KALEIDOSCOPE OF CONTRADICTIONS

Delia Lin
The phrase *maodun* 矛盾 encompasses numerous related concepts and feelings in English, including contradiction, tension, conflict, paradox, dilemma, inconsistency, animosity, enmity, and estrangement. The well-known story of *maodun* told in the legalist text *Han Fei Zi* 韩非子 (see Forum, ‘Contradiction and the Stubborn Bystander’, pp.3–6) is aimed at critiquing ‘self-contradiction’ in Confucian presuppositions to argue for the legalist principles of *fa* 法 (law) and *shi* 势 (power).¹ The Communist Party of China (CPC) adopts the Leninist theory of dialectical contradiction to identify the major forces at opposition in society 主要矛盾 — or ‘the principal contradiction’, as it is often translated — to achieve its political goals. As I explain below, this abandonment of the legalist understanding of *maodun* for a monolithic ‘politics-first’ approach inevitably exacerbates rather than eases the kaleidoscope of social contradictions.

## Legalist and Logical Contradictions

The story of *maodun* is widely taught throughout schools in the People’s Republic of China (PRC) to explain self-contradiction in logic. A weapons dealer from the state of Chu was boasting in the market that his spears (*mao* 矛) were so sharp they could pierce anything and his shields (*dun* 盾) were so strong nothing could pierce them, only to find himself stunned by the embarrassing question, ‘What if you stab your shields with your spears?’ What is not taught is the context in which the story is told and what it means to Chinese political thought.

The story appears twice in the legalist text *Han Fei Zi*, attributed to Han Fei (c.280–233 BCE), one of the representative political philosophers of the legalist school 法家. Contrary to Confucian governance, which assumes the necessity of a moral ruler and the malleability of human nature through repeated practices of decorum and ritual propriety, legalism is a school of political thought emphasising the absolute authority of the ruler and uniform enforcement of regulations and punitive codes. In both instances,
“maodun” is used as an allegory to highlight self-contradiction in the logic of key Confucian principles. The first appearance is in the chapter ‘Nan Yi’ 難一, where the philosopher Han Fei rejects the Confucian principle of ‘transformation through moral teaching’ 德化, which says that a perfectly moral ruler can transform the people and bring order to society by setting a moral example. Han argues that the Confucian exaltation of the mythical, saintlike Emperor Yao 尧 (traditionally, c.2356–2255 BCE) and his equally revered successor Emperor Shun 舜 (traditionally, c.2294–2184 BCE) is as self-contradictory as the weapons dealer’s claims about his spears and shields, for if Yao’s project of moral transformation had genuinely worked to eliminate problems in society, Shun would not have needed to continue with the same task of solving those problems. Han Fei proposed that the more effective way of governing the people and rectifying their wrongdoings was strict enforcement of clearly stated laws and regulations.

Han repeated the story of “maodun” in the chapter ‘Nan Shi’ 難勢 to illustrate the insoluble conflict between the Confucian premise that good governance required a saintly ruler 賢治 and the practical aspects of the establishment of power 势治. Han rejected the former and promoted the latter, arguing that exceedingly saintly rulers such as Yao and Shun were rare — as were exceedingly cruel and ruthless rulers such as King Jie 桀 of Xia (traditionally, c.1728–1675 BCE) and King Zhou 孟 of Shang (traditionally, c.1105–1046 BCE), both of whose tyranny was traditionally regarded as leading to the collapse of their dynasties. Most rulers were ordinary humans, Han Fei stated, and so good governance could, and should, rely not on the appearance of a saintly ruler but on the projection of authority from a powerful position to ensure enforcement of the law 抱法處勢. With laws and the power to enforce them, even an ordinary ruler can govern well. Han did not dismiss the risk that the legalist principle of shi might bring chaos to society if a cruel and ruthless ruler came to power; he argued, however, that this would rarely happen.

In the two instances where he used “maodun”, Han Fei savvily revealed the paradox of exaggerating the accomplishments of a godlike, saintly
ruler and the inherent incompatibility between the exaltation of such a ruler and effective law enforcement. But Han’s excessive emphasis on law and power, with attention neither to the need to constrain that power nor to the role of morality within institutions, made his own thesis paradoxical as well: how can effective law enforcement be realised when the ruler is above the law, and how can social stability be maintained if the law serves no moral end other than protecting the power of the ruler? Notwithstanding the strengths and shortcomings of Han’s argument, I suggest his use of *maodun* as an allegory for logical fallacies is based on what then passed as commonsense rationalisations. The CPC’s quest for a Sinicised socialism led it to replace this rationalisation with a monolithic belief in Leninist dialectical contradiction — the logical validity of which they do not see as open to debate.

**Sinicised Leninist Dialectical Contradiction**

In his seminal work on the development of the communist movement in China leading to the ascendancy of Mao Zedong 毛泽东, *Chinese Communism and the Rise of Mao* (1951), Benjamin Schwartz suggests the Maoist extension of Marxism-Leninism, as the general trend of Marxism in its Leninist form, had been not towards ‘enriching’ or ‘deepening’ the doctrine, but rather towards its ‘disintegration’.² The CPC under the leadership of Mao drifted from the original premise of Marxism-Leninism; it was neither ‘the vanguard of the proletariat’ nor a ‘peasant party’ in the Marxist-Leninist sense, but an elite of professional revolutionaries organised along Leninist lines, who had risen to power by mobilising the dynamic of peasant discontent.³ Schwartz maintains that, despite this movement towards ideological disintegration, five core elements of Marxism-Leninism became integral to Chinese communism.⁴ The first element was the Chinese communists’ own subjective conviction that they were unswerving Marxist-Leninists despite actions that by most
standards would be seen as diverging from classical Marxism-Leninism. The second was the Leninist faith that the Communist Party’s leadership was the chosen instrument of history whose purpose was to lead China to successful socialism. The third was the Leninist theory and practice of party organisation — a tightly organised elite striving towards power by identifying itself with the discontent of the masses — ensuring the place of the party as the agent of historical redemption. The fourth was a tendency towards totalitarianism. The final element was the Leninist doctrine of imperialism, which was so attractive to the founders of the CPC and the Chinese intelligentsia, infused as they were with hatreds and resentments aroused by nineteenth and twentieth-century Western imperialism. Schwartz summarised Mao’s strategy as one that asserted the right and power of a revolutionary vanguard party organised in accordance with Leninist principles and animated by faith in Marxism-Leninism to rule.\(^5\)

This highly practical strategy of focusing on monolithic faith rather than ideological alignment with classical Marxism-Leninism continues. One would be disappointed if one hoped to find consistency in the CPC’s definitions of or approaches to ‘socialism’ or ‘democracy’ throughout its 100 years of history. These concepts have undergone so many unpredictable transformations and re-formations they have become insubstantial while remaining symbolically important. They are deployed to support the subjective conviction that the CPC is Marxist-Leninist and the chosen instrument of history, representing the will of the people to lead China to greatness through Socialism with Chinese Characteristics 中国特色社会主义. In the year-end CPC Politburo study session called the Democratic Life Meeting 民主生活会, held on 27–28 December 2021, CPC General Secretary Xi Jinping 习近平 urged party members to increase their own faith in the Party’s history 增强历史自信 and to unify everyone’s thought and action 统一思想、统一行动 around such faith.\(^6\)

To celebrate the Party’s centenary in July, the Party Central School conducted an open lecture series entitled ‘Red Classics in the One Hundred Years of the Party’s History’ for the nation’s ninety-five million party members. In the year-end CPC Politburo study session called the Democratic Life Meeting 民主生活会, held on 27–28 December 2021, CPC General Secretary Xi Jinping 习近平 urged party members to increase their own faith in the Party’s history 增强历史自信 and to unify everyone’s thought and action 统一思想、统一行动 around such faith.\(^6\)
members. The lecture series hailed two texts, *On Practice* and *On Contradiction* — which were allegedly authored solely by Mao in 1937 — as the Party’s methodological and philosophical foundation. The lectures credit these texts with not only saving the CPC from major setbacks in the 1920s and early 1930s, but also guiding its successes from the revolutionary period through to the Xi Jinping era.

*On Contradiction* establishes a Sinicised version of Lenin’s notion of ‘dialectical contradiction’, which sees all development and life as resulting from the interdependence of the contradictory aspects present in all things and the struggle between them. Following Lenin and Stalin, Mao emphasises the importance to the Party of identifying the ‘principal contradiction’ in society and the principal aspect of the contradiction as the basis for formulating its key policies. For example, Mao states that in a capitalist society, the principal contradiction is one between the
bourgeoisie and the proletariat. At the beginning, the bourgeoisie may be the principal — that is, the dominating — aspect of the (principal) contradiction, but eventually they will be overthrown by the proletariat, who will then become the main force of social development.¹⁰

The CPC’s success thus comes from the ‘correct’ and ‘scientific’ identification of principal contradictions during critical transitional periods. The Marxist scholar Han Zhenfeng 韩振峰 of Beijing Jiaotong University has outlined four principal contradictions that the Party has ‘correctly’ recognised and identified: between imperialism and the Chinese nation during the New Democratic Revolution Period (1919–1949), between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie, that is, between socialism and capitalism after the founding of the PRC, between the ever-growing material and cultural needs of the people and backward social production in the Deng Xiaoping–led Reform Era and, finally, between unbalanced and inadequate development and the people’s ever-growing needs for a better life, as announced by Xi Jinping during the Nineteenth National Congress of the CPC in 2017.¹¹ Each of the principal contradictions justifies its period’s key policies and goals, from revolution in the pre-liberation period, class struggle, and cultural revolution in the post-1949 Mao era and economic development in the Deng era to the ‘third distribution’ system (in which high-income individuals and enterprises give back to society through voluntary gifts and donations to the Party and state) and ‘common prosperity’ in the Xi era.

This Sinicised interpretation of Leninist dialectical contradiction may reinforce belief in Marxism-Leninism among the party faithful, but it creates a circular argument in the Party’s narrative logic. Because the principal contradiction is defined as the driving force of change and development, the Party’s ability to identify it demonstrates both its greatness and its legitimacy in directing the nation’s development. Yet insistence on the Party’s infallibility in identifying the principal contradiction precludes logical and rational debate, such as the one in which Han Fei engaged against the Confucians, as well as a less monolithic
interpretation of society’s *maodun*, which might be multiple. This makes it difficult to find consistent, systematic, sophisticated, and effective solutions to complex problems. In their work on corruption in Beijing public hospitals, for example, Yujian Fun and Zelin Yao have discovered that medical crimes and corruption primarily arise from the contradictory expectations of the state that hospitals will pursue socialist values in care and at the same time adopt capitalist methods of administration. Deng Xiaoping asserted that there was no fundamental *ideological* contradiction between socialism and a market economy. Fun and Yao’s work reveals that, nonetheless, there is a fundamental *practical* contradiction between socialism and the market that creates the structural basis for corruption. However, this practical contradiction, which does not fit into the theory of the principal contradiction, is neglected by state media in favour of an argument focusing on the relevant actors’ moral failings.

**Ubiquitous Contradictions**

Contradictions are everywhere. A monolithic solution or analysis applied to issues arising within an increasingly complex society is bound to create and exacerbate structural contradictions. For the past decade, economist Wu Jinglian 吴敬琏 has been arguing that China’s economic and social contradictions are reaching a critical point because of unsustainable growth, the gradual decline of the benefits of an export-led growth strategy and excessive state interference in the market and prices. Wu argues that China’s sustained success in economic reform relies on the government reforming itself into a limited and efficient one based on the rule of law. If it does not, economic and social catastrophes — including greater corruption, a broader wealth gap, intensified social unrest and weaker ability to govern — are inevitable.

Scholars have long observed that Chinese legal institutions operate under a basic contradiction: rule of law versus party supremacy in all
matters, including the interpretation, application, and enforcement of the law in terms of both general principles and the outcomes of particular cases. Consequently, as legal scholar Ling Li 李玲 argues, courts must perform as both a pliant political agent and a legal institution with agency.

Maintaining a contradictory double character is common in society as well. Not only celebrities but also many ordinary Chinese Weibo users have two accounts: a public-facing one 大号 and an anonymous one 小号. While the former reveals the user’s identity to the public and is used to attract fans and perform a public persona, the latter hides the user’s identity from the public — sometimes from even their own friends and family. Using an anonymous account, a celebrity, for example, can ‘secretively’ follow their own fans and comfortably project their personality as opposed to their persona. It is of little surprise that while the Party is calling for its cadres and young people to ‘play a central role’ C位担当 in building the nation’s ‘new era’ — ‘C位’ being slang for the central position on stage (in a band, for example) — many, exhausted by the rat race and multiple external demands on them, would rather ‘lie flat’ 躺平, curtailing their goals and ambitions (see Forum, ‘Overwork, Pointless Work, Avoiding Work and Legal Work: The Contradictions of Labour’, pp.65–73).
Chinese society today is caught between contradictory values. The Socialist Core Values require Chinese citizens to prioritise patriotism above all else, but this increasingly puts them in conflict with other important values, such as trust and respect, which enable interdependence in social relationships, both personal and professional. This collision of values is exemplified by the online firestorm in December 2021 over the sacking of journalism lecturer Song Gengyi from Shanghai Aurora College. One of her students had covertly recorded part of a lecture in which she argued that a journalist should question statistical claims, including the evidence in support of the government’s official death toll of 300,000 for the 1937 Nanking Massacre. The lecture took place during the week when China marked the eighty-fourth anniversary of the massacre — one of the most infamous war crimes of the Japanese occupation during World War II.

In the video, Song also suggests one should not dwell in hatred forever and that, while mourning, one should also reflect on the causes of war. The student edited the video, reported it to the university administration and shared it on Weibo. In the video, you can hear the student snickering, saying, ‘Good, good, we can report this.’ Soon after the video was made public, not only did the college sack and reprimand Song, but also state media such as the Global Times and People’s Daily quickly joined in the condemnation. The People’s Daily castigated Song as ‘not worthy of being a teacher’ and even ‘not worthy of being a Chinese national’. This incident went viral on Chinese social media. Netizens expressed concerns about official endorsement of Cultural Revolution–like snitching on people for perceived political offences. Many condemned the Aurora student who made the video public as a despicable ‘dobber’, while others hailed him as a patriotic hero. On 18 December, the Global Times published an article describing the student as a brave ‘whistle-blower’ standing up against historical nihilism. The commentary further enraged netizens who found his actions contemptible. Subsequently, the authorities banned the topic on social media. Any social media user commenting...
on the Aurora teacher controversy runs the risk of having their WeChat or Weibo accounts blocked or removed. After netizens reported that a teacher from a rural school in Hunan Province, Li Tiantian 李田田, had posted a sympathetic message on Weibo on 17 December 2021, local authorities reportedly forced their way into her home and took her to a psychiatric institution despite the fact she was four months’ pregnant. Li sent urgent online messages seeking help while she still had access to her mobile phone. Thousands of supporters persistently shared and discussed her story online while demanding her safe release. Nine days later, on 26 December 2021, a post on Li’s public Weibo account stated that she was safe and had been returned home. Netizens called Li’s release an illustration of ‘the active onlookers’ power’ 围观的力量.

**Conclusion**

Legalist philosopher Han Fei used the parable of *maodun* to illustrate logical contradictions within Confucian reasoning. Early Chinese communists transformed *maodun* into a Sinicised form of Leninist dialectical contradiction. This gave the Party the monopolistic power to identify the principal contradictions in society to justify its major policies and political goals for change and development, while still demonstrating its unswerving Marxist-Leninist convictions. Yet such a monolithic approach, by emphasising a subjective and changing attitude as determined by prevailing party needs, is inadequate to address and resolve the multitude of contradictions in society. All societies are full of contradictions. The scale and intensity of these contradictions are only exacerbated in the absence of an open, logical, and rational debate about how to understand and resolve them. Benjamin Schwartz stressed that the feeling of solidarity in belief was a force that should not be underestimated; devoid of the beacon of reason, however, the question remains whether it will inevitably lead to new crises that will be all the more tragic for having been foreseeable but also unavoidable if party policy, as determined by the leader, is infallible.
This text is taken from China Story Yearbook: Contradiction, edited by Linda Jaivin and Esther Sunkyung Klein with Sharon Strange, published 2022 by ANU Press, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.

doi.org/10.22459/CSY.2022.02