

THE DEVELOPMENT OF COMMUNIST DIALECTICS IN CHINA

*Note: This column resumes the **Red Flag** series on the history of communist dialectics.*

For at least three decades after the founding of the Communist Party of China (CPC) in 1921, the main source of communist philosophy was the Soviet Union. Some early Chinese access to Russian dialectical materialism came from the few Chinese leftists who could read Russian, but the larger source was Soviet material published by Japanese communists. Translations from Japanese and writings by Chinese students who had studied in Japan were key sources for several decades.

An important early writer on communist philosophy was Qu Quibai. He studied Russian and worked as a reporter in Russia, where he became a communist. In 1923 he taught Marxist philosophy at the newly founded Shanghai University, and became a member of the central committee of the CPC. Beginning in 1924 Qu published several influential books that explained key concepts of communist philosophy.

One of Qu's main interests in communist theory was the role of conscious political action within the framework of the inevitability of the victory of communism. Initially Qu's knowledge of Soviet philosophy was more an obstacle than a help on this issue, since he tried to use the anti-dialectical "mechanist" viewpoint that all changes are caused from the outside. This wrong view was still influential in Russia until the late 1920s (See *Red Flag*, 10/02/14), but was defeated in the early 1930s in the philosophical debates in Russia (See *Red Flag*, 11/13/14).

The Soviet debates deepened and clarified dialectical materialism and produced several

widely used textbooks. The improved Soviet philosophy was often called the "new philosophy" in China. Qu accepted this new philosophy, including its idea that it is the internal contradictions in things, not external factors, which are the main cause of development. Qu Quibai was executed by the nationalist Guomindang in 1935.

Another major figure of the new philosophy in China was Li Da, who translated a number of Japanese-language Marxist philosophy textbooks by Russian, German and Japanese writers. Later he was co-translator of one of the Soviet textbooks on the new philosophy. An early member of the CPC, he left the party in 1923 and did not rejoin until 1949. His translations and his own writing had a wide influence, however.

Li's most important work was called *Elements of Sociology*. Published in 1935, it contained a long section on Marxist philosophy. This work developed the most important themes of dialectics and materialism, including dialectical contradictions driving change, qualitative versus quantitative change, and that knowledge is a dialectical process that proceeds from human practice and returns to guide practice.

Although theoretically rigorous, Li Da's works were not aimed at the mass audience that the communist

movement needs to reach.

Popularization and defense of dialectical materialism were the main aims of the philosophical work of Ai Siqi, a generation younger than Li and Qu. Ai was

educated in Japan and learned Marxism and the Russian language there. He was co-translator of an important Soviet textbook. He edited a magazine that explained the new philosophy and wrote several very influential books on communist philosophy including *Philosophy for the Masses* (1936) and *Philosophy and Life* (1937).

Ai worked hard to make communist philosophy available to the masses, using popular culture. He used the film comedian Charlie Chaplin, immensely popular in China, to illustrate various ideas from dialectical materialism. In one of his magazine columns, Ai described the difference between perception and theory this way: The first stage of knowledge is perceptual knowledge, the kind we get by seeing, feeling and smelling. Perceptual knowledge is essential but it must be expanded and corrected by reasoning. Their mustaches make Charlie Chaplin and Hitler look similar superficially, but more careful examination can tell them apart. Reasoning and theoretical knowledge is often necessary to overcome the superficial similarities in perception.

Despite the contributions of the philosophers



Ai Siqi



mentioned here, Mao Zedong was by far the most influential communist philosopher in China. Taking over the new philosophy, he acknowledged that he learned a lot from the others mentioned here. From intensive collective study in the lib-

erated area in Yan'an China in 1936-37, he produced a summary of dialectical materialism from which two important essays were extracted, "On Practice," and "On Contradiction." Our next two columns will discuss these important essays.