

China Perspectives

HISTORICAL EVOLUTION OF THE EASTERN MODE OF PRODUCTION

Jiaxiang Zhao

Translated by Qin Li



Historical Evolution of the Eastern Mode of Production

In the four volumes of *The Development Trajectory of Eastern Societies and the Theories and Practices of Socialism*, the author re-examines Marx and Engels' theories on the development trajectory of Eastern societies by integrating theoretical analysis of Marxist theories and a historical investigation of socialist revolution and socialist construction around the world.

This second volume focuses on Marx and Engels' historical materialism, explains the general laws of historical development, and brings this to bear within the context of Eastern societies. The author notes that Marx and Engels' historical materialism and its derivative theories on Eastern societies are compatible and interconnected. In addition, he reveals how Marx and Engels' theory of the "Asiatic mode of production" plays an important part in the development trajectory of Eastern societies, and is closely related to their theory of "five social forms."

This volume is a key reference for readers who study and are interested in Marxism, Marxist philosophy, and the history of philosophy.

Jiaxiang Zhao is Professor of Philosophy at Peking University, and has served as vice dean and director of the academic committee of the Department of Philosophy, as well as vice president and consultant of the Chinese Historical Materialism Association. His main research interests include Marxist philosophy and Marxist classic works.

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Introduction

Marx and Engels' historical materialism discusses the general laws of historical development. During their research on the subject, they paid great attention to the special trajectory of the development of the Eastern society. Their theory of Eastern society is an application of their theory on the general laws of social development. These two theories are compatible and interconnected, indicating a relationship between particularity and generality. The theory of Marx and Engels on the "Asiatic mode of production" and its role in social development is an important part of their theory on the development trajectory of Eastern society, and is closely related to their theory of "five social forms". This book explores (the evolution of) Marx and Engels' concept of "the Asiatic mode of production" and its role in historical development and in the theory of the "five social forms."



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1 Debating the “Asiatic mode of production”

History and research methods

To properly understand Marx and Engels’ concept of the “Asiatic mode of production,” we need to investigate the history and research methods within the debates on this concept.

1.1 History of the debates

In 1859, Marx summed up the general development of human history in the *Preface to A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*: “In broad outline, the Asiatic, ancient, feudal and modern bourgeois modes of production may be designated as epochs marking progress in the economic development society.”¹ Marx’s concept of the “Asiatic mode of production” has a history of over 150 years. People have always debated this concept and its role in social development. It seems to be the “Goldbach Conjecture” in the disciplines of humanities and social sciences. There were two large-scale debates around the world. The first world-wide discussion from 1925 to 1931 began in the academia of the Soviet Union, followed by Japan and China. And the discussion in China’s historical field continued into the 1940s. The discussion at the beginning of the founding of the People’s Republic of China can be seen as the continuation of the first world-wide discussion. The first world-wide discussion focused on Chinese history, and the economic and social changes in Russia, India, Iran, Afghanistan, and other countries. The second world-wide discussion from the 1960s to 1970s involved historians, economists, philosophers, and geographers from the United Kingdom, France, Hungary, the then German Democratic Republic, Japan, Italy, Australia, and other countries. This second discussion was deeper and broader than the first. In addition to the Eastern society, the discussion also encompassed pre-colonial African society, the American society before its discovery by Columbus, and the ancient Middle Eastern societies. China’s debates on this issue began after the “Cultural Revolution” and continue even today. However, controversy remains. It is no exaggeration to say that the concept of the “Asiatic mode of production” pops up in almost all philosophical, historical, and economic debates on Chinese history and its alternations in social forms.

2 Debating the “Asiatic mode of production”

Over the last 30 years of debate on the concept, some scholars in both China and beyond denied Marx and Engels’ “five social forms,” perhaps due to their misinterpretations of the “Asiatic mode of production” and its role in social history.

Some claim that the Asiatic, slave, and feudal societies are not three different economic and social forms, but three types or modes of the same social form (i.e., the pre-capitalist society after disintegration of the primitive society), coexisting simultaneously (rather than in a historical sequence) at different locations.

On the other hand, other scholars believe that after the disintegration of the primitive society, several different social forms co-existed but evolved according to different development trajectories and sequences in different countries or regions: Some Asian countries, such as China and India, entered a society of the “Asiatic mode of production”; Ancient Greece and Rome entered the slave society; and the Germanic people established the feudal society on the ruins of the Western Roman Empire. In the world as a whole, only the feudal system of Western Europe had nurtured the capitalist production relations and produced a capitalist society after the bourgeois revolution. Countries and regions outside Western Europe, especially those of the “Asiatic mode of production” as according to Marx, failed to enter capitalism. Therefore, these scholars conclude that in the world, only parts of Europe have developed in the sequence of primitive society, slave society, feudal society, and capitalist society, which is not the case in other and greater parts of the world. Consequently, these scholars claim, the theory of successive replacements of the five social forms is not universal and does not conform to historical facts.

Still, others believe that countries like China and India, in their 2,000- or 3,000-year history, from the collapse of the primitive society to their degeneration into a colony or a semi-colony after the imperialist invasions, had been a society of the “Asiatic mode of production” without going through a slave society or a feudal society.

One more group of scholars holds that only the antagonistic social formation is called the economic social form. This includes the four social forms—the Asiatic society, the slave society in Ancient Greece and Rome, the feudal society, and the capitalist society—that Marx mentioned in the *Preface to A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*. The primitive society and the future communist society are not antagonistic societies and do not belong to economic social forms. The four economic social forms, plus the two non-economic social forms, give humankind a total of six social forms.

Most people holding the above view assert that the theory of five social forms was not brought forth by Marx and Engels, but by Stalin in 1938 in *Dialectical and Historical Materialism*, and that it is one of the theoretical sources of dogmatism and should be negated and discarded. In this context, a systematic study of Marx and Engels on the “Asiatic mode of production” and its role in social history is theoretically and practically significant for: (1) Proper understanding of the theory of five social forms by Marx and Engels, (2) adhering to the viewpoint that historical development is governed by objective laws, and (3) comprehensive understanding of the evolution and replacement of social forms.