



Robert Elliott Allinson: Influences of Mao Zedong—notations, reflections and insights

New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020; 232 pages

Jana S. Rošker¹

Received: 28 November 2019 / Revised: 15 December 2019 / Accepted: 8 January 2020 /

Published online: 14 February 2020

© Academy for International Communication of Chinese Culture 2020

As Irene Eber writes in her foreword to this book, “This is a ground-breaking work”. She is right, for it is indeed a work of utmost importance—and for many different reasons. First of all, it is a work that explores and introduces a realm that has—particularly in the Western world—hitherto not been researched, although it certainly deserves to be thoroughly and meticulously investigated. Secondly, in explaining Mao Zedong’s philosophical thought, it brings forward many innovative ideas, which allow us to see and to understand certain aspects of the Chinese ideational tradition and its fusion with the Western philosophy in a different, more sensible and fruitful manner. In addition, the book is essential because it deals with a highly topical issue, one that can certainly help us improve our understanding of contemporary China, its ideologies, its intercultural relations, and its vital connections to its rich intellectual tradition.

The author of this highly interesting work, Professor Robert Elliott Allinson, is an internationally well-known comparative philosopher, working for many years on the similarities and contrasts of Chinese and Western ideas, and exploring the manifold possibilities for their fruitful amalgamation. For several decades, both his research and pedagogic work have been tightly linked to the Chinese University in Hong Kong. During this period, he gradually and continuously published the main results of his investigations in numerous influential articles, book chapters and monographs.

In this book, he aims to eliminate some of the prevailing prejudices that are still pervasive in the common Western perception of Mao Zedong’s work. Contrary to most interpretations, the author argues that Mao’s work was not only “purely” political, but rather rooted in different complex philosophical theories (p. xv), including both Western and traditional Chinese ideational discourses. Although the line between Mao’s philosophical and political thought is often difficult to draw (p. 3),

✉ Jana S. Rošker
Jana.Rosker@ff.uni-lj.si

¹ University of Ljubljana, Ljubljana, Slovenia

Allinson assumes this task with a rather confident attitude. Hence, he successfully explains the differentiation between Mao's political thought on the one side, and his philosophical theories on the other. He clarifies most of these basic issues in the first chapter, which equips the readers with a good factual background and a formal framework, enabling them thereby to comprehend and appropriately classify the meaningful nuances permeating the multifarious contents of his theories.

The work is ordered into eight lengthy chapters, each of which is additionally divided into several subchapters. Its contents are organized in a twofold structure: on the one hand, the work follows a chronological order that opens—after depicting Mao's general image, and critically questioning the usually unchallenged interpretations of his personality and work—with an informative account of his early thought. It then follows the process of his gradual intellectual maturation, and concludes with an illustration of his late philosophical contributions. In this general framework, one can detect another substructure, for at the same time, and in a parallel stream of thought, the book introduces both Mao's ideas that were based upon the Chinese philosophical tradition, and those that were instead based upon his studies of ancient, premodern and modern Western thought. These expositions are even more important, for “there have been studies of Mao's Marxism, but very little, in comparison, of Mao's early acquaintance with both Western philosophy and classical Chinese philosophy, and of the dedication he brought to his philosophical studies” (p. 6).

With such a structural design, the author's clear analyses show how Mao Zedong gradually succeeded to create an interesting (albeit sometimes not completely coherent) synthesis of his own, (i.e., Chinese), intellectual tradition on the one hand, and Western philosophical ideas on the other.

Making good use of most of the relevant primary sources, as well as of modern Chinese and Western secondary material, Professor Allinson clearly demonstrates why and how it is important to consider the influences of both intellectual traditions in order to improve our common understanding of Mao Zedong's thought. Although in Mao's work, the Chinese philosophical tradition always seems to be somewhat relegated to the rear, this book establishes the manifold reasons for its actual relevance. Through his analysis of Mao's work, Professor Allinson shows why and how Confucianism, Daoism and Hegelianism are “all valuable elements in understanding China's social and economic development” (p. xvi). Systematically, the book then illuminates the fact that Mao's understanding of the entire (not merely Hegelian and Marxist) Western philosophical discourse has also mainly been determined by viewpoints and paradigms deriving from the referential framework of the Chinese philosophical tradition. On the other side, Mao's “analytical interpretation of Confucius shows the analytic and synthetic skills he is developing from his exposure to Western philosophy” (p. 41). This specific kind of different, multilayered philosophical syntheses becomes clearly visible from the analysis of Mao's early, i.e. pre-propagandist and even pre-Marxist writing.

As already noted, this book is also immensely helpful for the understanding of contemporary China; in this regard, Mao's interpretations of Confucianism can to a certain extent fit nicely into the current ideologies of the so-called Confucian revival. An analysis of such connections and relations points to the continuous

relevance of the Chinese philosophical tradition, and reveals a great deal about manifold differences and commonalities between Mao's Communist China and contemporary Chinese society, existing on the difficult and complex edge between capitalism and "socialism with Chinese characteristics".

Towards the end of the book, however, the reader learns that the traditional Chinese influences on Mao's political philosophy cannot be reduced to Confucianism, Daoism and other pre-Qin ideational discourses. Chapters 5 and 6, respectively, expose the deep influences of *Yijing*, the ancient *Book of Changes*, on Mao's thought, and also upon his understanding of the Hegelian and Marxist dialectics.

The book concludes by challenging the common misinterpretations of Mao Zedong, who is commonly seen as simply a problematic and autocratic political leader without any relevant contributions to genuine political theory or even less to philosophy. In the last chapter of his book, Professor Allinson meticulously demonstrates Mao's important impact, clearly displaying its continuous and lasting significance not only for Neo-Marxist, but also for general philosophical developments. In this context, Allinson exposes several valuable contributions of Mao's thought to general philosophical developments. Here, we could mention Mao's careful distinction between formal logic and dialectics (p. 124), the transformation of the principal and non-principal aspects of contradiction (p. 141), his inclusion of the yin-yang complementarity into the study of Marxism (p. 171), the primacy of the will, the continuous struggle without resolution (p. 176) and many others.

The book discusses Mao Zedong's philosophy in a way that purposely does not limit the debate to its direct, often superficial interpretations and its factual political and propagandistic implications, but rather connects it to its rich ideational background, exposing thereby both Mao's own philosophical innovativeness, and new approaches enabling the readers to gain an improved understanding of modern China. In this way, the book certainly helps to fill important academic gaps in Sinology, recent Chinese history and comparative philosophy.

Professor Allinson's conscientious investigations enable us to experience new horizons in the study of China. These new skylines are stimulated by his unique combination and integration of various elements of Mao Zedong's thought. Since these elements were derived from different sources, i.e. from European, Chinese, classical, traditional and modern philosophies, Allinson's vibrant, but coherent synthesis enables his readers to gain a deeper understanding of Mao Zedong's thought, creating hereby a new image of his personality (see for instance page 25). In this context, the author also proposes a need for a radical re-interpretation of Mao's policies and decisions. Highlighting the fact that Mao's moral philosophy was grounded upon voluntarism and even Egoism (in the sense of the highest valuation of individual needs and abilities), Allinson argues for a new understanding of his intellectual impact. "Instead of putting forth the argument that Mao's later excesses, in both his rise to power and when he becomes established in power, are proof that he was not a philosopher, one could put forward the argument that the problem was precisely that Mao was a philosopher, but that Mao's philosophy was not well founded" (p. 79).

Overall, I think Robert Elliott Allinson achieves his goals in this book by clearly demonstrating a thoughtfully elaborated case of a truly intercultural, and, at the same time, truly intersubjective philosophy with widely influential connotations. This volume will be of great value to anyone interested in Chinese or cross-cultural philosophy, political theory and recent history. Allinson's innovative re-interpretations of Mao Zedong's thought can—inter alia—inspire us to look for different, alternative solutions to several challenging problems of contemporary global philosophy. As such, this book certainly deserves our attention.