

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Bodies and environmental matters in Maoism and Gandhism

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Abstract

When the global material reality has already been reshaped and determined by western modernity, Gandhism and Maoism stand for attempts to discover a material world other than the existing one. I examine the ways in which the theory and practice of the body in Mao and Gandhi resonates with new materialisms' views of the body and matter as dynamic multitude and anti-dualistic open system. Gandhi and Mao share the concerns of new materialism in terms of seeing human bodies, environments, (in)organic matters and systems as configurations of multiple influences and dependencies. To put Maoism and Gandhism in the perspective of today's new materialism, the entanglement of human, nature and matter in their ideas also functions as a kind of agency in connection to other socio-political forces (instead of deploying ethics, as current new materialist ontologies have done) to enact changes. The ways in which the two formidable Asian thinkers grasp materials sound more like an abstraction, revealing that materialisms – either old or new – may be something other than what they define themselves as.

Key words: Body; cosmology; ecology; Gandhi; machine; Mao; materialism; matter

While comparing China and India for their transformations in modernity is common in many scholarly works, it is also not uncommon to contrast Mao with Gandhi in terms of their philosophies, political thoughts and strategies of revolutionary movements in order to learn how they may help search for some alternative mode of living in the modern era. The Mao–Gandhi comparison reveals how the two political giants remain as powerful legacies to contend and negotiate with in their places of birth today. Indian critics who are sympathetic with Maoism are far more enthusiastic than their Chinese counterparts in juxtaposing Mao and Gandhi to draw out meanings in different contexts.¹ Maoist and Gandhian visions of a different future serve well as a poignant symbol of something unfulfilled or unrealized that haunts the present age. When the global material reality has already been reshaped and determined by western modernity, Gandhism and Maoism stand for attempts to discover a material world other than the existing one, in the process generating a corporeal subjectivity of their own. In this article, I examine the ways in which the theory and practice of the body in Mao and Gandhi resonates with new materialisms' views of the body as dynamic multitude and anti-dualistic open system, as well as how Maoist and Gandhian perspectives deal with material-ity (matters plus their attributes and properties) in their responses to the challenges of modern European powers and technologies. Gandhi and Mao, to different degrees, share the concerns of new materialism in terms of seeing human bodies, environments, (in)organic matters and systems as configurations of multiple influences

¹See, for instance, the book-length studies Bandyopadhyaya 1973; Das 2004 and Thurber 2021. Other shorter comparisons are numerous, such as Vaitheswaran 1976; Singh 1979; Zachariah and Hoffman 1985 and Wheeler 2014.

and dependencies. Hence, I also analyse the extent to which their ideas, oscillating between the epistemic mind and the ontological world, can contribute to, reflect on and take action towards the climate change crisis in our current time.

Human bodies and natural entities appropriated and mobilized by Mao and Gandhi for their political movements are grasped as matters in my discussion. While it is no secret that Maoist and Gandhian ideas have been under the influences of modern Western cultures (although they received them through their own experiences and predicaments), the ways they remake materials, including human bodies and natural environment *per se*, for the political agenda of their non-capitalist emancipation are also steered towards overcoming the division and alienation caused by the capitalist logic of reification,² which in their views is incarnated not only by the Western mode of modernization, but also by the formation of state and its institutionalization. In many ways, Mao's and Gandhi's treatments of the human body and the environment could be quite instrumental, reducing supposedly organic and natural qualities and abilities to some kinds of objects to be moulded, utilized or disposed of. The primacy of practice over theory – a relation that is more a dialectical interaction than a rigid hierarchy – in both Maoism and Gandhism enables the breaking of the subject–object dichotomy established from the Enlightenment tradition and facilitates the liquidization of their relationship. At the same time, the thingification of human being and nature complicates the notion of human agency; both concepts are heavily relied upon. Ironically, Mao and Gandhi may have helped the population of the two largest peasant countries in the world to transform themselves into their own reified forms of objectivity ready for the enormous economic and social changes brought by the capitalist mechanism in the twenty-first century. But to put Maoism and Gandhism in the perspective of today's new materialism, the entanglement of human, nature and matter in their ideas also functions as a kind of agency in connection to other socio-political forces (instead of deploying ethics, as current new materialist ontologies have done) to enact changes. The ways in which the two formidable Asian thinkers grasp materials sound more like an abstraction, revealing that materialisms – either old or new – may be something other than what they define themselves as.

In fact, Marxism itself, according to Étienne Balibar's provocative intervention, is a “strange materialism without matter,”³ and not only because it is a critique of capitalism as a system of domination by abstraction (social relations and the materiality of things substituted by exchange value and commodity fetishism). Marx's dialectical materialism that “has nothing to do with a reference to *matter*”⁴ is a materialism of the immaterial or the invisible,⁵ being predicated on the rejection of traditional materialisms, including mechanism, determinism, monism, reductionism and scientism. These “old” materialisms are only disguised idealism in the sense that they only impose or project a different order – matter in place of spirit, consciousness or reason – onto nature or the world. But even if Marx attempted to evacuate the idealist foundations (representation and subjectivity) from materialism, his theory of the proletariat as the revolutionary force that brings change to itself and the world only breathes new life to idealism by also representing the proletariat to itself as a subject. If the Marxist endeavour to oppose materialism against idealism ends up installing the materialism–idealism dilemma at the very heart of the theory of the proletariat and its privileged historical role,⁶ we should not be surprised to see the intertwining of voluntarism⁷ and materialism in the thoughts of Mao and Gandhi.

²The concept of reification begins with Karl Marx to designate how man-produced things have become independent of humans and govern their life, and to criticize the transformation of human beings into thing-like beings that no longer behave in a human way but are governed by the laws of the thing-world. The notion was developed by Georg Lukács in his *History and Class Consciousness* of 1923 to explicate why the proletariats fail to resist capitalism successfully.

³Balibar 1995, p. 23.

⁴Balibar 1995, p. 23. *Italic in the original.*

⁵Toscano 2014.

⁶Balibar 1995, p. 27.

⁷Although voluntarism carries special meaning and tradition in western philosophy, it is the term often used to describe how Mao and Maoists emphasize the decisive role of willpower or consciousness in transforming historical and social reality.

The emphasis on spirituality or spiritualism, a loose term grasped as something in opposition to Western materialism in the modern context, in both traditional Chinese and Indian civilizations with which Mao and Gandhi respectively are familiar, is already a cliché. By no means can we easily attribute the willpower dimension in their thoughts to the origins of such traditions.⁸ Traditional Chinese culture that epistemologically categorizes the world made up of differentiated but interrelated entities is attributed as “analogist,” whereas modern, Western societies with scientific perspectives are named “naturalist.”⁹ While such framework of ontological regimes could be charged of essentialism, the specific historical periods both Mao and Gandhi lived through may allow humans to harbour two or more conflicting schemas at once.¹⁰ It is well noted that Mao and Gandhi exhibited an exceptionally receptive attitude to the new foreign knowledge of their times, although both of them could also be very nationalistic and even anti-Western. From the perspective of spirit or willpower, militant Maoism and pacifist Gandhism are not essentially opposing as they appear to be. Indeed, both strongly advocate harsh and ascetic corporeal practices to realize their abstract principles. In a comparative, if not similar, manner, they adopt bricolage, toolkit experimental approaches to handle the obstacles or problems their political movements confront, while being good at mass mobilization as well as sharing quasi-religious faith and praxis. Although things looked at alike could mean very different things in different milieux, Maoism and Gandhism are of a warrior nature (indeed, the non-violent *satyagrahis*, not unlike the belligerent Maoists, must be trained like soldiers to fulfil their goals).¹¹ Their belief in and commitment to the key functions of manual labour and asceticism may coincide with today’s bio-political governmentality of the human body,¹² pervading an alarming sense of dehumanization. In spite of their common conviction in the subjective will or man’s spirit over the objective material limitations, both thoughts concur that human agency is not absolutely sovereign and entirely free from the determinations of other matters around it in the universe to carry out a daunting socio-political mission. To an extent, they are practising a kind of relational ontology in which individual entity or subject has no essence of its own (in this sense, the willpower is also socially constructed),¹³ whereas all things are composed through their interactions with one another. The resurgent interest in materialism may provide a chance for us to reread the two Asian thoughts in the light of such matters.

Living in a historical era when the notion of Eastern spiritualism was conjured as an alternative to Western military might and materialism resulting from the scientific rationality, Gandhi and Mao did not necessarily reiterate the Cartesian duality, although they could not be exempted from the paths taken by many other Asian nationalists who, with their evident hostility towards the West, have been enthusiastically learning from Western modernity and imitating the Western model of nation-

⁸The existing studies on Gandhi have widely recognized how his ideals were influenced by traditional religions like Buddhism, Jainism, Hinduism, Christianity, Zoroastrianism and Islam (Chakrabarty and Majumdar 2010; Chatterjee 1983; Parekh 1989; Richards 1991), while admitting how Gandhi’s philosophy absorbed and connected with many modern ideas (Jahanbegloo 2018; Mohan and Divja 2019). The analysis of Mao’s philosophical trajectory also observes both Chinese and Western philosophical traditions nourished Mao, although it’s agreed that Mao’s understanding of Western philosophical ideas, including his Sinicization of Marxism, occurred by means of his Chinese philosophical assumptions and classical heritage, especially his special interpretations of Confucius and Mencius (Allinson 2020).

⁹Descola 2013. In Descola’s anthropology of ontology, four basic ontological regimes are found in the world: animism, totemism, analogism and naturalism that designate different understandings of identities and differences between humans and other beings and things in terms of their physical makeup and subjective capacities. In short, those who hunt and gather are mostly animists and totemists; those who farm and herd animals are analogists, and those living in industrial societies dominated by scientific thinking are naturalists.

¹⁰The cosmology of *Yijing* (*Book of Changes*) assumes that resemblances between things and phenomena are based on shared intrinsic characteristics rather than analogies. Such systematic Chinese philosophical thought that Mao was familiar with is homologic rather than analogic. See Matthews 2017.

¹¹Misra 2014.

¹²Michel Foucault first brought up the term “biopolitics” in his 1976 book, *La volonté de savoir* (which has been translated in English as *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1*) to denote a politics that conceives life processes as the object of governing, regulating and steering in order to fulfil political purposes.

¹³Perhaps the spirituality promoted by the Asianists in the early twentieth century could be understood as a form of resistance against the imposition of the “world history” driven by the Hegelian absolute spirit.

state construction. Similar to all people under the spell of the European Enlightenment, Gandhi and Mao, far from being anti-scientific, almost accepted the sciences at full value, even though they employed sciences with more resilience and flexibility because of their very different circumstances. They strongly believed that their ideas of bodies and the implementations of these beliefs in real life were scientifically based, albeit their scientific laboratory (either experimenting on oneself or one's nation) was a product of their own making with reference to debatable hypotheses from Europe and elsewhere. Being influenced by the intellectual legacies of the European Enlightenment, such as the values and concepts of reason, scientific objectivity, emancipation and modernity, Gandhism and Maoism also knowingly or unknowingly deviate and go beyond them in their corporeal practices, probably because the human bodies in their theories are made to have contact with the world of other matters in nature, which always exceed the pattern and delineation of cultural and ideological meanings. Underlying the two thoughts is their strong urge to reappropriate western sciences to construct new epistemic frameworks for their own social realities. One typical example is the young Mao publishing his essay on physical education in *New Youth* magazine to advocate a somatic nationalist response to the challenges of western imperialism.¹⁴

Views on modern machinery and human-tool assemblage

In 1938, in order to convince other party members about the necessity of armed struggle in Chinese revolution, Mao warned his communist comrades that “political power grows out of the barrel of a gun.” He further elaborated that

those ... which have guns have power, those which have more guns have more power ... Our principle is that the Party commands the gun, and the gun must never be allowed to command the Party. Yet, having guns, we can create Party organization ... We can also create cadres, create schools, create culture, create mass movements. Everything in Yanan has been created by having guns. All things grow out of the barrel of a gun ... [I]t is only by the power of the gun that the working class and the laboring masses can defeat the armed bourgeoisie and landlords ... only with guns can the whole world be transformed. We are the advocates of the abolition of war, we do not want war; but war can only be abolished through war, and in order to get rid of the gun it is necessary to take up the gun.¹⁵

Other than foregrounding the importance of quantity (more guns, more power) and absolute control (the party's total command), for Mao the gun is a tool but concomitantly more than a tool, playing both destructive and creative roles in revolution. While it has been widely held that Europeans enjoyed technological advantages – their guns and ammunition in particular, which supported the construction of their worldwide empires – Mao did not see arms only as a sheer instrument to resist the oppressive power but also as a kind of embodiment of the party organization and a game-changer for creating a potentially malleable future. In Maoist materialism, objects could change to become their opposite in a reality full of contradictions and a universe in constant motion. The key for Mao is how human agency under the command of the party wields such tools to bring changes in specific Chinese contexts, though his understanding of materiality does not make any major break from Soviet Marxism.¹⁶ A material item such as a gun is not only a tool in the ontological sense but also a means perceived by the people with specific epistemology to wield and use it for various purposes. At some point, the machine may even have its own agency. With limited resources in the revolutionary period, Mao contemplated what a body could do for revolution, for changing the world as well as its context, and for redefining humanity (though humanity is always already pliable) and its shifting relations to non-human matters.

¹⁴Mao [with penname, Ershiba huasheng] 1917.

¹⁵Mao 1938 / 1968, pp. 274–75.

¹⁶For the genealogy on how Mao learned from the Soviet Marxist philosophy in the 1930s, see Knight 2005.

Mao's perception of the material in relation to the human body had further developed after the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC). Modelled on the Soviet Russian cult of the machine, Mao's China from the 1950s envisioned social collective bodies as integral parts of modernizing machinery. As the birth of "new man" was imagined in the new society under the Chinese communist regime, humanity has been reconstituted and redefined by the Maoist discourse to subvert the nature-culture dichotomy and to incorporate machines instrumentalized for revolutions and nation-building. Again, the Leninist party must have full control over the objectification of human bodies into productive apparatuses. Such instrumentalization of human and non-human alike could carry constitutive powers. The techno-scientific practices and their profoundly productive effects are deeply implicated in what constitutes human bodies. In contrast with the bourgeois capitalist mechanism in which humans are alienated by the machine, socialist regime promotes human-machine organic integration. Mao's notion of "human-machine continuums"¹⁷ was more than a sheer metaphor since his dialectical views of man, nature and things, with the support of some theoretical physics, have strong conviction in blurring and smashing the boundaries between organic and inorganic forms. In his talk on Japanese physicist Sakata Shochi, Mao asserts that "man's cognition stems from practice. We use the axe and machinery to transform the world, and our cognition, is thus deepened. Tools are extensions of human organs. The axe is an extension of our arms while the telescope is an extension of our eyes. The human body and its organs can all be extended."¹⁸

Maoist peasants and workers who had been presented with their muscular bodies were actively engaging in impossible collective labour, as if in the fable of Yu Gong moving the mountain told by Mao. Although Mao sometimes appeared to be ambivalent about the omnipotence of human agency, he was generally aware that humans are constrained by the materialist limits of existence. But to deal with the issue of determinism, he held a steadfast conviction that there is an imperative to change in all matters and things are always in the state of becoming something other than themselves. Mao saw disequilibrium as the norm: "the law of imbalance is a universal precept of development... Sudden change is the most basic law in the universe. Life is a sudden change. Death is also a sudden change."¹⁹ In another occasion, Mao added: "since everything in the world is itself a contradiction, a unity of opposites, its movement and development is wave-like... Such is the undulatory nature of the movement of opposites in all things."²⁰ By rejecting the simple law of identity, the Maoist commitment emphasizes that all matter, including humans, is not just itself but also, by going through struggles and transformations, potentially other things as well. The dynamic and dialectical formulation of material opens up the possibilities of human-machine assemblage for a revolutionary cause. The mobilized labourers transformed their bodies into machines and performed machine-like productive actions, constituting multiple assemblages and collective subjectivities as cogs and wheels in the revolutionary machinery. His basic principle is that "matter can be transformed into mind and mind can be transformed into matter."²¹ While Mao rejects the ontological dualism between mind and matter (because he sees consciousness or spirit as a form of matter in movement), human beings' engagement with machinery does not just change the reality (through the use of machines) but also changes them in the process, since humans are subject to internal change and bounded by struggle within and between things. In short, the machine is very much at the heart of human becoming. Instead of dehumanizing or reifying human bodies, the machines – the instrumental things or tools – with reference to the biological and cellular framework, have been animated or enlivened from their supposed inertness to living entities. The agency of machine or thing correlates with the metamorphosis of the human body by transforming the human flesh into productive tools to form a collective series or a whole for the sake of constructing a revolutionary society. Nevertheless,

¹⁷Chen 2012.

¹⁸Mao 1969, p. 565.

¹⁹Mao 1969, pp. 149, 213.

²⁰Mao 1957/1977a, p. 361.

²¹Friedman 1983, p. 74.

such human becoming-machine remains a controlled change, which is not dialectical enough to go awry from the planned objectives.

Mao's notion of human-machine assemblage probably could not be understood as the objectification or reification of human subjectivity, because the human being is never of subject status in the Maoist perception while the object is not exactly an inert and passive object, but always in the process of becoming something else via a contradiction-driven self-transformation. Such legacy of equalizing human and non-human matters prevails in post-Mao China, and is exemplified in the manner that the regime has more trust in non-human machines than its human citizens. Reification thus becomes the actual existence of both objects and subjects in a society governed by a combination of brutal commodification and top-down autocratic monitoring of most aspects of everyday life. In the international race for advanced artificial intelligence, for example, China is pursuing the most aggressive strategy with a focus on developing intelligent machines that could independently make high-level strategic decisions since it is believed that there are no limitations restricting the intelligence of algorithms.²² This is how the Communist Party of China utilizes thingification as a determining type of practice to stabilize and reproduce the institution, thus further rendering the dynamic dimension of human-machine assemblage and the dialectical change of materials invalid. Post-Mao China's techno-developmentalism with an extensive automation campaign these days has consolidated the state-capital symbiosis and inflated technological fetishism while marginalizing low-skilled workers, intensifying social inequality and depriving labour unions' agency in any production relationship.

In comparison, it is generally held that Gandhi opposed human body to machine.²³ He saw that the proliferation of machinery and the mass production in the machine age obstructed necessary manual labour, kept humans idle and drove them out of work. Against the speed of modern machine, the Gandhian body experiment appears to have the great endurance ability for the slow and sluggish changes of the external environment. Different from the Maoists' belief in a drastic, sudden and quick method, the Gandhian mode of thought visualizes a gradual, continuous and virtually perpetual process of social transformation towards the distant ideal community and healthy nation.

His promotion of the home-grown cotton spinning programme as a protest against and a striving for independence from the British imperialist control over the Indian textile industry rejuvenates one's dynamic relation with ordinary objects. Clothes provided by Britain, although their fashions were provoking a consumerist orgy of the senses, were actually fleshless existence in Gandhian understanding. Such material objects were stripped of their affective substance and reduced to the abstract state of commodities in the mechanism of capitalism. At the beginning, in the early 1920s as part of the civil disobedience movement, Gandhi proposed that everyone in India, regardless of their age, gender and social class, should use the traditional *charka*, the spinning wheel, to spin daily in order to produce their own cloth and wear this homespun cotton to the exclusion of foreign cloth as a symbol of independence from the domination of British industry. Rebellion against colonial control hence makes a materialist turn since spinning and its related activities are real practices rather than signs, language or discursivity. Other than representing *Swadeshi*, self-sufficiency, the spinning wheel at the same time stands for interdependence by means of an entire network of social relations involving production, distribution and consumption, because the *charka* knits a web of cotton growers, carders, weavers, distributors and users together. Being rendered as a physical agent, the spinning wheel also embodies the dignity of labour, equality and unity beyond colonial exploitation. The economy aside, Gandhi also saw it as a national self-purification since wearing homespun *khadi* was deemed a natural cure or tonic. In addition, hand-spinning as a pure, practical and productive form of exercise gave one the peace of mind needed for abiding celibacy and offered "balm for his afflicted soul and a diversion to take the thoughts of his ailment away from him."²⁴ In his "Letter to Harjivan Kotak" in 1927,

²²Pecotic 2019.

²³"There is a convention of presenting a Gandhi who opposes the machine to the body." See Mohan and Dwivedi 2019, p. 49.

²⁴*Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, vol. 27, p. 152.

Gandhi wrote, “Fix your thoughts exclusively on *khadi*. You will not find anywhere in the world as a woman like *khadi*; countless men may be wedded to her and yet she always remains a virgin. And a man who takes her alone as wife will still be an inviolate *brahmachari*.”²⁵ It is actually more than an issue of sexualizing a thing in discursive terms; rather it is the physical efficacy of the thing in producing emancipatory transformation. In such a manner, Gandhian materialism is not particularly concerned about the ontology in the sense of what the world is made of, but focuses on the corporeal nature of humanity and its relation to other matters as active, sensuous and practical human activities and interactions. If instrumental reason and exchange value use objects as a means to an end, the Gandhian spinners respect the specific qualities of the things with their sensory capacities as the modes of engagement with the world, and as constitutive features of humanity and their social practices. In this way, the history of hand-spinning, weaving and wearing the homespun cloth is also the history of human self-production and self-transformation.

Gandhi’s understanding of the spinning tool could be quite anthropocentric, and he has said little about the nature of this primitive machine – probably because his holistic notion of the human body, which in itself is a microcosm, is already connected to the macro-ecology. The goal to revive agrarian, simple and self-sufficient living and natural economy in the village community may implicitly assert decentralization and a traditional power structure in rural India, of which Gandhi would not have been unaware. But he was against the wasteful exploitation by the forces of colonial capitalism, thus rejecting complicated machinery and heavy industries. Industrialism is considered to lead to greed, violence, oppression, exploitation, concentration of wealth, imperialism and inequality, and hence is seen as detrimental to the moral development of humans.

Ecological visions, birth control, bio-governing

There is hardly any clear reference to his concern for environmental preservation in Gandhi’s own writings, even though his philosophy has been attributed to inspiring today’s environmentalist movements. His belief in the integrated whole and the interconnectedness of all things is a perfect match with contemporary ecological concepts. Gandhi’s commitment to the harmony between human and nature cannot be facilely ascribed to the impacts of Jainism and Hinduism, since he did not foreclose the significant influences by numbers of Western writers, such as John Ruskin, Paul Bureau, Anna Kingsford, Henry Salt, Havelock Ellis, Leo Tolstoy, Henry David Thoreau and many others on his notions of self-restraint, natural cure, non-violence, simple living and vegetarianism. However, the Gandhian view of the intimate relationship between nature and human society has been manipulated by Narendra Modi’s Bharatiya Janata Party in its conservative traditionalist approach to saffronize the environmental discourse, to justify existing hierarchies as a natural ecosystem, and to redefine the organic model of an Indian nation based primarily upon the ideology of the Hindu majority.²⁶

On the other hand, Mao has generally been portrayed as a cruel dictator who ruthlessly devastated the natural environment for his unscientific, single-minded blueprint of utopia building.²⁷ The state leader’s will power to ambitiously transform nature in large-scale, even well-intended ways, with catastrophic consequences, did not happen only in Mao’s China. The statecraft of administratively (re) ordering nature and society and the predominance of high modernist ideology prevail across the political spectrum from right to left. The most lethal effects occur when these two elements conjoin in an authoritarian state that is willing to fully use its coercive power to launch social engineering projects and in a pro-state society that has no capacity to resist these plans.²⁸ The Maoist endeavours to remake nature and human beings by forced means survive, if not thrive, in post-Mao China.

The control and management of the environment and natural things in Maoist discourse aims at providing the necessary living conditions for human species to create their ideal world. Such operation

²⁵ *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, vol. 40, p. 453.

²⁶ Krejčík 2019.

²⁷ Shapiro 2001.

²⁸ Scott 1998.

and disposition of natural or physical things are different from mere governmentality and claiming sovereignty. As the government of matter and all kinds of bodies is primarily targeted at regulating, steering and dominating the governed subjects in their relationships with environments and things, and sovereignty is a power exercise on a bounded territory and on the subjects inhabiting it, the Maoist politics of matter orients more towards structural transformation. Instead of only serving the technics of governing, the Maoist preoccupation with material bodies invests more in soliciting the changing powers generated from the interactions between the natural and the artificial, and between human and non-human entities, while humans are also treated and governed as things to achieve a specific mission. In his instruction on learning from each other, Mao wrote that “why must a true collectivist demand humility from himself? ... [H]e knows that work is constructed like a huge machine with its wheels, screws, steel frames, and other parts of different sizes and shapes, each being indispensable... for the perfection of the revolutionary work, he must co-ordinate his own work with that of others.”²⁹ Such collective is precisely the combination of human bodies and tools wielded together.

The transformation of nature mutually generates with the transformation of human nature in Mao’s perception. Resonating with the Chinese traditional view, Mao believed cosmology and ethics were intertwined. Therefore, humans are destined to follow the rule of the universe. The notion of eternal change and split in particle physics led Mao to further intensify the traditional concept of an impermanent universe by asserting the idea that the cosmos is governed by conflict and struggle, and hence human actions are nothing but conflict and struggle, which are not necessarily the means to achieve specific goals but rather ends in themselves.³⁰ (I will provide more contextual discussion on this issue in the later part of this article.) While Mao defined the human subject as an agent actively engaged in struggling against internal limits and external constraints, he did not share the modern bourgeois idea of nature as a passive and indolent force that resists and is indifferent to the human will.³¹ Mao’s view was that nature is not given a separated status from human society, as matter is not understood as ontologically different from mind. Contemporary mainstream environmentalists may find Mao has no sense of ecological balance, but the fact is that Maoist thinking simply dismisses the idea that there is any balance and harmony in nature. Nature may have resisted human-oriented transformation and interacted with human labour in a hostile manner, but there is also a split within nature itself, which is grasped as the malleability of natural material reality. The universe, in Mao’s understanding, ceaselessly produces contradictions from within and unremittingly develops dialectical changes between oppositions.³² Thus, as long as human subjects are ready ideologically and physically for big changes, the restless and plastic nature could also be transformed, or conquered and subjugated in human hubristic language (though not at human will). Yet there is no absolute control of nature since everything universally contains and generates internal oppositions. The only absolute is the unbalanced development and everlasting split. That explains why Mao would say that even a future communist society would not last because of its inability to avoid the motion and change within the universe, which is characterized by contradictions and the struggles generated.

Even though the *satyagraha* (literally holding fast to truth) promoted by Gandhi was very different from the violent strategies of people’s war and mass activism in Mao’s communist politics, they somehow share the idea that bodies are by no means self-contained, self-identical, fixed and closed entities, while affirming that the body in its materiality is vulnerable to be affected and transformed. In a narrower focus, Gandhi offered many reflective thoughts about the human body in relation to the environment and expressed somatic concerns in the principle of self-rule (*swaraj*) through his own self-experiments at a personal and national level in the colonial context. He closely tied a person’s

²⁹Mao 1963.

³⁰Some scholar argues that Mao’s dialectical thinking is highly influenced by the *Yijing* (*Book of Changes*) than the Hegelian and Marxist sources that he believed the end of the process of change is not the resolution of contradictions, a synthesis as it were, but its continuation and assumption of new forms. See Allinson 2020.

³¹Chong 1996, p. 169.

³²Cheng 2013, p. 197.

physique with morality, and actively corporealized politics to seek a truth other than the one well defined by the European Enlightenment. His epistemology could be understood as “truth in action,”³³ which views human knowledge as emerging from an engagement with material reality and truth as located in the circumstances of particular situations. Knowledge for him is the experimentation of truth actualized through practice. Gandhi wrote that, “I claim for [my experiments] nothing more than does a scientist, who, though he conducts his experiments with the utmost accuracy, forethought and minuteness, never claims any finality about his conclusions, but keeps an open mind regarding them.”³⁴ While challenging modern Western scientific epistemology that privileges universal truth and objective knowledge but refutes all other claims to alternative possibilities, Gandhi wanted to create and train “*satyagrahi* scientists” needed for his movements and reforms – those who have a responsibility to society and are willing to combine both heart and mind in scientific research and experiments.³⁵ In his speech given at Indian Institute of Science in 1927, Gandhi told students that “all research will be useless if it is not allied to internal research – which can link your hearts with those of the millions.”³⁶ By “internal research,” he meant not some private pursuit of mystic experience, but “a public space where the questions of science, both moral and societal, kept within the purview of laypersons.”³⁷ Rejecting the premises of modern science on mechanistic and compartmentalized notion of the body and the universe, Gandhi advocated a different cosmology with a holistic view of the body and a nonviolent relation between man and non-human nature.

If a political activity does not involve one’s body, it does not involve the human subject. One’s body is constitutive of one’s activities, no matter how spiritual or moral they may be. National politics, human identity and self-transformation are all corporeal affairs and material creatures, however social, rational, historical they are. Such a “biomoral imperative”³⁸ manifested in the aspects of diet, sex, hygiene and healing largely determines the success and realization of the militant non-violence in Gandhi’s philosophy and vision of socio-political reform. Even though Gandhi put great emphasis on willpower, he never saw the self as a disembodied soul. First and foremost, his advocacy for universal celibacy (a more developed version of *brahmacharya*)³⁹ is not only related to self-discipline and self-control of relentless desires unleashed by colonial modernity and capitalism. Indeed, it is even something more than a personal adherence to moral code and conduct, but an important element of nation-building and rejuvenation. In Gandhi’s perspective, unrestrained sexual intercourse in colonized India would only procreate “a race of cowardly, emasculated and spiritless creatures.”⁴⁰ Only radical abstention from sex – that is, self-disciplined and self-oriented birth control – can generate a nation of well-formed, strong and handsome men and women.

The corporeal disciplining of human bodies is intimately related to population regulation. Gandhi’s concern with the body aimed to manage the physical and moral existence of the subjects. His visionary politics unfolded in his preoccupation with sexuality and the related diet reform as a kind of laboratory for experimentation, not only to regulate daily life but also to imagine and implement perfect self-government. Perceiving food’s intimate relationship with self-control in the way that controlling one’s palate is identical to controlling desire, Gandhi insisted that, other than standard vegetarianism, a moderate, non-spiced, minimally cooked meal of simple, natural food was the dietary basis for *brahmacharya* and even the foundation for national health. Other than an issue of procreation for a certain race or even the entire human species, celibacy as Gandhi invested it with his own understanding also

³³Rudolph and Rudolph 2006, p. 5.

³⁴Gandhi 1928, pp. xii–xiii.

³⁵Prasad 2001.

³⁶*Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, vol. 39, p. 211.

³⁷Prasad 2001, p. 3730.

³⁸Alter 2000, pp. 4, 23.

³⁹In the Hindu religious traditions, *brahmacharya* means the virtue of celibacy when unmarried and fidelity when married, as well as the mandatory renunciation of sex and marriage. It is considered necessary for a monk’s spiritual practice. *Brahmacharya* refers to simple living, meditation and other spiritual behaviours.

⁴⁰*Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, vol. 13, p. 204.

emerges as a unique response to the horror of violence inflicted by imperialism. As the ubiquitous brutality of colonialism was unspeakable and inexpressible, only celibacy's power to embody a new moral order could stop people from becoming numb to violence and enable them to get in touch with the illicit working of the imperialist terror by providing service to the community. The personal self-discipline and struggle against desire should be tied intimately to the courageous and heroic forms of embodied protest against socio-political injustice as long as such private practice is translated into the public sphere of common social experiences. Human rationality and knowledge are indistinguishable from, and responsive to, the needs and confines of the flesh. A Gandhian physiology of self-rule involves the disciplining of body and the formation of selfhood by means of health, food, sex and drugs, which are inherently somatic, affective, political and moral in the context of the national anti-colonial struggle.

Though emphasizing the ascetic behaviours of revolutionaries, Mao held a more relaxing view on the population issue. Around 1957, Mao was still quite ambiguous about China's population policies while having been briefed by scientists, such as Ma Yinchu who was in favour of stricter family planning, about the worries of Malthusian threat. But like all political leaders with unrivalled governing power, Mao indulged himself in the supremacy of social engineering and began in 1958 to boldly declare that "under the leadership of the Communist Party, as long as there are more people, miracles will be created."⁴¹ Believing population growth could enhance national productivity and cultural rejuvenation, as well as recognizing most Chinese people did not have knowledge of and the means for contraception, Mao said at the Eighth National People's Congress of 1958 that, "We do not worry if China's population has reached 800 million, or even 1000 million. As an American journalist predicted, one hundred years later, China's population will be half of the world's total. By that time, every Chinese is a university graduate and of high education level, birth control will come naturally."⁴² With Mao's strong support, the communist government promoted pro-natalist policy from the late 1950s by remunerating families not according to productive output but to number of workers. Under such a scheme, having more children means not only more labourers for the nation but financial remuneration for the family.⁴³ From 1949 to the 1980s, when the one-child policy was introduced, China's birth rate continued to grow by more than 2 per cent every year. Although the slogan "*renduo hao banshi*" (more hands make light work) has been closely tied to Maoism, during his rule Mao did occasionally mention birth control, even if the official efforts were sporadic and inconsistent. What has often been generally neglected is that his views on birth control may have profound implications for environmentalist visions, since Mao advocated frugality and biodiversity in relation to demographic management. In two different meetings held in early 1958, Mao said respectively: "Don't be afraid, [though we have a large population] we practise frugality. On the one hand, we promote birth control; on the other, we encourage thrifty lifestyle, by making it a common practice" in the supreme state conference in January; and "no birth control should be imposed on ethnic minorities, people in Heilongjiang, Jilin, Jiangxi, Shaanxi, Gansu provinces, while other regions should have birth control" in the CPC central committee meeting held in Sichuan in March.⁴⁴

The state authority over the Chinese population to let people procreate in Mao's era or to let them die in the reform period with the enforcement of abortion for the sake of realizing an ideal future for the nation may appear the same – typically a Foucauldian biopower to foster or disallow life for the regime-led interest of regulating the biological existence of the governed people. The official discourse of frugality is also deemed a disciplinary political technique within the regime to facilitate the effective governance of bodies, both human and non-human.⁴⁵ Although Gandhi might have ascribed individual responsibility to the Indian population, with reference to their own national-colonial situations,

⁴¹Howden and Zhou 2015, p. 240.

⁴²Liu 2015, pp. 7–8.

⁴³Howden and Zhou, 2015, p. 243.

⁴⁴Liu 2015, p. 4.

⁴⁵Non-human here refers to the waste, excess matter, inflation and consumerism that the Chinese official frugality discourse targeted in different historical periods. See Gao 2018.

both Gandhi and Mao were inclined to associate humanity with lowly origins. Human is not above nature, as some kind of conqueror and master, but humbly exists in the midst of other beings. Even if they have strong faith in humans' unwavering will to alter and remould objective reality, Gandhian and Maoist thought also realized that such change could not be carried out by human beings alone with their autonomy and self-enclosure, but had to be carried out with their openness to and dependence on the surroundings and on each other.

How can one transform a historical context, a situation or a world if one is a product of it? Context or world could be understood as matter and so does mind in such Asian political radicalism. There is a bearing on the human body with creative power to set matter (one's own body as well as things other than oneself) in motion, and galvanize it into something dynamic. Yet the world of things is not static or closed, but engaged in the process of becoming to constitute what it is. Mao in particular grasped the Marxist dialectical materialism as the cosmic law, under which all phenomena are interlocked and interrelated by complex dynamic forces, and reality evolves through conflicts and oppositions while nothing is stable and discrete. Comparable to the Marxists, Gandhi saw the material activities of human beings as the basis of their social existence, hence they are made responsible for their own moral transformation without the necessary intervention of any third party. Both Gandhi and Mao may concur that while human existence is a protruded formation of materiality that is flexible and vibrant, human agency is not sovereign and free from the determinations of other matters around it. In other words, humans could be autonomous and self-determining, yet they never stop being dependent upon the things on all sides of them. Such conviction undoubtedly justifies the authoritarian state intervention and control over the population in the illiberal Asian contexts.

Cosmology, epistemic-ontology

From the establishment of the PRC, Mao began his regular conversations with Chinese nuclear physicists about the nature of matter, atomic theory, Einsteinian science and other issues. The memoir of the top-ranking scientist Qian Sanjiang, who helped China develop the first atomic and hydrogen bombs, states that Mao told him:

All sorts of miracles can be performed ... An atom is a unity of opposites, the proton and the neutrons. One divides into two – this is a universal phenomenon. Protons, neutrons, as well as electrons are also divisible. Now this has not been proved by scientific experiment; yet under advanced experiment conditions, it will be proved...Do you believe this? If you don't, anyway I do.⁴⁶

The notion of “one divides into two, two does not merge into one” and the ideological debates in China's intellectual circle that followed apparently originated from Mao's understanding of atomic science. Mao was also enthused by the atom theory of the pro-Marxist Japanese scientist Sakata Shoichi to justify his idea that splitting or division is natural and progressive. In an article published in November 1957, Mao wrote:

No matter what the world is, class society in particular, there are full of contradictions ... There is no one single place without contradictions ... Look at an atom, there is full of unities of contradictions. The atom contains a unity of two opposites, the nucleus and the electrons. The nucleus of the atom contains a unity of opposites with the protons and the neutrons. The proton is a matter of proton and anti-protons, and the neutron is a matter of neutrons and anti-neutrons. In general, there is nothing which is not a unity of opposites ... One divides into two. This is a universal phenomenon, and precisely it is dialectics.⁴⁷

⁴⁶Friedman 1983, p. 53.

⁴⁷Mao 1957/1977b, p. 498.

By means of the process of infinite splitting, divisions or contradictions as dynamic forces, in Maoist belief new forms (human or non-human) could be generated continuously. China's strife for national strength, political recognition and international status also relied on the splitting of atoms, which manifested in its first successful atomic bomb test in 1964. Mao's strong attachment to the naturalness of infinite splits and contradictions made him more committed to the legitimacy of China's violent split with the Soviet Union and to permanent revolution as the momentum for socio-political transformation. Critics may see Mao's Einsteinian conviction only as a metaphor – an excuse to promote his political agenda. But I would prefer to see it as Mao's refusal to imagine the infinitely divisible atom as something that encroaches socio-political life from the outside. As particles will continuously be discovered to divide into anti-particles; matter remains eventful, mutable, indeterminate and capable of affecting the socio-political ordering and constituting new political subjectivities. Although Maoist thinking is inclined to voluntarism by upholding the subjective will over objective circumstances, there is no simple, unidirectional concept of agency and causality focusing only on human being. The will of the subject is by no means the driving force of changes or in the privileged position of control because the human subject is always intermeshed with the contingent material world and is engaging in some immediate relation to its own potential to vary.

Mao attempted to ground his notion of permanent revolution in the idiosyncratic version of Einsteinian physics. What such a new epistemological view offered by Einsteinian physics would promise, in Mao's understanding, was the continuous drive towards the unknown, marvellous changes never imagined before. Mao had a lifelong enthusiasm for science, dating back to his youth, such as "the nature of biology, microphysics, epistemology and cosmology, of life, matter, knowledge and the universe."⁴⁸ In Mao's interpretation of physics, life is not a stable property or a pre-given, but rather depends on the changing conditions of existence within and beyond life processes. In similar logic, matter is not a fixed substance, but something in its becoming, not a stable and passive entity but an incarnation of agency. While all natural beings (including humans) are in the state of endless flux and all motions are interconnected in Maoist cosmology, the quantitative transformation would lead to important structural changes in quality. Mao was inspired by the newly developed theory of physics to assert his ideas of permanent revolution, continuous class struggle, mass mobilization for collective subjectivity and energy, and ongoing remoulding of the individual's mind and body for socio-political transformation. He wrote: "All movement is waves. In natural science there are sound waves and electro-magnetic waves. All movement is wave-like advance. This is the law of development of motion... It is not changed by human will."⁴⁹ And he urged to release mass energy: "Now the enthusiasm of the masses is like atomic energy. Release their power. After fifteen years we'll have 40,000,000 tones of steel, 5 billion tones of coal and 40,000,000 watts of electricity."⁵⁰ For Mao, everything is a course of unending change: "Everything in the world is [a process of] change. Physics also is [a process of] change. Newtonian mechanics is also [a process of] change. The world went from not having Newtonian mechanics to having Newtonian mechanics. And afterwards from Newtonian mechanics to relativity theory. This is dialectics itself."⁵¹

Far from regarding matter as docile and stable objects, Maoists act as "good materialists" to anticipate and seek the specificity of things to make a difference, to surge forward in a new wave by pushing the old one out, and to liberate massive new energy. In this sense, Mao has shifted and even turned around the Marxist epistemology and its dialectical materialism to explain changes and leaps, while departing from Marx and Engels in insisting on the need for endless struggle as life continues in the dynamic universe – even at the expense of China's political stability, the CPC's hegemonic bureaucracy and with the vast cost of tremendous human sufferings. Sarcastically, it is precisely a de-anthropogenic schema that does not essentially work for human interest but challenges human

⁴⁸Freidman 1983, p. 52.

⁴⁹Mao 1967, p. 51.

⁵⁰Mao 1969, p. 155.

⁵¹Mao 1969, p. 565.

priority. Hence Mao's slogan *ren ding sheng tian* cannot be smoothly translated as human determination to master nature, or war against the ecology, in today's environmentalist perspective. It could be interpreted more as an endeavour to "overcome a resignation to the forces of *tian* [natural force] and inspire the Chinese people to take control of their destiny."⁵² While human beings' active engagement in deciding their own fate is part of the cosmic divide, the human action – no matter how aggressive it may be – remains integral to the primacy of internal contradictions within all materials that constitute the driving forces.

Yet Mao's quasi-religious allegiance to the boundless schism and matter's dynamism may result into the idea of originary force and stable substance. The ironic effect of Mao's faith in the physics of infinite divisions and the generative force of things in political practices was that the Cultural Revolution fanatics, in active responses to Mao's calling, brutally denounced Einstein, Sakata and Chinese nuclear physicists as anti-socialist and bourgeois authorities, verifying the truth of unending splits within all manner of things and the incessant movements of contestation. The anti-capitalist Cultural Revolution also made China more receptive to the later extensive capitalization in the post-Mao era. The actual outcomes of the political campaigns initiated by Mao might have been virtually the dialectical opposite of what he dreamed of. Another bitterly ironic reversal is that Mao's perfectly preserved dead body has been put on permanent display in a crystal coffin in a hall covering almost 3-hectares in the middle of Beijing, even though Mao was knowingly the first leader to commit himself to be cremated, a practice promoted by the new government in order to discourage the traditional grave-building that wasted precious land. Mao's mummified body becomes the thing that can no longer be transformed.

For Gandhi, the truth in his notion of *satyagraha* is located in nature and the cosmos, but deployed in the phenomenal world of the bodies. Since the body as a micro-cosmos is connected with the macrocosm, in theory one can find truth in oneself. Gandhi's ideas of self-rule in relation to the surrounding matters could be called a kind of materialism, but his type is neither dialectical nor mechanical, speculative nor vitalist, culturalist nor historical; rather, it is a more anthropological, bodily or somatic one that takes seriously human beings' animality, physical activity and corporeal composition. For Gandhi, it is the practice, not any metaphysical framework, that constitutes and defines human body and its truth. Bodies in Gandhi's mind are unfinished and open-ended while being capable of transforming themselves through a series of activities and practices. Gandhi sees the body as both individual and personal as well as collective and national, binding up with one another and with the milieu. In Gandhi's cosmology, microcosm could transform macrocosm. Any ethical or spiritual actions can have the power to transform physical events.

Not adopting the binary soul–body terminology, Gandhian thinking always already comprehends the incarnate creature of which the inside and the outwards are bound together as active, communicative, relational, self-transforming and self-transcending. Hence, the body as a whole is "all at once, a sensory self, a product of history, and a thing of nature."⁵³ His engagement and experiments with the body and its potential were thus essential to the contribution to national self-rule. Gandhi used the double meaning of the word to refer to rule thyself and national independence so as to teach Indians that they would not be ready for, and able to rule, their own nation until they had reformed themselves and their society. Thus, corporeal practices are inseparable from political objectives. Human ways of reasoning and perceiving the world are deeply embedded in their creaturely and material nature. To live a life with truth and reason, in Gandhi's view, involves lifting one's concern, other than the caring of the self, above narcissistic self-interest. Love of one's nation is not just an affection or a spiritual sentiment, but a material practice embedded in a context by changing oneself and helping those who need it, while faith is not just a self-contained mental state but a conviction arising from sharing in the practical and communal life form of the ashram. In other words, the human body is not simply constructed or inscribed with meanings, but the body as matter itself

⁵²Liebman 2019, p. 555.

⁵³Alter 2000, p. xv.

generates meanings. The chunk of materials one happens to be constitutes the fundamental principle for self-formation as well as the condition of being a person.

Their persistent impacts

Particularly in terms of their conception of corporeal matters, Asian radical political thought such as Gandhism and Maoism remains significant resources to help build an alternate onto-epistemology in a Western-dominated reality. I try to think with and after Gandhi and Mao in order to find out what possibilities their projects open up, especially in our times when picturing the end of human world in the era of the Anthropocene is easier than imagining any serious socio-political transformation brought by collective actions. Both Gandhism and Maoism have been renowned for their disregard of the historical contexts and restraining milieu, and for their whole-hearted commitment to changing their times, even though Gandhism and Maoism could barely be comprehended apart from their specific histories. Their afterlife appears to be very volatile. The reviving forces refuse to see Gandhi and Mao as dead historical figures, and their “spectres” – which means more than just bodiless apparition of ghosts – are also unwilling to remain in their own times since spectres or spirits may also have their ontological status and are built into matter itself in the form of (disembodied) energy or life. A spectre could be a transformative thing rather than a sheer abstract concept. Perhaps spectre is matter dwelling in the non-human realm which is invisible and indiscernible to the human sensory-experiential reality. Bodies of Gandhism and Maoism, not necessarily in opposition to their spectres, do not merely refer to the political party, the ideological apparatus and/or the state; the body matters that spectres of Gandhi and Mao haunt are the earth’s living beings, human and non-human, that are yet to be totally conceptualized and represented.

While dislodging the human subject from the advantaged position and asserting the interrelationality of disparate things, Gandhian and Maoist thought never demotes human responsibility and decent human agency from the role in socio-political transformation. In comparison to the academic new materialist learning, Gandhi and Mao testify their understanding of interrelated world and reality to collective or personal practices. However, they do not see individual as the basic unit of ontology either. Gandhi’s own corporeal practices and experiments, like fasting, spinning, salt-making, observing vegetarian diet and sexual abstinence, can only make sense with the nationalist project as a whole. A common thread runs through the two types of thought that grasp the diversity of things in the world as the generative processes that constitute them. They both endeavour to offer a comprehensive understanding of the material networks and ecological connection between humans and non-human things, and promote initiatives to negotiate and destabilize the boundaries between the human and the non-human worlds. Both socio-political types of thought strategically put aside humanism to reflect upon epistemology, ethics and politics in the realms of human beings and things so as to expand the power of agency to the non-human nature. Nature (human or non-human) is regarded as some dynamic entity marked by continuous inventions and reconstructions. Gandhi’s and Mao’s socio-political programmes, while at different scales and speeds, endeavour to achieve specific goals, but they do not necessarily carry any final cause or telos as usually expected.

In face of “external” imperialist intrusion and exploitation, Gandhi’s critique seems to be only a denouncement, a debunking or a consolidation of a certain political position. What should not be overlooked is that such “external” invasion is grasped in Gandhian thought eventually as an agent of transforming disruption, which could be aligned with the exploration of new possibilities. Hence, the critical energies in response to existing capitalist logic are meant to recognize the contents and qualities of potential transformation and the possibility of composing the relations otherwise. In Maoist cosmology, non-human nature is seen as having agency in social and political life, dialectically generating instability, novelty and contradictions to the established orders. But such a view of the universal history is not essentially a history of necessity. Instead, the mechanism of the universe oscillates between necessity and contingencies, depending on how all the elements come together, whose results have to be seized and turned towards different ends. The question of the overdetermining causes of

historic necessity has to be traced back to the movements and interactions of human and non-human matters. Only retrospectively can one tell the becoming-necessary of contingent encounters, events, struggles and conjunctions of all the processes. In other words, the system itself is by no means the imposition of stability but a dynamic complexity opened to transformative change immanent with a chaotic and disruptive interiority, resulting in continuous innovation and creativity.

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