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## 半封建社会，半殖民地

Semifeudalism,  
Semicolonialism

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In his treatise *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism*, Vladimir Lenin inserts the term ‘semicolonialism’ to describe China under global capitalism’s industrial and financial imperialism.<sup>1</sup> Theories sharpen and clarify conditions that are neither clear nor consistent; the addition of the prefix ‘semi’ refined the strategic understanding of colonialism as a matter of degrees and historical conditions that are permanently in flux. This reformulation also expanded what global imperialism/colonialism (or capitalist imperialism in the Soviet tradition) meant strategically. After 1917, in Internationalist Comintern politics, semicolonialism indicated relative subordination to imperialist powers. Translated as *banzhimindi* in Chinese, this latent, formulaic category in European internationalism was given new life in the writing of Chinese Marxists in the 1930s, such as Chen Hongjin and Mao Zedong.<sup>2</sup> Mao particularly interpreted Marxism to address conditions facing the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in the 1920s and 1930s. In the 1930s and 1940s, key ideas inherited from European traditions of revolutionary thought and party organisation were retooled to fit Chinese conditions under the banner of Mao Zedong Thought. One resulting category was ‘semifeudal, semicolonial’ (*banfengjianshehui, banzhimindi*), which was both a conceptual innovation of Maoist dialectics and a strategic approach to people’s war (see Guan’s essay in the present volume). The power of the concept of semicolonialism and semifeudalism was due to its proximity to local conditions and availability to strategic praxis; because it was close at hand, the concept had predictive value.<sup>3</sup>

*The White-haired Girl*

The coded simplicity of the term semifeudal, semicolonial was widely communicable and routinely transmitted to the masses. Transforming a backward society into a progressive one during the War of Resistance against Japan involved both disciplining

intellectuals and also raising the consciousness of the ordinary people so they, too, understood the difference between emancipation and oppression. Among the massive number of syncretic cultural texts that appeared in the mid-century, the 'White-haired Girl' story shows most obviously how the reality of history in China could be coded into a story about China's semicolonialism and semifeudalism.

Beginning in 1945 and in direct response to Mao's 'Talks at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art,' the CCP authorised a story about Xi'er, a peasant girl, her beloved fiancée Dachun, her father, her godmother, and her fellow villagers. Based on the vicissitudes of village girls abused by landlord families, 'White-haired Girl' was staged in various versions but the core story remained the same. The narrative takes place in a small village in Shaanxi province, and revolves around the life of Xi'er who is engaged to a poor peasant named Wang Dachun. Because of his debt from a phony interest charge, Xi'er's father commits suicide (in the ballet version, he is killed by the debt collector). As a result, the father's 'creditor,' the local landlord Huang Shiren seizes Xi'er to pay her father's debts. This exchange transforms Xi'er into a commodity subject to the abuse of her owners; she is forced to work day and night, and becomes pregnant after being raped by the landlord's son. Alerted to the fact that she will be sold to a brothel, she escapes to a mountain shelter where she gives birth to a stillborn baby. Xi'er lives in a cave in the mountain where she learns to be free and self-sufficient, and survives by stealing food from a local temple. In another version of the story, an angry mob believes that Xi'er is a spectral apparition threatening their community with harm and attempts to desecrate her body until they are stopped by Wang Dachun, who recognises his lover (this version was intended to help eradicate superstition; see Williams's essay in this volume). In the mainstream version, Dachun uses his revolver to flush out the supposedly supernatural 'white-haired spirit' only to find that it is his beloved. Despite the different variations and art forms, the tunes are still familiar. Peng Liyuan, spouse of China's leader Xi Jinping, starred as Xi'er in the People's Liberation Army song and dance troupe during the 1980s, and more recently, served as artistic director of a revival tour, which opened in the hallowed revolutionary site of Yan'an in November 2015.<sup>4</sup>

Decoding this cultural phenomenon is by-the-book. Each figure embodies elements of semicolonial, semifeudal, backward village society. Old Zhao, who advises Wang Dachun not to seek revenge on the landlord but to join the Eight Route Army, typifies the honest but culturally illiterate poor peasant. Dachun, the poor landless peasant and his mother, Wang Dashen, live in permanent indebtedness to the Huang family whose scion, Huang Shiren, and Dowager, Madame Huang, inflict pains small and large on their indebted workers. Each character performs a range of predictable activities that identify them as archetypes. Huang Shiren, for instance, is a tool of the Nationalist Party and a leader of the rural bourgeoisie. He is a rapist and unredeemable criminal who relies on imperialist and international capital to extract surplus value and labour from villagers until they die. Similarly, scenes showing Xi'er, abandoned and pregnant, milling wheat like a water buffalo, convey how semicolonial, semifeudal sociology truthfully represents reality. The feudal setting where peasants incur debt just to stay alive and where landowners are usurers, armed with bourgeois pistols is contrasted with the white-faced, red-lipped Eighth Route Army soldiers, whose solemn and operatic visages signal that the time has come for poor peasants who are seeking revolutionary vengeance to take action. Before he is reunited with Xi'er, Wang Dachun returns to

the village and teaches his old cohort how to stage an uprising. He has learned to read and has become a politically aware, revolutionary cadre. The strategic logic that Party members bring to the village merges into revolutionary indignation and vengeful rage as the villagers overthrow the semifeudal, semicolonial old order.

### *Fierce Debates*

Despite its seductive appeal and simplicity, Maoist terminology—semifeudal, semicolonialism, colonialism, feudalism—has provoked savage historiographic debate. First, these terms cannot be subsumed into theories about colonialism in India and British capital accumulation known under the rubric of ‘postcolonial theory.’ Postcolonial theory is a portmanteau of related techniques for theorising England-to-India relations including: a) magical inversions (‘provincialising’ imperial power); b) disputing class and class consciousness (incommensurability, subalternity); c) conflicts over the status of capital as such in colonisation (othering or otherness); and d) post-Althusserian disregard for the historical limits of culture. There is some doubt that postcolonial theory even supports its alleged intention, to comprehend colonialism in India.<sup>5</sup> Second, in the last several decades, China historians have struggled to distinguish universal elements of Marxism from localisms. In US debates, some scholars argue that Maoism, a field of praxis, has no bearing on Marxism, which consists of Marx’s critique of capitalist logic and history of capitalism’s rise out of conditions in Europe.<sup>6</sup> Others say that Maoism is a utopian offshoot of Marxism, its potential lying in voluntaristic effort and a praxis for changing social relations of production outside Marxism’s Europe-oriented universalism.<sup>7</sup> The Adelaide School suggested Maoism was a future Marxism that could bridge national differences and unevenness in the relations of production internationally.<sup>8</sup> A few have refused to admit Maoism into the Marxist Pantheon at all, declaring instead that Maoism is a ‘discourse,’ a localist category without universal significance.<sup>9</sup>

How Maoists sculpted the phrase ‘semicolonialism, semifeudalism’ is a legitimate historical question. Marxism, Maoists observed, was universally true. Marx, they argued, discovered the ‘universality of the contradiction between the productive forces and the relations of production in class society in general.’<sup>10</sup> Singularity (Chineseness) and utility lie in Marx’s emphasis on praxis or what Maoists particularly valued, i.e. *method*. Their explanation was as follows. Universally without exception, Marxism makes material and social process visible. Intervening in reality requires flexibility, however. Practitioners of Marxism find truth in circumstances in order to choose the best course of action. A good strategist must understand immediate process, embrace dynamic contradiction, and anticipate where human action can influence outcomes. In semicolonial China, Marxists realised that while the principal contradiction is class society as such, there are singular or ‘Chinese’ non-principal contradictions.

### *Universalism and Localism*

The ‘semi’ in semicolonialism opens the way to recognising what is a singular and non-principal contradiction while holding onto the universal or principal contradiction stated above. It turns out that semicolonial and semifeudal offers a way

into given conditions through specific instances. The determinate difference between colonial and semicolonial spaces, for instance, gives analysts the key to grasp how the concrete universal appears in the world under specific temporal and geographical conditions, such as the pursuit of irregular guerilla warfare in a border region in 1938. On the basis that China was semicolonial and semifeudal, Maoist battle strategy was both regular and irregular, relying on ground troops as the main force, and guerrilla warfare to drain Japanese imperialist military power.<sup>11</sup> As Nick Knight has long pointed out, the difference between the Maoist and orthodox Leninist-Stalinist approach to contradiction lies in the Maoist mandate that analytic terminology proliferate around singularities and specifics.<sup>12</sup>

If China was understood to be a semicolonial, semifeudal social order, and not a colonial, feudal state—i.e. distinct from India—planners could see warfare in a new way. This understanding of concrete universality allowed for battle plans to be designed on the basis of real conditions. These were not cerebral exercises but high-stake analyses, such as Mao's 1938 essay 'On Protracted War,' in which he wrote that: 'The Sino-Japanese War is none other than a war of life and death between a semicolonial and semifeudal China and an imperialist Japan in the 1930s. Herein lies the basis of the whole problem.' 'On Protracted War' explained what semicolonial meant in that context, on the way to addressing why protracted war was the strategy needed to defeat Japan.<sup>13</sup> The essay reasoned that China was no longer a feudal society in great part as a consequence of European and Japanese imperialism. Therefore, in a global context, with the Soviet Union on the one hand and the example of a failed Ethiopian war of independence against Italy on the other, Marxists could locate China's singular 'identity.'<sup>14</sup>

The bigger point was to demonstrate how semicolonial, semifeudal conditions were ripe for politically defining identity and mobilising the masses in a protracted war that drained the enemy's relatively stronger position. Under real conditions and correct theoretical work (theory and praxis in relation to identity) attacking an enemy requires using a feedback mechanism, such as the mass line, that puts into constant circulation political, military, cultural, and mobilisational resources. Protraction means only that no one yet knows what amount of time will be needed to unbalance the enemy. It is a temporality that exists within an uneven spatiality composed of different topographies, resources, populations, and shifting real conditions. Not only that—engaging in protracted struggle expedites the transformation of the very conditions that make possible the protracted warfare. Consciously understanding the reality around us makes it possible to decide strategy and tactics.

### *The Truth of the Singular Moment*

The historical task of the Chinese nation-in-process during protracted war against Japanese imperialism was to overthrow semicolonial, semifeudal relations of production and to set in motion a dialectic—theory and praxis—that would transform national identity and readjust class struggle. The CCP's long experience of battle had demonstrated that the *sine qua non* for the Party was to grasp the 'unity between the theory of Marxism-Leninism and the practice of the Chinese Revolution.'<sup>15</sup> As this essay has shown, that was not an abstraction. To initiate praxis on the basis of theory, one can extract from Mao Zedong Thought the contemporary historical moment

(the Second Great Imperialist War, emergence of the Soviet Union, etc.) and the truth of that singular moment. This method provides clarity about momentary configurations of identity, topography, sociology, economics, and suggests a range of good policy options. When Maoists use the term semicolonial and semifeudal this way, it is not a description but a representation of the realities that theoretical Marxism can, when used properly, actually illuminate.

The power of representation is certainly a reason why in December 1939 the collective group of writers associated with Mao published an official textbook about society, revolution, and Party building (the latter chapter was never completed) for incoming intellectuals and CCP members.<sup>16</sup> *The Chinese Revolution and the Chinese Communist Party* starts with the history of a space that originated, like all places, as a classless society, and had emerged into slave and then feudal social relations, but was currently a weak semicolonial, semifeudal country. In simple language the text explained that because imperialism introduced foreign capital, the feudal economy began to crumble, and the landlords, bureaucrats, and bourgeoisie turned toward capital investment in modern industries. There is nothing particularly Chinese about the concluding argument:

It is clear that by penetrating into China the imperialist powers have on the one hand accelerated the disintegration of China's feudal society, caused factors of capitalism to emerge in China and transformed the feudal society into a semifeudal one, and on the other hand imposed their ruthless rule on China and reduced an independent China into a semicolonial and colonial China.<sup>17</sup>

My essay consequently demonstrates how central to Maoism the phrase semicolonial, semifeudal turns out to be. And yet, it also turns out that unsnarling claims about Chinese singularity does not make Maoism into a 'Sinicised' or discursive Marxism. As Mao Zedong Thought emerged, it claimed only that all situations and societies where Marxism prevails are singular. No two sites of class struggle will ever be the same: however, no amount of difference alters Marxism-Leninism's universal truth.

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