

**Harro von Senger and Marcel Senn (eds.)** *Maoismus oder Sinomarxismus?* Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2016. 300 pp., including index. ISBN: 978-3-515-11028-0.

The volume *Maoismus oder Sinomarxismus?* is an unusual and rewarding read, that takes up a highly relevant yet rarely discussed topic. Compiled from papers presented at a conference on Maoism and Sinomarxism held at the University of Zürich in December 2014, 11 authors engage in sophisticated academic debates on the praxis and theory of Sinomarxism as a legal and social philosophy (*Rechts- und Gesellschaftsphilosophie*) in contemporary China. The individual contributions appear to be clean but direct transcriptions of the presentations. This novel format crafts an immersing read, almost conveying a feeling of being present at the conference. This sensation is intensified by the inclusion of transcriptions of the discussion rounds in some cases. While this format is rather puzzling at first, it works surprisingly well and adds a dynamic feel to the discussion of an otherwise cumbersome topic.

The contributors discuss political, philosophical, legal and historical perspectives on China's interpretation of Marxism as a type of sociopolitical philosophy – Sinomarxism – as well as drawing some international comparisons (Nepal and India). Daniel Leese discusses Maoism and its impact on contemporary Chinese politics, including its meaning as a term in Western reporting on China and Xi Jinping's ascent, and its meaning as a Chinese term of a more philosophical nature. Beat Wieser's chapter elaborates on aspects of so-called Chinese Pragmatism, which is at times misunderstood as opportunism, while in fact: 'the political agenda is unvaryingly the determining factor' (35). These two interventions are followed by the first discussion round, with several questions, each followed by responses from the two authors/presenters.

The second pair of chapters focus on the dialectical relationship between Sinomarxism and Confucianism (Hans van Ess), and the roots of contemporary 'Chinese totalitarianism' and the Legalism of ancient China (Heiner Roetz). Although traditional philosophy, and especially 'Confucian wisdom' has broad appeal among the population, and also has some impact on formal Party ideology, both authors agree that striving for modernity and progress outweighs the direct impact of traditional philosophy on contemporary politics and ideology. This is also reflected in the Q&A of the second discussion round.

The next cluster discusses the role of Experimentalism and models in Chinese politics (Anja Senz), and the legal and ideological founda-

tions of Sinomarxism, as well as its functionality as a 'guide to action' of the Communist Party (Harro von Senger). Both contributors touch upon the question of the existence of a formalized theory of governance in the Chinese government; both the presentations and the discussion round revolve around this controversial issue. While both argue that there is in fact a well documented and neatly thought-through body of concepts bound up to a general theory of governance to be found in the Party discourse – von Senger introduces several concepts, first and foremost the *Widerspruchslehre* (School of contradictions) – the ensuing discussion and a larger panel discussion indicate that these views are not entirely shared by the other conference participants.

The last round of chapters give an international perspective on the topic, introducing the role of Maoism in Nepal (Lukas Heckendorn Urscheler) and in India (Jens Rosenmeyer). Both presentations lay bare a strong localization of the 'original' Maoism of China, and the relevance of the structure and frictions of local society on the particular brand of Maoism that has taken shape in India and Nepal.

Finally, a short retrospection concludes the volume, stressing the importance of understanding Sinomarxism as the normative ideological foundation of contemporary Chinese politics, and the fact that we cannot ignore it given China's rise on the international stage.

All in all, the volume is very informative, and since the individual topics represent important debates taking place both in academia and the mass media, the discussion of Sinomarxism is both relevant and timely. Also, the unusual format works well with the content. There are, however, differences in the depth and detail of the various chapters: while the contributions by e.g. Daniel Leese, Hans van Ess, Heiner Roetz and Harro von Senger are well documented and thorough discussions (including footnotes and translations of original Chinese material), others, while interesting and relevant, are presented in a less academic manner. This disparity throws the volume out of balance, a factor that is also somewhat felt in the discussion rounds. While these work well in some cases as additions to the chapters/presentations, their value varies with the relevance and ingenuity of the questions asked. Thus, while some parts are highly informative, and almost academic writing in their own respect, as a whole the volume feels somewhat wanting as a singular and coherent piece of work. This is perhaps too much to ask of the format, and a transcription of a conference surely cannot be expected to be as well worked-through as a traditional conference volume with updated and further developed conference papers.

Nevertheless, the book is highly recommended to anyone capable of reading German, and should be read by those interested in the politics and political philosophy of contemporary China, and the Communist Party in particular. Sinomarxism is an underappreciated concept outside China, and the authors are right to point out its importance to the study and understanding of China today. There is no clear answer given to the question of the title – whether China's political philosophy should be seen as Maoism or Sinomarxism – but, implicitly, the latter is the theme of most of the discussions. Modern China has its own normative, philosophical and ideological underpinnings, and this important point is vividly brought forth throughout the volume. And while the format has its shortcomings, it is a refreshing way of presenting the proceedings of a conference that would be unlikely to be otherwise published for a broader audience.

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