

# **On Theory and Practice**

Li Pei Kan

1921–1927

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Editor's note: Li Pei Kan (or Li Feigan) (1904-), writing under the name of Ba Jill (or Pa Chin), was one of China's best known writers of the twentieth century. His novel, *Family* (Garden City: Anchor Books, 1972; originally published 1931), is a classic of modern Chinese literature. His pseudonym was a contraction of the Chinese names for Bakunin and Kropotkin, but he was particularly influenced by Emma Goldman, whom he described as his "spiritual mother." He corresponded with her for many years and translated several of her and Alexander Berkman's writings into Chinese. He played an active role in the Chinese anarchist movement and refused to join either the Guomindang (Nationalist Party) or the Communist Party, unlike other prominent figures in the Chinese anarchist movement, such as Wu Zihui (Selection 98), who collaborated with the Guomindang. The following excerpts are from articles Li Pei Kan published in the anarchist press during the 1920's. At the beginning of that decade, the anarchists were the most influential revolutionary group in China; by the end of that decade, they had been eclipsed by the Communists and suppressed by the Guomindang. The translations are by Shuping Wan of Montgomery College.

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## **How to Build a Society of Genuine Freedom and Equality (1921)**

THESE DAYS "FREEDOM" AND "EQUALITY" have become the pet phrases of some people. If you ask them what freedom means, they will answer: "Freedom refers to freedom of speech, press, organization, and correspondence." If you ask them what equality means, they will answer: "Every citizen is equal before the law without discrimination." However, this is not genuine freedom and equality ...

The obstacle to people's freedom is government. Since the establishment of government, the people have completely lost their freedom and are controlled by the government. We want to have mutual love among our brothers and sisters all over the world, but governments always force us to be patriotic, to be soldiers, and to kill our compatriots of the world. Even in China the situation is terrible, and the Chinese kill the Chinese. These years in the provinces of Hunan, Shanxi, and Sichuan the blood runs like a river and the dead bodies are heaped up like a mountain. Such terrible misery is exactly the benefit that government has brought us.

Capitalists monopolize the common property that belongs to the whole world, and the poor people lose their means of living. Instead of punishing those capitalists, the government protects them by means of law. The people do not have any possessions, and in order to survive they have to resort to robbery. They are actually forced to do so by the capitalists, but the government calls them robbers, and executes them by shooting. This is not to justify robbery. We just want to take back some of our confiscated possessions. Why do we deserve to be executed by shooting while those capitalists who rob the common possessions of the world deserve a comfortable life? If the poor people do not resort to robbery, the only option is to become beggars. Sometimes the government and capitalists show their benevolence, grant to the poor a tiny share of the money they have robbed, and call it by the fine-sounding name of philanthropy. They falsely accuse us of enjoying begging rather than working. Readers! Don't we want to work? The truth is that they don't give us a job opportunity and just pour abuse upon us. Therefore, the so-called freedom

and equality mentioned above seem to have nothing to do with the people! Is this genuine freedom and equality? I don't think so. What is genuine freedom and equality? I believe that only anarchism means genuine freedom and communism means genuine equality. The only way to build a society of genuine freedom and equality is social revolution.

What is anarchism? Anarchism advocates that the government and all the organizations attached to it should be abolished and that all the instruments of production and products should belong to the whole people. From each according to his capacity, to each according to his needs. Each one performs the duty that fits his capacity best. Some can be doctors and some can be mine workers. Less hours for hard jobs, and longer hours for easy jobs. Food, clothes, and houses are all provided by certain institutions. Everyone enjoys equal education with no distinction ...

Without political laws there is genuine freedom; without capitalists there is genuine equality.

My labouring friends! Please imagine the freedom and equality in a society without authoritarian powers! Do you want to have such a society? If yes, you should wage a social revolution and overthrow the evil politics. The society of freedom and equality will then be realized. Unite all your friends immediately! If you continue to tolerate your sufferings, you will simply allow yourselves to be meat on the chopping block of the capitalists! Believe me!

*(Semi-Monthly, No. 17, April 1, 1921)*

## **Patriotism and the Road to Happiness for the Chinese (1921)**

Day by day China has become an apathetic society without any happiness. Now some youth of consciousness advocate that the only way to save China from this miserable situation is to promote "patriotism," and take "patriotism" as the only way to happiness for the Chinese. As a result the sound of "patriotism" can be heard all over the country. This is a terrible phenomenon. I believe that "patriotism" is an obstacle to human evolution. As a member of humankind my conscience drives me to refute such a fallacy and to offer my suggestion of "the way to happiness for the Chinese." The following words come out of my conscience. I believe that in such a big country like China there should be at least some people of conscience who may support my ideas .

... Except for some cruel warlords and politicians, human beings are all opposed to and condemn wars, and the origins of wars actually come from "patriotism." If human beings love each other and work together peacefully, how could there be wars? "Patriotism" started to rise in the "era of animal desire," when the state came into being. The state is characterized by hypocrisy and selfishness. In order to satisfy its animal desire, the state pushes its people to invade other countries and to die. The victory of war brings pleasures to warlords and politicians, and the loss of the war takes the flesh and blood of the people as military expenses. Is war of any benefit to the common people? Unfortunately, the common people are totally unaware that so-called patriotism is a weapon used to kill their dearest ones. "Patriotism" is a monster that kills people. For example, in the late nineteenth century the German government promoted patriotic sentiment and implemented conscription. All adults, including intellectuals and priests, would have to go to perform military service, and to kill people under the instruction of the militarists and politicians. They were ordered to kill workers on strike, and even their parents and brothers. Alas! What else can be more savage and cruel than this?

...I believe that the promotion of patriotism can never bring more happiness to the Chinese; instead it can only bring them more misery. The only way for the Chinese to seek happiness is to abolish the following institutions:

**I. Government:** Government is an institution of authoritarian power. It protects laws, kills us, deprives us of our means of living, insults us, and helps the capitalists kill the poor. We human beings were born to be free by nature, but the government has created so many laws to bind us up; we love peace, but the government pushes us to the war; we are supposed to practice mutual aid with our compatriots all over the world, but the government tells us to compete with each other. Everything that the government does is contradictory to the will of the vast majority of the people. Above all government is the basis for patriotism. If we want to seek happiness, our priority is to overthrow the government.

**II. Private Property:** Private property is the result of plunder. Property originally belonged to all human beings, but a small number of people, by means of their power and knowledge, took public property as their own. This led the weak people to be homeless, and the powerful people to buy others' labour. They enjoy what the labourers produce while the labourers have nothing left for themselves. Private property is the number one inequality in the world. Also, private property has led to rivalry, theft, robbery, and moral degeneration. It is private property that has maintained the existence of government for such a long time. Therefore, the abolition of private property will make it easier to abolish the government.

**III. Religion:** Religion shackles human thought and hinders human evolution. While we want to seek truth, it teaches us superstition; while we want to be progressive, it asks us to be conservative. Some priests say: "God is omnipotent. God is truth, justice, kindness, beauty, power, and vitality, and man is falsity, injustice, evil, ugliness, impotence, and death; God is the master, and man is the slave. Man alone is not capable of achieving justice, truth, and ever-lasting life, and must follow God's revelations. God created the world, and monarchs and officials represent God and deserve to be served by the people." ... This is the essence of Christianity, and similarities can be found in other less powerful religions. Bakunin's comment is great: "If God really did exist, it would be necessary to abolish him." Let's do this.

The institutions discussed above are all our enemies. Before we can embark on the way to happiness we must abolish them. Afterwards we will redistribute property, initiate free associations, practice the principles of mutual aid, from each according to his capacity, to each according to his needs, one for all, and all for one. Is this not a happy life? However, we have to pay a price before we can obtain happiness. What is the price? It is the warm blood of many people. Bakunin said: "Nothing in the world is more exciting and more enjoyable than the revolutionary endeavor! Would you rather let your life linger by bowing down to despotic power or bravely risk your life fighting against the tyrant to the end?" How exciting and courageous! I hope our friends will join us and contribute our warm blood to the most exciting and the most enjoyable revolutionary endeavor. Let us march together to the road of happiness!

*(Awakening the People, No. I, September 1, 1921)*

## **Anarchism and the Question of Practice (1927)**

Anarchism is a product of the mass movement, and can never divorce itself from practice. In fact, anarchism is not an idle dream that transcends time. It could not have emerged before the Industrial Revolution, and could not have developed before the French Revolution. Many Chinese hold that Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu were China's [first] anarchists. This is very misleading. Taoism shares nothing with modern anarchism. The time of Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu could not have produced the ideas of modern anarchism.

I think that many people have some misunderstanding of the doctrine of anarchism. It is true that anarchists are opposed to war, but the kind of war that anarchists are opposed to is the war resulting from the power struggle among warlords and politicians. We do support the struggle of the oppressed against the oppressors, and the struggle of the proletariat against the bourgeoisie, because it is a war for self-defence and liberty, which Malatesta considered to be "necessary and sacred." We also support the war of colonies against their metropolitan states and the war of the weaker nations against imperialist powers, although the goal of such wars is a little different from our ideal. Some people are opposed to class struggle, which, they argue, is contradictory to the happiness of all humanity. There was an article in the People's Voice (No. 33), which also reflected such a point of view. Anarchists are by no means opposed to class struggle, and actually advocate class struggle. Anarchism is the ideal and ideology of the exploited class ... in the class struggle. It can be misleading simply to advocate seeking happiness for all humanity, as humanity is not a whole, and it was divided into two antagonistic classes long ago. "Anarchism has never been the ideal of the ruling class" (Kropotkin). "The real creator of anarchism is the revolutionary working class" (Aliz).

No practical problem can be more important than the problem of the Chinese revolution. It is the problem of the initiation of social revolution that occurs in our minds all the time. We are materialists ... We understand that the arrival of social revolution cannot be determined by our good wishes. It results from social evolution and is determined by the needs of history. Within the limits permitted by material conditions the effort of the individual may facilitate social evolution, but it is not the only factor in social evolution ...

There is no contradiction between revolution and evolution. Reclus said: "Evolution and revolution are the same phenomenon of a sequence of actions: evolution comes before revolution and develops into revolution." Anarchism cannot be realized in a very short period. Its success requires an accumulation of uninterrupted revolution and construction. Aliz made a good comment: "The realization of anarchism does not come all of a sudden. We have no way to fully realize the ideal of anarchism at one full stroke, and have to realize it step by step." It is impossible for us to fully realize the ideal of anarchism under China's current conditions. Our ideal, the ideal of future society, is a correct one. It is not an illusion, but its realization is limited by material conditions. In other words, the ideal society will not suddenly appear like a miracle; it comes gradually. Every effort we make may speed up its arrival, but there are still limitations. This may not be as ideal as we wish, but this is a fact. If there is social revolution in China, we want to fully realize the ideal society of anarchism; but is it possible to practice the principle of each according to his capacity and to each according to his needs when China's economy is underdeveloped, and daily necessities and even food still depend on imports from foreign countries? Under such conditions we have to make compromises. This does not mean that we have to accept failure. We do need to make some preparations before the revolution comes, and allow the workers to develop

industry by means of cooperation. Even after the revolution starts, it will still be impossible for us to reach the ideal society of anarchism in a single bound. We have to move towards our ideal step by step ...

This is only a hypothesis about China's situation after the social revolution takes place, but we really don't know if it may happen in the near future. First, China's material conditions are not mature; second, the gap between Chinese anarchists and the masses is still very wide. Some anarchists are only interested in the propaganda of some principles among the people, but they never ask themselves if their propaganda is accessible to the people and what the people really want. How can we engage ourselves in the movement of workers without knowledge of their immediate concerns? It is hardly possible to ask them to wage a revolution with an empty stomach. It is true that social revolution may not occur in China immediately, but we should start our preparations and facilitate its inauguration ...

China has entered the era of revolution. Many of the revolutionary movements in China are not the movements of the Nationalist Party [Guomindang] but the movements of the people. Tens of thousands of workers are on strike, and numerous young people fight in the battlefields. Under the white terror many people are devoting themselves to the revolution. They have not the slightest fear of jail or death. Some people say that those revolutionaries are misled by a small number of people, that their dream is wealth and power, that they are running dogs of new warlords, that they are loyal followers of the Three People's Principles [of the Nationalist Party], and that they want to set up a bourgeois government. This is absolutely not true. It is true that there is a difference between the northern expedition of the Nationalist Army and China's revolutionary movement, the independent war of a semi-colonial country and the aim of anarchists, but we anarchists are not opposed to it and simply want to go even farther. Before we can abolish capitalism, we are by no means opposed to any kind of anti-imperialist movement. I hate Soviet Russia, but I hate imperialist powers even more; I hate the Nationalist Party, but I hate warlords even more. The reason is simple. Soviet Russia is not as evil as the imperialist powers, and the Nationalist Party and warlords are not jackals from the same lair. Certainly it would be wonderful if we could offer the people something better. It does not bother a bourgeois scholar to look on unconcerned and make empty talk in opposition, but to a revolutionary it is a crime. "Perfection or nothing" is the idea of an individualist, not the idea of a revolutionary who fights for the interests of the people, because such an idea does not reflect the needs of the people. If you have no means to bring "perfect" happiness to the people, how can you deny their opportunity to enjoy a slight portion of happiness? We should understand that this revolutionary movement is not monopolized by a particular political party. Without the participation and support of the people, how can those warlords be defeated? We anarchists did not play an influential role in the movement. This was our mistake. If we simply look on and denigrate this movement merely as a power struggle or war among warlords, and describe the Nationalist Party and Zhang Zoling [Manchurian warlord] as jackals from the same lair, then those right-wing conservatives would certainly be very happy and say thanks to us!

... The propositions of the Nationalist Party are contradictory to ours, and in principle this party is our enemy. It is well known that the Nationalist Party wants to construct a good government, and we want to overthrow all kinds of government. Nevertheless, we have no objection to some causes such as the overthrow of warlords, and the overthrow of imperialism, but we want to move forward even further and reject the government of the Nationalist Party and its construction. (Several years ago when I put the slogan "self-reliance of the weaker nations to overthrow all

imperialism” on the cover of the first issue of the People, some comrades in Wuchang and Hunan wrote letters against this slogan. They said that the slogan was superficial. Before the abolition of capitalism, they argued, to call for the overthrow of imperialism was to attend to trifles to the neglect of essentials. They also said that anarchists should not accept the idea that there were weaker nations in humanity. I don’t agree with them. We do not deny the existence of weaker nations as a fact, but should weaker nations remain slaves of imperialist powers until the realization of anarchist society? Can colonies and semi-colonies never get independence before the abolition of capitalism?) Most of the common people agree with the Nationalist Party merely on some slogans, but disagree with it on many issues. At present the Nationalist Party is the leader of the people ... If we go to the people, throw ourselves into the revolutionary torrent, and lead the people to move towards a greater aim, then the people will naturally distance themselves from the Nationalist Party and follow us, which can bring more anarchist influence to the revolutionary movement, and make a deep impression of anarchism in the mind of the people. If we work in this way, although anarchist society may not be fully realized immediately, the people will move in this direction (at least better than the current situation). If we make an effort, we sow a seed; if we attempt to build a dike to contain the revolutionary trend, we are doomed to be submerged ...

At present the revolution in China has gone beyond the aims of the Nationalist Party. For example, the peasants rise to overthrow local tyrants and evil gentry, peasants’ associations everywhere make resistance against landlords, and workers organize labour unions to make resistance against capitalists. This is wonderful news ...! believe that if we make ourselves a part of the revolutionary torrent, we will be able to create some new slogans such as “peasants’ autonomy,” “peasants’ management of land,” “abolition of foremanship.” In time of turmoil and war we can burn down some county executive offices, or go to help the peasants organize communes to enable them to run their own affairs without the government’s involvement. We should join the labour movement as workers, think about the concerns of our fellow workers and create new slogans, such as the reduction of working hours, protection of workers’ means of living, and workers’ education. Among the important issues in contemporary China, the priority should be advocating workers’ rights to directly supervise all equipment in the factory, to abolish foremanship, and to negotiate with factory owners through the labour union. In regard to the slogan of taking over the factories by the workers, I think for the time being this is not feasible, although we can advocate it at an appropriate time. In practice our slogans must be relevant to the immediate concerns of the people ...

We can criticize the principles of the Nationalist Party and the Communist Party, but we should not denigrate them ... But, some people hold that we should join the Nationalist Party, to which I am strongly opposed.

In sum, if we throw ourselves into China’s revolutionary torrent, although we are unable to fully realize anarchist society overnight, we may bring the Chinese people closer to the ideal of anarchism, and bring more anarchist influence to the movement. This would certainly be a much better attitude than looking on unconcerned and making indiscreet criticisms.

*(People’s Bell, 1927)*



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From Robert Graham (Ed.), *Anarchism: A Documentary History of Libertarian Ideas; Volume One: From Anarchy to Anarchism (300 CE to 1939)*.

Further reading: Arif Dirlik, *Anarchism in the Chinese Revolution*, Berkeley: University of California, 1991; Peter Zarrow, *Anarchism and Chinese Political Culture*, New York: Columbia University, 1990.

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