kim would focus on the radicality of thought within the Korean people, and attempt to build Communism and *Juche* through a nationalist propaganda (a term he welcomed and used dozens of times in this work, with no negative connotation) campaign, attempting to awake the ethnic ideas of the Koreans.

The primary function of this speech and subsequent pamphlet was to “unearth our national legacies and carry them forward,”<sup>46</sup> as “the lack of *Juche* in propaganda work has done much harm to Party work.”<sup>47</sup> The entirety of the works stands at the construction of an *idea* separate from material realities; not once in the speech is corrective economic policy mentioned as a solution to the ills of the Korean people. The conversion of the thoughts and acts of the minds of Koreans, especially the South Koreans under the subjugation of the U.S. imperialists, is the primary function of this piece. “Only when our people are educated in the history of their own struggle and its traditions, can their national pride be stimulated and the broad masses be aroused to the revolutionary struggle.”<sup>48</sup> From this premise, Kim takes aim at not only the United States as a dialectic enemy to the proletarians of Korea, but also the Soviet Union! The Russians, through their cultural and political missions to Korea, have colonized the culture and minds of the Koreans. Kim spends pages upon pages of the pamphlet pointing out the ways in which the Soviets and the West, dialectically aligned with the imperialists for the sake of overriding the Korean Identity and *Juche*, have stamped out Korean culture. An excerpt from the more flippant of the assertions reads:

*“Once I visited a People’s Army vacation home, where a picture of the Siberian steppe was hung. That landscape probably pleases the Russians. But the Korean people prefer the beautiful scenery of our own country. There are beautiful mountains such as Mts. Kumgang-san and Myohyang-san in our country; there are clear streams, the blue sea with its rolling waves and the fields with ripening crops. If we are to inspire in our People’s Army men a love for their native place and their country, we must show them many pictures of such landscapes of our country.*

*One day this summer when I dropped in at a local democratic publicity hall, I saw diagrams of the Soviet Union’s Five-Year Plan shown there, but not a single diagram illustrating the Three-Year Plan of our country. Moreover, there were pictures of huge factories in foreign countries, but there was not a single one of the factories we were rehabilitating or building. They*

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<sup>43</sup> David-West, Alzo. 2013.

<sup>44</sup> Mao, *On Contradiction*

<sup>45</sup> Kim, pp. 2

<sup>46</sup> Ibid pp. 7

<sup>47</sup> Ibid pp. 5

<sup>48</sup> Ibid pp. 2

*do not even put up any diagrams and pictures of our economic construction, let alone study the history of our country.*

*I noticed in a primary school that all the portraits hanging on the walls were of foreigners such as Mayakovsky, Pushkin, etc., and there were none of Koreans. If children are educated in this way, how can they be expected to have national pride?*

*Here is a ridiculous example. Even in attaching a table of contents to a booklet, foreign ways are aped and it is put in the back. We should learn, as a matter of course, from the good experience of socialist construction, but what on earth is the need of putting the table of contents in the back of a booklet in foreign style? This does not suit the taste of Koreans. As a matter of course, we should put it in the front of a book, shouldn't we?*

*In compelling schoolbooks, too, materials are not taken from our literary works but from foreign ones. All this is due to the lack of Juche. The lack of Juche in propaganda work has done much harm to Party work.<sup>49</sup>*

While seemingly trivial, these examples serve as critical testaments to the cultural colonization of the Korean peoples in the mind of Kim, and sets him out in an effort to radically “agitate through propaganda,”<sup>50</sup> a concept which develops into an intricate strategy of ideological spread and faith in *idea* rather than material. He explains later the network of propaganda cells which must be created in the propaganda and agitation department; the purging of “dogmatist” Soviet materialists comes first, then the remaining pure members of the party will be educated to lead cells of devoted individuals to rapidly spread the *Juche Idea*.<sup>51</sup> These individuals will attend to the *spirit* of other ethnic Koreans, and manipulate them through propaganda to agitate others, thus rapidly spreading the number of WPK members. Further, the members must identify those who “even lag behind the non-Party masses” and not expel them, but rather re-educate them in the ways of *Juche*, so as their negative ideology does not affect the minds of other Koreans.<sup>52</sup> Those with the “*Party Spirit*”, as Kim calls it [15 times], will enhance the overall spirit of Korea, and thus emanate the spirit of *Juche* through their thought, and subsequently their actions. “A determined struggle must be fought to arm every Party member firmly with our Party's ideology and eliminate all remnants of bourgeois ideology persisting in the minds of Party members and working people. The Party spirit of our members should be tempered thoroughly, until their shortcomings and ideological maladies are completely remedied.”<sup>53</sup>

Thus begins possibly the largest potential upshot of this piece, the potential for Kim to be interpreted as an anti-materialist agent of the dialectic. Such a term as “dialectical materialism” would surely necessitate those in its tradition to adhere to the materialist philosophy, one would think. With Mao in the Marxist materialist tradition of material flow imprinting on the self and defining the identity and role of a given individual, and Kim suggesting the primacy of the individual over the material conditions, an interesting predicament is brought forth. Kim, recognizing the loss of the Korean identity to the Soviets and the United States in culture,

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid pp. 4-5

<sup>50</sup> Ibid pp. 18

<sup>51</sup> Ibid pp. 14

<sup>52</sup> Ibid pp. 13-14

<sup>53</sup> Ibid pp. 15

clothing, music, and education, took a leap of necessity in embracing a very anti-materialist solution to regain the agency of the Korean people. Rather than focusing a philosophy around a class hierarchy or around the economic conditions of the countryside, Kim creates and espouses *Juche*, an argument for the primacy of a unified Korean ethnic group with culture and a rich history. Rather than changing the material, Kim focuses on the very “self” of each and every Korean, and this speech seeks to make that effort clear. Thought, in the philosophy of Kim, is in itself a radical action of progress, rather than thoughts being reflections of material conditions. When Marx dissented from the Hegelian dialectic, it was primarily out of conflict with such rampant idealism which runs contrary to the very assumptions of *Capital*, that the materialist substructures of the world are causing the epochs and social struggles of our time. The question must then be asked, is Kim in the Hegelian tradition rather than a Marxist tradition? The answer is of course less clear than one would hope. In the view of some scholars, Kim and his dynasty’s “anthropocentric *Juche* axion turns out to be non-philosophical and in fact nonsensical, being neither humanist nor materialist nor rationalist in conceptual substance.”<sup>54</sup> But it is worth raising the question of just how much Kim borrows from the Hegelian conceptions of *Idea* and *Spirit* when they are alluded to in his work. The question becomes even more complicated upon the inclusion of Kim’s successor Kim Jong Il, who, as a scholar of Hegel, clearly translates Hegelian concepts and terms into Korean and identifies them as the original thought of his father, and the foundational principles of *Juche* itself.<sup>55</sup> Dr. Shannon Kurt Brincat stands as one of the only scholars to support this link, stating: “Juche began as a predictable form of anticolonial nationalism, but slowly evolved into an idealist metaphysic that bears close resemblance to Korean neo-Confucian doctrines, and again, to Hegel’s philosophical idealism... North Korea has turned Marx on its head—or put Hegel back on his feet—by arguing that ‘ideas determine everything.’”<sup>56</sup>

## Conclusions

The cases of Mao and Kim are not merely interesting Communist trials in different locations; they represent important ideological distinctions within the very framework of dialectical materialism itself. In the case of the Chinese Communist Party, the answer to the ancient classes of cultural and economic dominance lingering in China was a straightforward materialist interpretation of Marxism; a philosophy so materialist it reappropriated an Engelsian term for physical material interaction and made it the central theme of its governing philosophy of *Contradiction*. To carry out the framework of State-Building Socialism, material structures were shifted to eliminate contradictions in class and form a state of proletarians under the red banner of socialism. In the case of Kim’s Korea, changing the very *spirit* of the individual by engaging in thought action and mass propaganda was the way to win over the masses necessitated by the colonial loss of the self. This arguably anti-materialist argument takes its roots directly from Hegel and his notion of the *Idea*. A conclusion must then be reached that both materialism and anti-materialism can be extracted from the Marxist dialectic, in the tradition of Marxism-Leninism, if the conditions of the state demand such deviation in the practitioner’s governing framework.

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<sup>54</sup> David-West, Alzo. 2013.

<sup>55</sup> Kim, Sunghee. 2017.

<sup>56</sup> Brincat, Shannon Kurt. 2013. *Communism in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. ABC-CLIO. pp. 123



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