

# **Chen Jiongming**

**Anarchism and the Federalist State**

Leslie H. Chen

# Contents

Introduction . . . . .	3
1. Early Revolutionary Activities . . . . .	5
2. Associations with the Anarchists . . . . .	6
3. The Zhangzhou Experiment . . . . .	8
4 The Federalist State . . . . .	10
Conclusion . . . . .	14
Note on the Author . . . . .	15
List of References . . . . .	15

## Introduction

Several major events occurred in China's search for modernization in the twentieth century: (1) the New Policies Reform and Constitutional movement of the late Qing period, 1898–1911; (2) the Republican Revolution of 1911; (3) the New Culture movement of the May Fourth period in 1919; (4) the Federalist movement of 1920–1926; (5) the Nationalist (Guomindang) Revolution of 1926–1949 and (6) the Communist Revolution of 1949.

Chen Jiongming (1878–1933) played an important role in the first four of these events. He was by training a lawyer and became a Qing legislator, a republican revolutionary, a military leader, a civil administrator and a federalist who sought to reconstruct China as a democratic republic.<sup>1</sup>

Chen has sunk into obscurity, however, because he disagreed with Sun Yat-sen about the direction that reform should take. Sun wanted to unite the country by force and institute change through a centralized government based on a one-party system. Chen advocated a multiparty federalism and the peaceful unification of China. Following a revolt of Chen's troops in 1922 that forced Sun to flee Canton (Guangzhou) and delayed his Northern Expedition (beifa), Sun turned on Chen. Sun's Nationalist Party (Guomindang) quickly began to publish slanderous material about Chen to discredit him.<sup>2</sup> The Communists, who had entered into an alliance with Sun and who still regard him as the founding hero of the Chinese Revolution have continued to characterize Chen as a traitor and a reactionary warlord.

The conflict between Sun and Chen was a conflict between two different concepts of nation building – centralism versus federalism (Chen 1991; Duara 1995, 177–204). Four years later, in 1926, when the Northern Expedition of the Nationalist-Communist alliance swept across the southern and central provinces, all provincial constitutions, provincial and local assemblies, and local self-government societies associated with the vision of a federated state ceased to exist. The story of Chen Jiongming and federalism has since remained hidden behind Nationalist and Communist accounts of modern Chinese history.

A paper by Winston Hsieh published in 1962 was the first Western scholarly work that gives a sympathetic analysis of Chen's political career with emphasis on his ideas and ideals (Hsieh 1962). Hsieh observes that Chen had strong intellectual affinity and political connections with many Chinese anarchists and that he was a great patron of the anarchist movement whenever he was in power. Three decades later, in the 1990s, similar remarks have been made in the three definitive works written on Chinese anarchism respectively by Zarrow (1990), Dirlik (1991) and Krebs (1998).

Since Hsieh's work we have known much more about Chen Jiongming's lifelong political activities, including his writings in Zhangzhou during the May Fourth period and in Hong Kong in his last years. Chen was one of the founders and patrons of an anarchist assassination group during the Republican revolutionary movement of 1910–1911. The group was the most idealistic and morally-conscious among all the radical organizations in the movement. After the successful overthrow of the Qing dynasty, the group was dissolved; Chen continued to be the patron and

---

<sup>1</sup> A detailed account of Chen Jiongming's political career may be found in Chen 1999. Interested reader may want to consult with the Chinese-language section of the website: ([www.chen-jiongming.com](http://www.chen-jiongming.com))

<sup>2</sup> For example, less than five months after the troop revolt, Sun's followers published a book entitled *Chen Jiongming panguo shi* [A history of Chen Jiongming's high treason against his country], by Li Shuxian, Lu Zhizhi and Xie Shengzhi, Fuzhou, Fujian, 1922. Reprinted in *Jiandai Zhongguo shiliao congkan* [A collection of historical materials on modern China] vol.3, ed. by Shen Yunlong, Taipei: Waihai Publishing, 1978

protector of his anarchist friends and comrades who now engaged in a social and cultural reform movement in Canton. During the May Fourth period, Chen created with the help of anarchist intellectuals a “model” city of New Culture in Zhangzhou, Fujian, which won the critical acclaim both in China and abroad. Back in Guangdong in the 1920s, Chen actively promoted peaceful unification of the country through “Chinese federalism” - a “bottom-up” form of federalism that clearly has its anarchist origin.

Anarchism is known in China as *wuzhengfu zhuyi*, meaning literally “without a government”.<sup>3</sup> This simplified term unfortunately leads to much misinterpretations as is also the case in the West. In the words of George Woodcock, the stereotype of the anarchist is that of the “cold-blooded assassin who attacks with dagger or bomb the symbolic pillars of established society” and “anarchy, in popular parlance, is malign chaos”(Woodcock 1962, 10).<sup>4</sup>

John P. Clark defines anarchism as a political theory which must contain: (1) a view of an ideal, noncoercive, nonauthoritarian society; (2) a criticism of existing society and its institutions, based on this antiauthoritarian ideal; (3) a view of human nature that justifies the hope for significant progress toward the ideal; and (4) a strategy for change, involving immediate institution of noncoercive, nonauthoritarian and decentralist alternatives (Clark 1978, 13). By invoking Clark’s definition, Zarrow concludes that the early Chinese anarchists meet all these four requisites, “at least to a degree” (Zarrow 1990, 239)

Chinese anarchists propagated their ideas and belief by publishing journals, books and pamphlets in Paris, Canton, Zhangzhou and Shanghai. Liang Bingxian sums up where they stood:

1. Interpret and publicize Proudhon’s theories of social revolution and of private property; Kropotkin’s communism and theory of mutual aid to supplement social Darwinism; and Kropotkin’s philosophy of living.
2. Oppose racialism, nationalism and militarism.
3. Oppose arranged marriage and marriage for profits; advocate freedom in love.
4. Champion individual freedom, social equality and a classless but organized society.
5. Oppose imperialism and national boundaries; promote a world of Great Harmony (*datong*).
6. Oppose religion that stupefies people’s mind; advocate mobilizing human wisdom to enrich physical world. (Liang 1978, 6)

Chinese anarchists were among the first to condemn Confucianism, to discuss feminism, to promote language reform, and to organize modern labor union (Zarrow 1990, 2; Dirlik 1991,

---

<sup>3</sup> In Mo 1997, Mo uses a straight phonetic transliteration, *An Na Qi zhuyi*; while Liang calls himself and fellow anarchists *ziyou shehui zhuyizhe* (Freedom socialists). For a discussion of the word anarchism, see, for example, Clark 1978, 3–6.

<sup>4</sup> To generations of Chinese intellectuals in the twentieth century, anarchism is a political theory for scorn and ridicule. The dominance of modern Chinese historiography by the Nationalists and Communists is one factor. Another factor that often escapes attention is the fact that generations of Chinese intellectuals have been subjected to “party-guided” education or the “participation” of education (*danghua jiaoyu*) since 1924 when Sun Yat-sen reorganized the Nationalist Party to follow Soviet Russia’s example and implemented an educational system controlled by the party. See, for example, (Yuan 2000). Yuan points out that “although the term sounds strange today, participation of education was the supreme guiding principle in Chinese education for decades...(It) stifled freedom of thought in schools ...No theory was allowed to contradict the government orthodoxy.”

128). They inherited a Confucian philosophy of human-goodness, and they believed that there are qualities of human beings which enable them to live together in a world of Great Harmony. Thus, they rejected the idea of a Utopia that exists outside of the existing world, and asserted that Great Harmony is achievable by commencing reforms in each community (Mo 1997, 66).

For the anarchist, there could be no separation of the revolutionary process from the revolutionary goal. It is on this issue of ends versus means that “anarchists and Marxists part company, rather than on their visions of the ideal society” (Clark 1978, 11; Carter 1978, 333–36). Chinese anarchists opposed class struggle to achieve a classless society. They criticized Marxism for establishing a center authority “either in the ‘proletariat’ or in its ‘representative’, the Communist party, that reproduced the very power structures that in theory it rejected” (Dirlik 1991, 9; Joll 1964, 278).

We shall proceed to explore the influence of anarchism on Chen Jiongming’s lifelong political career using Clark’s definition and certain characteristics of Chinese anarchists as guidance.

## 1. Early Revolutionary Activities

Chen Jiongming was born in 1878 in Haifeng, Guangdong, to a landlord family that enjoyed moderate wealth and a reputation for scholarship. He began to study the Confucian classics at the age of five, and won the *xiucai* degree when he was twenty-two. In 1906, he enrolled in the Academy of Law and Political Science in Canton and graduated two years later at the top of his class. The Qing government intended the newly established academy to train future officials, especially parliamentarians. Part of a reform program designed to prepare China for a constitutional monarchy, the effort resembled that of Japan following the Meiji Restoration of 1868. The academy invited Japanese and Chinese educated in Japan to give courses on the Japanese constitutional movement and Western learning.

Two events characterize Chen Jiongming’s early commitment to local and national affairs. The first resulted in the successful impeachment of a magistrate for cruel and improper conduct. As the obscure law student from a remote township in East Guangdong, Chen gained a reputation in the provincial capital for leadership and for being willing to risk his life to fight injustice. He also refused to benefit financially from his efforts (Chen 1999, 13).

The second event took place during Chen’s vacation from the Academy in February of 1908. At the historical shrine of Wen Tianxiang in Haifeng, Chen persuaded over thirty young men of the village to swear secret support for a national revolution.<sup>5</sup> Chen’s group was made up of genuine, homegrown “village intellectuals” in the anti-Manchu movement, they were neither foreign-educated nor members of one of the long-established secret societies. While China’s many revolutionary groups shared strong nationalistic and anti-dynastic views, the Haifeng group differed from their overseas compatriots, like Sun Yat-sen, who preached the overflow of the Manchu regime from the haven of foreign countries. For these village intellectuals, revolution was the means to an immediate goal, the eradication of the misery and social injustice that surrounded them every day. They paid special attention to the problem of local reconstruction and social reform. Like the anarchists, they wanted “a social revolution (*shehui geming*) to follow immediately the successful national revolution (*minzu geming*)” (Mo 1997, 52).

---

<sup>5</sup> See Chen 1999, 13–14. Wen Tianxiang (1236–1282) symbolized Chinese (Hans) resistance to foreign invaders. As prime minister to the last Song emperor, Wen had led a war against the Mongol (Yuan) invaders.

After graduating from the Academy in 1908, Chen returned home, where in 1909 he established the *Haifeng zizhi bao* (Haifeng self-government gazette). Chen was the editor-in-chief with several others of his village comrades as editors. They did not hesitate to point out social ills, constantly adding, for instance, the headline “the evil of inequalities” to reports of buglar-ies or robberies. In October, only a year over the minimum age of thirty, Chen was elected to the first Guangdong Provincial Assembly in Canton. There he simultaneously helped develop practical policies while secretly working to overthrow the Qing Dynasty.

Prior to the successful revolt in Wuchang that sparked the Revolution of 1911, Chen had participated in two abortive revolts in Canton: the Revolt of the New Army of February 12, 1910 and the Uprising of April 27, 1911. The failures forced Chen to change his strategy to avoid focusing on the heavily armed and fully alerted capital city of the province. When the news of the Wuchang Revolt of October 10, 1911 reached Canton, Chen secretly left for his home districts in East Guangdong to raise a revolutionary army. Peasants formed the bulk of this army; they were led by a mixed group of former military officers, secret society members, local intelligentsia, and overseas Chinese from Southeast Asia. Chen Jiongming, for the first time in his political career, found himself the commander-in-chief of an army - an army one might justifiably called a “people’s revolutionary army”. Chen adopted the ancient sign of a well-field system for the flag of his army, signifying the old Chinese saying “land to the tiller” (*gengzhe you qi tian*) (Chen 1999. 41–45).

Chen’s army captured Huizhou, a capital city in East Guangdong on November 8, 1911, which led to the province’s declaration of independence on the next day without firing another shot. Chen subsequently became governor-general of the province’s new Republican government. In the critical period following a tumultuous revolution, his administration had provided Guangdong the continuity of a strong and stable government. His accomplishments were, as described by the American consul general, Leo Bergholz, “nothing less than a miracle” (*USDS* 1264, March 11, 1912)

## 2. Associations with the Anarchists

After the failure of the New Army revolt in February 1910, Chen Jiongming secretly left for Hong Kong where he and ten others joined with Liu Shifu (1884–1915) to organize a secret revolutionay society called the China Assassination Corps. The Corps was successful in the assassination of a Manchu general, but failed in its attempts on two other high Qing officials with the loss of two members. When Guangdong declared its independence, the Corps voluntarily disbanded. Supposedly in the spirit of despising worldly fame, the Corps decided to keep its history secret. They burned all documents except certain items kept in memory of their martyrs. As a consequence, the activities of the Corps were shrouded in mystery until several decades later when two survivors chose to break their silence.<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> Obviously the Corps was not proud of what they did. Violence is inconsistent with anarchist values and it is essential to anarchism that ends not be separated from means. The issue of violence and anarchism is complex and contentious. For example, Tolstoy insisted on the intrinsic importance of nonviolence for anarchism (Carter 1978, 320). Others, however, contended that “compared with the wholesale violence of capitol and government, political acts of violence are but a drop in the ocean.” (Goldman 1969, 107)

The unofficial but unquestioned leader of the Corps was Liu Shifu, who became the doyen of the Chinese anarchism. In an article meant to propagate anarchist ideas to the common people, Liu states his goal:

All the people of the world are like brothers. Naturally we love one another. But the governments invented patriotism. Soldiers are trained to kill .....The laws are simply established customs, as said by the great anarchist Kropotkin...Disorders came from contention, and contentions, from evil society, and when society is evil, the laws fail to do good....

The necessities of life are clothing, food and home. Clothing, food and home are derived from goods and goods are the product of the earth and labor.....Anarchy destroys the system of private property and promotes communism. Everyone works as he can and gets what he wants... There is no contention for money....All men live an equal life and are free to work. Quarrelsome society turns into a loving one.<sup>7</sup>

And how to achieve this idealistic society of Great Harmony, Liu explains:

The principle of anarchism may not be easily understood by unintelligent persons. The responsibility to reach them rests with the intelligent...In preaching anarchism one has to make the principle understood. When the majority of the people believe in anarchism, government will be abolished. At that time the minority of the population may be ignorant of the principle, but there will be no difficulty in making them understand (USDS 893.00B/4, April 24, 1920).

Liu's is a passive approach by persuasion and example. He was preoccupied with the importance of individual regeneration in the reformation of society. He listed twelve rules of personal conduct for members of his Conscience Society (*Xinshe*) to follow, which prohibited the consumption of meat, liquor, and tobacco, the employment of servants, riding in rickshaws, marriage, family surnames and participation in government, the parliament and assemblies, political parties, the armed forces, or any religious organization (Krebs 1998, 105–106).

Liu and his followers were men of action. In addition to publication of magazines and pamphlets, they conducted schools to learn Esperanto and even attempted to establish a village of Great Harmony (*Datong cun*).<sup>8</sup> Six years later in Zhangzhou, Chen Jiongming confided to a follower of Liu :

It is difficult to dislodge the burden of evil. It is even more difficult for someone who is willing to shoulder that burden himself. [Liu] Shifu teaches people to dislodge it. Let me take it on my shoulders for the rest of my life!" (Liang 1978, 11).

---

<sup>7</sup> This article, entitled "Sketch of Anarchism" was distributed in Zhangzhou, Fujian by Liu's followers in 1920, five years after Liu's death. It was translated by the American Consulate at Amoy (Xiamen) as enclosure to USDS 893.00B/4, April 24, 1920.

<sup>8</sup> Mo 1997, 61–62, 67–68. The village project was abandoned when Yuan Shikai's loyalists took over Chen's government in August 1913.

Chen chose to take a different approach to achieve a similar goal.<sup>9</sup>

Liu Shifu was widely respected for his seriousness of purpose and deeply committed to practising what he preached - traits that Chen Jiongming had shared in his lifelong political career.

Chen also befriended Wu Zhihui (1864–1953), another doyan of anarchism. Wu, a promoter of the popular “Work and Thrift” study movement in the early 1920s, came south to solicit Chen’s support and succeeded in getting a donation of \$100,000 for the building fund of the Franco-Chinese Institute in Lyon, France (Mo1997, 24). Wu later became an elder statesman of Sun Yat-sen’s Nationalist Party. In 1924, he failed to effect a reconciliation between Sun and Chen (Chen 1999, 239–41). In a letter to Chen, Wu explained the necessity of grooming Sun Yat-sen for a leader of the party, like Lenin in Russia. Wu confessed that he was still a “talking” anarchist, but, in reality, one who “holds a pair of grass shoes” [is a humble follower] under the banner of the patriotic [Nationalist] party (Chen 1999, 291–96).

### 3. The Zhangzhou Experiment

The two years (August 1918 – November 1920) that Chen Jiongming spent in Zhangzhou gave his first extended opportunity to put his reform ideas into action. His apprenticeship in the Guangdong Provincial Assembly and his experiences as governor-general in 1912 now bore fruit. He knew he had to maintain military strength while working to build strong civil institutions. The guidelines that shaped his actions came from the New Culture movement. The idea of this movement had emerged from the anger stimulated by Japan’s Twenty-one Demands and the events of May 4 1919.

Chen’s army, now called the Guangdong Army, was led by men who fought with him in the Revolution of 1911. In a proclamation to his army, Chen explains his political objective in veracular language:

**Question:** What is the Principle of Nation-Building (*jianguo zhuyi*) ?

**Answer:** It is democracy (*minzhu zhuyi*).

**Q:** The Republic of China is a democracy. What is the safeguard for it?

**A:** Before the promulgation of a national constitution, the safeguard is provided by the Provisional Constitution [of 1912] (Duan and Ni 1998, 1:320).

As commander-in-chief, Chen set himself up to a high standard of morality; his army was the most disciplined in the era.<sup>10</sup>

Chen embarked on a program of social reform and economic development in the twenty-six counties under his control in southern Fujian. So striking was the scope of reform that it soon

---

<sup>9</sup> After the Revolution of 1911, Liu and several other members of the assassination corps worked under the new Governor Chen, organizing the Association of the Army Corps to help disband citizen soldiers. Two years later, when Yuan Shikai loyalists took over Canton, Liu and his followers finally left for Shanghai where they continued to publish the magazine *Voice of the People* (*Minsheng*). Liu died of tuberculosis in 1915 at the early age of 31. Chen was then in exile in Malaysia and later sent funds to Liu’s brother for support of the magazine. (Mo 1997, 76).

<sup>10</sup> Chen Jiongming commanded a successful regional army that, for most part, remained loyal to him to the bitter end. It was easy for Nationalist propagandists to label the Guangdong Army as “Chen’s private army” and Chen as a “warlord” or a “militarist”, as they did immediately after Chen’s split with Sun in 1922. The label lingers to this date due in large measure to the “partification” of Chinese education for the past three quarters of a century (See Note 4)



attracted attention abroad. A newspaper in Germany, for example, referred to Zhangzhou as “the shining star in the East” (Chen 1963, 42). Some Peking University students, afire with idealistic visions of the new communist regime in Russia, were so much impressed after visiting Zhangzhou that they commented in their student publication: “[Chen] is a man devoted to revolution...[The practices] in an age of communism could not be better than what Chen has carried out in Zhangzhou ... Zhangzhou is the Moscow of southern Fujian” (WSQK 1959, 389). The American consul at Amoy commented: “The Chinese saw what could be done without undue hardship and heavy taxation” (USDS 4091, August 31, 1921). Indeed Zhangzhou was referred to by some contemporaries as “Little Model China” (Chen 1999, 294).

On the cultural side, Chen had the help of a group of “freedom socialists”, mostly Liu Shifu’s followers who came to Zhangzhou “to reform education, publish books and newspapers, change the attitudes of society, raise the people’s level of knowledge, and transform the twenty-six counties of southern Fujian into a healthy and autonomous region.” They believed this piece of clean and healthy land could serve as a shining model to the rest of China, thus inducing reform of the whole country (Liang 1978, 12).

Chen Jiongming had had little time to write during his active political career. However, in Zhangzhou, he managed to author several articles and some poems. His writings reveal unmistakably the profound influence of the anarchistic ideas for absolute equality, moral purity, democracy, mutual aid and emancipation from institutional yokes.

In the center of Zhangzhou’s first public park, which Chen had built as a symbol of the new era, he erected a tower. On its four sides were inscribed in large characters the four central concepts of the New Culture movement: *ziyou* (freedom), *pingdeng* (equality), *bo’ai* (fraternal love), and *huzhu* (mutual aid). In his foreword to *Minxing bao* (Fujian Star), Chen explored the meaning of these words and the philosophy underlying the new movement.<sup>11</sup> He argued that the New Culture movement must necessarily involve the reform of human thought, but in reforming human thought, he cautioned against the use of force or anything that resembled what we would call brainwashing. He believed that China must follow an evolutionary process based on fraternal love and the principle of mutual aid. Ultimately, he believed, human society would evolve to a stage where people enjoyed the happiness of full equality and suffered no bondage of states, nations, or individuals. What we need is, Chen argued, a great awakening of every mind so that all may be free of the prevailing erroneous thinking that “each must struggle for his own existence without any concern for the life and death of others.”

As a student at the Academy of Law and Political Science in Canton, Chen had expressed his enthusiasm for social Darwinism by giving himself the courtesy name of Jingcun (struggle for existence) (Chow 1960, 64n-t). At this point, however, he had obviously deviated from the doctrine of social evolution, considering a brutish struggle for existence morally inadequate.

At the time of rising nationalism, Chen held that nationalism constituted a far from sacred or complete vision of human society. He argued forcefully against its tenets as a categorical imperative. Instead, he believed in the truer and more lasting principles of fraternal love and mutual aid:

Men have the natural capacity for brotherly and fraternal love (*bo’ai*). If one knows how to love his country, why not teach him to extend his full capacity to love all of

---

<sup>11</sup> *Minxing bao* was published twice a week. The full text of Chen’s Foreword is reprinted in Duan and Ni 1998, 402–406.

human society? To be able to love all mankind means that one cannot discard his compassion for others since it is linked at least in part to all mankind in the historical past....If any nation is being oppressed today, we can rush to offer her assistance without being in conflict with the compassion we hold for other nations .....Is not the concept of “socialism of all mankind” (*quanrenlei shehui zhuyi*) a better doctrine? (Duan and Ni 1998, 404–405).

In another publication, the *Minxing ribao* (Fujian Star Daily News), Chen wrote a manifesto outlining the paper’s mission. He reiterated the themes of building a new society by shaking off the yoke (*shufu*) of the old society for freedom, by discarding class distinctions for equality, and by putting aside competition for mutual aid (Duan and Ni 1998, 441–45).

Contrary to anarchist teaching, Chen was not opposed to religion. When his friend Xu Qian, a noted jurist, decided to “escape from Confucianism to convert to Christianity” (*tao ru gui ye*), Chen was inspired to write an article entitled *Don’t Be a Slave to Evils* in praise of Christianity. Jesus of Nazareth, Chen observes, was a man who preached equality, freedom, fraternal love and self-sacrifice and who was willing to bear the painful burden to save the world. Chen credited Christianity as the prime moving force for the freedom and equality enjoyed by the people in the Western countries (Duan and Ni 1998, 408–18).

In both British and American diplomatic reports, Chen Jiongming was occasionally referred to as “the Bolshevik general”, but the report of an American missionary at Zhangzhou to the consul at Amoy offered a milder assessment: “At a large athletic meet held here the past week, [Bolshevist] literature was distributed and some speeches made. The General [Chen] himself a socialist (but I cannot believe of the most radical type) has apparently aided in this movement.”<sup>12</sup>

Wu Zhihui visited Zhangzhou in 1919–1920. His remarks typify the prevailing attitude of most Chinese intellectuals at the time, including Chen Jiongming:

As to Marxism, we had studied it and debated over it many times in our publication *The New Century* in Paris more than ten years ago. We finally rejected it [as inapplicable to China]... In reality, every country has its own ways and conditions that accompany the outbreak of a social revolution. We had no idea what Lenin had up his sleeve (Liang 1978, 17).

Although the Chinese were not sure “what Lenin had up his sleeve”, they neither feared nor disliked the new Soviet state. They were curious about it and sincerely admired Lenin’s leadership in the fight of the oppressed Russian people against czarist imperialism. The Soviet Union was in its infancy, and the Chinese Communist Party did not yet exist. It was still a time when everyone was exploring a variety of new social ideas.

## 4 The Federalist State

After returning from Fujian with the Guangdong Army in November 1920, Chen Jiongming immediately embarked upon a fervent program to make Guangdong a model province so as

---

<sup>12</sup> USDS 893.00B/2, April 26, 1920. The literature was produced and distributed by followers of Liu Shifu. It was anarchist, not Bolshevik. The confounding of anarchism and Bolshevism was typical of the confusion that prevailed at the time over the relationship of these radical ideologies. See, for example, Dirlik 1991, 151

to “gain the confidence of the nation (*mofan qixin*)”. In an interview with Rodney Gilbert, the American correspondent of the *North China Daily News* (Shanghai) two months after his return to Guangdong, Chen explained the underlying philosophy and ultimate goal of Guangdong’s reform programs:

The people of China are not organized to express themselves or to make their collective will felt. They are accustomed, however, to self-government in their village communities, and if there is democracy in China, it will have to evolve from these communities and their tradition of self rule. We must work **from the bottom up**, and not from the top down as we have been trying to do for so many years.....

We believe that if we begin the application of our ideas in Kuangtung [Guangdong] and if we are at all successful, the example will prompt the people of the provinces around us to insist upon a similar system, and that the movement will spread throughout China.....If we can get a few provinces we can federate and bring in the others, one by one, until we have made over into a *lien sheng cheng fu* [*liansheng zhengfu*] – a Government of United Provinces (USDS 3809, February 18, 1921).

In the two-year period of 1921–1922, significant and unprecedented results were achieved for the reconstruction of Guangdong in all fronts – in establishing modern municipalities, election of county magistrates and assemblymen, reform of education, industrial development, judicial reform, labor movement, commerce and transportation (Chen 1999, 120–56). The election of county magistrates and assemblymen was unprecedented in China’s history. The Guangdong government fostered the organization of labor unions, but it “sternly cautioned” them against strikes as a means to settle labor grievances. At the same time, the government launched a drive to eliminate illiteracy among the labor force by establishing evening schools in the factories (Huang 1922, 59). By early 1922 there were more than 130 unions registered with the provincial government representing more than 300,000 members (*Huazi ribao*, February 10, 11, 12 and 14, 1925). The Machinery Workers Union was among the most powerful, and its leaders were prominent anarchists (Mo 1997, 26).

Without a written law and with little precedent, Governor Chen took upon himself to put into practice what workers of advanced industrial nations only gained a decade later – the right of the workers to *collective bargaining* through their own representation without interference, restraint or coercion by the employers. Using such an approach, he helped settle the great Hong Kong Seamen’s strike of 1922 (FO 371/8030 March 11, 1922, 92; *Qun bao* March 6, 1922 [SRYS 5:100]; Chen 1999, 142–48). Chen had similar idea for organizing peasant unions as a vehicle for agrarian reforms; he put it into practice in East Guangdong in 1923–1925 (Chen 1999, 148–50).

Chen Jiongmings’ idea of building democracy from the bottom up clearly had its anarchist origin.<sup>13</sup> The noted American educator and philosopher John Dewey, who visited China for a two-year lecture tour in 1919–1921, had high praise for Chen and the federalist program in Guangdong. Dewey visited Guangdong in the spring of 1921. In July he reported for *The New Republic* on Chen’s views on unifying China “by the people themselves, employing not force but the methods of normal political evolution.”<sup>14</sup>

<sup>13</sup> For anarchism and the federalist idea, see, for example, Clark 1978, 6; also Gerrin 1970, 63–65

<sup>14</sup> Dewey 1921, 235. Apparently Dewey and Chen shared many views on solving China’s problem. Dewey’s pragmatism was “more socialist than libertarian, more anarchist than communist or liberal”. (See Manicas 1992, 407).

While the Guangdong Provincial Assembly was working on the provincial constitution in early 1921, Chen Jiongming was drafting a “reconstruction plan” (*jianshe fanglue*) - a proposal for a national constitution. The plan was, in essence, a political “initiative” by the Guangdong federalists, which sought immediate action towards the goal of unifying the country (Chen 1999, 159–62). In the North, Hu Shi and a number of prominent scholars, writing for the Peking periodical *Nuli zhoubao* (Edeavor Weekly) advised both Sun Yat-sen and Wu Peifu that only by the adoption of a federal system of government could the nation be saved from partitioning by warlords (Li 1971, 583). A dissenting voice was raised by Chen Duxiu who would later become the founder of the Chinese Communist Party.<sup>15</sup> Chen Duxiu mounted a vehement attack on the federalists: “Those who advocate ‘a federation of provinces’ are simply using ‘federation of self-governing provinces’ (*liansheng zizhi*) as a pretext to effect the seizure of territories by military governors.”<sup>16</sup>

After forging an alliance with the Chinese Communist Party in 1924, Sun Yat-sen took up Chen Duxiu’s line of attack:

If we were to imitate the American federal system and change China into united provinces, it would become necessary for each province to have its constitution and to govern itself. After the provincial constitutions are implemented, then a federal constitution could be built up.

But in reality that would be changing a united China into some twenty independent units and then reuniting them, just like those ten old independent states of America a hundred years ago. That solution...is utterly wrong [for China]. (*GFYJ* 1960, 253; d’Elia 1974, 312)

Sun never did discuss the pros and cons of a federal system of government in China. Instead, he played with two pairs of antonyms to advance his argument - “united” (*tongyi*) versus “separate” or “disunit” (*fenlie*), and “centralized-authority government” (*jiquan*) versus a “shared-authority or federal government” (*fenzhi*). Sun led his listeners to believe that a united provinces system, in which authority was shared between the central and local governments (*fenzhi*), was actually a disunited or splintered (*fenlie*) state of affairs. Sun also used the term “unification” (*tongyi*) erroneously as a synonym for concentrating all power in the central government (*jiquan*). Following the Soviet example, unification by force with a highly centralized regime run according to the wishes of the party leader became the single, unalterable program of Sun’s reorganized party in 1924.

Such a fusion of words - *tongyi* and *jiquan* - held great appeal for the divided nation. Aided by Soviet techniques of mass propaganda and political action, Sun was able to discredit the federalist principle of building democracy from the bottom up, a doctrine that had been enormously popular in China for more than a decade.

To allay the fears of the Chinese people about the establishment of a Soviet-style totalitarian state, Sun shrouded his program with two new principles. In the Nationalist Party’s Declaration

---

<sup>15</sup> Both Hu Shi and Chen Duxiu were prominent leaders in the May Fourth movement. For the split between them, see, for example, Keenan 1977, 74

<sup>16</sup> Li 1986, 193. Chen Duxiu’s article was originally printed in *Xiangdao zhoubao* 1:2, September 13, 1922. In September 1922, Chen Duxiu attempted to persuade Chen Jiongming to join the Communist Party and lead the revolution in South China; see Liang 1978, 39.

at its First National Convention in January 1924, Sun announced the adoption of the Principle of Equalization of Power (*junquan zhuyi*) and of county (*xian*) self-governemnt. In the former, the division of power between the central and local governments will “favor neither the centralized-authority (*zhongyang jiquan*) nor the shared-authority (*difang fenquan*) system of government”. The governor of a province is to be elected by the people, but he “receives orders from the central govnrment to perform his duties”. The county is designated as the basic unit for local self-government (*GFYJ* 1960, 606). In essence, what Sun proposed was a Soviet-style federation or union of “self-governing” counties.

After the defeat of the Guangdong Army in 1925 by Sun’s Soviet-trained, Soviet-equipped force, Chen Jiongming made his home in Hong Kong, where he continued to seek the unification of China by political means. He found a new political party, called the Zhigong Party, with its membership primarily from overseas Chinese in the Americas and Southeast Asia. The party stipulated federalism as the fundamental principle for the nation-building of the Chinese Republic (Chen 1999, 267–68).

In his book *A Proposal for the Unification of China* published in 1927, Chen sees Chinese federalism coordinating four levels of geographical division - the village, the district, the county or city, and the province - with two types of organization, the traditional geographical organization and the occupational or trade organization (Chen 1999, 269–72). Here we can sense an anarchistic system of “extreme” decentralization in which power is delegated upwards from the smallest unit - the Jeffersonian township or the village (See, for example, Nock 1970, 56–57). The new participation of the occupational or trade organizations reminds one of Bakunin’s free federation of workers’ associations, industrial as well as agricultural, and scientific as well as literary associations (See, for example, Maximoff 1964, 298).

During his last years in Hong Kong, Chen advocated the extension of the federalist principle to the reconstruction of Asia, Europe and America, eventually leading to a world federation:

1. Build the Chinese nation upon the principles of equality of wealth, equality of rights, and the equality of enjoyment.
2. Build Asia into an organized unit, a cornerstone for a world organization. To achieve a world in harmony (*datong*), Asia, Europe and America must be separately organized into federations.
3. Organize the world into a federation based on the principle of equality and peaceful co-existence. Abolish military organizations in every nation. China should play the role of founding member in such a world federation. (Chen 1927, 28–29; *Nianpu* 1957, 36–37)

In the years around 1920 many people worldwide were advocating world federalism, for they had been sickened during World War I with the meaningless slaughter and destruction brought about in the name of nationalism. The League of Naions had been established, but that painfully weak institution could not stand against the forces of fascism and nazism. Many Chinese intellectuals had had hope for the League of Nations; notably among them was the Marxist Li Dazhao. Li saw a historical progress to higher levels of organization: “The Americas, Europe and Asia would each unite. Finally, they would join together and abolish all racial and national boundaries” (Zarrow 1990, 218).

There appears to be no significant difference between what Chen Jiongming advocated and what Li Dazhao foresaw in leading to a world of Great Harmony. The important difference lies in the strategies that one takes to achieve his goals. The federalist Chen Jiongming would apply the concept of federation to every levels of organization, building democracy from the bottom up - an anarchist strategy that ends should not be separated from the means in the process of change. Li Dazhao took the Marxists' approach. To the anarchists, the Marxists' goal is not necessarily wrong, but "given the methods they advocate, they can be certain never to reach it" Clark 1978, 11).

## Conclusion

Nationalism, revolution and communism have dominated the study of modern Chinese history from the late Qing period to the present. Federalism and anarchism have long been ignored by those who regard all history through the eyes of the victors. Study of Chen Jiongming's political career provides a glimpse of federalism and its interplay with nationalism and anarchism on the eve of the communist expansionism in China. As observed by James Joll, "the belief that triumphant causes alone should interest the historian leads to the neglect of much in the past that is valuable and curious, and narrows our view of the world" (Avrich 1967, 4).

The first quarter of the twentieth century was a golden age for Chinese intellectuals. During the late Qing reform movement, about one hundred journals circulated at any one time, containing numerous essays on Western thought and practices (Bailey 1990, 5-6). Within six months of the May Fourth student incident in 1919, more than four hundred new periodicals, all in vernacular language, appeared in the newsstands (Dewey 1973, 13). The noted educator Cai Yuanpei later recalled the situation of the 1910s and 1920s nostalgically: "At that time, freedom of thought and speech developed nearly to their utmost" (Yuan 2000, 47).

The pivotal turn came in 1924 when Sun Yat-sen reorganized the Nationalist Party to follow Soviet Russia's example and implemented "participation" (*danghua*) of education, civil service, judiciary and the armed forces.<sup>17</sup> Four years after Sun's death, in 1929, Hu Shi, at which time he was serving as chancellor of a private university in Shanghai, reported: "[At present] to deny the existence of God is acceptable, but criticizing Sun Yat-sen is forbidden...It is forbidden not to read Sun's 'Last Will and Testament' or not to observe the weekly commemorative ceremony."<sup>18</sup> From this time on, the most influential theory was always the ruler's speech and writing.

Chen Jiongming's commitment to federalism was the natural outgrowth of his experience and philosophy. He believed in reform from the bottom up. He thought that the country should draw on traditional Chinese strengths, especially its long experience with self-government on the local levels. By strengthening those capacities, Chen thought that his fellow Chinese would learn to govern themselves successfully at the regional and ultimately the national level. He lives, wrote John Dewey in *The New Republic*, "an almost Spartan life in a country where official position is largely prized for the luxuries it makes possible" (Dewey 1921, 235).

Was Chen Jiongming an anarchist? He was no more an anarchist than John Dewey was.<sup>19</sup> If a label is desired, Chen was unquestionably a federalist, who had embraced certain important

---

<sup>17</sup> See Note 4 for the meaning of the word "participation"

<sup>18</sup> Yuan 2000, 48; originally from Hu 1998, 5:579.

<sup>19</sup> See, for example, Manicas 1992 for comments on Dewey's political philosophy.

ideas and ideals of anarchism. He was, above all, a man who was totally committed to practising what he preached.

---

## Note on the Author

Leslie Chen is the son of Chen Jiongming (Chen Chiung-ming), governor of Guangdong Province in early Republican China. He was trained as an engineer at the National Chiao-Tung (Jiaotong) University, Shanghai, and Harvard University. After a thirty-year career in engineering, he retired and devoted his time to studying his father's political career. He has compiled a collection of historiographic materials as well as two Chinese language biographies of Chen Jiongming. He is the author of a recent book *Chen Jiongming and the Federalist Movement: Regional Leadership and Nation Building in Early Republican China*, Center for Chinese Studies, University of Michigan.

## List of References

- Avrich, Paul. 1967. *The Russian Anarchists*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Bailey, Paul J. 1990. *Reform the People: Changing Attitudes Towards Popular Education in Early Twentieth-Century China*. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press.
- Carter, April. 1978. "Anarchism and Violence" in *Anarchism NOMOS XIX*, edited. by J. R. Pennock and J.W. Chapman. New York: New York University Press.
- Chen Jiongming. 1927 *Zhongguo tongyi chuyi* (A proposal for the unification of China). Hong Kong
- Chen, Leslie H. 1995. "On Sun Yat-sen's Three Principles of the People". Paper presented to the 1955 ASPAC Conference of the Association for Asian Studies, Pacific University. Published in Selected Paper Series, Pacific University, Forest Grove, Oregon.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1991. "Chen Jiongming (1878–1933) and the Chinese Federalist Movement". In *Republican China* 17.1:21–37
- \_\_\_\_\_. (Dingyan). 1999. Leslie H. Dingyan Chen, *Chen Jiongming and the Federalist Movement: Regional Leadership and Nation Building in Early Republican China*, Ann Arbor: Center for Chinese Studies, University of Michigan.
- Chen, Qiyou. 1963. "Chen Qiyou xiansheng fangwen ji" (An interview with Mr. Chen Qiyou), by Zeng Wen, Beijing. In *Haifeng wenshi* (Historical accounts from Haifeng County), vol.1, edited by *Haifeng zhengxie wenshi ziliao yanjiuhui* (Haifeng Political Consultative Historical Documents Research Committee). Haifeng, Guangdong, 1985.
- Chow Tse-tsung. 1960. *The May Fourth Movement: Intellect Revolution in Modern China*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Clark, John P. 1978. "What is Anarchism?". In *Anarchism, NOMOS XIX*, edited. by J. R. Pennock and J.W. Chapman. New York: New York University Press.

- d'Elia, P.M., s.j. 1974. *The Triple Demise of Sun Yat-sen*. Wuchang, 1931. Reprinted, New York: AMS Press.
- Dewey, John. 1921. "Divided China". In *New Republic* (July 20) 27: 212–15; 235–37.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1973 *Lectures in China 1919–1920*, translated by Robert W. Clopton and Tsuin-chen Ou. Honolulu: The University Press of Hawaii.
- Dirlik, Arif. 1991. *Anarchism in Chinese Revolution*. University of California Press.
- Duan Yunzhang and Ni Junming. 1998. *Chen Jiongming ji* (Collected Works of Chen Jiongming), Guangzhou: Sun Yat-sen University Press.
- Duara, Prasenjit. 1995 *Rescuing History from the Nation: Questioning Narratives of Modern China*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Gerrin, Daniel. 1970. *Anarchism: From Theory to Practice*. New York: Monthly Review Press.
- GFYJ. 1960. *Gufu yijiao sanmin zhuyi zongji* (Sun Yat-sen's teaching and the Three Principles of the People). Taipei: Nationalist Archives.
- Goldman, Emma. 1969. *Anarchism and Other Essays*. New York: Dover.
- FO. British Foreign Office general correspondence. Public Records Office, London. Papers are listed by document group, document number, date, and page.
- Hsieh, Winston. 1962. "The Ideas and Ideals of a Warlord: Chen Chiung-ming (1878–1933)" *Paper on China*, vol.16, Cambridge, Mass: East Asia Research Center, Harvard University.
- Hu Shi. 1998. "Xinwenhua yundong yu Guomindang" (The New Culture Movement and the Nationalist Party). In Ouyang Zhesheng, comp., *Hu Shi wenji* (The Collected works of Hu Shi) Beijing.
- Huang Yanpei. 1922. *Yi sui zhi Guangzhoushi* (Canton at year one). Shanghai: Commercial Press.
- Huazi ribao*. (*The Chinese Daily News*). Hong Kong
- Joll, James. 1964. *The Anarchists*. New York: Grosset and Dunlap.
- Keenan, Barry. 1977. *The Dewey Experiment in China: Education Reform and Political Power in the Early Republic*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Krebs, Edward. 1998. *Shifu: Soul of Chinese Anarchism*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishing.
- Li Dajia. 1986. *Minguo chunian de liansheng zizhi yundong* (The Federalist movement in the early years of the Republic). Taipei: Hongwen Press..
- Li Jiangnong 1971. *Zhongguo ji bainian zhengzhishi* (A political history of China in the past one hundred years). 8<sup>th</sup> edition. Taipei: Commercial Press.
- Liang, Bingxian. 1978. *Jiefang bielü* (A Story of Liberation). Hong Kong, 1951–1952. Reprinted in *Jindai Zhongguo shiliao congkan*, vol.19, edited. by Shen Yunlong. Taipei: Wenhai Publishing.
- Manicas, Peter T. 1992. "John Dewey: Anarchism and the Political State". In *John Dewey – Critical Assessments*, edited. by J. E. Tiles, 2: 407–29. New York: Chapman and Hall.
- Maximoff, G.P. *The Political Philosophy of Bakunin*. New York,: Free Press.
- Mo Jipeng. 1997. *The Reminiscences of Mr. Mo Jie-peng*, Oral History Series No.64, Taipei: Institute of Modern History, Academia Sinica.
- Nianpu*. 1957 *Chen Jingcun xiansheng nianpu* (A chronological biography of Mr. Chen Jingcun [Jiongming]). [By Chen Yansheng, et al.] Hong Kong, 1957.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1995. *Chen Jingcun (Jiongming) xiansheng nianpu* (A chronological biography of Mr. Chen Jingcun [Jiongming]). 2 vols. edited by Chen Dingyan (Leslie H.). Taipei: Guiguan Publishing Company, 1995.
- Nock, Albert Jay. 1973. *Our Enemy the State*. New York: Free Life Editions.



- Qun bao*. (*Community Daily News*). Canton.
- Shen bao*. (*The Shanghai Daily News*). Shanghai.
- SRYS. 1994. *Shanweishi renwu yanjiu shiliao* (Collection of historical materials for research on natives of Shenwei municipality). Shanwei, Guangdong: Shanweishi renwu yanjiu shiliao bianzuan weiyanhui.
- USDS. United States Department of State documents. Document group 893 concerns China's internal affairs. National Archives, Washington, D.C.
- Woodcock, George. 1962. *Anarchism — A History of Libertarian Ideas and Movement*. Cleveland: World Publishing.
- WSQK. 1959. *Wusi shiqi qikan jieshao* (Introduction to the periodicals published in the May Fourth period) vol.3. Beijing.
- Xiangdao zhoubao* (*Guidance Weekly*). 1922–1927. Shanghai
- Yuan Zheng. 2000. “The ‘Participation’ of Education: A Pivotal Turn in Modern Chinese Education, 1924–1929”. In *Twentieth Century China*, 25.2: 33–53 (April 2000). Ann Arbor: Center for Chinese Studies, University of Michigan.
- Zarrow, Peter. 1990. *Anarchism and Chinese Political Culture*. New York: Columbia University Press.

The Anarchist Library  
Anti-Copyright



Leslie H. Chen  
Chen Jiongming  
Anarchism and the Federalist State

Retrieved on 2007-03-11 from [web.archive.org](http://web.archive.org)

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