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China's Ancient Labor Party

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By “China’s Ancient Labor Party” I am referring to Mozi and his group. Although his group disappeared entirely from history at the latest during the end of the Warring State period (475-221 BC), his book, also called Mozi, although largely forgotten was able to survive through millennia. He was an outstanding thinker and what is more a militant, grounded on a well-defined program, who fought on behalf of the toilers in ancient China.

Mozi is worth remembering because he represents the highest form of political consciousness of craftsmen and other lower classes in Ancient China. Since the demise of his school, for two thousand years, although there had been lots of toilers’ rebellions, they had never been able to attain the level of Mozi and his disciples. One reason for this was that the political and cultural intolerance imposed by the highly centralized absolutist state since the Qin Dynasty made alternative political thinking, let alone those that represented the working people, nearly impossible to thrive.

Unfortunately this is a similar situation to that which today’s Chinese working people are facing. Thanks to the Great Leap Forward of industrialization, however, their material conditions today are far better than their counterparts in ancient China. Therefore, in the long run today’s working class is more equipped in their fight for emancipation. I believe that future generations of the labor movement could draw a lot of inspiration from reading and learning from Mozi’s school.

Taiwanese scholar Wang Zanyuan has said that of the pre-Qin dynasty philosophers, while almost all concentrated on social, political, ethical and other values, only Mozi was similar to Western philosophers and, in addition to the above, his knowledge also crossed into metaphysics, epistemology and moral philosophy. He was also a Western style scientist and philosopher. [\[2\]](#)

The two scholars Zheng Jiewen and Zhang Qian have said that Mozi’s writings, a short ten thousand words of ink alone, covering philosophy, logic, psychology, politics, ethics, education and natural science, should qualify as an encyclopedia. [\[3\]](#)

Ancient Chinese education lacked instruction in science and production technology. Confucius once rebutted his disciple who wanted to learn the skill of farming as degrading himself from being a part of the gentry to the status of “little people.” Mozi’s writing is so remarkable in contrast because it contains so much, including technological knowledge.

It is of course worth commemorating him on the May 1st Labor Day because he was a man of praxis and therefore also a politician, military strategist and engineer. It is also possible to say that he was the founder of an ancient labor party.

A Civilian Peacekeeping Force

Mozi lived during the late Spring and Autumn period (770-476 BC) at about the same time as Confucius or shortly afterwards, possibly between 468-376 BC. In the 294 years during the Spring and Autumn period there were 297 wars. These were often provoked by large states exterminating smaller ones. But regardless of whether they were from the large or the small states, ordinary people were the victims.

This provides the background to Mozi's "fei gong," or "against military aggression," which became his most famous doctrine. He was not a pacifist who opposed all wars, even including self-defense wars. Mozi opposed wars of aggression, but not only supported wars of self-defense but also led his disciples to help small states to defend themselves.

The most famous of Mozi's stories is stopping the King of Chu from attacking the small state of Song, which was recorded in the chapter of "Mozi - Gongshu." King Chu wanted to attack the Song state, and was glad that one of Mozi's classmates, Lu Ban, an excellent engineer in military affairs, decided to help him to make a special kind of ladder.

Upon hearing the news Mozi sent his disciples to defend the Song state while he himself immediately travelled to the Chu state to speak with King Chu. When he met with King Chu he first played a war game with his classmate and defeated him. [4]

"I know how to beat you," Lu Ban said slanderously when pausing for a while, "but I will not tell you how."

"I know how you will beat me," replied Mozi calmly, "but I will not tell you how."

"What are you two talking about?" asked King Chu, surprised.

"Lu Ban's meaning is that if he kills me then no one can stop you from attacking Song," replied Mozi turning towards the King. "However, around three hundred of my students have travelled to Song city with defence equipment and are waiting for the enemy from Chu state. Therefore killing me serves no purpose at all."

Therefore King Chu had no option but to give up his attack on the Song state. [5]

From the People, For the People

Mozi's advocacy opposing military aggression came from his higher level thought, being completely dedicated to working people's interests. Although there is no direct and inevitable relationship between class origin and thought, it does not mean that they are unrelated.

Mozi is an example of this. Although Mozi's distant ancestors were nobles, [6] after many generations his family had been reduced to the status of common people. He himself was an outstanding craftsman who according to legend built the first mechanical flying bird "€" which in ancient times, however, meant that he belonged to the humble craftsman class.

The majority of his disciples were also ordinary working people, mostly craftsmen. This is what distinguishes him from the majority of pre-Qin dynasty philosophers who had higher class origins, and why Mozi stressed the position of working people.

Throughout his book he criticised the rulers for victimizing the poor who stole a dog or a pig as evildoers, while on the other hand the rulers stealing a country made them "righteous." He further made the accusation that "the wealthy live in luxury while the poor freeze in winter as they have no clothes on."

Mozi always spoke out strongly for ordinary people and repeatedly said, "The people suffer from three evils: those who starve are denied food, those who are freezing are denied clothing, and those who labor are denied rest."

Love and Redistribution of Wealth

There are two kinds of resistance by the poor. At the end of the Qin dynasty Liu Bang, a lowest-ranking official, violently rebelled against the Qin dynasty, but he only fought against the emperor in order to be made the emperor. This is similar to the current "localist" leaders in Hong Kong.

But Mozi did not think in this way. He wanted equality and fraternity to replace society's law of the jungle. His advocacy of "universal love" and "mutual benefit" were concerned with bringing fraternity into play.

He argued that the root of social turmoil originates from the disappearance of fraternity and the rise of inequality, resulting in the occupation of high government posts by incompetent nobles who led extravagant lifestyles.

In opposition to hereditary power and wealth of the nobles he advocated Shangxian (employment of worthy people) and "Jieyong" (moderation of expenditure).

That people do not love one another is firstly reflected in the way that rulers do not care for the people and how big countries bully smaller countries. The wise do not use their wisdom to promote public happiness and instead use it to bully people.

Mozi criticized this, saying "big states attack small states, big families bully small families, the strong rob the weak, the nobles look down upon common people, those who are cunning cheat the less wise."

To stop this requires the promotion of universal love. In the chapter "Shangxian" he puts forward a kind of political logic that is contrary to the law of the jungle that is also working under capitalism:

"The strong should be forthcoming in helping others, the rich should share their wealth, those who are knowledgeable should teach others. With this new order of society those who are hungry shall have food, those who feel cold shall have clothes, and then social turmoil shall give way to social peace."

In the chapter "Jingshuo," an opponent of universal love asks the question, "you advocate universal love but you do not know how many people there are in the world, so to say that you love all the people in the world is against logic."

This question was rather drastic, as it challenged Mozi's logical premise. Mozi's witty reply turned the tables on his critic:

"Yes, I do not know the size of the world's population but that does not prevent me from loving all the people in the world. Go ahead and ask a person if I love that person, I will say I do love that person. If you are able to ask about each person in the world, I will be able to love all the people of the whole world."

Ancient China was not without revolutions, but revolutions such as those led by Chen Sheng and Wu Guang (peasant leaders who overthrew the Qin dynasty) only wanted to change the emperor after all. Mozi on the other

hand proposed bold changes to the class system, breaking the feudal era bloodline theory.

He criticized the idea of blue blood and put forward the idea of Shangxian, or qualification by merit. “The officials should not enjoy life-long high status. Similarly common people should not always stay at low social status. Those who are capable should be promoted; those who are not should be demoted.” (Shangxian, part 1)

According to the late Qing scholar Liang Qichao, there is a sentence in Mozi’s book that may be understood as arguing for a social contract between the people and the kings, and it is only this that gives legitimacy to the King. This interpretation is criticized by Wang Zanyuan, however. He thinks that the sentence should be interpreted as “the King is meant to constrain his subjects,” an explanation that is completely the opposite. [7]

There is no need to dwell on this battle of words here. In short, Mozi and his group were the only ones at that time to stand in the position of ordinary people and to have a complete vision of social transformation. They were without a doubt the political organisation that was promoting the most progressive program.

Why Call Mozi’s Group a Labor Party?

Some people say that Mozi’s advocacy is spiritual and concerns in “heavenly destiny” and that his group should therefore be regarded as religious. Zheng Jiewen and Zhang Qian disagree. They say that although Mozi respected the heavens and ghosts, he did not lead people to an unknown spiritual world and instead was concerned with reality and actively transforming society. Therefore although Mohism appears to contain religious belief it is not actually a religion. [8]

We can say that Mozi’s group was an ancient labor party due to the following reasons:

1. They were mostly laboring class in their social composition.
2. They possessed a comprehensive social transformation program, from its fundamental principles for governing (universal love and re-distribution of wealth), Shangxian (the employment of worthy people), and thrift and free will theory applied to political lobbying methods and military knowledge, etc.
3. They actively struggled for political and military power in order to implement their program, sending students to different states to become officials in order to promote Mozi’s ideas and to help small states to defend themselves and to resist against larger states.
4. Not only did each member hold a position in accordance with their own abilities but they also had organisational discipline. Disciples had to pay a “party fee” and if any disciple violated the group’s “program,” the leaders of Mozi’s group could recall them from their government positions.
5. This party was also a military organization which had strict fighting discipline. One classic book recorded that they had 180 well-trained warriors who were ready to die for the cause. Volumes 14 and 15 of the book Mozi were also about military science and knowledge. From the defence of a city and methods on how to provide military training to make all of the people become soldiers, details are provided.

It is clear that Mozi’s group had actual combat experience and were not just scholars. Mozi’s later disciple, Meng

Sheng, upon failing to defend a city inspired 183 people to face martyrdom (see details below).

Why Mozi's Ideas Did Not Spread

Mohism had a lot of influence during the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods. However, although Mozi's writings have continued to be circulated until today, after the Warring States period Mozi's group completely disappeared from China.

Among the reasons for this is first of course that the theory of representing the interest of the working people was vigorously attacked by monarchs, nobles and scholars. The upper classes at this time hated this doctrine and practice.

Mozi opposed the extravagance and waste of the upper classes, and this drew the attack of Confucius's student Xunzi who criticized Mozi's teaching as "advocacy of the lowest laboring classes."

Mencius even more viciously attacked Mozi's theory of universal love for defying the moral of loving one's father and therefore as being a theory of animals, because for Confucianism there cannot be universal love as love must necessarily be hierarchal according to status.

Another reason that Mohism did not continue to spread was that Mozi's group were loyal citizen soldiers. This can be seen from the story of Mozi's group defending the city of Yang Chengjun. Many years after Mozi died, the leader of Mozi's group was Meng Sheng. He was good friends with the feudal lord Yangchengjun and when the latter went away he asked Meng Sheng to defend the city.

Later Yangchengjun's overlord the King of Chu took away the city from him during a fierce power struggle. Meng Sheng was unable to defend the city, and was so ashamed that he told his disciples that they needed to die in martyrdom. Disciple Xu Ru advised Meng Sheng that their deaths would not bring any benefit to the ruler of Yangcheng and that it would result in the death of Mohism. Meng Sheng answered:

"If I do not die then from today onwards those seeking strict teachers will not choose Mohism anymore, those seeking friends will not choose Mohism anymore, and those seeking good ministers will also avoid choosing Mohism. I will die in order to practice the principles of Mohism so that it can continue. I will now pass on the position of leader of Mozi's group to Tian Xiangzi. So there is no need to fear that Mohism will not continue to be passed on."

When Meng Sheng died, 182 disciples also martyred themselves. Only two disciples were spared to go as messengers to find Tian Xiangxi. After listening to their account, Tian Xiangzi appealed to them to stay but the two disciples refused and returned to also die as martyrs.

Mohism did not fail because of this loss. But it is not difficult to see why the ruling classes could not tolerate a working people's military organisation such as that of Mozi's group for long. They were only able to survive in a period where there were still a lot of smaller states existing side by side with big states.

When China entered its Warring Period where eventually only seven big states remained, Mozi's group was already disappearing together with many small states. At the time of unification by the Qin dynasty Mohism was definitely destroyed forever as the emperor made very clear that even civilians bearing arms and practising military skills were

not be tolerated.

Similarly, in the following two thousand years of empire, no Mohist style egalitarian labor party and civilian “peacekeeping force” would ever be tolerated either.

[Against the Current](#)

[1] The Chinese original of this article has been posted on the Borderless Movement, Hong Kong and it was distributed on May Day. The English translation is by Bai Ruixue.

[2] Mozi, Preface, Wang Zanyuan, 1996, Dongda Book Company. Taipei.

[3] Mozi, Zheng Jiewen and Zhang Qian, 2008, Nanjing University Press.

[4] Lu Ban was worshipped by all Chinese craftsmen through millennia, and until today there is a Lu Ban temple in Hong Kong's Central, whereas Mozi did not enjoy such popularity at all.

[5] The above story can be found in the chapter of “Gongshu” in Mozi. The vernacular translation comes from Lu Xun's “non-attack” short-story. Lu Xun was a great writer of the early years of the Republic of China.

[6] Mozi's ancestors could be traced back to Bo Yi, who was a Shang dynasty noble, and who together with his brother Shu Qi starved to death in protest against the violent overthrow of Shang dynasty by the Zhou dynasty.

[7] See footnote 1. Wang also thinks that Mozi's Shangxian does not contain the idea that the people should elect their ruler but that the role is inherited as a result of ancient destiny. He thinks that Mozi argues that the heavens will decide on a suitable ruler to govern a country so there is no need of democracy.

[8] Zheng Jiewen and Zhang Qian, 80.