

# The Position of *Oppose Bookism* in Mao Zedong Thought

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**How to cite this paper:** Chu, H. G. (2025). The Position of *Oppose Bookism* in Mao Zedong Thought. *Open Journal of Philosophy*, 15, 227-235.  
<https://doi.org/10.4236/ojpp.2025.151014>

**Received:** January 22, 2025

**Accepted:** February 17, 2025

**Published:** February 20, 2025

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## Abstract

The Western model of modernization has become the new dogmatism, and we should oppose it from the actual situation of China to go our own way in the practice of the Chinese path to modernization. The dogmatism is also called bookism. It means that theory is divorced from practice. *Oppose Bookism* is a book that criticizes dogmatism by Marxist method, which was written by Mao Zedong (Mao Tse Tung, 1893-1976). This article explores the position of this book in Mao Zedong Thought from the perspective of the sinicization of Marxist philosophy. As far as I'm concerned, influenced by the academic tradition of Neo-Confucianism in Hunan, he emphasizes the dialectical unity between theory and praxis. Through his investigation of the social situation in China, he realizes that correct understanding comes from actual investigation. Therefore, this work, *Oppose Bookism*, discusses the relationship between theory and practice from the perspective of combining the universal principles of Marxism with the Chinese revolution and traditional Chinese culture, and summarizes the revolutionary experience. Later, *On Practice* and *On Contradiction* have elaborated in depth the relationship between theory and practice. Therefore, practically speaking, it marks the beginning of China's own revolutionary path, and theoretically speaking, it is the beginning of the sinicization of Marxist philosophy. This provides methodological guidance for the Chinese path to modernization in the new era.

## Keywords

Oppose Bookism, Mao Zedong, Dogmatism, Seeking Truth from Facts

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## 1. Introduction

"*Oppose Bookism*" was written by Mao Zedong in 1930 and was originally entitled *On the Work of Investigation*. It was published in 1964. Influenced by the ancient

Chinese academic tradition, he paid great attention to the unity of knowledge and practice, as well as the combination of Marxism and Chinese social reality. So, he carried out a large number of rural surveys. Based on this, in *Oppose Bookism*, he combined Marxism with Chinese revolutionary reality and traditional culture for the first time, so it marks the initial formation of the practice view of Mao Zedong, and it is the beginning of the sinicization of Marxism.

Analysts have studied the value of this book from the aspects of investigation and research, as well as the sinicization of Marxism and the ideological line. In my opinion, we should examine the theoretical position of *Oppose Bookism* from the perspective of Mao Zedong's intellectual structure, and his investigative work on the social situation in China. In addition, he always fought against dogmatism; in practice, he explored the correct revolutionary path, and in theory, he emphasized the correct methods of studying and applying Marxism. Consequently, this paper argues that *Oppose Bookism* is the starting point of Mao's criticism of dogmatism.

## 2. The Initial Formation of Practice View of Mao Zedong

Mao Zedong was influenced by the way of ancient Chinese scholarship, especially the tradition of the unity of knowledge and practice in Neo-Confucianism in Hunan (also called Xiang Learning). Therefore, he knows the importance of practice very early. In the investigation of modern Chinese society, especially the rural situation, he also realizes that research is the basis for decision-making. Based on these ideological traditions and practical experience, "*Oppose Bookism*" put forward the concept of ideological line and initially established the Marxist view of practice.

### 2.1. The Tradition of the Unity of Knowledge and Practice

As Engels (Friedrich Engels, 1820-1895) said, "in every epoch philosophy, as a definite sphere of the division of labour, presupposes a definite fund of ideas inherited from its predecessors and from which it takes its departure." (Marx & Engels, 2001: p. 62) Chinese traditional culture has played an important role in the formation of Mao Zedong's view of practice. In other words, Chinese traditional culture, especially the traditional style of study of Neo-Confucianism in Hunan with regional characteristics, shaped Mao Zedong's view of practice, and it also had an impact on Mao Zedong's Thought.

Neo-Confucianism in Hunan has an active spirit and practical statecraft, which is an academic discipline that deepens practice. For example, Hu Anguo (Song Dynasty, 1074-1138), the founder of Neo-Confucianism in Hunan, highlights that we should study facts and truth with practice. (Li, 2007) After him, Wang Fuzhi, Wei Yuan and Zeng Guofan as well as Tan Sitong inherit this academic tradition. They all emphasize that we should verify what we have learned through observation and investigation. Mao Zedong concludes it in his "*Classroom Notes*": in ancient times, scholars emphasized action. (Schram, 1992: p. 16) His teacher, Yang Changji (1871-1920), is also the representative of this school, and he believes we

should “understand the present age thoroughly”. (Schram, 1992: p. 39) In a word, this tradition is the unity of knowledge and practice, and the unity of knowing and doing. During schooling period, he realized the importance of the unity of knowledge and action. He believed that “If we want to contribute our bit to the world today, we naturally cannot do so outside this domain of ‘China’. It seems that we cannot do without on-site investigation and research on conditions in this domain.” (Schram, 1992: p. 505). He called this character “to be sincere”, which means “not to boast, not to covet undeserved reputation, not to do overly impractical things, and not to talk about ideals too lofty.” (Schram, 1992: p. 10) This means that even before accepting Marxism, Mao Zedong had already focused on the unity of knowledge and action.

Later, he transformed this academic tradition into the working method of the Chinese Communists. He argued that “without investigation, there is no right to speak”, in the work, *Oppose Bookism* (Schram, 1995: p. 419). And he stressed that the Chinese Communists should make decisions on the basis of investigation and research. He believed that this was the “ideological line” for the Communist Party of China to guide the success of the revolution. Later, the ideological line is named “seek truth from facts”. (Schram, 2005: p. 752) That means it is the first time to explain the relationship between knowledge and practice from the perspective of Marxist philosophy in *Oppose Bookism*. Therefore, analysts think that this work, *Oppose Bookism*, is an important philosophical work on the epistemology of dialectical materialism for Mao Zedong before *On Practice*. (Feng, 2005) There is no doubt that we can regard *Oppose Bookism* as the rudiment of Mao Zedong’s Philosophical Thought. (Zhao, 1994) Concretely, we can say that the work marks the initial formation of the practical view of Mao Zedong. Today, this is still the ideological line of the Communist Party of China, and the “ideological line” of seeking truth from facts is a brilliant example of “the Two Combinations”—combine the basic principles of Marxism with China’s specific realities, and combine the basic principles of Marxism with the excellent traditional Chinese culture. (Wang, 2024) Mao Zedong not only pays attention to the close connection between theory and practice in academic methods but also goes deep into the investigation of specific situations in action among all classes of Chinese society.

## 2.2. Recognizing the Importance of Practice in Investigation

In other words, if the ancient academic tradition is the theoretical basis, then the investigation is the practical basis of this work—*Oppose Bookism*.

He investigated the rural conditions in Hunan, Jiangxi provinces and so on. And he wrote many books about the investigation before *Oppose Bookism*, such as, *Analysis of the Classes in Chinese Society* (Dec., 1925), *Report on the Peasant Movement in Hunan* (Feb., 1927), *Xunwu Investigation* (May, 1930), and so on. Therefore, he argued that, “without the investigation of actual conditions they will fall into the pit of fantasy and adventurism”. (Schram, 1995: p. 203) In these writings, he used Marxist methods to examine the situation of the various classes in

Chinese society and gained a deep understanding of the situation of the peasants and the countryside in China. This is theoretically summarized in *Oppose Bookism*.

So, in this book, he explained what the investigation is and explained the purpose and the method of the investigation, and in particular, he illustrated the relationship between “book” and reality. He argued that, “when you have really investigated it thoroughly so that you understand it, you will have a way of solving that problem”, so to investigate is to solve problems. (Schram, 1995: p. 419) He also described in detail the methods of the investigation, including discussion, the universality of the participants, taking notes and so on. In particular, he stressed that “we should go among the masses and carry out real investigations, and if the tactics and line of the Party don’t penetrate deeply into the masses, the reason lies in the mischief caused by such formalism”. (Schram, 1995: p. 421, 424) This means that he put forward the mass line of thought for the first time in the history of the party. Later, he concluded that again, “this is the epistemology or methodology of Marxist-Leninist theory: in all practical work of our Party, all correct leadership must come from the masses and go to the masses”. (Schram, 2015: p. 364) Therefore, some argue that the book initially establishes the mass standpoint of believing in the masses and relying on the masses. (Wang & Gao, 2021)

The aim of the investigation is to understand the situation of the various social classes and to obtain a correct estimate of class forces to decide on the correct tactics for the struggle and to rid ourselves of the idealist spirit. (Schram, 1995: p. 422) That’s to say, he discussed the relationship between “book” and reality or the relationship between theory and practice using the Marxist method. “We need ‘books’, but we must definitely correct the bookism which departs from reality.” (Schram, 1995: p. 421) This indicates that he realized the importance of practice not only in theory but also in practice. So analysts believe that, the work *On Practice* is based on the *Oppose Bookism*, because the basic principle of the unity of theory and practice is further expounded from the height of philosophy in the former. (Xu, 2018) For instance, Mao Zedong believes, Marxism is correct. It is not because Marx is a sage, but Marx’s theory has “been proved correct in our practice, and in our struggle”. (Schram, 1995: p. 421) Later, he says in *On Practice*, “only social practice can be the criterion of truth. The standpoint of practice is the primary and basic standpoint in the dialectical materialist theory of knowledge.” (Mao, 1961: p. 297). It is precisely because of the attention to the practice of Chinese revolution that Mao Zedong opened the sinicization of Marxist philosophy.

### **3. The Starting of Sinicization of Marxist Philosophy**

The victory of the Chinese revolution requires us to apply Marxism concretely in China, because Marx’s whole way of thinking is not so much a doctrine as a method. Mao Zedong fought against dogmatism or bookism in cognition and action, not only finding the correct path of the Chinese revolution, but also beginning to clean up the wrong understanding of the ideological line; it means that he

opened the historical process of sinicization of Marxism.

### 3.1. Exploring the Correct Way of China Revolution in Revolutionary Practice

At that time, the Chinese revolution under the guidance of the Communist International was an imitation of the Russian revolution; these people didn't understand the actual situation of Chinese society. "Everything we copied from abroad was adopted rigidly, and this ended in a great defeat... The reason is that there were some comrades who did not take reality as their starting point but dogmatism. They did not combine the fundamental theory of Marxism-Leninism with the concrete practice of the Chinese revolution." (Mao, 2020: p. 365) In order to avoid the failure of revolution, China needs its own theory.

As scholars said, in the process of becoming a Marxist, Mao Zedong noticed the particularity of China's problems at the beginning and showed a strong interest in understanding China's national conditions. (Jiang & Tang, 2023) Indeed, he was very concerned about the specific situation in China. For example, in his practical work, he emphasized that only the union of workers and peasants could make the Chinese revolution win. Different from the Russian revolutionary road, he put forward the idea of "establishing independent regimes of the workers and the peasants by armed force". (Mao, 1961: p. 66) Therefore, he argued that in *Oppose Bookism*, we should pay attention to the situation of all these classes, including the industrial proletariat, the poor peasants, the farm laborers, etc. He said, "we must understand the villages, but we must also understand the cities; otherwise, we will be unable to adapt to the demands of the revolutionary struggle." (Schram, 1995: p. 423) This means that he not only adhered to the path of socialist modernization, but also emphasized the path of independent modernization: Adhering to the socialist revolutionary road, but not copying the Soviet model.

History and practice have proved that this is the revolutionary road suitable for China. Obviously, without investigation into the actual situation, the guidance of Communist International can only be idealism. "Victory in China's revolutionary struggle will depend on the Chinese comrades' understanding of Chinese conditions". (Schram, 1995: p. 423) In a word, this book *Oppose Bookism* is the first theoretical summary of the experience of the Chinese revolution; that is, revolutionary theory comes from revolutionary practice. If the "content is in accord with the objective and subjective circumstances of the struggle", the leading or guidance is correct. (Schram, 1995: p. 420) Stuart R. Schram (1924-2012), who is a famous expert on Mao Zedong study, says the main concern that Mao Zedong "put forward the slogan of adapting Marxism to Chinese conditions" is "to shape the approach of the Chinese Communist Party to fit the political and cultural circumstances of the time." (Schram, 1990: p. 84) However, in the actual revolutionary movement, due to the strong influence of the Communist International at that time and the Party still in its infancy, the views of *Oppose Bookism* were not implemented, and the revolution suffered greater failures and setbacks. But the fail-

ure experience of the revolution and Mao Zedong's investigation of rural areas in China are helpful for him to explore the correct path of China's revolution. The choice of this road means that he started the sinicization of Marxist philosophy in revolutionary practice. Meanwhile, judging from all his works about opposing dogmatism, this book is also the beginning of his theoretical criticism of dogmatism and a declaration of war on dogmatism.

### 3.2. The Beginning of Opposing Dogmatism in Theory

So to speak, it is a revolutionary practice—especially the investigation and analysis of the social situation in China that makes Mao Zedong pay more attention to the unity of knowledge and action. Meanwhile, it is also the historical starting point of the Sinicization of Marxism; because the book *Oppose Bookism* carries forward the traditional way of studying, and also emphasizes the combination of the universal principles of Marxism with the revolutionary reality of China.

The bookism is also called dogmatism, and it regards theory as a doctrine rather than method. When Mao Zedong wrote *Oppose Bookism*, China did not have the concept of dogmatism at that time, so the name of this wrong thought was bookism. On the contrary, the correct ideological line is to proceed from reality and integrate theory with practice.

After *Oppose Bookism*, he continued to fight against the erroneous tendency of dogmatism. In terms of method, he discussed how to treat Marxism correctly; and in terms of theory, he further explored the relationship between theory and practice.

For instance, “the theory of Marx, Engels, Lenin and Stalin is universally applicable. We should regard it not as a dogma, but as a guide to action.” (Mao, 1965a: p. 208) And “we can put Marxism into practice only when it is integrated with the specific characteristics of our country and acquires a definite national form.” (Mao, 1965a: p. 209) In the 1940s, he again opposed dogmatism in theory. He argued that dogmatism and empiricism alike are subjectivism in the work, *rectify the party's style of work* written in Feb. 1942. Because “it is precisely such ignorant people who take Marxism-Leninism as a religious dogma.” (Mao, 1965b: p. 43) Comparatively speaking, *Oppose Bookism* correctly treats Marxism-Leninism theory from the perspective of an ideological line, and it sets up the foundation for later works. So, some people believe that it represents Mao Zedong's initial contribution to the scientific interpretation and practice of the Marxist ideological line. (Leng, 2005: p. 142)

In addition, he also criticized dogmatism from a philosophical point of view. For example, *On Practice* and *On Contradiction* are also written in order to expose the subjectivist errors of dogmatism. He emphasized that the most essential thing and the living soul of Marxism is the concrete analysis of concrete conditions, and he criticized dogmatists for separating the relationship between theory and practice. The dogmatists “regard general truths as emerging out of the void; they turn them into purely abstract unfathomable formulas, and thereby com-

pletely deny and reverse the normal sequence by which man comes to know truth.” (Mao, 1961: pp. 321-323) Therefore, some scholars comments that, “through the systematic interpretation of the relations between practice and cognition and the essence of contradiction theory, and through the deep theoretical criticism of dogmatism, Mao Zedong’s two works—*On Practice* and *On Contradiction* have developed into the ideological line of seeking truth from facts.” (Li & Zhang, 2017) Others believe that these two works are philosophical summaries of the struggle against dogmatism, and these works analyze the epistemological roots of dogmatism and tear off the theoretical disguise of dogmatists. (Qiu, 1997)

If these two works mark the formal formation of Mao Zedong’s philosophy, we can say *Oppose Bookism* marks the beginning of the formation of Mao Zedong’s philosophy—the theoretical achievements of the sinicization of Marxist philosophy.

Analysts have pointed out that he raised the issue of investigation and research and opposing dogmatism entirely from the perspective of philosophical epistemology. It not only profoundly exposes the essence of idealism of bookism, but also comprehensively expounds the ideological line of materialism as the philosophical basis of investigation and research. Therefore, it is the symbol of the formation of Mao Zedong’s philosophical thought. (Zhao, 1992: p. 153) Only by completely eliminating dogmatism in cognition and action can we truly establish the subjectivity of the Chinese revolution. Mao Zedong advocates the scientific attitude of seeking truth from facts to treat Marxism and Marxist philosophy.

In summary, he not only explores the correct revolutionary road in practice, but also criticizes dogmatism in theory, which is the embodiment of the living soul and enduring spirit of Mao Zedong Thought. “The enduring spirit of Mao Zedong Thought refers to the stand, viewpoint and method crystalized in the Thought, which features three basic tenets—seeking truth from facts, the mass line and independence.” (Xi, 2014: p. 25) *Oppose Bookism* embodies these three principles for the first time, marking the initial formation of Mao Zedong Thought. This book was widely considered in 1961 and was officially published in 1964. During this period, Mao Zedong again emphasized that investigation and research are still the basic skills needed to do a good job, and this book became the guide to action to correct economic development problems at that time. That is to say, whether in the writing period or in the publishing period, this book has guiding significance for the revolution and construction.

In the new era, in the practice of the Chinese path to modernization, we still need to combine the fundamental theory of Marxism with the concrete practice of the Chinese, and go our own way to avoid copying the Western model—new forms of dogmatism in the new era. As people said, China’s modernization practice is not “the repetition of socialist practices of other countries, or the duplication of modernization endeavors elsewhere, nor can they be readily slotted into the template devised by earlier writers of Marxist classics. There is no orthodox, fixed version of socialism. A blueprint will become a bright reality only when we

combine the basic principles of scientific socialism with China's realities, historical and cultural traditions, and contemporary needs and constantly analyze and summarize the lessons gained from our practice." (Xi, 2020: p. 98) This also emphasizes that we should adhere to the ideological line of seeking truth from facts to oppose the bookism and dogmatism. We can be regarded as linking theory with practice only when we become good at applying the Marxist stand, viewpoint and method. It is also the Chinese path to modernization that requires us to adhere to the ideological line of *Oppose Bookism* and opening up a new realm of Marxism through "the Two Combinations".

#### 4. Conclusion

The sinicization of Marxist philosophy begins in the struggle against dogmatism or bookism. The work *Oppose Bookism* opposes dogmatism or bookism in theory for the first time and puts forward the concept of ideological line, and it shows that investigation is the basis of decision-making from an epistemological perspective, so it is the symbol of the formation of Mao Zedong's Marxist view of practice. It can be said that Mao Zedong answered the question about the relationship between knowledge and practice for the first time in a Marxist way, and it is the embryonic form of the views of *On Practice* and *On Contradiction*. And it also shows his adherence to the ancient Chinese academic tradition. This means that in the early 1930s, Mao Zedong started the process of sinicization of Marxist philosophy. The value of this work is not only to correct the wrong ideas existing in the party at that time but also to provide the basic basis for the orientation and follow-up theoretical development of Marxism in China.

#### Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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