

# **Anarchism in China**

Daniel Cairns

2009

# Contents

References and Suggested Readings . . . . .	5
---	---

Anarchism is a significant though neglected trend in Chinese history. Proto-anarchist ideals that developed during the Warring States Period in works such as the *Zhuangzi* and the writing of Bao Jingyan became integral to traditional Chinese philosophy, followed later by a modernist anarchism that thrived as a set of social, political, and ethical ideas during the revolutionary period. Despite the proto-anarchist legacy, most studies of Chinese anarchism limit their scope to the early twentieth century, focusing on the movement's peak, from 1907 to 1919 – when anarchism was the most influential radical socialist trend in China – and on its marginalization from 1920 to 1949. Post-1949 history is without explicitly anarchist activity, yet because of its earlier influence, anarchism's history is a helpful tool with which to analyze both the communist regime and the post-Mao economic reforms.

The Chinese anarchist movement emerged when it became clear that the Qing dynasty was struggling to adjust to the pressures of foreign imperialism and domestic instability. At that time, intellectuals were actively seeking out and digesting foreign concepts that could ease the transition to modern nationhood. The ideas of mutual aid, voluntary cooperation, and personal liberty that anarchism professed emerged as integral elements of Chinese social and political discourse in this context. Anarchism resonated with elements of traditional thought and a distinctly anarchist sensibility was articulated in the writings of some Buddhists, Confucians, and Daoists.

Anarchism emphasized political reorganization and social transformation. Specifically, anarchists believed that foreign science and philosophy should be studied, traditions were pernicious myths that must be dispelled, the family was deleterious to the individual's autonomy, patriarchy was harmful and illegitimate, imperialism should be halted, authority over others is degrading, and the state is unnecessary. Anarchists were also the first to advocate a peasant-based revolution in China, a theory later championed by Mao Zedong. In fact, in their commitment to bringing new ideas into revolutionary discourse, anarchists were instrumental in introducing Marxism and other forms of socialism to China. Consequently, while anarchism has its own history, it is often difficult to separate it from the broader revolutionary milieu. Especially in the early years, 1903–6, revolutionaries ignored the minor distinctions in ideology and so many strands of socialism were conflated; anarchism was seen as synonymous with nihilism and populism.

The first explicitly anarchist activity among Chinese citizens began in 1906–7. Almost simultaneously, expatriates in Paris and Tokyo founded anarchist organizations: the New World Society and the Society for the Study of Socialism, respectively. Members traveled to study foreign ideas and methods, but while abroad discovered various radical tendencies that impacted their thinking. Before long, both societies were publishing their own papers. In Paris the *New Era* spread anarchist political analysis and social theory; likewise, the Tokyo group printed *Natural Justice*, which focused on scholarly issues, feminism, and rural communism. The groups shared news and opinions through these organs, but these publications also reveal their contrasts. The Tokyo anarchists were agrarian collectivists, inspired by Tolstoy, while the society in Paris was progressive, placing an emphasis on science, reason, and education.

The second wave of anarchism in China, occurring between the fall of the Qing and the founding of the communist part of China, is marked by an increase in domestic activity. The Society of the Cock Crowing in the Dark, led by Shifu, was the first domestic anarchist group. It was founded in 1911, the year the Qing fell. Shifu was a dynamic personality, both energetic and intellectual. He participated in the founding of multiple anarchist collectives, unions, and publishing ventures. After his death in 1915, the energy of the anarchist movement shifted towards what would become the China, May 4<sup>th</sup> movement.

Between 1919 and 1920 the May 4<sup>th</sup> movement coalesced around ideals of free expression and personal liberties. Anarchism, sharing similar values, flourished in this climate. It had a radicalizing effect on May 4<sup>th</sup> thinking, moving it beyond aesthetics and culture to economic, political, and social realms. While May 4<sup>th</sup> is primarily seen as an intellectual movement, anarchists believed that intellectual and manual work were needlessly divided; they suggested that one must both study in the schools and labor in the fields. This ethos pervaded many educational experiments of the time, from the Work-Study movement to the National Labor University, and was even reinterpreted during the Cultural Revolution.

The next phase of anarchist activity in China was shaped by its relationship to the nascent communist movement. The Communist Party of China was founded in 1921, though Comintern agents started actively recruiting activists into Marxist study circles a year prior. These groups initially drew many anarchists to them. The non-anarchists in attendance often came because they were interested in anarchism. Though there were commonalities between anarchists and communists, the CCP soon purged out many anarchists for the sake of ideological unity. Still, aspects of anarchism were not totally absent from official doctrine: Li Dazhao, China's first Marxist, was greatly influenced by Kropotkin's doctrine of mutual aid; Mao Zedong admitted to being influenced by anarchism; Chen Duxiu's sons were both anarchists before converting to Marxism.

Shortly after the founding of the CCP, the anarchists who did not join the party distanced themselves from the communist movement. They disagreed over the doctrine of the dictatorship of the proletariat, anarchists holding that a transformation out of class-based society would come once the general populace became sufficiently conscious. Debates held in the revolutionary press proved the CCP to be better rhetorically equipped.

Sensing pressure to organize against the communists, some anarchists joined the Guomindang. Indeed, for years there was an affinity between anarchists and the GMD – Sun Yat-Sen actually claimed that the ultimate aim of the GMD was anarchism and communism. The GMD also supported unions and striking workers and helped anarchists establish the National Labor University, a syndicalist training school. The Revolutionary Alliance, the precursor to the GMD, also counted many prominent anarchists as members. Anarchists Liu Shiwei, Zhang Ji, and Zhang Binglin even hosted lectures by Japanese anarchists through the RA. Ultimately, however, anarchists proved to be little more to the GMD than ideological weapons against the communists. By 1927 the anarchist movement was atrophying; the last arena of its influence was among sections of workers in Shanghai and southern China, where anarchists were active until the 1940s.

There are two main analyses of anarchism in Chinese history. One emphasizes its anti-traditionalism, stressing the influence of foreign ideas such as socialism and humanism. This view asserts that while Chinese anarchism was born as an ideology of rejection of China's emergent modernity, Chinese anarchists adopted elements of Western thought even as they negated Western modernity. The second analysis suggests that anarchism is not necessarily imported. This view points to the long tradition of proto-anarchist thought in China, encompassing Daoists but also including Buddhists and Utopians. The truth lies somewhere in between: anarchists like Liu Shiwei were unquestionably interested in Chinese national heritage, while Li Shizeng was thoroughly European in outlook.

Anarchists demanded absolute social revolution, that is, a bottom-up transformation of quotidian life. Therefore, they disagreed with the nationalist and communist revolutionary groups who believed change could be instituted through policy, from above. Similarly, anarchists were anti-nationalist. Some historians posit that anarchists, unwilling to pander to patriotic sentiments,

effectively forfeited ground to groups like the GMD and CCP who based their platform on preserving the Chinese nation-state.

Historians sometimes question the importance of anarchism in China's revolutionary history because it was an ideology that did not achieve success on a nationwide level. Anarchist groups in China never coalesced into a political party, or even a unified network. Anarchist activity was scattered and their platform was inconsistent. However, reflecting on the role that anarchism played in radicalizing communist and nationalist leaders, bringing new ideas to China, and demanding a social revolution, clearly anarchism was an integral and ubiquitous part of the revolution.

## References and Suggested Readings

- Bernal, M. (1968) *The Triumph of Anarchism over Marxism, 1906–1907*. In M. C. Wright (Ed.), *China in Revolution: The First Phase, 1900–1913*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Dirlik, A. (1989) *Origins of Chinese Communism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Dirlik, A. (1993) *Anarchism in the Chinese Revolution*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Gaaster, M. (1969) *The Anarchists*. In *Chinese Intellectuals and the Revolution of 1911*. Seattle: University of Washington Press.
- Gao J., Wang G., & Yang, S., (Eds.) (1984) *Wu zhengfu zhuyi zai zhongguo [Anarchism in China]*. Changsha: Hunan renmin chubanshe.
- Ge, M. et al., (Eds.) (1984) *Wuzhengfuzhuyi sixiang ziliao xuan*. Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe.
- Ming, C. K. & Dirlik, A. (1992) *Schools into Fields and Factories: Anarchists, the Guomindang, and the Labor University in Shanghai, 1927–1932*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Pickowicz, P. G. (1990) *The Chinese Anarchist Critique of Marxism-Leninism*. *Modern China* 16 (4): 450–67.
- Rapp, J. A. (1998) *Daoism and Anarchism Reconsidered*. *Anarchist Studies* 6 (2): 123–51.
- Scalapino, R. A. & Yu, G. T. (1961) *The Chinese Anarchist Movement*. Berkeley: Center for Chinese Studies.
- Zarrow, P. G. (1990) *Anarchism and Chinese Political Culture*. New York: Columbia University Press.

The Anarchist Library  
Anti-Copyright



Daniel Cairns  
Anarchism in China  
2009

*The International Encyclopedia of Revolution and Protest*, Edited by Immanuel Ness. DOI:  
10.1002/9781405198073.wbierp0048

**[theanarchistlibrary.org](http://theanarchistlibrary.org)**