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# Anarchism in China

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## High Tide at May Fourth, Decline During the 1920s

Anarchists were prominent in the May Fourth incident in 1919, which gave shape to the Communist revolution in China after World War I. Arif Dirlik has shown the high degree of anarchists' involvement in this action, regarded by Chinese Communists as the springboard of their movement. By the early 1920s, however, anarchism weakened in the face of the Nationalist and Communist movements, both emphasizing military means to advance national development. By the late 1920s members of the Paris group of anarchists became senior advisors in Chiang Kai-shek's Guomindang (Nationalist Party), their opposition to Marxism taking precedence over whatever else remained of their anarchist principles.

During this later period some anarchists emphasized free thought and individual expression. A few remained creatively faithful to anarchist principles. Chief among these was the novelist Ba Jin (Li Feigan), who took his pen name from the Chinese form of the names of Mikhail Bakunin and Peter Kropotkin. Ba Jin died in 2004 at the age of 100, a revered symbol of the positive achievements of China's revolutionary twentieth century. His humanism reflected his anarchist principles.

The Communist leadership recognized the anarchist movement as it undertook to evaluate the Cultural Revolution (1966–1969). Seeking sources of the “ultraleftism” deemed responsible for that chaotic decade, they commissioned efforts to collect materials on the earlier anarchist movement. The compendia published as a result of those efforts have proved indispensable for research on Chinese anarchism. But it is not at all clear that anarchism played any role in that tragic decade, the causes of which would seem to lie deep in China's history and in the nation's tortured transition to a workable form of modernity.

China's defeat in the Sino-Japanese War in 1894–1895 was a crowning blow after repeated humiliations in earlier decades of the nineteenth century. Even more important to many intellectuals were problems of injustice and corruption in China's social and political order. Anarchism offered a systematic analysis of and response to all such problems, and Chinese intellectuals who adopted anarchist principles did so for some combination of this broad range of concerns.

## Early Anarchism in China, 1905–1910

Two major forms of anarchism developed in China, both originating in European intellectual life of the previous several decades. The earliest notions about anarchism came by way of Japan and drew on revolutionary activism elsewhere, especially on Russian populism, which emphasized assassination and other forms of “propaganda by the deed.” A number of assassination attempts occurred in China during the first decade of the twentieth century.

Early Chinese anarchists in Japan emphasized traditional thought and values. The activist couple Liu Shipei and his wife He Zhen gave shape to the anarchist ideas of the group that formed in Tokyo. Liu posited an anarchist society based on natural communities in the Chinese countryside, while He Zhen became the first to expound anarchist feminism in China. Liu and He presented their views in *Tianyi bao* (Heaven's justice) and *Heng bao* (Natural equality). Personal and political considerations made the anarchist careers of this radical couple brief.

The second model for anarchism emphasized the rationality of science and natural law. This anarchism influenced Chinese who sojourned in Europe, especially in France, in the early 1900s. The Chinese anarchist group that formed in Paris developed an avant-garde, science-oriented form of anarchism. Their greatest inspiration was Peter Kropotkin, the great Russian anarchist leader who

had abandoned violence in favor of sophisticated theory and popular organizing. His anarchism rested on observation of history and society, and he emphasized the concept of mutual aid (*huzhu*), which became a watchword for Chinese activists of all viewpoints by the late 1910s.

The Paris group criticized superstition and backward social customs. They urged the application of modern science in every aspect of life, thus launching a major theme among subsequent generations of intellectuals. Three individuals formed the nucleus of the Paris group: Zhang Jingjiang, Li Shizeng, and Wu Zihui. Zhang managed his family's business importing European goods to China. Li, who studied biology, started an enterprise to prepare bean curd (*doufu*) for sale. These activities launched the group on a practical footing and provided outlets for their evolving anarchist ideas. Wu joined them later and wrote eloquently in their anarchist journal *Xin shiji* (The new century). Begun in 1907, this journal emphasized the scientific basis of anarchism, ridiculed superstition in Chinese life, and challenged the Qing government's authority.

## **Liu Shifu, the Epitome of Chinese Anarchism**

Liu Sifu (1884–1915), who adopted the name Shifu in 1912, became China's most consistent anarchist. Liu's evolution as an anarchist reflects all the influences described above. He went to Japan to study in 1906 and joined the Tongmeng Hui (Revolutionary Alliance). Following a failed assassination attempt in May 1907, Liu studied the Paris group's *Xin shiji* and other journals during three years in prison and completed his transition to theoretical anarchism. Essays written then also show Liu's attraction to the Buddhist ideal of the self-sacrificing bodhisattva, which characterized his entire career.

After the Republic was established in early 1912, Shifu used only pacifist means to propagate anarchism. He organized family

and friends into an anarchist commune in Guangzhou. The group launched *Min sheng* (Voice of the people), which commented on social movements within China and abroad and published translations of anarchists such as Kropotkin and Emma Goldman. The group taught Esperanto, and in *Min sheng* Shifu publicized the worldwide Esperanto movement, a great idealistic community on the eve of World War I. Yuan Shikai's crackdown in late 1913 abruptly ended Shifu's activities in Guangzhou, and his group relocated in Shanghai, where they continued to publish *Min sheng* regularly despite declining funds. Shifu contracted tuberculosis, but as a strict vegetarian inspired by Leo Tolstoy, he refused to eat meat to gain strength; he died in spring 1915.

Shifu had broken with Sun Yat-sen's concept of a new Chinese state. He castigated Sun as a state socialist like Marx, anticipating the enmity of Chinese anarchists to the Chinese Communists, who organized some years later. Shifu stood as a powerful exemplar of anarchist principles, but his idealism was difficult for less austere individuals. Members of his group continued their anarchist mission as ordinary laborers in Shanghai, organizing labor there and in Guangzhou. Some in the group carried their influence as far as Singapore.

In France, meanwhile, the old Paris group of anarchists continued the practical aspect of their work in a work-and-study program during and after World War I. This assisted many young Chinese with sojourns in Lyons or Paris for study-abroad experiences. Such major figures as Zhou Enlai and Deng Xiaoping participated. Mao Zedong himself was strongly attracted to anarchist ideas during the late 1910s and early 1920s during the formative stage of his development. The ultimate choice of Marxism reflected this generation's acceptance of discipline and authority as essential to making revolution.