

# Bringing Forth the New Through the Old: What the West Can Learn from China's "Two Integrations"

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Abstract: This study concerns what the West may learn from a dialectical principle entailed in "the second integration," a topic of significant discussion in Chinese academic circles. This "second integration" concerns the integration of the basic principles of Marxism with the best of China's traditional culture. In relation to traditional culture, the key is to "make dialectical decisions as to what to accept and to reject" and "bring forth the new through the old." In other words, the path to renewal is to dig deep into one's own philosophical and cultural tradition to find alternative sources for renewal. The article is structured as follows: after a brief overview of the condition of the West, which is in serious trouble at a time of qualitative change, the initial concern is to explicate the dialectical principle contained in the "second integration." This approach is then deployed with three problematic features of Western culture: "zero-sum game"; "chosen people"; and "possessive individualism." By digging deep into the Western cultural tradition, it is possible to find neglected alternatives that may possibly be recovered and dialectically transformed (*Aufhebung*): "loving others as oneself"; the "restoration of all things"; and "all things in common." In relation to the final value, a contribution from Friedrich Engels draws the main analysis to a close.

Keywords: “two integrations”; dialectical transformation; chosen people; restoration of all things; possessive individualism; all things in common.

## 1. Opening Remarks

The topic for this article concerns what insight – or indeed enlightenment – the “West” may gain from China’s “two integrations.” More specifically, I am interested in a methodological principle embodied in the “second integration,” namely, a careful dialectical process of identifying the essence of the “best of” traditional culture so as to provide new resources for innovation and renewal. Much more will be said about this methodological principle a little later.

Before proceeding, a couple of definitions are needed. As for the “West,” it is important to have a specific and clear definition: the “West” is a rather small number of countries in the world, situated in Western Europe, North America, and perhaps Australia and New Zealand. The combined population of these countries is no more than 12% of the global total, but through the history of the last 400-500 years they came to dominate most of the world through colonialism and imperialism, which brought so much suffering to so many peoples. As for the “second integration,” it is the second of “two integrations”: the integration of the basic principles of Marxism with China’s concrete practice and with the best of China’s traditional culture.<sup>1</sup> I am particularly interested in the

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<sup>1</sup> The translation of the “second integration” into English is a subject of discussion. The Chinese is: 马克思主义基本原理同中华优秀传统文化相结合 *Makesizhuyi jiben yuanli tong Zhonghua youxiu chuantong wenhua xiang jiehe*. In current translations, one will often find 优秀 *youxiu* rendered as “excellent” or “fine” traditional culture. However, this usage is increasingly felt by senior translators to be redundant (personal communication), so I have proposed on a number of occasions that the translation as

“second integration.”

The structure of this article is as follows: first, a brief overview of the serious trouble in which the “West” finds itself today; second, an explanation of the key methodological principle embodied in the “second integration”; third, a suggestion to discard the dross of “zero-sum thinking” and to recover “loving others as oneself”; fourth, a consideration of the deeply held concept of the “chosen people” or the “elect,” and the identification of a distinct alternative in “the restoration of all things”; fifth, an analysis of the relatively recent cultural concept of “possessive individualism,” to which the much richer and longer-held value of “all things in common” is a distinct answer; finally, a discussion of an insight from Friedrich Engels in relation to “all things in common” in the longer historical context of the German peoples, and thus of the West. Throughout, I emphasise the need to engage dialectically so as to bring forth the new from the old: not a return to the old, but a qualitative transformation in light of new conditions. The conclusion raises a number of questions and identifies the preliminary nature of the proposal argued below.

## 2. Context and Method

### *2.1 Context: The West Today*

There are a number of ways to analyse the problems facing the West today: the few countries of the world that make up the West have –

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“best of” (traditional culture) best captures the dialectical principle at stake. Further, we also need to pay attention to the accepted mutual translation of “culture” and 文化 *wenhua*. Here we have the old problem of the overlap but not complete alignment of semantic fields. In this case, the Latin-derived “culture” is an agricultural metaphor, while the Chinese 文化 *wenhua* has a richer sense in terms of the constantly transforming and renewing text-based tradition.

to use a metaphor – hit the wall; in a longer historical view, we are witnessing a process of much-needed and inevitable re-balancing after a few hundred years of imbalance when the world was dominated by the West; or that we are now experiencing a period of qualitative change in the world. These explanations are not mutually exclusive; instead, they provide different angles on the same question. Analysts have observed the unsolved structural contradictions of Western capitalist countries at least since the 1970s, but there is now an increasing consensus that the few countries of the capitalist West are really at a loss as to what to do. Scholars write of the “long depression” (Roberts 2016), of the systemic or “structural crisis” of capitalism (Alboresi 2023), and of the “end-game of capitalism” (Lauesen 2024). We may see this problem from economic, political, social, and cultural dimensions. Over the last sixty years the capitalist West has experienced economic decline, stagnation, and has since 2008 “flat-lined” (Freeman 2023). Intractable problems in the economic base have had effects on societies and political systems: decline, then social fragmentation, and now open and antagonistic social and political divides, so much so that we may speak of state-unmaking and a torn social fabric. Culturally, these Western countries have reached the limit-point of the liberal project of the last few hundred years. Alongside an overwhelming sense is of pessimism and gloom, many people in Western countries have become increasingly fearful of the rest of the world, where the vast majority of humanity lives. It is as though they know that there are problems aplenty, but that they still prefer to blame others for the problems.

It will take quite some time for the West to assess why they have come to this point, stop blaming others, and find sources for renewal –

although the resources will need to be qualitatively different from the ones they have now. Why qualitatively different? This point will become clear as the argument proceeds, but it is based upon a growing Chinese consensus that the world is undergoing now a period of qualitative change.<sup>2</sup> Not merely quantitative change, but qualitative change – the methodological premises come from dialectical materialism. It follows that the place of and relationship between countries in a qualitatively transformed world will require new ways of being in the world (孙 Sun 2023). Hence my contribution: I would like to make some initial suggestions for finding alternative resources in the Western cultural, philosophical, and religious tradition for the sake of renewal. In other words, what might the West learn from a Chinese approach that looks to its own long cultural tradition so as to identify what is best about that tradition and what can contribute to innovation, renewal, and what is known as a “new form of human human civilisation.” This is not a small task, I must admit, but a beginning must be made.

## *2.2. The “Second Integration”: A Methodological Principle*

This is the context in which I would like to situate the following analysis. Now the point of the title of this paper comes to the fore, since the methodological insight comes from a recently articulated proposal concerning the “two integrations,” namely, the integration of the basic principles of Marxism with China’s concrete practice and with the best of China’s traditional culture. At this point, one can safely assume that scholars outside China are thus far unaware of this major new

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<sup>2</sup> Some readers may be more familiar with the emerging reality of a “multi-polar world” (Pondrelli 2023).

development. Inside China, there are at the time of writing hundreds upon hundreds of articles and studies on this topic.<sup>3</sup> To explain briefly: the “first integration” was explicitly identified already in the middle to late 1930s. From the Zunyi Conference of January 1935 to Mao Zedong’s “On the New Stage” of 1938, we find the initial articulation of integrating Marxism with China’s concrete realities. Mao spoke of the fact that there is “no such thing as abstract Marxism, but only concrete Marxism,” that Communists needed to study China’s “own laws of development” and develop Marxism that is “applied to the concrete struggle in the concrete conditions prevailing in China.” In fact, it is this speech that we first find the terminology of “the sinification of Marxism,” by which Mao meant that Marxism “all its manifestations” should be “imbued with Chinese characteristics” and “Chinese particularities” (毛 Mao 1938, 658–59).

However, it is the “second integration” that has garnered most attention since it was explicitly identified on 1 July, 2021. Since then there have been a couple of further elaborations, of both the core values that arise from China’s traditional culture and that have a significant compatibility with scientific socialism, as well as the methodological principles that are needed for the dialectical interaction between the basis principles of Marxism and the best of China’s traditional culture (习 Xi 2022b; 2023). Many have been the studies published on this topic and there is no need to belabour the reader with their details here, save to point out that I have a very specific interest in a feature of the second

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<sup>3</sup> I have already published a couple of articles on the topic, and have completed a book manuscript (by invitation) that offers a perspective from a foreigner who is somewhat knowledgeable about China’s culture and civilisation, and especially about Chinese Marxism.

integration: the methodological principle as to how innovation and renewal relate to traditional culture.<sup>4</sup>

A number of formulations bring out the methodological principle rather clearly. The first formulation is to “keep what is upright but not keep what is old, respect the ancients but not return to the ancients” (守正不守旧，尊古不复古 *shouzheng bu shoujiu, zangu bu fugu*) (习 Xi 2023).<sup>5</sup> It is somewhat difficult to translate such succinct phrases, so some explanation is needed. Their context concerns the inherently innovative drive of traditional culture, which has constantly renewed itself over the millennia and has more recently been able to do so through Marxism. To keep or guard what is “upright [正 *zheng*]” refers to what is right, correct, and just in traditional culture and has become part and parcel of everyday life for Chinese people. However, this does mean preserving all that is old for the sake of tradition. Similarly, respecting what is old or ancient does not entail a conservative push to restore ancient ways or return to the ancients. One must respect and uphold what is valuable from traditional culture in light of this culture’s inherent innovation. This brings us to the second formulation: “discarding the outdated in favour of the new” (革故鼎新 *gegu-dingxin*) (习 Xi 2022b).<sup>6</sup> Deriving from the *Zagua* (杂卦) section of the *Zhouyi* (周易, the oldest layer of the *Yijing* 易经), the formulation has become –

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<sup>4</sup> Unfortunately, in Western countries there is a tendency to see traditional culture and modernisation in terms of an either-or relation: modernisation threatens to abolish traditional cultural values, which must therefore be “preserved” – where possible – in light of new conditions.

<sup>5</sup> Since this study moves between Chinese concepts and matters pertaining to the West, I include where needed the Chinese (both characters and pinyin) for key terms.

<sup>6</sup> The character 故 *gu* has a wide semantic field – ranging from “incident,” through the adverbial “on purpose,” to what is “ancient” or “old” – but I have translated it as “outdated” to bring out the meaning more clearly.

through many reformulations throughout the cultural tradition – the four-character saying of 革故鼎新 *gegu-dingxin*. Lest this saying be misread, let me emphasise that the question is not one of “wiping the slate clean” and beginning again from a *tabula rasa*. By contrast, discarding what is outdated and irrelevant requires a careful analysis of what is attached to old social forms and cannot be transformed, and what is qualitatively essential for the cultural pulse, for cultural identity, continuity, and innovation. This is what persists in the new social form and can be taken to a higher qualitative level.

For the third formulation, we need to step back a decade or so, to a symposium of literary and cultural workers. Here we find the following: “Make the past serve the present, ... make dialectical choices to accept or reject, bring forth the new through the old, discard negative factors, carry further positive thoughts, ‘follow the guide of the ancients and open up one’s life’, and realise the creative transformation and innovative development of Chinese culture” (古为今用、... 辩证取舍、推陈出新，摒弃消极因素，继承积极思想，‘以古人之规矩，开自己之生面’，实现中华文化的创造性转化和创新性发展 *guwei-jinyong, ... bianzheng-qushe, tuichen-chuxin, bingqi xiaoji yinsu, jicheng jiji sixiang, ‘yi guren zhi guiju, kai ziji shengmian’, shixian Zhonghua wenhua de chuangzaoxing zhuanhua he chuangxinxing fazhan*) (习 Xi 2015, 26).<sup>7</sup> From this quotation, I would like to emphasise the need to make dialectical decisions in regard to accepting or rejecting aspects of traditional

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<sup>7</sup> Note also the early appearance of the phrase, “the creative transformation and innovative development” of Chinese culture. These came to be known as the “two innovations” (两创 *liangchuang*) or the “double innovation” (双创 *shuangchuang*) and have been the focus of quite a number of scholarly studies that examine why, how, and what the results might be (郭 Guo and 肖 Xiao 2022; 李 Li 2022; 王 Wang 2022; 魏 Wei 2022).



culture, which is then explicated in terms of bringing forth the new through the old. As Guo Yueduo (2014) has emphasised, this process is thoroughly dialectical. It is at this point that we explicitly encounter the intersection between traditional and Marxist philosophical approaches, for which dialectics is the key. Of course, with traditions of thought that have distinct points of origin and emphases, it is not so much a neat fit as a healthy encounter. This is already evident in the copious notes made by Mao Zedong in 1935-1937, when he and others studied the key texts of dialectical materialism. Mao's annotations are notable for their active engagement, for bringing to the fore many examples from China's history, and sparking a new stage of dialectics that has become known as "contradiction analysis" (毛 Mao 1988; Boer 2021b, 55–84).

Other formulations of this dialectical principle can be found, such as "discard the coarse and hold onto the refined" (去粗取精 *qucu-qujing*) and "discard the false and preserve what is true" (去伪存真 *quwei-cunzhen*), (刘 Liu 2022, 61), but I would like to focus on the Chinese translation of the German *Aufhebung* as 扬弃 *yangqi*. At a philosophical level, 扬弃 *yangqi* is the translation of the Hegelian concept of *Aufhebung*, which entails a process of negating what has gone before and simultaneously raising it to a qualitatively new level. However, there is also a question of how semantic fields relate to one another through the process of translation. Etymologically, 扬弃 *yangqi* is an agricultural metaphor: it refers to a process of throwing something up into the air, as with winnowing grain, and then discarding what is not wanted or needed. The process must be repeated many times, with the wind taking away the chaff and the grain kernels falling to the ground. In other words, this is a process of "winnowing and discarding," of

drawing out the kernels or essence and discarding the chaff, dross, or what is no longer useful. In other words, rather than losing some meanings of partially overlapping semantic fields (which is not uncommon), what we have is an extension of the meaning of *Aufhebung*: it now also concerns taking up the essence and discarding the dross as part and parcel of dialectical transformation.

### 3. Seeking Alternative Values: From “Zero-Sum Game” to “Loving Others as Oneself”

To return to our question: what can the West learn from the methodological principle embodied in the “second integration”? I would like to focus on three cultural factors, three ingrained assumptions of the “West”: The “zero-sum game” (零和博弈 *linghe-boyi*) or “zero-sum thinking” (零和思想 *linghe-sixiang*); the “chosen people” (被选中人 *bei xuan zhong ren*) or the “elect”; and “possessive individualism” (占有性个人主义 *zhanyouxing gerenzhuyi*). I suggest that these are not positive values, and in fact may be regarded as the cultural dross or dregs that need to be discarded. The question, however, is whether we can find other cultural values within the various streams that make up what we know today as Western culture, values that may undergo a process of qualitative transformation (*Aufhebung* 扬弃 *yangqi*) for a renewed and distinctly different place in a world that is undergoing qualitative change (质变 *zhibian*).

Less will be said concerning the “zero-sum game,” the assumption of “I win, you lose,” except to make a few brief points. To begin with, it is relatively easy to find alternative and genuine values both within the Western cultural tradition. Internal to the Western tradition is the long-

held value of “love your neighbour as yourself,” or “love others as yourself” (愛人如己 *airen-ruji*). Further, the value comes from a founding document of Western culture (despite its Southwest Asian provenance): the Bible.<sup>8</sup> The text I have quoted comes from Matthew 22: 39, and embodies the second of “two commandments,” which function as a summary of the “Law and the Prophets.” I make this point here, since the alternative values to follow are also drawn from the Bible. Of note here too is the long-accepted Chinese translation as 愛人如己 *airen-ruji*. Here we may speak of Western-style four-character saying (成語 *chengyu*). To go a step further: the “love” in question is not simply one of emotion or feeling, but it has a distinctly concrete and universal sense, embodied in the Greek Ἀγάπή *agape* used in this saying. This is the highest form of love, one that is both difficult to attain since it refers as much to one’s enemies and one that has profound social ramifications. Finally, one may wonder how “zero-sum thinking” can be propagated by those who also – at least on paper – adhere to “loving others as oneself”? Unfortunately, the love in question has too often been restricted to the small group known as the “chosen people.” Obviously, this restriction is not the meaning of Ἀγάπή *agape* at all. It follows that any viable restoration of “loving others as oneself” needs to break free from the bonds of the ideology of the “chosen people.”

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<sup>8</sup> No matter how much the West may have lost its soul, the fact remains that it is no much a constructed ancient Greek “classical tradition” that lies at the foundation, but rather the Bible and theology – the intersection of biblical narrative and Greek philosophy – that provide a significant piece of the foundation. To be clear, theology is a system of thought and analysis developed over millennia, and it concerns core questions of history, human existence (anthropology), collective and individual (society), and the shape of the future. As with any system of thought, theology provides both insights and has its limitations.

#### 4. From the “Chosen People” to the “Restoration of All Things”

More deliberation is needed for the “chosen people” (被选中人 *beixuan zhong ren*) or the “elect” (选人 *xuanren*). The meaning is clear: a specific group of people have been chosen above all others. To this “chosen” group belong many privileges that are denied to others. It is important to note that this concept and cultural assumption goes back to the classical texts of the Western tradition, to the Hebrew Bible and New Testament, and that it was cemented in place by Augustine’s *City of God* (1985) from the early fifth century CE. For Augustine, the whole of human history should be understood as a struggle between the city of God and the earthly city, between the elect and the damned, a struggle that would be resolved only at the end of time. After the Bible, the *City of God* – written in Latin – remains a founding text of the Western tradition, ensuring that the “elect” would remain a core element of Western cultural assumptions. The doctrine of the “chosen people” or “elect” is connected with a number of highly problematic Western assumptions: “either-or,” or the “zero-sum game” (see above); the pattern of seeking hegemony and wantonly waging wars for the sake of spreading the “values” of the “chosen people;” the sense of cultural and civilisational superiority over others; “master race” and “inferior races”; *Übermensch* and *Untermensch*; and much more. While this concept has biblical and theological origins, with God as the one who chooses, in its subsequent iterations the theological dimension has largely dropped out of the picture. In this cultural assumption we can see the ideological justifications of imperialism, colonialism, slavery, genocide, and crimes against humanity, which have caused so much misery to so many

peoples in the world. All of the many peoples of the world subjected to these deprivations were assumed to belong to those who were not “chosen” or who did not belong to the “elect.”

What is to be done with the idea of the “chosen people” and the assumption that most do not belong to the “chosen”? Are there resources within the Western cultural tradition that provide alternatives that may be recovered? The problem of the “chosen people” is quite difficult since arises from the classical texts of the Western tradition, has a long history and is deeply entrenched. It takes some effort to find an alternative in that very same tradition that may be recovered and transformed. A distinct possibility concerns the concept of *apokatastasis*, or the “restoration of all things,” a concept also with a history of two millennia. Once again, we find the source of this alternative and genuine cultural virtue in the Bible, in Acts 3: 21.<sup>9</sup> The original Greek reads ἀποκαταστάσεως πάντων (*apokastaseōs pantōn*), and is often translated as a time of final and “universal restoration.” The long established Chinese translation of this text gives us a second Western-style four-character saying: 万物复兴 *wanwu-fuxing*. As one would expect with such a text, many are the commentaries and expositions (beyond my purview here), but I would suggest that the universal restoration in question concerns not merely human beings (which is challenge enough for the doctrine of the “chosen people”), but

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<sup>9</sup> The context is Peter’s sermon on Solomon’s Portico, as presented in the Book of Acts. The fuller sentence runs from verse 19 to 21: “Repent therefore, and turn to God so that your sins may be wiped out, so that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord, and that he may send the Messiah appointed for you, that is, Jesus, who must remain in heaven until the time of universal restoration that God announced long ago through his holy prophets.”

also includes all of nature: the text speaks of the restoration of “all things [*pantōv*]”.<sup>10</sup>

The question arises as to how we may understand the relation between the “chosen people” and the “restoration of all things.” Exegetical acrobatics may attempt to limit the restoration to the elect, but this would entail that the “elect” is the determining category. Instead, we need to consider the diverging theological emphases of Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy (each of course claiming to “catholic” or “orthodox”). In this light, the profound influence of Augustine’s *City of God* (see above) was felt above all in the Latin West. Debates turned on how the “elect” and the “damned” should be understood, but we should note that within the Roman Catholic Church the Order of St Augustine (founded 1244 CE) was deeply influential, that Martin Luther was originally an Augustinian friar, and that John Calvin’s doctrine of predestination is in many ways the logical outcome of Augustine’s original proposal. Clearly, this was a development in the Latin-speaking church, which was prominent mostly in Western Europe, and was carried through with different emphases in the Protestant Reformation.

By contrast, the Eastern and Greek-speaking tradition took a somewhat different path. In terms of the “restoration of all things,” some theologians prior to Augustine had already taken up the concept and sought to develop it further. These include Origen of Alexandria (c.185–c.254), Gregory of Nyssa (c. 335–c. 395), and – a little later – St

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<sup>10</sup> If this value can be recovered and renewed in our time, it may offer a distinct Western cultural contribution to dialogues concerning the Chinese concept of “ecological civilisation [生态文明 *shengtai wenming*].”

Isaac the Syrian (c. 613– c.700), all of whom had a significant influence on Eastern Orthodoxy. To focus on Origen (2020),<sup>11</sup> for whose theology the “restoration of all things” was a key component: he argued that redemption was a long historical process of education for all, and that this redemption would lead to the eventual restoration of human beings, or “rational souls.”<sup>12</sup> While Origen did not seem to include the whole of created nature in this restoration, this inclusion would seem to be a logical corollary. By now it should be clear that Origen and those who followed his line of argument were at odds with the idea that only some, only the “chosen people” or the “elect,” would experience restoration. It is precisely in the Eastern Orthodox tradition that the concept had had greater influence.

The question remains as to how the West may exercise a dialectical process of bringing forth the new through the old in relation to the “restoration of all things.” The first step would be to listen more to the Eastern Orthodox tradition and understand why this value has had more appeal, how it has come to be understood, and what the implications might be. Further, there is the knotty problem of how the “restoration of all things” may relate to the “chosen people” or “elect.”<sup>13</sup> One option would be to treat the latter as the dross or dregs of the

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<sup>11</sup> Origen’s *On First Principles* is a fragmentary text, but there is sufficient for material to reconstruct his system of theological thought.

<sup>12</sup> For a clear examination of this development, see Kallistos Ware (2000).

<sup>13</sup> The question has not passed unnoticed in the West. For example, the long-standing debate over whether the theologian Karl Barth held to a species of “universal salvation” turns on both a passage in *Church Dogmatics* (vol. 4) and the overall direction of his theological system. The passage in question (2010, 105–106) twists and turns: Barth emphasises the hope that the superabundance of grace may extend to all human beings, but that this should not be understood as what he sees – mistakenly – as the guarantee entailed in *apokatastasis*. For an effort to espy the overall direction of Barth’s theology towards the “restoration of all things,” see Greggs (2009).

cultural tradition that need to be cast aside as no longer of use and indeed detrimental. Another option would entail recasting the “chosen people” in light of the “restoration of all things,” in which the latter becomes the principle aspect of the contradiction (毛 Mao 1937). Finally, the concept of universal restoration would itself require a dialectical transformation into a qualitatively new form, one that values human beings as very much part of the whole natural world.

## **5. From “Possessive Individualism” to “All Things in Common”**

The third problematic cultural assumption concerns “possessive individualism” (占有性个人主义 *zhanyou gerenzhuyi*), and the assumed primacy of the private individual (Macpherson 2011). In the West it continues to be assumed that the private individual is most important. Any collective – especially society – is seen as secondary, and perhaps at most as a collection of individuals. Individual choice and expression, as well as the associated possessiveness (where even human rights become an individual’s property), have become the highest ideals and any effort to restrict such assumptions is resolutely resisted. Further, the focus on the private individual is a core component of the ideology of liberalism and arose from a capitalist system in which bourgeois private property – and thus “possessive individualism” – was primary.

Compared with the “chosen people,” the concept of the possessive individualism is easier to challenge with an alternative traditional value within the Western cultural tradition. The rise of “possessive individualism” took place gradually over the last 500 years or so, running through the European Renaissance of the fourteenth to



sixteenth centuries, the Reformation of the sixteenth century, and the Enlightenment of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. As capitalism was gradually established in Western Europe – through imperialist and colonial plunder of the rest of the world – the cultural framework sought new ideas and new models. During this time we find the struggle to raise the private individual above the collective and social reality, all of which was embodied in the ideology of Western liberalism.<sup>14</sup>

What was negated in the process? The cultural assumption of the collective or social human existence, and especially the value of “all things in common.” Again, this value comes from the Bible, in this case Acts 2: 44.<sup>15</sup> Much may be said about this value and its history, but I must restrict myself the following relevant points. First, in the West it was a common assumption that the world was created without private property, or, to put it positively, that all was created as common, as a common store. This was seen in many ways as both the created and thus an ideal order for the world. By contrast, the emergence of private property – along with toil, hardship, and death – was seen as a curse, the result of disobedience and sin, and thus a failure and an evil (Genesis 3: 17-19). Indeed, right through the Middle Ages, “possessiveness” was regarded as the vice of “greed.”

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<sup>14</sup> Note also Losurdo’s (2011, 248) influential definition of liberalism, since it shows the intimate connection of liberalism with the “chosen people”: liberalism has always been a small “community of the free and its dictatorship over peoples unworthy of liberty.”

<sup>15</sup> The wider context in Acts 2 is as follows: Acts 4: 32-35 speaks mentions that the early group of Christians “had everything in common” and that those who had lands and houses sold them and brought the proceeds to the apostles. 2: 44-45 provides a concise summary: “And all who believed were together and had all things in common; and they sold their possessions and goods and distributed them to all, as any had need.”

Second, it required an immense struggle by some of the early thinkers of what became a capitalist system to overcome the notion of “greed” in relation to acquiring private property. These include the ideologue of the early Dutch commercial empire, Hugo Grotius (1583–1645), as well as John Locke (1632–1704) and Adam Smith (1723-1790). Their labours turned on efforts to recast the biblical narrative of Genesis 1-3 so as produce what became a foundational myth of capitalism: private property, and all that flows from it in terms of “possessive individualism” now became part of the divine plan, a natural and beneficial development of human existence from the very beginning (Boer and Petterson 2014).<sup>16</sup>

Third, we find through much of the Middle Ages and at the dawn of the modern era in Europe that “all things in common” was the slogan of peasant revolutionaries: Arnold of Brescia, the Waldensians, Apostolic Brethren, Dulcinians, Beghards and Beguines, Lollards, Taborites, Bohemian Brethren, and the Peasant Revolution led by Thomas Müntzer in 1525 (during the time of the Protestant Reformation). These movements had two related features: one was found in all of them, namely, living in communities in which all possessions were held in common, along with common production and distribution according to need; the other was found in some of the movements, namely, a revolutionary effort to overthrow a system they saw as no longer living up to the value of “all things in common” (Boer 2019, 1–27). For Thomas Müntzer (c. 1489-1525), the leader of the 1525

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<sup>16</sup> While Grotius and Locke laboured over the biblical text so as produce this new interpretation, by the time we come to Adam Smith the explicitly biblical and theological reference drops away, so that the myth seems to be a secular one.

Peasant Revolution in German-speaking states, “all things in common” included a society of mutual aid and of cooperation rather than conflict. More fully: “All things are to be held in common [*omnia sunt communia*] and distribution should be to each according to his need, as occasion arises” (Müntzer 1988, 437; see also Kautsky 1897, 130)

Fourth, let us consider the different formulations of this value. The original Greek of Acts 2: 44 has ἅπαντα κοινά, *apanta koina*; the Latin (Vulgate translation) has “omnia sunt communia,” which is how it was known through the European Middle Ages; English has “all things in common”; and the well-established Chinese translation is 凡物公用 *fanwu gongyong*. A potential exists for comparative analysis with a well-known core value in the Chinese cultural tradition: 天下为公 *tianxia-weigong*. This value found at least as early as the *Book of Rites*, which was compiled in the third to second centuries BCE. But how should it be translated? Literally it means “all-under-heaven is as common,” but has come to assume the sense of “the whole world as one community.” However, the semantic field so rich that many prefer to leave it untranslated. As with any comparative exercise, the work necessity includes analysis of the different histories and cultural contexts, but also what common ground may be found and indeed what mutual influence there may be.<sup>17</sup>

## 6. An Insight from Engels

Thus far, I have drawn the methodological principle from the Chinese articulation of the “second integration,” which in shorthand can

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<sup>17</sup> The task remains before us, especially as I have not been able to find any Chinese-language studies that undertake a potentially fruitful comparison.

be described as the dialectical process of drawing out the new from the old and then transforming it in light of qualitatively distinct conditions. In this final section, I suggest that we may already find an earlier form of this methodological principle in the work of Friedrich Engels, at the beginning of the Marxist tradition. The insight from Engels appears in a neglected but important work, “The Mark” (Engels 1882a; 1882d). More specifically, Engels’s contribution piece is to show how the “West” may recover the cultural value of “all things in common”: it will not be a return to a pre-capitalist past but a recovery and transformation for a post-capitalist future.

In the late 1870s and into the 1880s, Engels undertook extensive research into the history of the German tribes and then states. Some of this research was published and some remained as notes and drafts (Engels 1882e; 1990; 1882b; 1882c; 1884b; 1884a). One publication was “The Mark,” which is addressed not to workers but to German peasants. Engels identifies a long-held value embodied in the “Mark.” This value was manifested concretely in the “Mark system” (*Markverfassung*), which concerned common holdings and collective ownership of fields, animals, forests, and natural resources, as well as the “Mark association” (*Markgenossenschaft*) and “Mark assembly” (*Markversammlung*).

In more detail, Engels reconstructs the history of how German peasants both lost much of their common and collective sovereignty over their land and yet how the sense of common ownership had persisted until Engels’s own day. These cultural assumptions run very deeply in German consciousness, and Engels takes on the task of reconstructing them. He establishes two historical realities: the grouping

of people according to kinship and common property in the soil (*Gemeineigentum am Boden*). While the former determined settlement patterns, the latter shaped the forces and relations of production. For peasant agriculture, common property in soil was manifested in field-shares: land was owned in common, so arable fields were allocated regularly (usually annually) based on soil quality and the ability of households to cultivate the soil. Engels's source for much of this material was a vast collection in written form of earlier customary practice and oral law (Grimm et al., 1840). Much research on this practice has taken place since Engels's time and we now know that this common ancient practice – found in many parts of the world and with some variations due to regional conditions – was socially determined, focused on labour rather than land, on the optimal use of resources, risk management for survival, field shares with property held in common, village communities, and focused on reallocating labour and produce rather than extraction for profit.<sup>18</sup>

Engels is keen to stress the fact that the Germans have sought the continuance of the “mark system” (*Markverfassung*). In other words, the German peasants fought hard and refused to give up all their rights over common lands. As for the social organisation of the Mark, Engels writes that there was an “equal share in the legislation, administration, and jurisdiction within the mark.” At regular times, all would meet in the open to discuss affairs of the Mark and where needed “sit in judgement upon breaches of regulations and disputes concerning the mark.” This tradition goes back to the “ancient German people's assembly,” which

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<sup>18</sup> Among many possible citations from many parts of the world, the following relate to Europe (Blum 1978, Roberts 1996, 15-37, Ault, 2006).

was “nothing other than a great assembly of the mark [*Markversammlung*]” (Engels 1882a, 636; 1882d, 447). Laws were made, but only where needed, officials were chosen and their conduct assessed, and in relation to judgement the role of the president of the assembly was to formulate questions to which answers were given by the aggregate of the members present.

This description is more than “village democracy” and may be seen as a form of “baseline communist democracy” (Boer 2021a, 106), with its elected representatives and the methods of dealing with the many issues concerning administration and jurisdiction. Although Engels acknowledges how this approach has been challenged through many centuries from the Roman conquests, through feudalism, to the emergence of capitalism, he stresses that the “mark organisation” has “struck such deep roots into the whole life of the Germans, that we find its trace at every step and turn in the historical development of our people” (Engels 1882a, 636; 1882d, 448).

Now we come to the key dialectical principle. How would the peasants be able to recover and transform the ancient practices of the “Mark”?

But how? – By means of a rebirth [*Wiedergeburt*] of the mark, not in its old, outdated [*überlebten*] form, but in a rejuvenated [*verjüngten*] form: by a renewal [*Erneuerung*] of common landownership [*Bodengemeinschaft*] under which the latter would not only provide the small-peasant community with all the prerogatives of big farming and the use of agricultural machinery, but will also give them means to organise, along with agriculture, major industries utilising steam and water power, and to

organise them without capitalists by the community itself (Engels 1891, 330; 1882d, 456).

From this quotation we can see that Engels does not seek to turn back the clock to a mythical “paradise” or “golden age.” Instead, he proposes a full dialectical transformation of the Mark in light of socialism. This would include the basic element of common land ownership, along with the latest technological means for big farming and higher yields. I would add the *Aufhebung* of ancient communal assumptions, in which the land, administration, and governance stand in the midst of society (see further Boer 2021a, 91–108). We may ask why Engels does not use the philosophical terminology of *Aufhebung* in this conclusion, preferring the terminology of rebirth (*Wiedergeburt*) and rejuvenation (*Verjüngung*). He was writing to the wide and popular audience of peasants, to whom he was appealing and saying that the communist project is very much theirs.

By now it should be clear that Engels’s approach in this 1882 essay, “The Mark,” foreshadows the methodological principle embodied in the “second integration.” Thereby, he offers an insight into the potential for the old value of “all things in common” to be recovered and transformed for a qualitatively different society.

## 7. Conclusion

The concluding comments will be brief. I have sought to deploy a methodological principle from the Chinese “second integration,” which has been expressed in various ways: bringing out the new through the old, making dialectical choices as to what to accept and reject, and taking up the essence and discarding the dross. Towards the end of the

argument, I proposed that we may find a precursor to this methodological principle in the work of Friedrich Engels, which indicates its presence throughout the Marxist tradition (albeit intermittently). Further, I have made some initial moves to address cultural problems in a West that is facing serious trouble. More specifically, I tackled three problematic features of Western culture: the “zero-sum game”; the “chosen people”; and “possessive individualism.” In searching for new resources through the old, I proposed that three alternative values run deep in the Western cultural tradition, “love others as yourself,” the “restoration of all things,” and “all things in common” (expressions that also have well-established four-character translations in Chinese).

A few final observations. To begin with, a reader may perhaps reply that the problems identified are part of “human nature,” assuming this is somehow a singular universal. As with other concepts such as “universal values,” the nature in question is very much a Western concept of human nature. Further, this study has addressed cultural problems and values, in light of cultural traditions. Of course, cultural matters will by no means solve problems on their own, for they are part and parcel of social formations and also require substantial shifts in the economic base. Further still, what I have proposed here is a small beginning to an immense task, and I am under no delusions that it will require a huge effort and many contributions to find a new way forward. In other words, it will take the West a long time indeed to assess soberly and rationally its internal problems, stop blaming others, and find a very different way of engaging with the rest of the world – a world that is already undergoing qualitative change. Finally, I have said



relatively little about Marxism, except to note that the “two integrations,” and especially the “second integration” that has been my concern, speak of the basic principles of Marxism, and that the contribution from Engels is also part of this framework. Perhaps all that needs to be mentioned here is that the methodology ultimately comes from dialectical materialism and its development in China as contradiction analysis (矛盾分析法 *maodun fenxifa*).

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