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On the Theory of Spiritual Emancipation and its Contemporary Significance by Mao Tse-tung

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Abstract: Marxism is a theoretical system pertaining to human liberation. Mao Tse-tung's theory of emancipation is the result of combining Marxist emancipation theory with China's emancipation struggle. Now, for the Chinese path to modernization, to achieve high-quality development depends heavily on spiritual emancipation and the development of human creativity. This requires strengthening the study of the theory of spiritual liberation. The development of human creativity is emphasized in Mao Tse-tung's theory of spiritual emancipation, which is crucial for directing the creation of modern society. There are, however, relatively few specialized studies on Mao Tse-tung's theory of spiritual emancipation; instead, most current scholarly research examines his emancipation theory from the viewpoints of women's emancipation and peasant emancipation. This paper concentrates on the philosophical connotation of emancipation, the main content of Mao Tse-tung's theory of emancipation, explains the specific meaning of spiritual emancipation, as well as the inherent logical relationship between spiritual emancipation and economic emancipation, national emancipation, emancipation of the productive forces and so on, and elaborates on the contemporary significance of Mao Tse-tung's theory of spiritual liberation.

Keywords: Mao Tse-tung; Emancipation; Spiritual Emancipation.

1. Introduction

The theoretical goal and value pursuit of Marxist ideology, as well as the main focus of Marxist theory, is the realization of human emancipation. Marxist human emancipation theory was integrated with the Chinese revolution to produce theory of emancipation of Mao Tse-tung (Mao Zedong,1893-1976).The liberation or emancipation of Women and nation is the main subjects of current studies on Mao Tse-tung's theory of emancipation. Besides, some analysts have also examined Mao Tse-tung's conception of human emancipation from the viewpoints of sinicization of Marxism and national emancipation. In fact, it is clear from analyzing Mao's writings from different eras that his theory of emancipation also includes economic emancipation, spiritual emancipation, and productive force emancipation and so on. Thus, this essay first examines the philosophical meanings of the emancipation: it refers to the capacity of individuals to act freely by overcoming limitations. Second, this article analyses the major ideas of Mao Tse-tung's spiritual emancipation. Third, the article looks at the theoretical and practical relevance of Mao Tse-tung's theory of spiritual liberation in the modern day.

2. The Connotation of Emancipation

Emancipation refers to the autonomous state in which individuals free themselves from certain constraints and restrictions, signifying that the real individuals can act independently. These constraints encompass various aspects, such as economic, political, and ideological-cultural limitations on human activities. Marx posits that all emancipation is a reduction of the human world and relationships to man himself. Furthermore, he distinguishes between political emancipation and human emancipation, arguing that political emancipation is merely a stage of human emancipation, and true human emancipation can only be achieved when real individuals exist as individuals.(Marx & Engels,1975a:p. 168)In this sense, *The Grand Dictionary of Social Historical Perspective* defines human emancipation as "the emancipation of all humanity from the blind forces of nature, social relations, and outdated ideas and concepts, leading to the establishment of a communist society".(Zhou Longbin,1993:p.10) To achieve this goal of emancipation, the means lie in proletarian revolution. This is because Marx analyzes emancipation from a socio-historical perspective, rather than viewing it solely as a mental act. As a result, the realization of human emancipation is not only the theoretical essence of Marxist philosophy but also the value objective of Marxism. "The profundity of Marxism, in the final analysis, can be summarized in one sentence: to seek emancipation for humanity."(Xi Jinping,2018:p.8)Mao Tse-tung sinicized Marxist emancipation theory in the context of the Chinese revolution, and in the process of answering the question of how to achieve human emancipation in modern China, Mao Tse-tung's theory of emancipation was formed.

The semi-colonial and semi-feudal nature of modern Chinese society determined that the most immediate goal of the Chinese people's emancipation movement was national emancipation. As Mao Tse-tung stated, "And only by achieving national emancipation will it be possible for the proletariat and other working people to achieve their own emancipation." (Mao Tse-tung,1965:p.196) This means that national emancipation is a crucial prerequisite for human emancipation, which encompasses political, economic, spiritual, and other dimensions. In Mao's view, achieving national emancipation through revolution is the foundational step toward the ultimate emancipation of humanity. Mao asserted that revolution was "in order to achieve the emancipation of the Chinese nation, in order to bring about people's rule, in order that the people may attain economic prosperity."(S.R.Schram,1994:p.268) Simultaneously, national emancipation signifies the emancipation of productive forces. "The reason politics and military affairs come first is that without them, the forces of production will not be able to achieve emancipation, and there will be no

possibility of talking about other issues." (S.R.Schram,2015:p.511)That is to say, only by achieving national independence can productively forces and the Chinese people be liberated, and they can attain freedom. In this sense, the scholar Bao Dawei explains emancipation as follows: "Emancipation is a historic practice in which humanity actively transforms production relations and productive forces to achieve public well-being."(Bao Dawei,2021)And the concept of emancipation is a dynamic expression of the objective conditions of the emancipatory practice and the consciousness of the subject, and it realizes its idea by stimulating the self-consciousness of the emancipated subject's action. Mao Tse-tung emphasized that, fundamentally, imperialism and feudalism were the greatest constraints faced by the Chinese people in their daily lives. "It is precisely imperialism and feudalism that have shackled the productive forces of the Chinese people. Without destroying them, China cannot develop and progress, and there is a danger of China perishing."(S.R.Schram,2015:p.936)

Like Marx, Mao Tse-tung, in fact, also distinguished between political emancipation and human emancipation. For example, after the founding of the People's Republic of China, that is, after achieving national independence, Mao further emphasized that the true emancipation of humanity is the highest value of socialism. "The final emancipation of the working class and the entire people can only be achieved in the era of socialism, and the Chinese working class must strive for this ultimate goal."(Mao Tse-tung,1965:p.403)

If the above discusses what emancipation means from a perspective of society, then Mao also explored the emancipation of individuality and the spiritual dimension from the perspective of person. Under the constraints of imperialism and feudalism, the development of individuality among the Chinese people was also suppressed. In the words of Mao, "China is a semicolonial, semifeudal country, where imperialist and feudal forces have destroyed individuality, preventing the Chinese people from developing their intelligence and talent or their bodies; both have been destroyed."(S.R.Schram,2015:p.851)Therefore, the emancipation of individuality is also an inherent requirement of the democratic revolution. As Mao pointed out, "liberating individuality" "should be included in the revolution of democracy against feudalism. Some people say that we neglect or suppress individuality. This is incorrect. If fettered individuality is not liberated, there will be no democracy, nor will there be socialism.**"**(S.R.Schram,2015:p.607)This delves into the spiritual level of human emancipation, emphasizing the development of human independence and individuality. In Mao's view, individuality and independence are the same thing. "Independence and individuality, as well as dignity, all mean the same thing."(S.R.Schram,2015:p.923)Scholar Wang Xiangqing pointed out that the content of Mao's concept of individual emancipation includes two aspects: first, liberating the masses from the constraints of the natural environment and society, making them masters of nature and society; second, freeing the masses from the constraints of old ideas and concepts, making them masters of themselves.(Wang Xiangqing,2008)Therefore, it can be said that the former aspect focuses on human independence, while the latter signifies human individuality. This closely links the emancipation of individuality with spiritual emancipation.

3. The Connotation of Mao Tse-tung's Theory of Spiritual Emancipation

In Mao Tse-tung's view, creative individuality implies a low degree of blindness. He regarded blindness, superstition as the spiritual burdens and the enemies in the mind. For instance, he believed that superstition is an enemy in people's minds. "Many things may become baggage, may become encumbrances, if we cling to them blindly and uncritically." (S.R.Schram,2015:p.534) Therefore, to "get rid of the baggage" means to free our minds of many encumbrances. This indicates that, for Mao, spiritual emancipation equals shedding burdens. "To examine one's baggage, to get rid of it, and to emancipate the mind." (S.R.Schram,2015:p.534)

In Mao's view, the enemies in the mind were especially prominent in the Party formalism and bookism or dogmatism. He considered Party formalism as a constraint on revolutionary spirit. "As a form, Party formalism not only is unsuitable for expressing the revolutionary spirit but also is apt to stifle it. To develop a revolutionary spirit, it is necessary to discard Party formalism and instead adopt a vigorous, lively, fresh, and forceful form of language." (S.R.Schram,2015:p.43)

Mao also viewed bookism or dogmatism as a form of spiritual oppression (the oppression of the spiritual yoke). Bookism, an idealist spirit, divorced from the realities of the Chinese revolution, suppressed people's enthusiasm, creativity, and independence, particularly undermining their ability to think independently. Opposing bookism is a process of breaking away from rigid ideas and concepts: the more thorough the critique, the higher the degree of spiritual emancipation. Therefore, Mao criticized bookism both theoretically and in revolutionary practice.Theoretically, he emphasized the correct approach to Marxism, "We should regard it not as a dogma, but as a guide to action."(Mao Tse-tung,1965:p.208) Practically, he focused on reflecting on Soviet experiences, advocating for the rejection of blind faith in Soviet practices and liberating the masses from various constraints. In 1956, in On the Ten Major Relationships, he pointed out, "It was by drawing lessons from their experience that we were able to avoid certain detours."(Mao Tse-tung,1977:p.1) Soon after, he reiterated, "Everything we copied from abroad was adopted rigidly, and this ended in a great defeat… The reason is that there were some comrades who did not take reality as their starting point but dogmatism." (Mao Tse-tung,2020:p.365)In summary, Mao's theory of spiritual emancipation emphasized breaking free from the constraints of certain ideas and independently exploring the path of the Chinese revolution to analyze China's specific conditions.

From this, it is evident that Mao's theory of spiritual emancipation adheres to a materialist standpoint and is not voluntarism. Voluntarism advocates absolute spiritual freedom, negating the external constraints on the spirit, thereby it severs the relationship between spiritual emancipation, economic emancipation, and the emancipation of productive forces.

4. The Contemporary Significance of Mao Tse-tung's Theory of Spiritual Emancipation

Theoretically, Mao Tse-tung's theory of spiritual emancipation is both an inheritance and a development of

Marx's theory of emancipation. Marx stated, "The real intellectual wealth of the individual depends entirely on the wealth of his real connections."(Marx & Engels,1975b:p.51) Similarly, Mao grounded human emancipation in the changes of social productive forces and production relations. In *On the Correct Handling of Contradictions Among the People*, he pointed out, "The working class remoulds the whole of society in class struggle and in the struggle against nature, and at the same time remoulds itself. It must ceaselessly learn in the course of its work and overcome its shortcomings step by step, and must never stop doing so." (Mao Tse-tung,1967: p.27) Mao's theory of spiritual emancipation teaches us that through continuous learning, we can transform the subjective world, thereby eliminating blindness and raising the level of awareness.

From this, it is evident that emancipation is also a systematic project. Emancipation encompasses political, economic, and spiritual aspects. Spiritual emancipation is a necessary intermediary and link in human emancipation**,** and it is indispensable at all times. Moreover, the various aspects of emancipation are mutually reinforcing. Specifically, economic and political emancipation aims to liberate productive forces, thereby providing favorable conditions for the comprehensive development of individuals, ultimately achieving human emancipation. The development of individuality and the enhancement of creative abilities, in turn, promote the improvement of social productive forces. As Mao noted, "our millions of people, once really emancipated, with their great latent productive possibilities freed for creative activity in every field, can help to improve the economy as well as raise the cultural level of the whole world."(Mao Tse-tung,1999:251-252)

Furthermore, emancipation is a process with stages and layers, with different historical content, degrees, and scopes in different periods. In other words, the specific progress of human emancipation is determined by social productive forces and social laws. This historical process also determines the focus of emancipation theory in different periods. Mao's theory of emancipation was formed in the practice of the Chinese revolution and social construction. Like, The New Democratic Revolution aimed to liberate the masses from exploitative and oppressive relations, while the Socialist Revolution sought to liberate individuals from the relationships between humans and nature, humans and society, and humans and themselves. In the modern world, to follow the Chinese path to modernization, it is necessary to further deepen reform and opening up, continuously liberate and develop social productive forces, and enhance social vitality. (Xi Jinping,2023:p.19)

Contemporary China, while liberating productive forces, also places great emphasis on providing a favorable institutional environment for the emancipation of individuality, thereby promoting spiritual emancipation. For example, in the field of scientific research, the Chinese government "gives more decision-making autonomy to research institutions, grants scientists more freedom to choose research pathways and use funds and frees research institutions and their staff from institutional red tape."(Xi Jinping,2022:p.230) Therefore, "our modernization balances material and cultural-ethical progress. It upholds the core socialist values, strengthens education on ideals and convictions, spreads splendid traditional culture, boosts people's moral strength, and fosters material abundance and the well-rounded development of all."(Xi Jinping, 2023:p. 141-142) Under the conditions of new quality productive forces characterized by innovation, spiritual emancipation becomes even more critical. Breaking away from traditional economic growth models requires breaking mental stereotypes, shedding burdens, and freeing oneself from rigid old ideas. At the same time, talent is the key to innovation, meaning that cultivating individuals with creative personalities is essential for developing original and disruptive technological products. This has become a contemporary requirement for human emancipation.

5. Conclusion

In summary, emancipation means freeing oneself from a state of constraint to enable autonomous activity. For Mao, it means shedding burdens. Mao Tse-tung's theory of emancipation answers the questions of what emancipation is and how the Chinese revolution achieved emancipation. While emphasizing the emancipation of productive forces, Mao also stressed spiritual emancipation, critiquing erroneous ideological tendencies such as Party formalism and bookism, and highlighting the importance of creativity and independence in human development. Mao Tse-tung emphasized the emancipation of the productive forces as well as the emancipation of the human spirit, thereby criticizing such erroneous ideological tendencies as the Party formalism and bookism, and he highlighted the importance of human creativity and independence in the process of human development. These ideas provide a scientific methodology for the Chinese path to modernization.

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