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A look at the Chinese Anarchist movement between 1905 and 1930

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The following was written as part my studies at SOAS between 2015–2016 for a class entitled “Nationhood and Competing Identities in Modern China” by Dr Lars Laamann. This piece is meant to be a simple introduction to a complicated and fascinating phenomenon. I’ve added references at the end of the post for those of you who wish to read further. I also welcome recommended readings and comments. This is part of an effort to decolonise anarchist thought.

“The recalling of anarchism also has obvious political implications for our understanding of the past and present of socialism in China. The repudiation of anarchism with the ascendancy of Leninist-Marxism also meant the suppression of certain questions crucial to socialism as a political ideology – in particular the question of democracy.” — Arif Dirlik

Following the death of Mao Zedong in 1976, a campaign of repudiation was launched by successive governments against his legacy and especially against that of his most well-known ‘achievement’: the Cultural Revolution. As Dirlik writes, “the repudiation of the Cultural Revolution following Mao’s death in 1976 was rapidly to call into question Maoist historiography of the socialist revolution as well.”

This meant that with modern China’s Maoist ‘foundation myth’ put into question, the importance of China’s anarchist legacy resurfaced as arguably the only remaining Leftist ‘alternative’ to Maoist-Marxist-Leninist historiography. Or, to put it in other words, “the intellectual context for the surge of interest in the history of anarchism is, ultimately, not just the repudiation of the Cultural Revolution but the disillusionment with Marxism-Leninism that it has brought in its wake.”

But who were the anarchists and why were they so successful in the first decades of the 20th century?

Interestingly, Chinese anarchism did not start in China proper but rather in the two main foreign cities hosting Chinese students of wealthy families: Paris, where the 'Paris Group' was established and, especially due to its geographic proximity, Tokyo where the 'Tokyo Group' found a home. While most students went to Tokyo, the influence of the 'Paris Group' remained as significant as that of the 'Tokyo Group'. In fact, "Paris [became] the center of the early Chinese anarchist movement." Working independently (but in constant contact with each other) at the same time, they brought French, Japanese and Russian anarchist thinking into Chinese society and dominated Leftist radicalism until the late 1920s.

The Paris Group, "fervent anti-traditionalists who decried any attempt to equate Lao Tzu with the modern anarchists, or the ancient well-field system with modern communism," sought to transform Chinese society by rejecting its conservative roots and replacing them with a set of new, radical principles. They called for the complete abolition of Confucianism which they viewed as outdated and corrupt, leading Ch'u Min-i to complain that "the Chinese seem to be the greatest lovers of things ancient."

The Tokyo Group shared many common beliefs with the Paris Group. But here it bares mentioning the difference between the two intellectual movements. The Tokyo Group seemed more willing to highlight what they claimed was China's historical propensity to anarchist or 'diluted anarchist' thinking which they argued found a home in political Daoism. While some were skeptical of this attempt at 'historical recycling' – Frederic Bender and Roger Ames warned against making direct links between 'Political Daoism' and Anarchism since, as Ames argued, "[Daoism] retains, albeit in improved form, ruler, rule, and the means of rule (the state)" – others viewed it as an attempt to appropriate anarchist philosophy and make it accessible to the majority of Chinese citizens.

- Edward S. Krebs – Shifu, Soul of Chinese Anarchism.
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you depend on others to eat.” Her husband, none other than Liu Shipei, supported her work as it conformed to his utopian vision of what a classless and equal society would look like.

It is therefore ironic that He Zhen’s work ended up being incorporated into her husband’s which, if anything, also serves as a reminder that the causes that He Zhen championed a hundred years ago are still as relevant today as they were then.

References/Further Reading.

Some of these are available for free.

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- Ames, Roger T – “Is Political Taoism Anarchism?” *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 10.1 (1983): 27–47.
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- Dirlik, Arif – *Anarchism in the Chinese Revolution.*
- Alex Feldt – “Governing Through the Dao: A Non-Anarchistic Interpretation of the Laozi.”
- Ole P. Fossgård – *The Early Chinese Anarchist Discourse on Feminism, 1906–1910*
- Will Firth – “Esperanto and Anarchism.” *Esperanto Und Das Internationale Sprachproblem* (1998).
- Rebecca Karl – “Interview with Rebecca Karl: China’s Qing Dynasty Anarcho-feminists.” *Shanghaiist*.

The latter was defended by Liu Shipei, a noted scholar and leader of the Tokyo Group, who argued that there were natural similarities between traditional individualist Daoism and Anarchism. Interestingly, whereas the Paris Group claimed intellectual superiority due to their emphasis on the importance of Western philosophy and Science, the Tokyo Group seemed to apply materialist analysis more consistently in their journals, in particular with regards to women and the lower classes in China.

There are a number of further differences between the two but we won’t dwell on them here, instead focusing on their similarities. For a start, both groups and their mainland Chinese counterparts, upheld a core anarchist belief in the importance of education in creating “whole persons.”

One way of doing that was through their prolific publishing of Chinese translations of ‘classical’ anarchist texts (mostly Russian and French) as well as penning many articles in the prominent anarchist journals of the time: *New Era* run by the Paris Group and *Natural Justice and Balance* run by the Tokyo Group via the “Society for the Study of Socialism”. Some of China’s most well-known anarchists of the period wrote in these two journals including Liu Shipei, He Zhen, Li Shizeng, Zhang Renjie, Chu Minyi and Wu Zhihui.

In their writings, both groups rejected the view that society’s progress was dependent upon capitalist competition. As Ch’u Min-i wrote: “Progress did not necessarily depend upon competition and competition did not always mean progress. Mutual aid was also a route to progress — with justice.” They also rejected the notion that “China needed nationalism because it suffered from foreign aggression, or that their revolution would render China vulnerable to further aggression” because, they argued, a successful anarchist revolution in China would influence revolutionary activity within the imperial powers, weakening the latter’s resolves and capacity to attack the country.

Additionally, both groups were participants in the Esperanto movement. Indeed, Liu Shifu, one of the most influential figures of the Chinese anarchist movement, even had his own journal, *La Voĉo de l'Popolo* (The Voice of the People) starting in 1913 at a time when many anarchist Esperantists “were murdered or sent to labour camps during the persecution of Soviet Esperantists.”

The idea behind these principles and actions was that in order to build an anarchist society which would be “based upon a combination of science and humanism”, itself a “heroic attempt to spell out a theory of progress that would signal man’s ultimate triumph over all external coercion and his own internal weaknesses” everyone would have to become ‘whole persons’, meaning “equally adept at mental and manual labor, upon whom anarchists continued to rest their hopes for the solution of the most profound cultural and social problems (which they took to be identical) facing China.” Therein lied the essence of Chinese anarchism and only through such efforts could a “class-less, equal society” come into being.

Impact and Legacy of China’s Anarchists

It is hard to assess the impact that anarchism had in the early days of the revolution or in its final phases, let alone the role it plays today. Anarchists emphasized structural problems such as patriarchy and capitalism that were at the heart of life in China and made no distinction between the ‘social’ and the ‘political’.

Anarchism also found a place in the life of the intellectual elite. This was exemplified by Cai Yuanpei, president of Peking University and founder of the Academia Sinica who, while not a strict anarchist himself, assembled influential intellectuals, among whom were known anarchists, at the university and collaborated with Li Shizeng to try and ‘reorganize’ Chinese education. His efforts in using Peking University as a space for Leftist thought would later influence the New Culture Movement (1915–1921).

Anarchists were part of both Nationalist and Communist movements, often through personal friendship ties. Many anarchists, such as Zhang Ji, Zu Zhihui and Li Shizeng, were active members of the Guomindang (Chinese Nationalist Party), arguing that participating in the party would allow them to remove the common threat that was the Qing Dynasty and steer the party towards adopting more ‘anarchist-friendly’ positions, thereby facilitating the task for future anarchists. In any case, we cannot say that the Guomindang anarchists ‘succeeded’ – and anti-Guomindang anarchists accused them of being opportunists, rejecting their claim of pragmatism – but their influence was certainly noticeable.

As for the communist leadership, the anarchists became hostile to their adoption of Leninist-Marxism following the success of the Bolshevik Revolution, rejecting particularly, “the Leninist concept of elitism, of tutelage.” So hostile were the anarchists to the Leninist-Marxists (and then Maoist-Leninist-Marxists) that by 1926 some were pressuring the Guomindang to “terminate the alliance with the Communists.”

But regardless, it was anarchists who organized the Diligent Work-Frugal Study Movement (1912–1927) which allowed some important future Communist Party figures such as Zhou Enlai, Deng Xiaoping, Chen Yi, Li Fuchun, Nie Rongzhen, Li Lisan, Cai Chang, Xu Teli and Li Weiham to go study in France and Belgium as ‘student-workers’.

Perhaps one final noticeable legacy of China’s anarchists was their groundbreaking call for the emancipation of all women. This proliferation of Feminist philosophy and activism by anarchists cannot be underestimated.

He Zhen, notably, distinguished herself by writing for both *New Era* and *Natural Justice* journals calling for the downfall of the patriarchal Confucian system which she viewed as complicit in capitalist exploitation. In a powerful diatribe against capitalist patriarchy entitled “women ought to know about communism” she asked: “Why do you women allow people to mistreat you? Because