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Chao Ren
Illinois Wesleyan University

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“Concrete Analysis of Concrete Conditions”: A Study of the Relationship between the Black Panther Party and Maoism

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between the Black Panther Party and Maoism**

Chao Ren

*“...the most essential thing in Marxism, the living soul of Marxism, is
the concrete analysis of concrete conditions.”*

— Mao Zedong, *On Contradiction*, April 1937

Late September, 1971. Huey P. Newton, co-founder and leader of the Black Panther Party, landed in the mysterious land of the East, the People's Republic of China.¹ In his brief ten-day journey to the People's Republic, which preceded the official visit of President Richard Nixon in February 1972, Huey Newton was repeatedly impressed by the significant achievements of the Chinese communist revolution. It seemed to Newton that he had found the heavenly paradise in the human world, the utopia of his mind.

“Everything I saw in China demonstrated that the People's Republic is a free and liberated territory with a socialist government...To see a classless society in operation is unforgettable.”² Thus did Huey Newton describe his experience in the People's Republic of China. He made contrasts between his experiences in capitalist territories and in the People's Republic. He compared his experiences when he went through the immigration and customs services. He described the customs of the “imperialist nations” as “dehumanizing,” while calling the customs of the People's Republic “free territory.”³ He also compared the police in the two systems, praising the Chinese police to be “serving the people” while criticizing the American police as “one huge armed group that was opposed to the will of the people.”⁴

Huey Newton's visit to the People's Republic of China in 1971 further confirmed and consolidated his acceptance of Maoist revolutionary doctrines. The trip served as his pilgrimage to the holy land of his revolutionary belief, much like Malcolm X's visit to Mecca in 1964 to complete his Hajj.⁵

Because of the strong call for Black Power and the use of violence, the Black Panther Party has been constantly compared to the White Supremist groups such as Ku Klux Klan or the White Citizens' Council as a black equivalence for these organizations.⁶ However, these comparisons and judgments of the Black Panther Party were made from the external appearance of the Party's struggles. If we trace the origins of the ideas and inspirations of the Black Panther Party, we would understand that the Black Panther Party was very different from the White Supremist groups, because the inspirations of the

¹ Huey P. Newton, *Revolutionary Suicide* (New York: Writers and Readers Publishing Inc., 1995), 323.

² *Ibid.*, 326.

³ *Ibid.*, 324.

⁴ Huey P. Newton, *Newton Reader* (New York: Seven Series Press, 2002), 51.

⁵ Malcolm X and Alex Haley, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (New York: Grove Press, 1966), 318.

⁶ Newton, *Newton Reader*, 282.

Party had a solid philosophical basis: the philosophical system of dialectical materialism.⁷ It was the combination of Marxist theories with Black Nationalism that distinguished the Black Panther Party from the other Black Power groups, and the violent racist White Supremist organizations as well.

Intellectual Origins of the Black Panther Party: Malcolm X and Maoism

The two direct intellectual origins of the Black Panther Party were the legacies of Malcolm X and Chairman Mao Zedong, both of whose ideas the Party had self-consciously embraced.⁸

In the second half of the 1960s, the Civil Rights Movement had grown into a more radical phase. Malcolm X spoke to the public, "Don't sit-in; stand up."⁹ Stokely Carmichael's call for "Black Power" in the 1966 March Against Fear in Mississippi signaled the shift to radicalism within SNCC, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. The rise of the Black Power movement began to challenge the nonviolent doctrines of Dr. Martin Luther King. Instead, the activists were now looking for new ways to acquire power and achieve "self-defense." They had witnessed that although the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act had been signed and passed by the federal government, the real subordinate condition of the black people did not change substantially. They became aware of the need to push the movement ahead, to call for the consciousness of the black people to seek power and protect their own rights. In this process of working for a coalition, two choices lay ahead of the activists: Black Nationalism based on the black identity, and proletariat internationalism based on socioeconomic conditions.

The resistance to nonviolence by Malcolm X and his constant call for black action to protect the black people themselves obviously had a strong influence upon the founders of the Black Panther Party. "Malcolm's influence was ever-present," said Huey Newton, "We believe that the Black Panther Party exists in the spirit of Malcolm."¹⁰ Bobby Seale, the other co-founder and leader of the Party, collected all of the speeches of Malcolm X and studied them carefully with his colleagues.¹¹ However, the Black Panther Party did not completely follow the doctrines of Malcolm X. Newton said, "I do not claim that the Party has done what Malcolm would have done...but Malcolm's spirit is in us."¹² Instead of adopting a separatist language or way of action, the Black Panther Party refused the tactics of the Nation of Islam and SNCC in its later years. Instead, however, the Party formed a "united front", a coalition of black liberation movement of people from all ethnic groups.¹³

⁷ Ibid., 275.

⁸ Robert O. Self, *American Babylon* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 224-25.

⁹ Malcolm X, "Don't Sit-in; Stand Up," Marxists International Archive, available from <http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/malcolm-x/index.htm/>; Internet.

¹⁰ Newton, *Newton Reader*, 51.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid., 52.

¹³ Self, *American Babylon*, 224-25.

The Party's deviation from the tactics of Malcolm X is noticeable: The influence of Malcolm X upon the Party was prevailing and evident. However, the Party rejected the idea in the core of Malcolm X's doctrines: the consciousness of the black people as a nation. The Party rejected Black Nationalism but embraced what they called "intercommunalism," and identified the most important interest as class interest, not national interest.

Why and how did this happen? The answer lies within the other source of the intellectual origin of the Party: Maoism.

Black Panther Party and Maoism: The Beginnings

The Black Panther Party was initially inspired by Maoism in several aspects. Huey Newton claimed that he was heavily influenced by the book *Negroes with Guns*, whose author, Robert F. Williams, went into exile in China in the early sixties.¹⁴ Williams was given a "royal reception" when he went to China.¹⁵ On October 1st, 1965, Williams was allowed to stand beside Chairman Mao for the National Day celebration and delivered an uncensored speech to one and a half million people, which obviously reminded him of the censored speech of John Lewis in the 1963 March on Washington.¹⁶ The warm welcome and freedom that Williams enjoyed in China certainly made a strong impact upon Newton.

The cross-influence of the black liberation movement and the Asian American struggle in California also gave rise to the recognition of Maoism. In the late 1960s, a political party of Chinese Americans emerged in San Francisco's Chinatown. The party called itself the "Red Guard Party," apparently modeling upon the youth radicalism of the Cultural Revolution in the People's Republic. The party also pushed for a "Ten Point Program," and called for the popular recognition of the Asian American identity.¹⁷ The Asian American movement was heavily influenced by the black movements, as the Asian American activists adopted the language and style of the Black Panthers.¹⁸ On the other hand, the "Red Guard" radicalism also consolidated the Black Panthers' acceptance and belief of Maoist principles. The Black Panther Party printed *Quotations from Chairman Mao* and sold it to raise funds.¹⁹ With the revenue collected from selling the "Little Red Book," the Panthers bought their first weapons from an Asian American radical.²⁰ The Party did not print the Little Red Book merely for financial reasons; they had integrated Maoist ideas into their political education programs.²¹ Even the Party's own justification of

¹⁴ Timothy B. Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 289.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 295.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 296.

¹⁷ Daryl J. Maeda, "Black Panthers, Red Guards, and Chinamen: Constructing Asian American Identity through Performing Blackness, 1969-1972," *American Quarterly* - Volume 57, Number 4, December 2005: 1079.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 1081.

¹⁹ Thomas D. Lutze, interview by author, Bloomington, IL, April 1, 2008.

²⁰ Maeda, "Black Panthers, 1087.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 1085.

violence was uniquely Maoist. Although the Party was modeled after the Deacons for Defense and Justice and accepted the arguments against non-violence of Malcolm X, what had been most frequently quoted to justify violence was a quotation from Chairman Mao: "Political power grows out of the barrel of a gun."²²

Black Panther Party, Maoism, and Anti-imperialism

The Black Panther Party's acceptance of Maoism was closely related to the anti-imperialist characteristics of Maoist thought. Prior to the founding of the Black Panther Party, the civil rights activists had recognized their own work as part of a global movement against imperialism. According to Cleveland Sellers, by the beginning of 1967 the majority of SNCC's members had already considered themselves "part of an emerging Third World coalition of revolutionaries who were anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist and antiracist."²³ Not until the rise of the later phase of the Black Power movement did the word "revolutionary" come into use in the Civil Rights Movement. The black "revolutionaries" were particularly interested in the works of the Third World revolutionaries: Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*, Che Guevara's *Guerrilla Warfare*, and Chairman Mao's writings were all closely read and studied.²⁴ In these works, the black revolutionaries discovered a shared destiny of suffering from exploitation by an imperialist class system.²⁵

On April 16th, 1968, days after the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Chairman Mao Zedong made a famous speech entitled *A New Storm Against Imperialism*. Mao's solid anti-imperialist perspective and charismatic revolutionary tone appeared to be highly fascinating to the black revolutionaries. In the speech, Mao claimed that the Afro-American struggle was "not only a struggle waged by the exploited and oppressed Black people for freedom and emancipation, it is also a new clarion call to all the exploited and oppressed people of the United States to fight against the barbarous rule of the monopoly capitalist class. It is a tremendous aid and inspiration to the struggle of the people throughout the world against U.S. imperialism and to the struggle of the Vietnamese people against U.S. imperialism."²⁶ Considering the actions of Muhammad Ali against being drafted for Vietnam, we can better understand why the ideas and revolutionary calls of Mao appeared to be so appealing to the black revolutionaries. The black revolutionaries were fighting against the

²² Newton, *Newton Reader*, 51.

Newton, *Revolutionary Suicide*, 324.

²³ Cleveland Sellers, with Robert Terrell, *The River of No Return: The Autobiography of a Black Militant and the Life and Death of SNCC* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1990), 188.

²⁴ Newton, *Newton Reader*, 50. Robert O. Self, and "The Black Panther Party and the Long Civil Rights Era," in *In Search of the Black Panther Party: New Perspectives on a Revolutionary Movement*, ed. Jama Lazerow and Yohuru Williams (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 40.

²⁵ Self, *American Babylon*, 224.

²⁶ Mao Tse-tung (Mao Zedong), "A New Storm Against Imperialism," *Peking Review*, April 19, 1968: 5-6.

established social institutions of white America, and the revolutionaries, including Chairman Mao, were fighting and condemning the imperialism of the United States. They were both targeting the same object—the U.S. capitalist, imperialist system. Sharing this same target of “revolution”, the black revolutionaries found the ideas of Chairman Mao extremely attractive to them.

Black Panther Party, Maoism, and Intercommunalism

“Intercommunalism” was a term created by the Black Panthers that recognized a contradiction between “the small circle that administers and profits from the empire of the United States and the peoples of the world who want to determine their own destinies.”²⁷ In a speech in February 1971, Huey Newton outlined the evolution of the revolutionaries from “black nationalists” to “revolutionary nationalists,” then to “internationalists,” and finally to advocates and fighters for “revolutionary intercommunalism.”²⁸ In every stage of this evolution, said Newton, the revolutionaries encountered new problems in new conditions: When the revolutionaries still considered themselves “black nationalists,” they found that the small number of people in the nation of Black Americans was a barrier for them to become a dominant force to gain power. Therefore, they turned into “revolutionary nationalists” and joined with the world-wide struggle movements for decolonization and nationhood. Later, these “revolutionary nationalists” again changed their self-definitions into “internationalists” in recognition of their own concern with the other people in the world and those people’s hope for social and economic revolutions. Eventually, the “internationalists” discovered the problem of Black American struggles: the United States was “no longer a nation,” so that the black people’s problem could not be solved in a “national” way; instead, it should be approached from units of society as “communities.”²⁹ According to Newton, a community was a “small unit with a comprehensive collection of institutions that exists to serve a small group of people,” and communities all over the world were connected together in either reactionary or revolutionary ways.³⁰

The Panthers finally landed on the theory of intercommunalism, a great breakthrough from the pure Black Nationalism in the beginning. This theoretical innovation was clearly marked by the influence of Maoist internationalism. The Panthers recognized China’s internationalist effort in generously aiding the Third World countries in Africa.³¹ This Maoist international spirit greatly inspired people like Huey Newton, who quoted Chairman Mao’s internationalist statement in front of his narration of his trip to China.³² However, the breakthrough from internationalism to intercommunalism, which looked like a

²⁷ Newton, *Newton Reader*, 187.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 184-88.

²⁹ Newton, *Newton Reader*, 184-87.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 187.

³¹ “Peking Builds Largest Tanzania Textile Mile,” *The Black Panther*, January 15th 1969,

³² “The people who have triumphed in their own revolution should help those still struggling for liberation. This is our internationalist duty. – Chairman Mao, *Little Red Book*” Newton, *Revolutionary Suicide*, 322.

deviation from Mao's thought, was also a product of Maoist influence. The answer is Mao's philosophy, which Newton called the "dialectical materialist method."³³

Black Panther Party, Maoism, and Dialectical Materialism

Major thoughts of Chairman Mao's philosophy were highly concentrated in two of his philosophical essays in 1937: *On Practice* and *On Contradiction*. In his *On Contradiction*, Mao clearly and systematically stated his thought on dialectical materialism. He analyzed the universality and particularity of contradiction, and elaborated on concepts like the principal contradiction and the principal aspect of a contradiction. The purpose of the essay was to guide the practice of the Chinese communist revolutionaries. The essence of his arguments was widely known as "concrete analysis of concrete conditions." By recognizing the universality and particularity of contradiction, one could easily apply the methodology of dialectical materialism to practical analysis, and use it to guide the actions.

Huey Newton was such a student of dialectical materialism. He called it "the whole order and process of the universe."³⁴ In his writings, Newton successfully demonstrated his mastery of the methodology of dialectical materialism. When he replied to the questions on intercommunalism, he was clearly following the teaching of "concrete analysis of concrete conditions" in analysis of certain revolutionary conditions of Black Americans and later even on environmental conservation issues as well.³⁵ Newton did not claim himself a Marxist, but he certainly was a good student of dialectical materialism. Sure enough, with the advocacy of Newton and Bobby Seale, the study of Maoist philosophy became an indispensable part of the Party.

Conclusion: Maoist Influence on Black Panther Party

The Black Panther Party had many distinctive signs of Maoist influence. The Chinese communist revolution significantly inspired Black Americans' struggle for freedom and liberation. The philosophy of dialectical materialism was at the core of the Maoist influence, and it was this philosophy that constituted the uniqueness (or rather, the "particularity") of the Black Panther Party. "Concrete analysis of concrete conditions." The Panthers were theoretically innovative: they did not stick statically to the doctrines of Malcolm X's Black Nationalism or Mao's internationalism; rather, they analyzed the conditions of their revolutionary struggles and made innovative decisions by themselves, calling for the new concept of "revolutionary intercommunalism." The Panthers rejected Black Nationalism, because they used their own mind to think, to analyze their certain condition, and to come to the conclusion that the socioeconomic interests of the oppressed class were more important than the quests of the black nation. The Maoist philosophy was a self-renewing one, and this philosophy served the Panthers well, and also made the Panthers different from other civil rights groups. The existence of a solid guiding philosophy also

³³ Newton, *Newton Reader*, 186.

³⁴ Newton, *Newton Reader*, 275.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 189-99, 304-12.

further refuted the comparisons of the Black Panther Party to either Ku Klux Klan or the White Citizens' Council, as the latter two had no concrete basis philosophically. Maoist thought, especially Maoist philosophy, had become a guiding principle of the struggles of the Black Panther Party, which empowered the Panthers to pursue freedom and liberation.