

Li Shizeng (1881–1973)

Daniel Cairns

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Li Shizeng was a Chinese anarchist, educator, and Guomindang (Kuomintang) member. He spent the most notable years of his life publishing anarchist materials in France and initiating the Work-Study Movement. Born into a wealthy and respected family, he was son to an advisor to the Tongzhi emperor; prestigious careers beckoned. En route to study biology at the Pasteur Institute in Paris in 1902, Li met Wu Zhihui, henceforth his lifelong comrade. In 1906 they founded the first Chinese anarchist organization, the New World Society. Soon afterwards this group began publication of *Xin Shiji* (*New Era*), which ran for three years, an exceptional span for a Chinese periodical of the time. The journal, to which Li contributed his gifts as a writer, translator, and editor, focused on translating anarchist texts and criticizing Manchu rule. This led the editorship to become involved with other anti-Manchu groups such as the Revolutionary Alliance and Guomindang. Despite other anarchists' criticism, Li suspended his suspicions of political parties when working with the Guomindang.

The most notable product of anarchist–Guomindang cooperation, the National Labor University, was a project with a distinctly working-class, anti-authoritarian, even subversive bent. Other innovative syntheses of anarchism and education in which Li participated included the Frugal Study Society of 1912, the Diligent Work-Frugal Study Society of 1915, and the Sino-French Educational Association of 1916. These formed part of the Work-Study Movement, a scheme to bring gifted Chinese students to France where they would study science and humanism, support themselves through hard work and anarchist conviviality, and ultimately become the next generation of revolutionary leaders. Indeed, when hard times hit the students in Paris – as in 1921, when the formal organizations could not support them all – students spontaneously banded together in “mutual aid groups” inspired by Li’s teachings.

For Li, anarchism was a moral philosophy linked to western scientific and humanistic principles. Trained as a biologist, he showed great interest in Darwin and the anarchist Kropotkin, whose *Mutual Aid* offered a corollary and supplement to Darwinism. It was Jacques Reclus, grandnephew of anarchist scientist Elisée Reclus, who introduced Li to anarchism. Li’s anarchist revolutionary writings, therefore, emphasized modern ideas against traditional Chinese beliefs. Furthermore, he despised drawing parallels between Daoism and anarchism. Anarchism for him was scientific, Daoism obscurantist; they were polar opposites. He opposed the Confucian tradition of the patriarchal family as sexist, authoritarian, and unhealthy.

Li’s contributions to anarchist literature were inspiring to a generation of Chinese radicals. As examples, the novelist Ba Jin decided to dedicate his life to the anarchist movement after reading Kropotkin’s “An Appeal to the Young,” which Li translated into Chinese, and Shifu, China’s revolutionary paragon, converted to anarchism after reading *New Era* while in prison.

In the 1920s, Li became a member of the Central Supervisory Committee of the Guomindang, seemingly abandoning anti-parliamentarism. In his later years, he retired to Taiwan and Uruguay.

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