

# SOCIALISM IN CHINA (1919-1965)

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# **SOCIALISM IN CHINA**

## **(1919-1965)**



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## Chapter 1

# Marxism Introduced to China after the Russian October Revolution; Initiated by Li Dazhao and Chen Duxiu, the Communist Party of China Is Founded

Chen Duxiu, initiator and major leader of China's New Culture Movement and "commander-in-chief" of the May Fourth Movement, put his heart and efforts into promoting democracy and the development of science. Together with a group of people who also worried about the country's future, they used the *New Youth* magazine as a base to attack the feudal ideology and culture. In the meantime, the success of the October Revolution in Russia led by Lenin was like a bright comet in the dark night, a great inspiration for the leaders of China's New Culture Movement. Furthermore, Marxism was

introduced into China around this time, and provided those who looked to the West for a solution with a new way to think about China's future and a practical path to save China and its people. Armed with a new perspective, these people pondered China's future, gradually developed into intellectuals with some basic understandings of Communism. They shouldered the historical responsibilities to save the country and its people and founded the Communist Party of China (CPC).



Chen Duxiu, core leader of the May Fourth Movement, and a founder of the Communist Party of China



It was the afternoon of June 11, 1919, and the streets of southern Beijing were full of noise and bustle from people attending a local fair. By contrast, in a corner of a quiet teahouse, three men dressed in scholarly garb were chatting. Suddenly, one of them, a man perhaps in his 40s and wearing a white suit and a hat, took out a pile of leaflets from his jacket and distributed them around the teahouse. Entitled "The Declaration of Beijing Citizens", the leaflet made five demands, including reclaiming Shandong Province's sovereignty; deposing traitor officials; and granting freedom of assembly and speech to citizens. The teahouse immediately became noisy, with some shocked and many more excited.

The three men looked at each other, smiled, and stood up to leave. It was getting late. Among the three men, Professor Li Dazhao of Peking University and Gao Yihan said goodbye to the man distributing the leaflets, who continued wondering about the fair. At about 10:00 p.m., he went to a rooftop garden and noticed people were watching a movie on a terrace downstairs. He took out a pile of leaflets to drop them below, but just as he was leaving, he was caught by two policemen.

He was taken to the police station, where an officer banged the table and roared: "State your name!"

Totally unruffled, the middle-aged man distributing the leaflets replied in a calm voice, "Chen Duxiu."

Upon hearing the name of this well-known individual, the officer was shocked, and lowered his voice, "Chen Duxiu of Peking University?"

"Precisely!" came the lofty reply.

The officer was at a loss, but continued: "Why are you handing out inflammatory leaflets in the public place? Were you an instigator of unlawful student activities a couple of weeks ago?" Clearly, by "unlawful activities" he meant the May Fourth Movement.

Chen replied, "What are 'inflammatory leaflets'? What are 'unlawful activities'? Are patriotic activities inflammatory? Is the endeavor to save the country unlawful?"

The officer was speechless, but thought that since Mr. Chen was well known, he should report the case to his superior to avoid potential trouble. He then told his underlings, "Put him into prison and await further instructions."

Behind bars, Chen Duxiu thought back on the road he had trodden these past years and reflected on the current political and revolutionary situation as it stood.

After the failure of the Hundred Days' Reform<sup>1</sup>, led by Kang Youwei and Liang Qichao, Chen Duxiu left for Japan to study Western bourgeois political theory. He accepted bourgeois ideas on democracy, and actively participated in Chinese students' revolutionary activities. After returning to China, he first founded a newspaper in his hometown Anhui Province, to spread the ideas of democracy and revolution; then he established and led "Yue Wang Hui" (Society of General Yue), an anti-Qing Dynasty secret society. During the Revolution of 1911, he participated in the revolution in Anhui and Zhejiang provinces. After Anhui gained independence from the Qing government, he took the post of general secretary of the provincial government and implemented radical reforms. However, the reforms were not successful due to opposition by the Royalist old guards. Later he took part in anti-Yuan Shikai activities in Anhui but failed again.

At that time, Chen became confused and depressed. What needed to be done to save China and the Chinese people? Without learning from the West, it appeared there was no way out. Chen recollected that Hong Xiuquan had established the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom and tried to practice agrarian socialism and equalitarianism, but failed; the Boxers had relied on feudalistic superstition to gather the masses, but in the end were unable to withstand Western aggression with advanced weapons. It also seemed that learning from the West did not lead to success either: During the Westernization Movement, the reformers had thought they could learn advanced military, technologies and industries from the West to make the country strong so that it would be able to resist invasion from the West, but they failed; Kang Youwei and Liang Qichao attempted to learn from Western political systems and reform the feudal ruling regime of China during the Constitutional Reform and Modernization of 1898, but they failed; the Revolution of 1911, led by Dr. Sun Yat-sen, had overthrown the Qing Dynasty and aimed to establish a republican system similar to what the West had, but warlords ended up seizing power

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<sup>1</sup> Referring to the Constitutional Reform and Modernization of 1898. – Ed.

and the resulting Republic had no substance and was unworthy of the name; from the Revolution of 1911 to the May Fourth Movement of 1919, Chinese scholars and thinkers had tried hard to introduce and spread different ideas and thoughts from the West, conducted many different kinds of social experiments, but nothing succeeded and aroused little attention from the citizens. What needed to be done to save China and the Chinese people? Chen Duxiu thought hard and ultimately came to this conclusion: China's top priority was to improve the national character and transform the culture; only with a new culture, could there be a new citizenship and a new society, only then could a new political system be implemented and stabilized.

Having this in mind, Chen Duxiu threw himself into the cultural and ideological fray. In September 1915, he established the *Youth Journal* (renamed *New Youth* after the second issue) in Shanghai, raising the curtain of China's New Culture Movement. In 1917, Cai Yuanpei became president of Peking University. A champion of inclusivity in academic learning, Cai invited many scholars with new ideas from around the country to teach at the university, and engaged Chen Duxiu as head of liberal arts department. The editorial department of *New Youth* magazine moved to Beijing, and Hu Shi, Li Dazhao, Lu Xun, Qian Xuantong and Liu Bannong all joined the editorial department and became major writers for the journal. Thus, *New Youth* and Peking University became two major centers of China's New Culture Movement. With "Mr. Democracy" and "Mr. Science" as its two slogans, the movement aimed to "build a new Western-style country and create a new Western-style society," or to build a bourgeois republic and develop capitalism.

At this reminiscence, Chen Duxiu could only shake his head with an ironic smile. He thought he had found a good way from Western countries to save China and its people, but reality had smashed his dream. After World War I, the contradictions and problems of the capitalist system had become apparent and, as a result, the Chinese started to have doubts about Western values. Specifically, the Western powers at the Paris Peace Conference not only refused all the reasonable demands from China, a fellow victor, including: the abolition of foreign spheres of influence in China; the withdrawal of foreign troops and the abolition of the Twenty-One Demands that Japan had forced on China. Instead, they decided to transfer to Japan the privileges

in Shandong Province previously enjoyed by Germany. The Western dreams were thus shattered. But where was the new way? Chen Duxiu thought of Li Dazhao's stance: to take the Russian path. Would that work? Chen lost himself in thought.

Similar to Chen, a group of progressive Chinese scholars were thinking hard about China's future and exploring a practicable path to save the country. Before and after the May Fourth Movement, they wrote articles and books, and established periodicals or societies, to study, introduce and spread different foreign ideologies and propose different programs to improve Chinese society. At that time, there were many schools of thought in China contending for attention. Over 400 periodicals were established, advocating new trends of thought; numerous societies and associations were set up, with 281 societies being registered in Beijing in 1919 alone.

There were many different views regarding the approach to reform the society, but they could be summed up into three main camps. The first group advocated learning from the West and taking the path of capitalism. Though they recognized the problems of capitalist societies, they believed it was still a more advanced culture and social system than China. The second group advocated the combining of Western values and Chinese culture to create a new culture. But how to combine the two? This group either had no feasible plan or proposed to turn back to the old path of "letting Chinese learning be the base and Western learning for application." The third group proposed to follow Russia and take the path of socialism, believing that only socialism could save China. This third view gradually became the mainstream thought.

However, the theories on socialism that were spreading around were not consistent. They included both scientific socialism created by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels and different kinds of self-called "socialism" of the bourgeoisie and petty bourgeoisie, such as anarchism, anarcho-syndicalism, mutualism, corporatism, Guild socialism, Bernstein socialism, etc. Faced with many forms of "socialism," most young progressives had no idea which one would be the best for reforming China, and thus had to feel their way toward true socialism.

During this process, Marx and Engels' scientific socialism stood out from various socialist ideologies for its scientific and revolutionary characters and



Li Dazhao, core leader of the May Fourth Movement, and a founder of the Communist Party of China

for the example of the Russian Revolution. The success of the October Revolution in 1917 turned socialism from an ideology and social ideal into reality for the first time, and set up the first socialist country in human history with a new political regime quite different from the capitalist countries. This enlightened the Chinese people, and particularly awakened intellectuals with a new direction and with promising prospects.

In July 1919, under the leadership of Vladimir Lenin, the Soviet Union declared that the Soviet Union would abrogate all unequal treaties that tsarist Russia had signed with the Chinese government and all privileges it enjoyed within China. This information delighted and excited the Chinese people who had long suffered from imperialist powers.<sup>1</sup> This event amplified the impact of the Russian Revolution on China and further promoted the spread of Marxism in China, leading more and more men of insight to approve and accept Marxism and scientific socialism.

Li Dazhao was among the torchbearers who first spread Marxism in China and called for learning from Russia. He studied in Japan in his early years, where he read classic Marxist works translated by Hajime Kawakami and gradually came to accept Marxism. He and Chen Duxiu were both leaders of the May Fourth Movement. A famous poem sings highly of their contributions. It goes like this: At Peking University's old Red House, /Two giants from the north and south, /Li and Chen wield mighty words, /Like sun and moon they light then and now.

In 1918, the second year after the October Revolution in Russia, Li Dazhao published some articles, including "A Comparison of the French and Russian

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<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, promises in the declaration were not realized due to various reasons. Unequal treaties signed between tsarist Russia and the Chinese government were not abrogated.

Revolutions.” He noted that the October Revolution in Russia signaled an era of socialist revolutions, just as the French Revolution had signaled the world entering an age of capitalist revolutions; and also that the development of the Russia’s revolution would certainly impact China. That same year, he wrote “Victory of the Common People” and “Victory of Bolshevism,” in which he enthusiastically praised Russia’s revolution, firmly pointing out that proletarian socialist revolutions would be the trend of world history, and passionately predicted: “You will see a world of red flags in the future!”

In the October and November 1919 issues of *New Youth* magazine, Li Dazhao published “My Views on Marxism,” an essay giving a systematic introduction to the basic principles of Marxism – historical materialism, political economics and scientific socialism. He pointed out that Marx’s “theory of class struggle links the three doctrines like a golden thread.” Still more commendable is that while calling for the path of socialism in China, he clearly stated that Marxism should not be applied simply and rigidly in China, but it should be combined with China’s prevailing conditions. In another essay “On Question and Doctrine Again,” he pointed out: “Generally, a doctrine has its idealistic side and practical side. It is similar in all countries. When this ideal is applied in actual politics, it will become different according to various times, locations and particular circumstances. This is also true for socialism.” Li’s essays generated a far-reaching and profound influence in China.

Li Dazhao was knowledgeable, sharp, sincere, kind, and good with people, qualities which made him a good teacher and a friend of many young progressives. His office at Peking University was often full of visitors and friends, and it became a place where young progressives from Beijing and elsewhere in China could talk, discuss and debate. The University Library where he was in charge also became a platform for spreading scientific socialism.

Li Da, Yang Pao’an, Chen Wangdao and some other students who studied in Japan also translated and published works of Marx, Engels and Lenin, and published articles in different periodicals to introduce Marxism, making important contributions to spread Marxism in China. In addition, Deng Zhongxia, Cai Hesen, Zhou Enlai, Gao Junyu, Yun Daiying, Li Hanjun, Qu Qiubai, Zhao Shiyan, Chen Tanqiu, He Shuheng, Yu Xiusong, Xiang Jingyu, He Mengxiong, Zhang Tailei, Wang Jinmei, Deng Enming, Zhang Wentian,

Luo Yinong and some other core members of the May Fourth Movement gradually became Marxists through participating in revolutionary activities and studying Marxism. Dong Biwu, Lin Boqu, Wu Yuzhang and some other activists in the Revolution of 1911 gradually changed their minds and became Marxists.

Among the activists in the May Fourth Movement who acquired some basic understanding of Communism, there was an outstanding talent from Hunan Province. This person was Mao Zedong. Mao was born on December 26, 1893, into a middle-class family in Shaoshanchong, Xiangtan County, Hunan Province. He loved history since childhood and read the *Outlaws of the Marsh*, *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* and other historical novels at elementary school. He was rebellious when he was a teenager, threatening suicide by jumping into a pool after a dispute with his father and quitting school and hiding in the mountains after quarreling with a teacher. Influenced by his mother, he developed a vague belief in Buddhism in his teens. At the age of 17, leaving home for further study elsewhere, he wrote a poem to his father: "The child determines to leave his native place, /to never return without making a name for himself; /a man does not have to be buried in his homeland, /and there is green mountain everywhere where I can rest." This poem illustrated the young man's aspiration and ambition. When studying at middle school in Changsha and Xiangxiang County, he was greatly influenced by Sun Yat-sen's ideas of democracy and revolution and Kang Youwei and Liang Qichao's ideas of reforming China. He wrote an article and posted it on the school wall, proposing Sun as president, Kang as premier, and Liang as foreign minister of the new government. In 1911 after the Wuchang Uprising, Mao renounced the pen and joined the Hunan New Army. Half a year later, he left the army and resumed his studies. In the spring of 1913, he was enrolled into a college – No.4 Normal School of Hunan Province (incorporated into No.1 Normal School the following year), where he was inspired by the New Culture Movement and the Huxiang School which promoted reasoning and the importance of application of academic theories into practical use. Mao thus studied philosophy, ethics and works of ancient Chinese thinkers. He paid attention to current affairs, liked to talk about politics, took an active part in social activities, organized a night school for workers,

and studied in other places during holidays to get to know local customs and to make friends. On holidays, he often gathered with schoolmates on Yuelu Mountain or Orange Island to discuss national affairs. As he wrote in one of his pomes: “Young we were, schoolmates, /At life’s full flowering; / Filled with student enthusiasm, /Boldly we cast all restraints aside.” In April 1918, with the goal of “reforming academic style, tempering behavior, and changing minds and customs,” Mao, together with Xiao Zisheng, Cai Hesen, Luo Zhanglong, He Shuheng and others, established the Xinmin Society in Changsha City to read and study together. After graduating from the normal school, Mao went to Beijing and became an assistant librarian in Peking University Library with the help of a recommendation from his teacher, Professor Yang Changji. During this period, he was active in the journalism association and philosophy society, and made friends with famous people, scholars and patriotic youth from the May Fourth Movement. Influenced by Li Dazhao and Chen Duxiu, he studied Marxism and learned about the experiences and lessons of the Russia’s October Revolution. His mind underwent profound change.

During the May Fourth Movement, Mao Zedong returned to Changsha and became leader of the student movements in Hunan Province there. With the Xinmin Society as a platform, he initiated the Hunan Student Union, established *Xiangjiang Review* magazine and supervised its publication, wrote articles praising the Russia’s October Revolution, believing that its victory would “spread across the whole world” and “we should copy that model.” In December 1919, Mao Zedong went to Beijing for the second time, discussing with progressive intellectuals, including Li Dazhao and Deng Zhongxia, about a fundamental way to reform China. In 1920, he went to Shanghai to discuss with Chen Duxiu about Marxist theories and Hunan revolutionary movements. Here Chen gave him Chen Wangdao’s translations of *The Communist Manifesto*, *Class Struggle*, and *The History of Socialism*. As Mao later recalled, “By the summer of 1920, theoretically I had become a Marxist, and in practice to a certain degree.”

As different ideologies spread like wildfire, China’s social structure was undergoing profound changes: the proletariat was gradually becoming an important social force in modern China.



The Chinese proletariat first arose in the mid-20th century among foreign enterprises in China, and grew stronger with the rise of enterprises run by the Qing Dynasty government and China's own bourgeoisie. By 1919, before the May Fourth Movement, the number of industrial workers had reached 2 million, and that of the proletariat was around 40 million, including artisans, coolies, hired workers in agriculture, workers in business and finance, etc.

At that time, even though the working class only accounted for one-tenth of the population in China, and they were relatively young and not well-educated, they were associated with a more advanced mode of production, and they were organized and disciplined. They were deeply oppressed by the bourgeoisie, the feudalist and imperialist powers. During the May Fourth Movement, the working class, a new and independent political force, began to show its strength. On June 5, 1919, Shanghai workers went on strike in support of the students. Within one week, over 50 companies and between 60,000 to 70,000 workers joined in. Workers from Beijing, Tangshan, Hankou, Nanjing, Changsha followed, and quickly spread to over 100 cities in over 20 provinces and regions. As a result, workers replaced students as the main force of the May Fourth Movement, making the movement even more influential. The expansion of the proletariat laid the social foundation for the spread of Marxism in China.

The wide dissemination of Marxism, a group of intellectuals with some basic understanding of communism, the expansion of the proletariat and the rise of workers' movements provided the necessary conditions for the establishment of a proletarian party. But who would shoulder this important task? The times called for a standard-bearer.

The Government of Northern Warlords (or Beiyang Government), which had seized the fruits of the Revolution of 1911, was alarmed by the spread of Marxism in China at that time. They attacked socialism as "a rampant heresy whose threat was greater than fierce floods and savage beasts," banned and destroyed all prints relating to Marxism; and punished and persecuted "radicals" who advocated Marxism and socialism. After Chen Duxiu was arrested, Li Dazhao and others tried hard to appeal for help, urging news media, social organizations, university teachers and students to help. Sun Yat-sen delivered a speech attacking the Government of the Northern Warlords in the South as well.