

**Engaging with Socialism in China:
The Political Thought and Activities of
Chen Gongbo and Tan Pingshan,
1917-1928**

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Abstract

This thesis investigates Chen Gongbo (1892-1946) and Tan Pingshan (1886-1956), two significant Cantonese Marxists who helped found the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in 1921. I use Chen and Tan as a lens to re-examine the dissemination of Marxism in May Fourth China and the underlying tensions in 1920s Chinese revolution. My study demonstrates that it was in the changing educational system in the early 20th century that Chen and Tan gradually improved their positions in the cultural field and participated in the intellectual ferment during the May Fourth period. At Peking University they became familiarised with Marxism. Their understanding of Marxism, however, was deeply influenced by European social democracy, as opposed to many other early communist leaders who believed in Bolshevism. This divergence finally led to the open conflict within the CCP between Guangzhou and Shanghai in the summer of 1922, which also embodied the different social identities among early Chinese Marxists. After the quarrel, Chen quit while Tan remained within the party. During the Nationalist Revolution, both Tan and Chen became senior leaders in the Kuomintang, but they had to face yet another identity crisis of whether to be a revolutionary or a politician. Meanwhile, they had to rethink the relationship between socialism and nationalism in their political propositions. This study of Chen and Tan's political thought and activities in the late 1910s and 1920s offers a different picture of Chinese radicalism and revolution in the early Republican period.

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Declaration

I declare that this thesis is a presentation of original work and I am the sole author. This work has not previously been presented for an award at this, or any other, University. All sources are acknowledged as References.

Introduction

On April 12, 1946, the High Court in Suzhou was crowded with Chinese and foreign journalists and a massive audience, eagerly expecting a significant figure to be judged. At four o'clock in the afternoon, a man in a long gown stepped calmly and unhurriedly into the court. A journalist at the scene recorded,

“The late spring in Suzhou is seeing the exuberant blossom and verdant trees. Outside the court, birds are singing cheerfully, enjoying the vernal sunshine and warm weather. The whole universe is immersed in vibrant air. However, in front of Chen Gongbo there is only a gallows waiting for him.”¹

Chen Gongbo (1892-1946), the acting chairman of the Reorganised National Government in Nanjing, known as the “puppet regime”, listened carefully and quietly to the statement of the presiding judge, which sentenced him to death.

A week later, *The China Weekly Review*, one of the most influential English journals in China commented:

“Even traitors are a very necessary element in molding the character of a rejuvenated people. If Chen arouses public sentiment, and by his disgrace further heightens public responsibility, he will have served in death that duty which he shirked in life.”²

As one of the founders of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the leading theoretician of the left-wing Kuomintang (KMT) in the 1920s, Chen spent many years trying to enlighten and mobilise the masses for the revolutionary cause, but never received a corresponding response from the people. Now, ironically, it was his death that served as a catalyst to inspire national consciousness and sentiment after the Second World War.

¹ “Chen ni Gongbo chu sixing” [The traitor Chen Gongbo has been sentenced to death], *Shen Bao*, April 13, 1946.

² “Exit ‘President’ Chen”, *The China Weekly Review*, April 20, 1946, p.159.

When Chen tasted the bitterness of prison in early 1946, people in Chongqing were still immersed in a jubilant atmosphere, celebrating the defeat of Japan and the end of the Second World War. On January 26th, an art exhibition about the people's life in Yan'an during wartime was opened in Chongqing and attracted numerous visitors. Visiting the exhibition together with some cultural celebrities, Tan Pingshan (1886-1956) was so pleased that he composed a poem on the spot, praising the “democratic” (*minzhu*) and “liberal” (*ziyou*) life under the CCP in Northwest China.³ At that time, Tan was known as a senior KMT member and the leader of the Three People's Principle Comrades Association (*Sanmin zhuyi tongzhi lianhehui*), an organization which campaigned for a democratic coalition government accommodating both the KMT and CCP leaders. Secretly, Tan was a CCP member who lobbied senior KMT members and cultural celebrities to oppose Chiang Kai-shek and his forthcoming military actions against the communist bases.

History is full of ironies. Chen Gongbo, a KMT leader, was waiting painfully for his execution by the KMT government. Right before his death, he still suggested in his last letter to Chiang Kai-shek that the CCP must be completely eliminated in China.⁴ By contrast, Tan Pingshan, a KMT leader as well, was working tirelessly towards the ultimate downfall of the KMT government. Right before he passed away in 1956, Tan still requested that the CCP openly acknowledge his glorious membership, of which had been deprived in 1927 and secretly restored in 1942.⁵ It was difficult to imagine that these two persons who had opposite beliefs and worked for opposite political forces once had a friendship that lasted ten years (1917-1927).

In these ten years, they studied together at Peking University and participated enthusiastically in the May Fourth Movement. After graduation they returned together to Guangdong, their hometown, and ran the only daily newspaper of the communists in early 1920s China. In 1921, they established and led the Cantonese branch of the CCP. From 1925 to 1927 both of them acted as senior leaders in the KMT and the Nationalist

³ Yuan Bangjian, *Tan Pingshan zhuàn* [The biography of Tan Pingshan], Haerbin: Heilongjiang Renmin Press, 1986, pp.155-156.

⁴ Chen Gongbo, *Kuxiao lu: Chen Gongbo huiyi, 1925-1936* [Bitter smile: the recollection of Chen Gongbo, 1925-1936], Hong Kong: CUHK Asia Centre, 1980, pp.446-449.

⁵ *Ming zhongyang dang'an* [The archive of the Revolutionary Committee of the Chinese Kuomintang], no. 1458-20-20-100.

Government (*Guomin zhengfu*). Their ten years of friendship witnessed huge political, social, and cultural changes that shook the country, which in turn put an end to their close relationship. After the KMT-CCP split in July 1927, Chen and Tan went separate ways. Chen became known as the most significant leader of the left-wing KMT (*Guomindang zuopai*) and actively opposed the dictatorship of Chiang Kai-shek (1887-1975). Tan left the KMT and remained in the CCP. He then led the riot in Nanchang on August 1st, 1927 against the KMT, known as the “Nanchang Uprising” (*Nanchang qiyi*). The failure of the rebellion led to Tan’s dismissal from the CCP, after which he organised the “Chinese Revolutionary Party” (*Zhonghua gemingdang*), known as “The Third Party” (*Disan dang*). Ironically, in spite of the constant quarrels on how to promote Chinese revolution between Chen and Tan after 1927, both of them were labeled by both the CCP and Chiang’s KMT as “counterrevolutionaries”.

My thesis investigates Chen and Tan’s political thought and activities during the ten years of their friendship. I use their case as a lens to re-examine the dissemination of Marxism in May Fourth China and the underlying tensions in 1920s Chinese revolution. This study is not a biography of Chen and Tan, and I do not try to discover every detail of their life. Nor do I give a full account of their lives after 1928. My aim, instead, is to discover new ways of studying the rise of Chinese radicalism in the late 1910s and 1920s through the changing political ideas and social identities of Chinese intellectuals.

My study demonstrates that it was in the changing educational system in the early 20th century that Chen and Tan gradually improved their positions in the cultural field and participated actively in the intellectual ferment during the May Fourth period. At Peking University they became acquainted with Marxism. Their understanding of Marxism, however, differed from other early communist leaders, which finally led to the open conflict between Guangzhou and Shanghai in the summer of 1922. This incident also revealed the different social identities among early Chinese Marxists. When Chen and Tan later became senior leaders during the Nationalist Revolution (*Guomin geming*), they had to face yet another identity crisis of whether to be a revolutionary or a politician. Meanwhile, they had to rethink the relationship between socialism and nationalism in their political propositions.

Literature review

The approach of this study benefits considerably from the existing scholarship on radical intellectuals and revolutionaries in late Qing and early Republican China. In the 1950s, early Chinese revolutionary history provoked a widespread academic interest among Western historians in a very pragmatic way. They were eagerly looking for a satisfactory historical explanation for the rapid and astounding success of Chinese communists in the civil war. Understandably, their focus was on the origin of Chinese communism and Mao Zedong (1893-1976), the distinguished party leader. Thus 1951 saw the publication of the book written by Benjamin Schwartz, *Chinese Communism and the Rise of Mao*.⁶ Heavily constrained by a lack of materials, Schwartz is only able to outline roughly early communist history with the cases of Chen Duxiu (1879-1942) and Li Dazhao (1889-1927), the two foremost founders of the party. He argues that the introduction of Marxism to China was closely connected with the October Revolution.⁷ Therefore, it was Leninism rather than other forms of socialism, such as social democracy, that contributed to the rise of Chinese communism. It was external stimulation rather than internal economic and social transformation (the development of capitalism and the emergence of a proletariat in the treaty ports) that made Marxism attractive to Chinese intellectuals.⁸

Schwartz's argument was challenged in 1967 by Maurice Meisner, who made a more detailed and comprehensive analysis of the starting point for Li Dazhao's embrace of Marxism.⁹ As opposed to Schwartz, Meisner discovers the diversified attitudes of Chinese intellectuals towards the October Revolution and perceptively identifies the role of idealism, nationalism and populism underpinning Li's embrace of Marxism. In other words, the October Revolution was not so much a catalyst for the dissemination of Marxism as Schwartz claims. Although Li did praise the revolution, he, according to Meisner, was

⁶ Benjamin Schwartz, *Chinese Communism and the Rise of Mao*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1951.

⁷ Schwartz, *Chinese Communism and the Rise of Mao*, pp.13-15.

⁸ Schwartz, *Chinese Communism and the Rise of Mao*, pp.21-25.

⁹ Maurice Meisner, *Li Ta-chao and the Origins of Chinese Communism*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967, pp.52-70.

steeped in the intellectual resources which ran counter to orthodox Marxism. Meisner's opinion is further developed in the late 1980s by Arif Dirlik, who points out that Marxism-Leninism was not the only option for radical Chinese intellectuals in the 1910s and that anarchism actually played a key role in helping with the spread of Marxism in China.¹⁰ Dirlik also challenges Schwartz's argument by indicating that the economic and social changes inside China during and after the Great War were not irrelevant to early Chinese Marxists.¹¹ At the same time as Dirlik's book on Chinese communism came out, historical studies of Chinese Marxism and socialism in mainland China were gradually freed from communist ideological propaganda. Yang Kuisong and Dong Shiwei's monograph for the first time examines in detail the different strands of socialism in 1910s and 1920s China and investigates how Marxism-Leninism became the mainstream among radical intellectuals.¹²

Even for the external analysis there were different voices. Not satisfied with the discussions revolving around October Revolution and European influences, as early as 1971 Li Yu-ning published a thin but groundbreaking monograph on the socialist debate before 1917, highlighting the introduction of socialist ideas and terms from Japan to China.¹³ Martin Bernal deepens Li's study by examining the history of Japanese socialism and recognising its democratic and utopian origins, which laid the moral foundation for Chinese overseas students to accept socialism before the 1911 Revolution.¹⁴ Wolfgang Lippert provides a more exhaustive investigation of Japanese lexical resources about socialism and Marxism which were adopted in China.¹⁵ Another breakthrough work studying Japanese influences on Chinese Marxism and communist movement is produced by Ishikawa Yoshihiro. Ishikawa investigates the Japanese publications and brochures from which Chinese intellectuals were able to obtain a good understanding of Marxism.¹⁶

¹⁰ Arif Dirlik, *The Origins of Chinese Communism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989, pp.10-13.

¹¹ Arif Dirlik, *The Origins of Chinese Communism*, pp.59-68.

¹² Yang Kuisong and Dong Shiwei, *Haishishenlou yu damoluzhou: Zhongguo jindai shehuizhuyi sichao yanjiu* [The mirage and oasis: a study of modern Chinese socialism], Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 1991.

¹³ Li Yu-ning, *The Introduction of Socialism into China*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1971.

¹⁴ Martin Bernal, *Chinese Socialism to 1907*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1975, pp.74-87.

¹⁵ Wolfgang Lippert, *Entstehung und Funktion einiger chinesischer marxistischer Termini* (Chinese translated version), Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 2003.

¹⁶ Ishikawa, Yoshihiro, *The Formation of the Chinese Communist Party*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2012.

It should also be noted that in the past 30 years the intellectual dimension was not the only perspective of studying Chinese Marxism. Several historians have made great contributions to the organisational perspective of early CCP history. Hans van de Ven summarises a four-stage process of the transformation of the CCP organisations from an aggregation of various study societies to a centralised, disciplined Leninist party.¹⁷ Steve Smith investigates in detail how the CCP took root in Shanghai in the 1920s and how their members mobilised the labourers at the grassroots level.¹⁸ Wang Qisheng compares the organisational characteristics between the KMT and CCP and argues that despite similar attempts to transplant the Bolshevik model the CCP did a much better job than the KMT in establishing a disciplined, tight-knit organization.¹⁹ If van de Ven, Smith, and Wang focus on the revolutionary activities within China, Marilyn A. Levine is interested in the Chinese radical intellectuals in Europe, especially in Paris. Levine discusses how the CCP branch gradually developed there and how it differed from their communist comrades in China in terms of organisation and ideology.²⁰

Meanwhile, with the rise of social and cultural history in the 1980s, historical writings began to question the objectivity of identity, gender, and class. As William Rowe indicates, concepts which were taken for granted in the past have now been regarded as socially constructed ones, and they are in fact produced by constant negotiations within specific political and social conditions.²¹ Accordingly, social norms, values, and identities are subject to the institutional, temporal, and spatial changes. Therefore, the academic interest in Chinese Marxism since the 1990s has gradually moved from generalised and textual discussions to local, social, cultural, and contextual interrogations. Issues such as the rise of mass media, the birth of modern intellectual groups, and the intellectuals' social networks have become relevant to the study of Chinese radicalism.

¹⁷ Hans van de Ven, *From Friend to Comrade: The Founding of the Chinese Communist Party, 1920-1927*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991.

¹⁸ Steve Smith, *A Road is Made: Communism in Shanghai, 1920-1927*, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2000.

¹⁹ Wang Qisheng, *Dangyuan dangquan yu dangzheng: 1924-1949 Zhongguo guomindang de zuzhi xingtai* [Party members, party power, and party struggle: the KMT organisation in 1924-1949], Shanghai: Shanghai shudian, 2003

²⁰ Marilyn A. Levine, *The Found Generation: Chinese Communists in Europe during the Twenties*, Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1993.

²¹ William Rowe, *China's Last Empire: the Great Qing*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009, pp.5-6.

Thus we can see a burgeoning publication of books concentrating on local intellectuals rather than those renowned leaders. Keith R. Schoppa and Yeh Wen-sin respectively choose two cases from Zhejiang Province. Schoppa underlines the complicated and multiple social networks of Shen Dingyi, an early Marxist who later became hostile to the CCP. Schoppa reveals how Shen's changing networks and identities drew him close to Marxism and later distanced him from it.²² Taking Shi Cuntong as a case, Yeh regards the spatial and cultural differences between the rural area and urban district as the key element shaping Shi's distinctive radicalism, which paved the way for his later embrace of Marxism.²³ Liu Liyan revisits the early history of Mao Zedong and Cai Hesen by focusing on the cultural milieu of their alma mater, the Hunan First Normal College.²⁴ Daniel Y. K. Kwan writes a biography of Deng Zhongxia, a prominent communist labour leader who led the Canton-Hong Kong Strike in 1925-1926 but, according to the author, was largely neglected by Anglophone historians. In this biography, Kwan focuses particularly on the connection and tension between the two social groups - Marxist intellectuals and workers, which exalted Deng to a prestigious position but finally led to his tragic execution at the hand of Chiang Kai-shek.²⁵

The discussions of local intellectuals persisted into the 21st century, when we find the monographs written by Hung-yok Ip, Elizabeth J. Perry, and Shakhar Rahav. Ip's book deals with a group of radical intellectuals, such as Peng Pai and Qu Qiubai, and investigates their self-reconstruction and self-imagination which justified the leadership of intellectuals over other social groups in revolutions in the 1920s.²⁶ Perry uses the case of Anyuan, a town in Jiangxi Province, to analyze how Chinese communist leaders adopted local conventional culture to facilitate their revolutionary propaganda among miners.²⁷ Rahav focuses on Wuhan, the capital of Hubei Province in Central China, exploring how

²² Schoppa, R. Keith, *Blood Road: The Mystery of Shen Dingyi in Revolutionary China*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995.

²³ Wen-hsin Yeh, *Provincial Passages: Culture, Space, and the Origins of Chinese Communism*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996.

²⁴ Liyan Liu, *Red Genesis: The Hunan First Normal School and the Creation of Chinese Communism, 1903-1921*, New York: SUNY Press.

²⁵ Daniel Y. K. Kwan, *Marxist Intellectuals and the Chinese Labor Movement: A Study of Deng Zhongxia (1894-1933)*, Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1997.

²⁶ Hung-yok Ip, *Intellectuals in Revolutionary China, 1921-1949: Leaders, Heroes and Sophisticates*, London: Routledge, 2005.

²⁷ Elizabeth J. Perry, *Anyuan: Mining China's Revolutionary Tradition*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012.

local intellectuals developed their social networks by establishing study societies and legitimised their radical activities during the May Fourth era. Rahav's research highlights these study societies as the basis and rudiment of the "mass party politics" later on.²⁸ The books published by Timothy Weston and Fabio Lanza on the history of Peking University, though not directly relevant to Marxism and Chinese revolution, also deal with the interaction between political culture and social institutions.²⁹

The dissemination of Marxism in 1920s China is a long-standing question that has been reinvigorated by the emergence of new perspectives and directions which greatly expand the possibilities for rewriting early Chinese revolutionary history. This doctoral study has grown out of these possibilities. Despite being the leaders in both the CCP and KMT, Chen Gongbo and Tan Pingshan have seldom attracted historical attention. Their reputation and influence in the communist movement and Nationalist Revolution could not parallel those of Chen Duxiu, Li Dazhao, Chiang Kai-shek, or Wang Jingwei. However, their thought and life will reveal a different picture of early 20th-century China, from that which we find in those prestigious leaders. Moreover, in this case study I build a bridge between intellectual, social, local, and transnational history, hoping to place Chen and Tan's ideas and activities in a kaleidoscopic historical context. The organisational approach is not the main focus of this study, but I have benefited from these earlier organisational histories, in comparing the different social identities of Chinese Marxists, especially in my analysis of the different party organisations between Guangzhou and Shanghai.

Structure of the thesis

This thesis consists of five chapters, each focusing on one significant topic in Chinese intellectual and political history. The five themes connect closely with each other, revolving around the two themes that I am mainly concerned with: ideas and social identity.

²⁸ Shakhar Rahav, *The Rise of Political Intellectuals in Modern China: May Fourth Societies and the Roots of Mass-Party Politics*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015.

²⁹ Timothy B. Weston, *The Power of Position: Beijing University, Intellectuals, and Chinese Political Culture, 1898-1929*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004; Fabio Lanza, *Behind the Gate: Inventing Students in Beijing*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2010.

In general, the five chapters are organised chronologically from 1917 to 1928, but the last two are thematic chapters which examine respectively the activities and thought of our protagonists during the Nationalist Revolution from 1923 to 1928.

I hope that, through the case study of Chen Gongbo and Tan Pingshan, my discussions of the five themes can create new space for the study of Chinese Marxism and revolution. The first chapter discusses the emergence of a new cultural field in early Republican China and places the dissemination of Marxism against this social backdrop. The second chapter investigates how Marxism was localised in May Fourth China and how early Chinese communist leaders developed two different interpretations of Marxism which related to the debates between Lenin and Kautsky in Europe. Chen and Tan's social democratic interpretation of Marxism challenges Schwartz's argument that Chinese Marxism had nothing to do with European social democracy. Chapter Three focuses on the connections between Marxists and local politics. Through the conflict between Sun Yat-sen and Chen Jiongming in Guangdong, the chapter analyses the tensions not only between the two interpretations of Marxism but also between the two different social identities (intellectual vs. revolutionary) among early Chinese Marxists. The fourth chapter continues to explore the issue of social identity, but this time it will turn to another identity crisis between revolutionary and politician. Finally, the fifth chapter revisits the political programme of the left-wing KMT and places Chen Gongbo's political ideas in a global and transnational perspective.

Now I will briefly introduce the specific contents and arguments in each chapter. The first chapter locates Chen Gongbo and Tan Pingshan in the early Republican cultural field which emerged from the educational reforms in early 20th-century China. Chen and Tan showed two different ways for local intellectuals to be admitted to Peking University and reach the top of the domestic educational hierarchy, which I think revealed the flexible, unconsolidated as well as the stable, institutionalised aspects of the cultural field in late 1910s China. I argue that they gradually formed their political ideas in this "semi-institutionalised" field which was shaped by cultural capital, power, and hierarchy. In order to make an impact on the "New Culture Movement" (*Xinwenhua Yundong*), they read widely, developed their social networks, and interacted with other cultural elites in the

campus. During their three years at Peking University, Tan and Chen were inspired by the “new culture” and increasingly interested in the political programme of German social democracy as well as British trade unionism and social liberalism. Interestingly, it was largely the non-Marxist and even anti-Marxist ideas from the West that helped make Marxism relevant to Tan and Chen, and these intellectual resources also shaped the way our protagonists interpreted Marxism.

The second chapter discusses how the juxtaposition of the two governments in North and South China undermined the legitimacy of the whole established power and led Chen and Tan towards a mass politics. Their vision of a new global order confirmed to them that a socialist tide was sweeping the whole world from Europe to Asia. However, their social democratic interpretation of Marxism produced a divergence between them and the communist leaders in Shanghai who advocated the “dictatorship of the few”. This distinction originated from the fundamental contradiction between “orthodox Marxism” and Leninism which was embodied in the intense debates between Karl Kautsky and Lenin. The two interpretations among early Chinese Marxists also revealed the underlying tension between the Bolshevik-style “dictatorship of the proletariat” and the democratic ethos of May Fourth.

The third chapter investigates a historical riddle in early CCP history which until now has not been completely solved. After the conflict between Sun Yat-sen and General Chen Jiongming, the Shanghai communists called Chen Gongbo and Tan Pingshan loyal followers of Chen Jiongming. However, the Cantonese Marxists rejected stoutly this charge, claiming that they never sided with Chen Jiongming. These contradictory statements, I argue, resulted from the different understandings of Marxism between Guangzhou and Shanghai, as analysed in the preceding chapter. The different political stances also revealed the different identities between Cantonese and Shanghai Marxists, since Chen and Tan were still observing politics in a detached and dispassionate way, while the Shanghai leaders had transformed themselves into revolutionaries who were prepared for political struggle. Chen finally quit the party and registered at Columbia University as a masters student in 1923.

The analysis of the social identities persists into the fourth chapter. After the two-year

study at Columbia (1923-1925), Chen Gongbo returned to Guangzhou and became a senior KMT leader, while Tan Pingshan remained within the CCP and, after the CCP members joined the KMT in 1923, acted as one of the most significant communist leaders in the KMT. They encountered similar dilemmas in the revolution, and I demonstrate that the origin of their difficulties lay in their identity crisis between being a revolutionary and a politician in the government. This issue of identity can be further traced back to a fundamental paradox between revolution and governance.

The final chapter examines Chen Gongbo's political ideas and the political programme of the left-wing KMT from a transnational perspective. I argue that the rising "new history" in the US and the anti-imperialist theories from Britain offered Chen an alternative to communism. To Chen, this approach enabled him to keep both the materialistic vision of history and the revolutionary spirit against the capitalist West, while rejecting the theories of class struggle and communist revolution which he thought as misleading illusions. I also respond to the existing scholarship which links Chen Gongbo with European fascism, and maintain that at least until the end of the 1920s there had been fundamental distinctions between Chen and fascists. I argue that the difficulty of locating Chen's political thought in the Western ideological spectrum is not due to the problems of Chen himself, but the analytical framework we use to judge him.

Historical materials

A large number of Chen and Tan's books, pamphlets, articles, lectures, and other relevant materials in the 1910s and 1920s have not been compiled and published. During the PhD, I have spent much time collecting these historical materials in Guangzhou, Beijing, Hong Kong, and the United States. In the special collection of the Guangdong Sun Yat-sen Library, I have taken more than 8,000 photos of the approximately 300 issues of *Guangdong Qunbao*, a daily newspaper run by Chen and Tan from late 1920 to mid-1922. These articles and reports day by day reveal their thought, activities, and social networks, without which I will not be able to discover their everyday life in this period. As far as I

know, until now my study has been the only attempt in both English and Chinese academia to use comprehensively *Qunbao* for historical studies.

I also make use of the Canton Customs Archive, which provides daily record of the local news and political rumours. Due to frequent wars and fires in early 20th century Guangzhou, most of the local newspapers and journals run in the 1910s and 1920s are missing, but the Canton Customs which was administered by British staff managed to keep these precious historical documents. These documents record many of Chen and Tan's activities in the 1920s, providing a solid foundation for my writing of the fourth chapter.

In 2018, I visited the Institute of Modern History of the Chinese Academy of Social Science (CASS) in Beijing, obtaining a large number of reports written by Chen and Tan from the Five Ministries Archive (*Wubudang*) and Hankow Archive (*Hankoudang*) of the KMT. The original copies of these archives are currently reserved by the National Chengchi University in Taiwan, but the Institute of Modern History of CASS made a full copy of them. Therefore, I was able to check them in Beijing. The Peking University Library provides me with some information about Chen and Tan's enrolment and life on campus. My study also benefits from the pamphlets by Chen and Tan which I found in the Harvard-Yenching Library. Newspapers copied from the Hong Kong University Libraries, the libraries of the Chinese University of Hong Kong, and the Hong Kong Central Library offer me necessary background information of Guangdong in the 1910s and 1920s.

Chapter One Peking University (1917-1920)

The existing scholarship of the early life of Tan Pingshan (1886-1956) and Chen Gongbo (1892-1946) has been limited to a handful of studies, most of which are written in Chinese and have minimal influence in the Western academia. For the investigation of Tan Pingshan's early years, the current research has until now not gone beyond the framework and arguments of Yuan Bangjian's monograph, published in 1986.¹ Yuan's book should be praised for its excavation of some first-hand materials, but is more limited in terms of its perspectives and narratives. This monograph basically embodies the style of the traditional revolutionary historiography, producing a linear story of how a youthful patriotic student, inspired by May Fourth Movement and Russian Revolution, transformed himself at Peking University into a radical intellectual favourable to Marxism. Tan's transformation in Yuan's book was neither swift nor smooth, but its direction was definite and its trajectory clear. This simplistic narrative fails to take into account the various non-Marxist intellectual resources influencing Tan's political ideas which went on to shape his interpretation of Marxism.

Compared to Tan, the name of Chen Gongbo is more frequently mentioned by both Chinese and Anglophone historians, but most of them examine Chen's involvement in Chinese political movements and economic planning after he quit the communist party and became a senior leader in the KMT in the mid-1920s.² For Chen's earlier career as a

¹ See Yuan Bangjian, *Tan Pingshan zhuan* [The biography of Tan Pingshan], Haerbin: Heilongjiang Renmin Press, 1986; Chen Denggui, *Tan Pingshan zhuan* [The biography of Tan Pingshan], Guangdong: Guangdong gaodeng jiaoyu chubanshe, 1999; Yan Jun, *Jingli fengyu ye tongzhou: Tan Pingshan nianpu jiedu* [A fellow traveler after wind and rain: the chronicle of Tan Pingshan], Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2012.

² An overwhelmingly number of studies focus on Chen's role in creating and organizing the left-wing KMT during and after the National Revolution. Arif Dirlik, Edmund S. K. Fung, So Wai-chor, and Li Zhiyu contribute much to this field. See, for example, Dirlik, "Mass Movements and the Left Kuomintang", *Modern China*, vol.1, no.1, 1975: 46-74; Fung, "Anti-imperialism and the Left Guomindang", *Modern China*, vol.11, no.1, 1985: 39-76; So Wai-chor, "Chen Kung-po: A Marxist-oriented Kuomintang Theoretician", *Papers on Far Eastern History*, 1987 (9): 55-70; So Wai-chor, *The Kuomintang Left in the National Revolution, 1924-1931: The Leftist Alternative in Republican China*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991; Li Zhiyu, "Guanyu guomindang zuopai wenti de zai sikao (1924-1931)" [A restudy on the issue of the "leftist of the KMT": 1924-1931], *Zhonggong dangshi yanjiu* [CCP history studies], 2016 (10): 87-99. Margherita Zanasi shows more interest in Chen's thoughts and economic project as the Minister of Industry after 1932 when Chiang Kai-shek and Wang Jingwei agreed to cooperate. See Zanasi, "Chen Gongbo and the Construction of a Modern Nation in 1930s China", in Timothy Brook and Andre Schmid ed., *Nation Work: Asian Elites and National Identities*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000, pp.125-157; Zanasi, *Saving the Nation: Economic Modernity in Republican*

student and a journalist, Martin Wilbur in his 1966 book provides some background, but these details are mainly based on Chen's own memoir, *The Cold Wind (Hanfeng ji)*, and there were very limited materials available from mainland China where the Cultural Revolution was just launched.³ Strong reliance on memoirs can also be observed in the monographs written by Chinese scholars, such as Shi Yuanhua and Li Ke.⁴ Apart from *Hanfeng ji*, the writing of these monographs also relied heavily upon the memoirs of the CCP cadres who had worked with Tan Pingshan and Chen Gongbo. Memoirs like these, however, were mostly written or recorded after 1949, produced mainly for revolutionary education and subject to the contemporary political movements.⁵ In fact, there are copious historical documents from other sources relevant to Chen Gongbo and Tan Pingshan's early years, such as a large number of newspapers, journals, and correspondence during the May Fourth period. We can make full use of these materials by carefully comparing them with the memoirs of Chen and other communist leaders.

Meanwhile, it is necessary to keep in mind the way these documents were produced, selected, and preserved, and this influences largely how we use them. For example, the articles included in Chen Gongbo's *Hanfeng ji* were written in different periods, and we should pay special attention to the discontinuity as well as the coherence of his narratives in different occasions. In most cases, Chen Gongbo seemed to be indeed an honest storyteller, but occasionally he would deliberately highlight some events and downplay the other ones. His most well-known article, "The CCP and me" (*wo yu gongchandang*), was written and published in 1943 when he followed Wang Jingwei (1883-1944) to cooperate

China, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006. A study dealing with Chen Gongbo's economic thought in the early 1920s is produced by Bryna Goodman, "Fanyi de lianjinshu: minguo zaoqi shanghai de jingjixue" [The alchemy of translation: the "economics" in the early Republican Shanghai], in Peter Zarrow and Chang Che-chia ed., *Jindai zhongguo xinzhishi de jiangou* [The construction of new knowledge in modern China], Taipei: Academia Sinica, 2013, pp.202-203.

³ See the introduction of Martin Wilbur ed., *The Communist Movement in China: An Essay Written in 1924 by Chen Gongbo*, New York: Octagon Books, 1966. Chen Gongbo's memoir is *Hanfeng ji*, Shanghai: Difang xingzheng chubanshe, 1945.

⁴ The best Chinese biography of Chen Gongbo by now has been produced by Shi Yuanhua, who discovers more details than Wilbur's study. However, Shi's description of Chen's life still depends largely on Chen's own recollection. See Shi Yuanhua, *Chen Gongbo quanzhuan* [A complete biography of Chen Gongbo], Taipei: Daw Shiang Publishing Co., Ltd., 1999. Li Ke also wrote a biography for Chen, but Shi's study is definitely better in terms of the richness of the historical documents and arguments. See Li Ke, *Chen Gongbo*, Shijiazhuang: Hebei renmin chubanshe, 1997.

⁵ Lin Meili, "Zhonggong zhengxie 'wenshi ziliao' gongzuo de tuihan, 1959-1966: yi shanghai jingyan wei zhongxin" [The work of "historical accounts" of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conferences, 1959-1966: a case study of Shanghai], *Xinshixue* [New history], vol.26, 2015 (3): p.149, 193.

with the Japanese army in Nanjing during the Second World War. In the article, his role in the anti-Japanese May Fourth Movement became somewhat vague. In order to disguise his activities in the student movement in 1919, he focused instead on another anti-Japanese movement taking place in 1918 which he did not participate in.⁶ Another example was that when recalling his days in Guangzhou running *The Social* (*Guangdong Qunbao*), he mentioned nothing about his strong suspicion of Japanese diplomats before the Washington Conference in 1922.⁷ His manipulation of history thus enabled him to avoid some embarrassments with the Japanese government in 1943.

In general, the previous studies of Chen Gongbo and Tan Pingshan's early life leave considerable work to be done, and some of them are more like propaganda products than serious academic monographs. The existing framework and perspective have not successfully placed them back into the historical context in the first two decades of twentieth-century China. As Quentin Skinner argues, with the text alone historians are not able to get an accurate comprehension of past ideas; instead they should try to make clear the interaction between the text and the context, reading between the lines and examining how the text responded to the specific circumstance.⁸ Benjamin A. Elman's studies of Confucianism in late imperial China also demonstrate that an investigation of ideas needs to consider the specific social institutions in which they were produced and disseminated.⁹ In effect, this contextual approach has been echoed by a recent attempt in the historiography of the May Fourth Movement to take into consideration more of the social background of the ideas of different cultural groups.¹⁰

Correspondingly, this chapter will use Chen Gongbo and Tan Pingshan as a lens, through which we are able to understand the interaction between social institutions and

⁶ Chen Gongbo, *Hanfeng ji*, pp.197-198.

⁷ Chen Gongbo, *Hanfeng ji*, pp.203-223.

⁸ Quentin Skinner, "Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas", *History and Theory*, vol. 8, no. 1 (1969): 3-53.

⁹ See, for example, Elman, *From Philosophy to Philology: Intellectual and Social Aspects of Change in Late Imperial China*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984; *Classicism, Politics, and Kinship: The Ch'ang-chou School of New Text Confucianism in Late Imperial China*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990.

¹⁰ See, for example, Xu Jilin, *Jindai zhongguo zhishi fenzi de gonggong jiaowang* [The public relationship of modern Chinese intellectuals], Shanghai: Shanghai Renmin Press, 2008; Yang Nianqun, *Wusi jishi zhounian ji* [In memory of the ninetieth anniversary of May Fourth Movement], Beijing: Beijing World Publishing Corporation, 2009; Fabio Lanza, *Behind the Gate: Inventing Students in Beijing*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2010; Zhao Xuduo, "Revisiting the Dissemination of Marxism in May Fourth China: A Perspective of Cultural Field", *Twentieth-century China*, vol.44, 2019 (2):190-205.

networks and Chinese intellectuals in the early twentieth century. More specifically, I will place Chen and Tan in the background of educational reforms and the emergence of a new cultural field in China where modern intellectuals (*zhishi fenzi*) instead of literati (*shidafu*) interacted, associated, and competed. It was the cultural capital and hierarchy in this field, I argue, that shaped and changed Tan and Chen's political ideas in the May Fourth era.

Pierre Bourdieu's theory here is of particular significance to my study, and this is made possible by the increasing dialogue between historians and social scientists.¹¹ Benefiting from the rise of social history in the last thirty years, historians studying modern Chinese intellectuals and revolution can now examine the activities and thoughts of their protagonists from a new sociological perspective. Bourdieu develops Skinner's argument on the connection between text and context by emphasizing that the context should be understood specifically as a dynamic cultural field. By "field" Bourdieu means a "network", or a "configuration", where various individuals and cultural groups interacted and struggled for capital and power. These activities in turn shaped the meaning of the text.¹²

Nevertheless, historians should be particularly cautious when borrowing the concepts and theories from sociology, as sociologists are concerned more with general and structural frameworks while historians often focus on dynamic processes and specific cases. The charm of Bourdieu's theory lies in its analytical framework, but the story of Chen Gongbo and Tan Pingshan and the constant interactions between ideas and social institution in May Fourth China were more complicated.

This chapter is primarily concerned with the early life of Tan and Chen until they graduated from Peking University in 1920. It will not be a chronological record of the two Marxists during their school age, but rather deal with how they made various choices and formed political ideas in an era when China was experiencing significant political, intellectual, and social transformations.

¹¹ Peter Burke, *History and Social Theory*, New York: Cornell University Press, 2005, pp.16-20.

¹² Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1993, pp.31-44; Bourdieu and Loïc Wacquant, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992, p.97.

Tan Pingshan: climbing up the ladder

Tan Pingshan was born in 1886 into an artisan family in Mingcheng, a commercial town about 60 miles from Guangzhou. Tan Chaofan, his father, was a tailor who ran a small shop. Tan Pingshan was his second son, and did not have to take the responsibility of the eldest son to inherit the family business; instead, Tan Chaofan saw in his second son an outstanding learning capability and thus decided to support him to pursue an official honour (*gongming*) in the imperial examination system (*keju*). In 1898, Tan Pingshan entered Dongzhou Academy (*Dongzhou Shuyuan*), the best school in the county which was established by the magistrate and local gentry in 1891.¹³ Here Tan received a complete Confucian education for six years and left in 1904, just a year before the abolition of *keju* system. During his time at Dongzhou, the Qing government in 1903-1904 launched a large-scale educational reform based on Japanese models after the Meiji Restoration.¹⁴

According to this reform, the educational system was separated into two streams: general and professional education. To accomplish the general one, a student was required to go through junior primary school (*chuxiao*, 5 years), senior primary school (*gaoxiao*, 4 years), middle school (*zhongxuetang*, 5 years), high school (*gaodeng xuetang*, 3 years), and university or senior college (*daxue*, 4-6 years), which amounts to 21 to 23 years. The long learning process was designed mainly by the chief designer Zhang Zhidong (1837-1909), who intended to include both Chinese Confucian training and Western knowledge.¹⁵ For the professional route (technical and normal education), the length would be shorter, about 17-18 years.¹⁶

As Xu Jilin points out, under this new educational system, the financial burden to the students and their families increased dramatically, and therefore placed a great pressure on

¹³ *Gaoming xianzhi* [Annals of Gaoming County], vol. 7(48): 111-112.

¹⁴ There have been huge amount of research touching different facets of the 1903-1904 educational reform. See, for example, Douglas Reynolds, *China, 1898-1912: The Xinzheng Revolution and Japan*, Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 1993, pp.127-150; Qian Manqian and Jin Linxiang, *Zhongguo jindai xuezhi bijiao yanjiu* [A comparative study of modern Chinese educational system], Guangzhou: Guangdong Education Press, 1996; Chen Qingzhi, *Zhongguo jiaoyu shi* [A history of Chinese education], Changsha: Yuelu Press, 2010; Lu Shunchang, *Qingmo zhongri jiaoyu wenhua jiaoliu zhi yanjiu* [A study of Sino-Japanese educational and cultural communication in late Qing], Beijing: Commercial Press, 2012.

¹⁵ Qian Manqian and Jin Linxiang, *Zhongguo jindai xuezhi bijiao yanjiu*, pp.71-90; Douglas Reynolds, *China, 1898-1912: The Xinzheng Revolution and Japan*, pp.146-147.

¹⁶ Qian Manqian and Jin Linxiang, *Zhongguo jindai xuezhi bijiao yanjiu*, p.35.

poor families.¹⁷ Indeed, modern schools were often located in cities, and the students had to bear higher tuition fees, living costs, and even some extra costs for textbooks and uniforms. For poor students, it was more practical to enter professional schools, not only because of their shorter period but tuition exemptions and, in some occasions, free accommodation. Tan Pingshan made such a choice and was admitted to Guangzhaoluo Technical School (*Guangzhaoluo Gongyi Xuetang*) in Zhaoqing, a larger town than Gaoming.

However, his parents' death further exacerbated his financial condition. After graduating from Zhaoqing in 1906 Tan had to return to his hometown and became a part-time teacher, saving money for higher education. In 1908, he finally managed to find a place in a newly established professional college in Guangzhou, the Advanced Normal College of Guangdong and Guangxi Province (*Liangguang Youji Shifan Xuetang*). At that time, the college offered two programmes: the standard programme (*zhengke*) for four years and elective programme (*xuanke*) for two years.¹⁸ The dual system was transplanted from Japan, and *xuanke* was designed for those who wanted a shorter period for study.¹⁹ Naturally, Tan chose this time-saving fast-track.

The high costs of modern education exerted huge pressure on Tan. Nevertheless, now he almost reached the apex of the Chinese educational system. In Guangzhou, he entered a new world which he had never imagined in Gaoming or Zhaoqing. R. Keith Schoppa's study indicates that various social circles (*jie*), or subcultures, began to emerge in the cities during the late Qing and early Republic period.²⁰ Guangzhou in the early 1900s could be a good example for Schoppa's argument, where a new local cultural field gradually took form. Most of the prominent figures in this field were those who returned from overseas (especially Japanese) universities and colleges and knew something about the Western world. The Advanced Normal College, as one of the top schools in Guangdong, recruited

¹⁷ Xu Jilin, "Chongjian shehui zhongxin: jindai zhongguo de zhishiren shehui" [Rebuilding the core of the society: the intellectual society in modern China], *Xueshu Yuekan* [Academic Monthly], 2006 (11): 138-145.

¹⁸ Shen Qionglou, "Qingmo Guangzhou keju yu xuetang guodu shiqi zhuangkuang" [*Keju* and the transition period of new schools in late Qing Guangzhou], *Guangdong wenshi ziliao* [The historical accounts of Guangdong, HAGD], vol.53, p.10.

¹⁹ Shu Xincheng, *Jindai zhongguo liuxue shi* [History of overseas study in modern China], Shanghai: Shanghai Bookshop Press, 2011, p.17.

²⁰ R. Keith Schoppa, *Blood Road: The Mystery of Shen Dingyi in Revolutionary China*, p.23.

some of these cultural elite as professors. Tan Pingshan soon realised that the college was an important centre for the gatherings of these intellectuals, and now he had a great opportunity to draw closer to the core of this group of Cantonese cultural elite.²¹ Apart from some basic Western knowledge, in the college he also received language training in Japanese and some reasonable English.²²

In 1905, the Chinese Revolutionary League (*Tongmenghui*) was established by Sun Yat-sen (1866-1925), Song Jiaoren (1882-1913), Zhang Taiyan (1869-1936), and Huang Xing (1874-1916) in Tokyo to overthrow the Qing government.²³ The *Tongmenghui* first developed revolutionary networks among the overseas students in Japan and then permeated into the big cities in China when these students returned, especially in the south. Guangdong was home to Sun Yat-sen and many senior revolutionary leaders, and they regarded Guangzhou as the most important base for revolutionary activities. Soon, the intellectual aura in Guangzhou was largely shaped by anti-Manchu sentiment.

Fukamachi Hideo has demonstrated how the *Tongmenghui* made use of local social networks to penetrate into Cantonese urban areas in the 1900s.²⁴ The educational institutions in Guangzhou were a key part of these networks, and Cantonese leaders like Gao Jianfu (1879-1951), Pan Dawei (1881-1929), Xie Yingbo (1882-1939), Huang Jie (1873-1935), and Zhu Zhixin (1885-1920) played significant roles. In 1905, Gao and Pan inaugurated *Pictorial Journal of Current Affairs* (*Shishi Huabao*), propagating anti-Manchu ideology among Cantonese students.²⁵ Gao, Huang, and Zhu all served as teachers in the colleges and schools in Guangzhou, such as the Advanced Normal College and the College of Law and Politics in Guangdong (*Guangdong Fazheng Xuetang*). Huang

²¹ Shen Qionglou, "Qingmo Guangzhou keju yu xuetang guodu shiqi zhuangkuang", p.10.

²² The senior normal college hired a group of Japanese teachers, most of whom graduated from Tokyo Higher Normal School. See Sanetō Keishū, *Zhongguoren liuxue Riben shi* [A history of Chinese students in Japan], Beijing: SDX Joint Publishing Company, 1983, p.72. The employed Chinese graduates from Japan were Gao Jianfu, Feng Siluan, Huang Jie, and Ye Juemai. See Shen Qionglou, "Qingmo Guangzhou keju yu xuetang guodu shiqi zhuangkuang", pp.9-10. The college also provided English courses. See Zhang Yaorong, ed., *Guangdong gaodeng jiaoyu fazhan shi* [A history of the higher educational development in Guangdong], Guangzhou: Guangdong Higher Education Press, 2002.

²³ Yuan Bangjian, *Tan Pingshan zhuan*, p. 6.

²⁴ See Fukamachi Hideo, *Jindai Guangdong de zhengdang shehui guojia* [The party, society and state in modern Guangdong], Beijing: Social Science Academic Press, 2003.

²⁵ *Shishi Huabao*, 2014, Guangzhou: Guangdong People Press.

and Xie also founded Nanwu Middle School.²⁶ Under their influence, Tan Pingshan eventually joined the *Tongmenghui* in 1909.²⁷

The local magistrates could not tolerate the boom of these anti-government organisations in the Cantonese educational and cultural circles, but the local government found itself unable to tackle the permeation of revolutionary thought and networks. Since the Taiping Rebellion (1851-1864) and the following war against the British and French army (1856-1858), the local government in Guangzhou was no longer able to keep order by itself and had to rely more and more on cooperation with the local elite (the gentry and merchants), though we cannot conclude from this the formation of a genuine independent civil society similar to that in western Europe.²⁸ The weak state control over the local community became more obvious after 1906 when the central government launched the constitutional reform and approved the establishment of local consultative bureaus (*ziyiju*), leaving more room for local gentry and merchants to play a more significant role in decision making.²⁹ The governmental control was so feeble that until the end of 1908 the local magistrates were still unclear about the activities of the *Tongmenghui* in Guangzhou, and many people who cut their queue to show their rebellion did not receive any punishment from the government.³⁰ In early 1911, the Cantonese newspapers could publicly praise the *Tongmenghui* and denounce the Qing government.³¹ It was the weak political control that an anti-Manchu revolutionary intellectual circle based on the organization of the *Tongmenghui* could maintain and expand swiftly in the Pearl River Delta.

²⁶ Mai Hanyong, "Nanwu xuetang zhi chuangban lichen" [The process of the establishment of Nanwu School], *Guangzhou wenshi ziliao cunqao xuanbian* [Selected collections of Guangdong historical accounts of past events], vol.7; Shen Qionglou, "Qingmo Guangzhou keju yu xuetang guodu shiqi zhuangkuang"; Kuo Ting-yee ed., *Mo Jipeng xiansheng fangwen jilu* [The interview record of Mo Jipeng], Taipei: Institute of Modern History of Academia Sinica, 1997, pp.3-5.

²⁷ Tan's membership of *Tongmenghui* was shown in a form he submitted to the central government of the PRC after 1949. Yuan Bangjian's book also mentions this. See Yuan, *Tan Pingshan zhuan*, p.6.

²⁸ Michael Tsing, *Nation, Governance, and Modernity in China: Canton, 1900-1927*, Stanford University Press, 2000, pp.29-41.

²⁹ Cheng Meibao, *Diyu wenhua yu guojia rentong: wanqing yilai Guangdong wenhua guan de xingcheng* [Regional culture and national identity: cultural perspectives of Guangdong since late Qing], Beijing: SDX Joint Publishing Company, 2006, p.34-37.

³⁰ *Sun Zhongshan yu Guangdong: Guangdongsheng danganguan kucang haiguan dang'an xuanyi* [Sun Yat-sen and Guangdong: selected translation of the Canton Customs Archives in Guangdong Archive], Guangzhou: Guangdong People Press, 1996, pp.3-4.

³¹ Qiu Jie, "Qingmo minchu difang zhengfu yu shehui kongzhi: yi Guangzhou diqu weili de ge'an yanjiu" [Local government and social control during late Qing and early Republican period: the case of Guangzhou], *Zhongshan Daxue Xuebao* [Journal of Sun Yat-sen University], 2001 (6): 46-58.

Through this revolutionary network, Tan had access to the official journal of *Tongmenghui*, *Minbao* (*The People*) and became involved in the theoretical discussions about national revolution, political democracy, and socialism. From *Minbao* he was also acquainted with the propositions of Sun Yat-sen, Zhu Zhixin, Zhang Taiyan, Song Jiaoren, Wang Jingwei, Hu Hanmin (1879-1936), Liao Zhongkai (1877-1925), and other renowned revolutionary leaders.³² Zhu, Hu, and Liao at this time attached much importance to socialism and the European socialist movements, which paved the way for Tan Pingshan's understanding of socialism and Marxism at Peking University several years later.³³

Nevertheless, Tan did not commit to *Tongmenghui*'s military plots against the government, and after graduation in 1910 he remained in the educational circle. He found a job at Leizhou Middle School located in the south end of Guangdong. As a graduate from the top provincial normal college, Tan was soon promoted to be headmaster in Leizhou and was elected one of the representatives in the provincial assembly after the 1911 Revolution. From 1906 to 1912, within just six years he was transformed from a poor student to an educational and political celebrity. This was largely due to his study at the Advanced Normal College and his connection with the revolutionary intellectual groups in Guangzhou.

In 1916 he suddenly resigned as the principal of the middle school. According to a memoir of a teacher working in the school, Tan was deeply involved in a personal conflict with Zhou Lieya, a graduate from Peking University, when they competed for the position of principal. Though Tan succeeded, several years later he was forced to resign and replaced by Zhou.³⁴ However, there are several serious problems in this memoir. First, Tan arrived in Leizhou in 1910 rather than 1918 as the memoir claims. Second, Zhou Lieya was nominated as the principal around 1930, and it was impossible for him to

³² Lu Fangshang, *Geming zhi zaiqi* [The resurgence of revolution], Taipei: Institute of Modern History of Academia Sinica, 1989, pp.74-78.

³³ Li Yu-ning, *The Introduction of Socialism into China*, pp.22-61; Martin Bernal, *Chinese Socialism to 1907*, pp.107-128; Zhu Hongyuan, *Tongmenghui de geming lilun: minbao gean yanjiu* [The revolutionary theory of Tongmenghui: the case of *Minbao*], Taipei: Institute of Modern History of Academia Sinica, 1995, pp.168-184.

³⁴ See Yuan Bangjian ed., *Tan Pingshan shiliao* [The historical materials of Tan Pingshan], Guangzhou: Guangdong renmin chubanshe, 1989, pp.368-369.

compete with Tan, let alone the fact that he actually studied together with Tan at Peking University in 1917.³⁵

Therefore, the reason why Tan Pingshan resigned is still unclear, though it was still possible that Tan did clash with someone. Yuan Bangjian offers a more convincing explanation that Leizhou was historically a penal colony, too remote and backward to meet Tan's ambition.³⁶ The multiple explanations notwithstanding, we are quite sure that he was dissatisfied with the position and intended to pursue a higher status in the educational system. This time he successfully entered Peking University, the top university in China at that time. Given the fact that he resigned as a headmaster and restarted as a student at the age of 31, we can sense his strong determination to take this adventure.³⁷

Tan's path all the way up was surely the outcome of his own effort, but we could only understand his choices within the context of a rapidly changing society: the political and educational reforms in late Qing period, the widespread revolutionary networks and activities, the downfall of the monarchy and establishment of a new Republic, and the emergence of a new cultural field and a new identity of modern intellectual in urban areas.

Making sense of the educational reforms

It is therefore necessary to discuss here a bit more about the significance to the educated young people like Tan Pingshan of the several educational reforms in early twentieth-century China. Before the abolition of *keju* and the introduction of the Western institutions, generally the Chinese educational system was to serve the political establishment. The *keju* system set both the purpose of education (to become officials and serve the Emperor) and the way the examinees were selected, which guaranteed a stable institutional channel for students to enter the political field. In other words, the educational system can be understood as an institutional tool for the reproduction of the imperial

³⁵ Tian Peilin, "Cong gaoxiao dao Beida de qiuxue shengya" [From senior primary school to Peking University], *Koushu lishi* [Oral history], Taipei: Institute of Modern History of Academia Sinica, 1991, vol.2, p.44.

³⁶ See Yuan Bangjian, *Tan Pingshan zhuan*, pp.7-8.

³⁷ The financial pressure brought by Tan Pingshan to his family forced his elder brother to mortgage the tailor shop and borrow money from relatives. As a result, the shop was bankrupted. See *Tan Pingshan shiliao*, p.367-368.

political order. It reproduced not only the power structure monopolised by literati, but a strong Confucian ideology. Only by participating in the examinations could a young man obtain a promising career and only *gongming* could lift one to a higher social status. Private academies (*minban shuyuan*) which preached doctrines different from the official theories and disciplines rose from the Song Dynasty and flourished in the Ming. But during the Qing these academies were gradually integrated into the official educational system and thus lost their independence from *keju*.³⁸

The educational reform in 1903-1904, together with the abolition of *keju* in 1905, changed the rules of the game and shaped a new educational hierarchy.³⁹ These reforms also bred a relatively autonomous new cultural field. As we mentioned above, Zhang Zhidong transplanted the Japanese school system to China with some adaptations, thereby establishing a hierarchy for both general and professional tracks: junior primary schools - senior primary schools - middle schools or medium colleges - high schools or advanced colleges - universities.⁴⁰ In order to consolidate this new system, the Qing government released a regulation equating the different levels of the new degrees to the previous *gongming* system.⁴¹ The government therefore acknowledged the educational credentials gained from Western-style institutions as a new type of cultural capital. Although the following two reforms, in 1912 and 1922, dramatically changed the initial system, they further consolidated this new educational hierarchy.

In the meantime, over the decades when Chinese students were sent abroad for further study in the late Qing and early Republican eras, a belief gradually emerged that the students who studied in Europe and the United States were superior to those from Japanese universities. “Indigenous” graduates had to accept their even more inferior position relative

³⁸ Chen Fu, *Xinling de xuexiao: shuyuan jingshen yu zhonghua wenhua* [The school of soul: the spirit of academy and Chinese culture], Taipei: Hungyeh Publishing Co., Ltd., 2005, p.137; Deng Hongbo, *Zhongguo shuyuan shi* [History of Chinese academies], Shanghai: Orient Publishing Co., 2006, pp.572-584.

³⁹ Xu Jilin called the new educational field the “intellectual society”, but the meaning is similar. See Xu Jilin, “Chongjian shehui zhongxin: jindai zhongguo de zhishiren shehui”, pp. 138-145.

⁴⁰ Qu Xingui and Tang Liangyan, eds., *Zhongguo jindai jiaoyushi ziliao huibian: Xuezhishi yanbian* [Collected historical documents of modern Chinese education: the changes of the educational institution], Shanghai: Shanghai jiaoyu chubanshe, 1991, pp.291-397.

⁴¹ See Qu and Tang, *Zhongguo jindai jiaoyushi ziliao huibian: Xuezhishi yanbian*, 540-542; Dong Shouyi, *Qingdai liuxue yundong shi* [The history of overseas study movement in Qing Dynasty], Shenyang: Liaoning renmin chubanshe, 1985, pp.203-204.

to overseas students within this xenocentric perspective.⁴² Hence, by the late 1910s the evolving modern educational system saw the rise of a twofold hierarchy in China. Vertically, different educational degrees from primary school all the way to university and college began to be seen as the only evidence of different knowledge accumulation and educational levels. Horizontally, overseas students tended to carry more esteem than their domestically educated counterparts. Perhaps the situation was best illustrated by an interesting formula mentioned in the memoir of Fei Xiaotong (1910-2005) for girls to evaluate potential lovers: “high school girls should look for boys from university while college girls should think about boys returning from abroad” (*Zhongxue zhao daxue, daxue zhao liuxue*).⁴³

The hierarchy was so consolidated in China that it developed in the early 1920s into a system sometimes ridiculously rigid. Tao Xisheng (1899-1988), a famous historian and KMT theoretician, never forgot the different desks and chairs for the staff with different educational backgrounds when he entered the prestigious Shanghai Commercial Press (*Shangwu yinshuguan*) in 1924:

“I graduated from a domestic university with some teaching experiences, and my salary was 80 Yuan per month. They provided me a three-foot long, half-foot wide desk, with a hard wooden stool... For someone graduating from a Japanese University like the Meiji University, the salary would be 120 Yuan and the desk reached three and a half feet long, two feet wide, with a stool. A graduate from the Tokyo Imperial University, 150 Yuan, a four-foot long, two and a half-foot wide desk with a cane chair... If the newcomer graduated from an ordinary university in the US or Europe, his salary could rise to 200 Yuan, whose desk and chair were the same with those from the imperial university. However, a person graduating from Oxbridge, Harvard, or Yale and once a professor in a domestic university, would be at once appointed as a director who enjoyed the highest treatment. His desk would be the largest and most complicated one and, apart from his own cane chair, he could have another one for the visitors.”⁴⁴

⁴² Shu Xincheng, *Jindai zhongguo liuxue shi*, pp.135-136.

⁴³ Fei Xiaotong, “Liu ying ji” [Recalling my study in Britain], *Wenshi ziliao xuanji* [Selected historical accounts], vol. 31, p.31.

⁴⁴ Tao Xisheng, *Chaoliu yu diandi* [Tide and drop], Beijing: Da baike quanshu chubanshe, 2009, p.83.

This interesting but bitter story (at least for Tao) of the desk and chair revealed the most rigorous form the educational hierarchy could ever be presented. In the cultural field which was deeply shaped by the educational hierarchy, those occupying the higher position enjoyed a higher reputation and had more say in cultural and educational issues.⁴⁵ Meanwhile, the initial social networks in this field – teacher, student, classmate or alumni – continued to play a significant role in cultural activities, but the social implications of these relationships began to change and these networks expanded beyond China. The graduates under the modern educational system also had more occupational choices, such as journalists, editors, academics, and attorneys. In this way, education was no longer just instrumental to political reproduction, but rather a mechanism producing and reproducing a new social structure. In particular, it created a new cultural field.

It should be noted, however, that in 1910s China this new cultural field was far from ripe in terms of both its inner institutionalisation and its connection with the established political field, and this is not in complete accordance with Bourdieu's conception. For example, there was no uniform textbook, normative syllabus, or standard examination for the students in schools and universities, and there was no settled selective criterion or process for staff recruitment and student enrollment. Almost everything was different across different areas and over different periods. Higher educational institutions had no stable financial resources, and the quota for enrollment was therefore subject to changing circumstances over time. Within just several years some new schools might spring up while some of the others were shut down and forgotten in the dust of history. In the meantime, there had not emerged a consensus about the criteria for evaluating the modern system, and traditional *gongming* still had influence. The rules and institutions within the cultural field were still being negotiated.

Obviously, the emerging educational system and cultural field was still far from stable. This “incomplete institutionalisation” thus left much space for unanticipated contingency and conscious manipulation. In fact, the admission of the 31 year-old Tan Pingshan to

⁴⁵ Patricia Thomson, “Field”, in Michael Grenfell ed., *Pierre Bourdieu: Key Concepts*, Durham: Acumen Publishing Limited, 2012, p.68.

Peking University in 1917 was precisely because that year the university had no restriction on the age of the students as well as the number of enrollment.⁴⁶

Moreover, the intertwined relations between politics and education before *keju* was abolished further extended to the 1910s and after. The cultural field did not gain a completely independent status from the political field. This led to an ambiguous boundary between the political and educational circles. After the Republican government was established, politicians in the central government attempted to reclaim their power over educational issues, but the provincial educational societies (*sheng jiaoyuhui*) which emerged in the late Qing period stressed their autonomy. The Jiangsu Educational Society (*Jiangsu sheng jiaoyuhui*) was the most powerful one, even more influential than the Ministry of Education on policy making and personnel appointment. The relationship between political leaders and new educational elite for a time became very strained when Yuan Shikai in 1913 requested that all the universities and schools should recover the worship of Confucius and the students should study Confucian classics again. Political interference from the government eventually provoked the Educational Independence Movement (*Jiaoyu duli yundong*) across the country during and after the May Fourth period.

The May Fourth Movement, though inflamed by the diplomatic frustration at the Paris Peace Conference where the Great Power rejected the claims of the Chinese delegation, revealed the permeable boundary between political and cultural fields. It showed how eagerly people in the cultural circle tried to interfere in political issues. Cai Yuanpei (1868-1940), the principal of Peking University, made great effort during the movement resisting the interference from the government on the one hand and persuading the indignant students to avoid extreme actions against the blamed political figures. Both of his efforts, however, failed, since there were so many entangled and tight connections between the two fields.

Moreover, prestigious elite individuals could transfer from one field to another, and there could even be double identities in a single person: a political leader and a cultural

⁴⁶ Yang Hui, "Wusi yundong yu Beijing daxue" [The May Fourth Movement and Peking University], in *Wusi yundong huiyi lu* [The memoirs of May Fourth Movement], vol. 1, Beijing: China Social Sciences Press, 1979, p.219; Zheng Tianting, "Wo zai Beida de sinian" [Four years at Peking University], in Wang Shiru and Wen Di ed., *Wo yu Beida*, p.265.

celebrity. Cai Yuanpei himself was in fact one of them. He was known in his early years as a knowledgeable scholar (*jinshi*), but then he became an outstanding revolutionary leader in the *Tongmenghui*. In the newly founded Republican government he was appointed as the first Minister of Education, a bureaucrat, but several years later he assumed the position of the president of Peking University and became an educator. Cai's case demonstrated how frequent and close interactions between politics and culture could be in this rapidly changing time. In hindsight, the reason why Tan Pingshan could connect with the revolutionary network when he studied in a college simply lay in this overlapping of the two fields. Interestingly, in 1912 Tan himself served two positions as well: a headmaster in the school and a representative in the assembly.

Therefore, it will still be overoptimistic to call the emerging cultural field in the 1910s an independent and institutionalised one with a clear boundary. If the fate of Tan Pingshan revealed to us the regular and institutionalised aspect of this field and presented to us a gradual promotion of an individual in a thriving hierarchical system, then Chen Gongbo's life presented to us a picture full of abrupt changes and leaps.

Chen Gongbo: off the track

Different from Tan Pingshan, Chen Gongbo hailed from a senior military officer family, living an affluent and even spoiled life in his childhood. His father Chen Zhimei retired as the commander-in-chief of Guangxi Province (*Guangxi tidu*) and returned home in Guangzhou when Chen Gongbo was six. Chen Zhimei in his late years was benevolent and tolerant to his only son and created a relaxing circumstance for him to grow up. Chen Gongbo could thus follow his interest in classical Chinese novels, such as *Sanguo yanyi* (*Romance of the Three Kingdoms*), *Shuihu zhuan* (*Water Margin*), and *Dongzhou lieguo zhi* (*Records of the States in Eastern Zhou Dynasty*). He was deeply fascinated with the heroism, chivalry, loyalty, courage, and rebellious spirit of the protagonists in these novels. Brought up in an officer family, since adolescence he had practiced Kung Fu and begun to imagine himself as a swordsman (*xiake*) able to eliminate the powerful evil and help the

weak. This heroic self-image was reinforced after he followed his father, who plotted and led two revolts against the Qing government in 1903 and 1907.

Although Chen Zhimei was initially a high-ranking officer, he was deeply frustrated about the corruption of the government. After the 1900 Boxer Rebellion, he was determined to rebel with the help of Cantonese secret societies (*huidang*). The first attempt was deterred in 1903 by a whistle blower, but there was another attempt in 1907. However, without the support of *Tongmenghui*, Chen Zhimei's uprising was immediately suppressed. On the last night, he dismissed all his followers and asked Chen Gongbo to flee to Hong Kong, waiting alone in the camp for the final arrest and death penalty. The self-sacrificing image of his father impressed Chen Gongbo in an unforgettable way and reminded him of the heroes in the classical novels. Thanks to the strong pleading of his friends in the central government, Chen Zhimei's capital punishment was commuted into life imprisonment, but the wealthy family fell into impoverishment overnight.

The ups and downs in Chen Gongbo's dramatic life made it impossible for him to receive a complete education. His learning experience started from extensive reading of novels, and only when he was nine did his father invite a teacher to teach him Confucian classics. However, the six years of classical learning only left him with a number of unanswered questions about Confucian philosophy, except for his interest in the Confucian principle "studying the physical world" (*gewu*). This interest laid a foundation for Chen's interest in materialism and economic determinism in the early 1920s, and I will discuss it in Chapter Five.

The family disaster in 1907 further interrupted his education. He had to escape to Hong Kong, where the fifteen-year-old Chen Gongbo had to work in a newspaper office. Here he joined the *Tongmenghui*.⁴⁷ In 1908 he was so homesick and concerned about his father in prison that he secretly returned to Guangzhou. He then entered the Yucai School (*Yucai shushe*) with the financial support of his father's friends. Yucai School was opened by a

⁴⁷ Margherita Zanasi wrote in her monograph that Chen Gongbo did not join the KMT until 1925 after he came back from the US. This is inaccurate. As the president of the Nanjing government supported by Japan, Chen Gongbo was arrested and put on trial in March and April 1946. Chen stated in the court that he joined the *Tongmenghui* in 1907, and that was the time he was staying in Hong Kong. See Margherita Zanasi, *Saving the Nation: Economic Modernity in Republican China*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2006, p.3; Zhu Zijia (Jin Xiongbai), *Wang zhengquan de kaichang yu shouchang* [The prologue and epilogue of Wang Jingwei's regime], Hong Kong: Chunqiu zazhishe, 1963, vol.4, pp.5-6.

Scottish man and the tuition fee was quite low. Chen mentioned that the school did not charge for student uniforms, which was a big relief for his family. Yucai School was famous for its intensive English training, and many of its graduates worked in the Canton Customs (*Yuehaiguan*) and the foreign firms (*yanghang*) in Shameen (Shamian).⁴⁸ Chen improved his English remarkably here, which benefited greatly his reading and translation of English monographs and newspapers later.

Thanks to the 1911 Revolution, Chen Zhimei was released from prison. As an anti-Manchu pioneer he was elected as one of the representatives in the provincial assembly, like Tan Pingshan. Benefiting from his father's reputation and his own connection with the *Tongmenghui*, the twenty-year-old Chen Gongbo was nominated as the president of a county assembly and a staff officer in the army. Following his father, Chen Gongbo rose and fell between heaven and hell. These senior positions had nothing to do with his educational credentials, but derived largely from his father's prestige and personal network.

At one time he was complacent about his own "achievement", but was awakened by a severe scolding by his father. Chen Gongbo then realised the importance of educational experience, and in 1914 he resigned all the positions and began to study law in the College of Law and Politics in Guangdong. With only three years of formal education in Yucai School, Chen managed to enter a top college in Guangdong. This was not only because of his exceptional intelligence, but because an educational system far from institutionalization could leave more space for manipulations. After graduating in 1917, Chen enrolled in the Department of Philosophy at Peking University. For him, going to Beijing was not so much a channel towards a higher position in the educational hierarchy, which he did not quite care about, but more as an intellectual power house to solve the many questions haunting him after learning Confucian classics and experiencing so many ups and downs. The university would also wash off his fickleness and dilettantism and teach him how to live an intellectual life.⁴⁹ But here he would find that his previous questions were still

⁴⁸ Zhu Yinghe and Shen Qionglou, "Yucai shushe yu Nanwu gongxue" [Yucai School and Nanwu School], *Guangzhou wenshi* [Historical accounts of Guangzhou], vol. 52.

⁴⁹ The details of Chen Gongbo's story above are mainly from *Hanfeng ji*.

unsolved, and, together with the Western knowledge and theories, more questions actually arose. He would also meet Tan Pingshan and begin their ten years of friendship.

Peking University as a “cultural field”

Now we should take a glimpse of the cultural field inside Peking University before Tan and Chen arrived. The lofty status of Peking University in the educational system made it a weathervane in the Chinese cultural circle and the competition in this circle had already begun before the downfall of the Qing.⁵⁰ The removal of Yan Fu (1854-1921) as the principal in 1912 and the subsequent resignation of Lin Shu (1852-1924), Yao Yonggai (1866-1923), and Yao Yongpu (1861-1939) signified the decline of the “Tongcheng Faction” (*Tongchengpai*) and the rise of Zhang Taiyan’s students who returned from Japan.⁵¹ Zhang Taiyan and most of his disciples hailed from Zhejiang, which connected them more tightly with a common spatial and cultural identity. The triumph of Zhang’s students in the university paved the way for the subsequent larger-scale reform after Cai Yuanpei came.

After Yuan Shikai’s death in 1916, Fan Yuanlian (1876-1927) became the new Minister of Education, and he at once invited Cai Yuanpei to be the principal of Peking University in July 1916. As we have mentioned, Cai was the first Minister of Education after the 1911 Revolution, and at that time he had appointed Fan Yuanlian as the deputy minister. Now Fan needed Cai to help him with the issues of higher education. As a revolutionary leader, a prestigious educator, and a scholar acquainted with both Confucianism and Western knowledge, Cai was the most qualified person for the position and only he could accommodate different academic groups in the university. According to Cai’s plan, Peking University would become a vibrant cultural field independent from politics. His famous inaugural speech in April 1917 acutely denounced the widespread addiction to political

⁵⁰ Shen Yinmo, “Wo he Beida” [Peking University with me] in *Wo yu Beida* [Peking University with me], Beijing: Peking University Press, 1998, p.70.

⁵¹ Shen Yinmo, “Wo he Beida”, p.71; Yang Liangong, “Wunian daxue shenghuo” [My five years in the university], in *Wo yu Beida*, p.271.

power and fame among the students and then expressed his ambition to build up a genuine academic university. This was surely influenced by his observation of German universities when studying at Leipzig University in 1908-1911.⁵²

In order to accelerate his reform, Cai invited a group of prominent intellectuals to Peking University, most of whom returned from Japan, Britain, and the United States: Chen Duxiu (1879-1942), Hu Shi (1891-1962), Liang Shuming (1893-1988), Zhang Shizhao (1881-1973), Li Dazhao (1889-1927), Liu Bannong (1891-1934), and Gao Yihan (1885-1968). Chen Duxiu did not obtain any qualification from a foreign university, but he was known to the cultural circle in Beijing as the founder of *The New Youth* (*Xinqingnian*) in Shanghai and for his radical articles attacking Confucianism. The cultural “tycoons” in Beijing such as Tang Erhe (1878-1940), Shen Yinmo (1883-1971), and Ma Xulun (1885-1970) thus recommended Chen Duxiu to Cai Yuanpei.⁵³ In order to improve Chen’s cultural reputation, Cai even counterfeited a Curriculum Vitae for him, claiming that Chen graduated from Nihon University in Tokyo and was previously a principal in Anhui.⁵⁴

The others who were introduced into Peking University were either the contributors to *Xinqingnian* or Chen’s friends, though they were not unanimous with Chen in terms of his extreme iconoclasm. For example, Hu Shi was fairly sympathetic towards the Chinese classics and advocated introducing the Western methodology to “sort out the national cultural heritage” (*zhengli guogu*) instead of demolishing the traditional culture indiscriminately. Zhang Shizhao fundamentally objected to Chen’s cultural proposition, though he shared his political stance of republicanism and democracy. With the rising cultural hegemony produced by the overseas educational qualifications and the soaring popularity of *Xinqingnian* across the country, Chen and his friends gradually came to possess prominent positions in Chinese cultural and educational circles.

Equally important were some of Zhang Taiyan’s students who hailed from the same province (Zhejiang) with Cai: Ma Xulun, Shen Yinmo, Ma Yuzao (1878-1945), Ma Heng

⁵² Chen Hongjie, *Deguo gudian daxue guan jiqi dui zhongguo daxue de yingxiang* [The value of German classical universities and its influences to Chinese universities], Beijing: Peking University Press, pp.158-159.

⁵³ Cai Yuanpei, “Wo zai Beijing daxue de jingli” [My experience at Peking University], *Wo yu Beida*, p.49; Ma Xulun, “Wo ren Beijing daxue jiaoshou de huiyi” [Recalling the time when I served as professor at Peking University], *Wo yu Beida*, p.59; Shen Yinmo, “Wo he Beida”, *Wo yu Beida*, p.76.

⁵⁴ Zhuang Sen, “Yifen tebie de lulishu” [A special Curriculum Vitae], *Shehui kexue zhanxian* [The frontiers of social science], 2006 (1): 134-135.

(1881-1955), Shen Jianshi (1887-1947), Zhu Xizu (1879-1944), and Qian Xuantong (1887-1939). They had long friendship with Cai Yuanpei.⁵⁵ Dissatisfied with the *status quo* and strongly supportive of Cai's proposal, they planned to grasp the valuable opportunity to consolidate their leadership of cultural power in Beijing and expand their academic influence across China.⁵⁶ They basically preferred an eclectic attitude between Western scientism and classical Chinese scholarship.

Meanwhile, classic scholars such as Liu Shiwei (1884-1919) and Huang Kan (1886-1935), who were also Zhang Taiyan's students, emphasised the value of traditional scholarship springing up since the High Qing period, such as textual research (*kaojuxue*) and exegetics (*xunguxue*). In October 1918, the university introduced the course selection system, borrowed from German universities, and teachers therefore had to fight for their popularity among the students, intensifying the polemical competition between them.⁵⁷ The university was more and more like a modern cultural field where intellectuals were competing for their influences and positions.

Before Chen Duxiu took charge of the School of Humanities cultural competition was still basically restricted within the classroom, where professors presented their views only to a limited number of students. The arrival of Chen and *Xinqingnian* from Shanghai changed both the situation and the fate of the journal. For the first time the scholars preaching the "new culture" possessed a fortress from which to attack the "conservative" bloc in front of a far larger audience. The battlefield was transferred from classroom to mass media.

The reputation of *Xinqingnian* was also boosted. Before 1917 there were very limited responses and feedback from the readers, and until early 1918 the journal had still been an unfamiliar name for some Chinese intellectuals.⁵⁸ After Cai Yuanpei headed Peking University, however, the identities of its editors and authors as professors at this top

⁵⁵ Timothy B. Weston, *The Power of Position: Beijing University, Intellectuals, and Chinese Political Culture, 1898-1929*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004, pp.116-117.

⁵⁶ Fabio Lanza, *Behind the Gate: Inventing Students in Beijing*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2010, p.70; Shen Yinmo, "Wo he Beida", p.71.

⁵⁷ Fabio Lanza, *Behind the Gate: Inventing Students in Beijing*, p.85; Ya-pei Kuo, "Polarities and the May Fourth Polemical Culture: Provenance of the 'Conservative' Category", *Twentieth-century China*, vol.44, 2019 (2): 174-189.

⁵⁸ Lu Xun, "Nahan zixu" [The preface of *shouting*], *Luxun quanji* [Collected works of Lu Xun], Beijing: Renmin wenzue chubanshe, 1981, p.419; Zhang Guotao, *Wo de huiyi* [My memory], Beijing: Dongfang chubanshe, 1980, vol.1, p.39.

university made the best advertisement of the journal to the public, and Chen Duxiu and his friends in turn took advantage of this famous forum to provoke controversy on Chinese culture and propagate their own propositions.⁵⁹

By contrast, their opponents in the university did not organise an influential journal matching *Xinqingnian*, and their voices were so feeble that the editors of *Xinqingnian* once had to fabricate a fake adversary to argue with themselves.⁶⁰ In fact, there were not many supporters of Chen's extreme discourse among the professors and students within the university, and many of those who were denounced by Chen as "conservatives" had overseas learning experiences and even knew the West much better than Chen.⁶¹ Chen's opponents failed to form a strong alliance, as their voices turned out to be quite weak until Lin Shu in Shanghai launched a counterattack in 1919, whose influence was equally offset by the overwhelming "new" group.⁶² Liu Shipai and Huangkan should have been the chief commander of the conservatives. However, Liu was constantly tortured by tuberculosis and finally passed away in 1919, and Huang's strongest counterblow was to scold the "new thoughts" in class, which did little harm to the popularity of the group of "new culture" among their enthusiastic readers all over the country.⁶³ Although the Confucian scholars did eventually manage to publish their own journal, *National Cultural Heritage (Guogu)* in 1919, only several months later it terminated after Liu Shipai's death.

Apart from creating journals, new intellectuals were also exploring other methods to amplify their influences. Speeches in classrooms and random debates in the university library, the hallways, and teaching buildings contained more significance than we can expect today. Each convincing speech or successful debate would imply a small victory, while an unprepared lecture with a mistake or a losing argument would promptly produce some doubt from the audience. Polemic and eloquence meant so much that even a distinguished professor could not escape. Ma Xulun was once heckled by Liang Shuming

⁵⁹ Wang Qisheng, "Xinwenhua shi ruhe yundong qilai de" [How was the New Culture Movement mobilized], *Jindaishi Yanjiu* [Modern Chinese history studies], 2007 (1): 26.

⁶⁰ Chow Tse-tsung, *May Fourth Movement: Intellectual Revolution in Modern China*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960, p.89; Wang Qisheng, "Xinwenhua shi ruhe yundong qilai de", p.27.

⁶¹ Kuo Ya-pei, "Polarities and the May Fourth Polemical Culture: Provenance of the 'Conservative' Category", *Twentieth-century China*, vol.44, 2019 (2): 174-189.

⁶² Chow Tse-tsung, *May Fourth Movement: Intellectual Revolution in Modern China*, p.88.

⁶³ Zhou Zuoren, "Beida ganjiu lu" [Recollection of Peking University], *Wo yu Beida*, p.110.

about his comparative approach between Daoism and Buddhism in the hallway, but failed to give a convincing response. Ma's students were at once doubtful of his academic ability and some even directly debated with him in the classroom.⁶⁴ Liang's own experience was no better, since he was often queried and embarrassed by those who disagreed with him in front of over a hundred students in class.⁶⁵ Tao Menghe (1887-1960), a prominent sociologist graduating from LSE, was known for his extensive readings of Western sociological theories and was fluent in foreign languages, but once he suddenly forgot in class how to translate *shehuixue* (sociology) to German (Soziologie). The students thus began to question his knowledge of Western sociology.⁶⁶ When teaching the course on traditional Chinese philosophy, Hu Shi at first suffered comprehensive doubt because he started from the period of Spring and Autumn (*Chunqiu*, 770-476 B.C.), rather than the immemorial legendary era of Yellow Emperor (*Huangdi*) as most of the philosophy teachers did. Hu's reputation was finally saved by the strong support of his student Fu Sinian (1896-1950), who by that time had built high authority among his classmates with his profound knowledge of Confucianism.⁶⁷

Organising societies was another way to compete for cultural power. In 1918, Cai Yuanpei began to encourage students to establish study societies, and soon it became a new way for young people to associate with like-minded fellows. Some societies were organised by those who held similar opinions towards cultural and political issues (issue-oriented societies). There were also societies comprising the students with common interest like literature, music, and sports (interest-oriented societies), while some societies were just based on those from the same hometown (spatial-oriented societies). Various social networks hence developed with the help of these three kinds of societies, and some even expanded to other universities and cities. The issue-oriented societies were often most influential, since the members were organized in a similar spirit or belief. The most acknowledged societies were *Xinchaoshe* (New Tide Society) and *Guominshe* (National

⁶⁴ Tian Peilin, "Cong gaoxiao dao Beida de qiuxue shengya", pp.43-44.

⁶⁵ Liang Shuming, "Wusi yundong qianhou de Beijing daxue" [Peking University before and after May Fourth Movement], in *Wo yu Beida*, pp.100-101.

⁶⁶ Tian Peilin, "Cong gaoxiao dao Beida de qiuxue shengya", p.44.

⁶⁷ Hu Shi, "Fu Mengzhen xiansheng de sixiang" [The thought of Mr. Fu Sinian], *Huainian Fu Sinian* [Commemorating Fu Sinian], Taipei: Showwe Information Co., Ltd, 2014, pp.2-3.

Society). The members of *Xinchaoshe* strongly advocated the introduction of Western thoughts and the establishment of a “new literature”, “new culture”, and “new morality”, and they had a very close connection with *Xinqingnian*. *Guominshe* originated from the 1918 anti-Japanese movement which objected to the Japan-China Co-defense Military Pact. Its strong nationalist stance meant that the majority of its members objected to a wholesale Westernisation. Many members of *Xinchaoshe* and *Guominshe* would later become the backbones of the CCP and KMT.

The interest-oriented and spatial-oriented societies were also influential. The famous *Xinwenxue yanjiuhui* (Journalism Study Society) and *Zhexue yanjiuhui* (Philosophy Study Society) gathered young people interested in mass media and Western philosophy, and their activities were often reported in the student journals.⁶⁸ Similar to the traditional hometown associations (*Tongxianghui*), the university spatial-oriented societies consolidated the common spatial and cultural self-identities among the members. For instance, the Society of Social Reformation (*Shehui gaige xuehui*) absorbed the students from Fujian and the Society of Advancing Together (*Gongjinshe*) from Shaanxi.⁶⁹

Tan and Chen at Peking University

Hailing from a distant province, Tan Pingshan and Chen Gongbo found themselves in a very unfamiliar environment, in terms of both the campus and the city.⁷⁰ Tan and Chen did not know each other before entering the university, but the same language and culture soon helped develop a solid friendship between them. Equipped with poor Mandarin, they were quite reticent in the first year. Also, it still took time for them to be familiar with the cultural atmosphere at Peking University. They spent the whole year reading widely, which enabled them to follow the trends on campus. Chen recalled that during this time he was

⁶⁸ Yang Hui, “Wusi yundong yu beijing daxue” [May Fourth Movement and Peking University], in *Wusi yundong huiyilu* [Memoirs of May Fourth Movement], Beijing: China Social Science Press, 1979, p.220; Luo Zhanglong, *Chunyuan zaiji* [A record of Chunyuan], Beijing: SDX Joint Publishing Company, 1984, pp.31-33.

⁶⁹ Zheng Tianting, “Wo zai Beida de simian” [The four years of my life at Peking University], p.267; Yang Zhonjian, “Liunian beida xuesheng shenghuo de huiyi” [My memory of the six years at Peking University], p.379. Both in *Wo yu beida*.

⁷⁰ Chen Gongbo, *Hanfeng ji*, p.195.

immersed in Western philosophy and did not spend much time communicating with people.⁷¹ However, perhaps it was not because he did not want to make friends, but he found it hard to understand the hot topics in the university without the necessary academic training.

In addition, Chen's uninhibited and rebellious temperament nurtured from childhood made it impossible for him to be deferential in his dealings with the powerful figures.⁷² Such disposition provoked his aversion to those seemingly pompous student leaders in the limelight like Fu Sinian, and he was therefore aloof about connecting with those near the core circle of the cultural field.⁷³ The cultural power by this time had already showed its grimness. Even among the young students, a student leader like Fu Sinian could behave arrogantly. Mao Zedong's experience could vividly exemplify this. When he travelled from Hunan to Beijing, working as a librarian and trying to associate with some student leaders, he was often ignored:

“Peiping [Beijing] seemed very expensive to me. I had reached the capital by borrowing from friends, and when I arrived I had to look for work at once. Yang Chen-ch'i [Yang Changji], my former ethics teacher at the normal school, had become a professor at Peking National University. I appealed to him for help in finding a job, and he introduced me to the university librarian. This was Li Ta-chao [Li Dazhao], who later became a founder of the Communist Party of China... My office was so low that people avoided me. One of my tasks was to register the names of people who came to read newspapers, but to most of them I did not exist as a human being. Among those who came to read I recognized the names of famous leaders of the renaissance movement, men like Fu Ssu-nien [Fu Sinian], Lo Chai-lung [Luo Jialun], and others, in whom I was intensely interested. I tried to begin conversations with them on political and cultural subjects, but they were very busy men. They had no time to listen to an assistant librarian speaking southern dialect.”⁷⁴

⁷¹ Chen Gongbo, *Hanfeng ji*, p.196, 199.

⁷² Chen Gongbo, *Hanfeng ji*, pp.195-196.

⁷³ Chen Gongbo, *Hanfeng ji*, pp.196-197; Tian Peilin, “Cong gaoxiao dao Beida de qiuxue shengya”, p.44.

⁷⁴ Edgar Snow, *Red Star over China*, New York: Modern Library, 1944, pp.149-150.

Tan Pingshan decided to try his luck. He was six years older than Chen and understood more deeply the cultural levers of power. In fact, Chen Gongbo admitted in *Hanfeng ji* that “Pingshan was several years older than me and more sophisticated and tactful than me”.⁷⁵ Tan’s life path from a poor petty intellectual in a small town to membership of a cultural elite in Peking University kept reminding him of the significance of striving for a higher position to make a voice. Tan was more willing and eager than Chen to embrace the hierarchy in the competitive cultural field. For Tan, Cantonese students were only a minor group in this northern university (very few professors at Peking University came from Guangdong either), and there was no society exclusively for Cantonese students. To access the cultural circle he had to rely on the issue-oriented and interest-oriented societies.

Soon he became a member of *Xinchaoshe* and *Xinwenxue yanjiuhui* in late 1918. *The Renaissance (Xinchao)* was the journal of *Xinchaoshe*, and Fu Sinian and Luo Jialun (1897-1969), whom Mao Zedong tried to get alongside, served as its chief editors. It soon became the most influential student journal in Beijing and perhaps in the whole country, and it was an important camp for Tan as well. Tan published his first article in the first issue of *Xinchao* in January 1919, which dealt with the connection between philosophy, science, and religion. We can notice behind the conclusion of the article that there is a piece of comment from the principal Cai Yuanpei made in April 1918, beginning with: “Tan has made an insightful argument”.⁷⁶ Clearly, Cai’s comment proved that the draft of Tan’s article had already been completed by early 1918, and, after seeking Cai’s advice, Tan prepared for its publication in the inaugural issue of *Xinchao*. These thoughtful arrangements demonstrated how eager and careful Tan was for his debut in the cultural field, and Cai’s praise did promote Tan’s reputation in *Xiaochaoshe* and the university. In the next two years, Tan published five articles altogether in the total of twelve issues of the journal, showing how active and productive he was to make his voice heard.

In the meantime, after observing the huge success of *Xinqingnian* and *Xinchao*, Tan realised not only the importance of the journals and newspapers in the cultural circle, but the imperative of receiving some training in Western journalism for future practice. He

⁷⁵ Chen Gongbo, *Hanfeng ji*, p.200.

⁷⁶ Tan Pingshan, “Zhexue duiyu kexue zongjiao zhi guanxi lun” [On the relation of philosophy with science and religion], *Tan Pingshan wenji*, pp.26-27.

soon got along well with Xu Baohuang (1894-1930), the only expert in journalism in the university. Xu was much younger than Tan, but in 1916 he had already obtained his master degree in economics and journalism from the University of Michigan. Journalism by the late 1910s was still a novel discipline to Chinese students, who could not find any relevant course even in Peking University. In fact, it was Tan Pingshan who initiated with some friends the establishment of *Xinwenxue yanjiuhui* and invited Shao Piaoping (1886-1926), a prestigious journalist, to join the society.⁷⁷ The society formally came into existence on October 14th 1918 and, at the request of Tan, Chen Gongbo also joined.⁷⁸ Studying for a whole year in the society, Tan and Chen obtained an honorary certificate.⁷⁹ Apart from the knowledge and practice of journalism, they also expanded personal networks among the young intellectuals, and actually it was in the society that they met with Mao Zedong.⁸⁰ Examining the list of members, we surprisingly discover that Cantonese students occupied more than a third, and the key role Tan played in the society revealed his initiative to enhance the influences of Cantonese students in the campus.⁸¹

Of the five articles published in *Xinchao*, the first two focused mainly on philosophical and ethical discussions.⁸² Interestingly, despite an investigation of Western philosophy, the two articles were written in classical Chinese. Considering the principle of *Xinchao* to advocate a new, “vernacular Chinese” (*baihuawen*), this proved that Tan was still unprepared to write in the new style. However, two months later when he published his fourth article on democracy, he was able to use some *baihuawen*.⁸³ In his fifth article, he could already write very proficient *baihuawen*.⁸⁴ To appear as an intellectual of the “new culture” and “new literature”, Tan knew clearly that he should distance himself from the classic literary form as soon as possible.

⁷⁷ Luo Zhanglong, *Chunyuan zaiji*, pp.31-32.

⁷⁸ Chen Gongbo, *Hanfeng ji*, p.197.

⁷⁹ *Beijing daxue rikan* [Daily periodical of Peking University], October 21st, 1919.

⁸⁰ Edga Snow, *Red Star Over China*, 1937, London: Gollancz, pp.148-149.

⁸¹ *Beijing Daxue Rikan*, October 21st, 1919.

⁸² Tan Pingshan, “Zhexue duiyu kexue zongjiao zhi guanxi lun” [On the relation of philosophy with science and religion], *Tan Pingshan wenji*, pp.1-27; “Fali yu lunli zhi benzhi qufen lun” [The difference between the essences of legal principle and ethic], *Tan Pingshan wenji*, pp.28-36.

⁸³ Tan Pingshan, “De mo ke la xi zhi simian guan” [The four aspects of democracy], *Tan Pingshan wenji*, pp.37-50.

⁸⁴ Tan Pingshan, “Xiandai minzhi zhuyi de jingshen” [The spirit of modern democracy], *Tan Pingshan wenji*, pp.51-57.

The third article marked Tan's transfer to political and social issues. The article, "The Solution to Labour Problem", was a translation from the famous Japanese journal, *Taiyō* (*the Sun*).⁸⁵ Tan's translation demonstrated his capability of engaging with literature on Japanese socialism.⁸⁶ The original article was written by Horie Kiichi (1876-1927), an economics professor from Keio University who obtained his degrees in the US and Britain. Horie praised the trade union movements in these two countries and regarded peaceful capital-labour reconciliation as the ultimate way to solve labour problems. Enlightened by British trade unionism, Horie's article recommended the legislation of labour protection and social policy to tackle the severe problems of widespread unemployment and low wages in Japan after the Great War.⁸⁷

After the Russo-Japanese war, especially after the 1908 "Red Flag Case" when many Japanese socialists were arrested and the 1911 High Treason Incident when prestigious socialist Kōtoku Shūsui (1871-1911) and his friends were allegedly involved in a plot to assassinate the Emperor, the Japanese government strengthened its harsh suppression of Marxism and anarchism.⁸⁸ Meanwhile, British style trade unionism was to some extent tolerated and thus dominated the Japanese labour movement.⁸⁹ According to this more moderate ideology, the solution to labour problems lay in progressive social reform rather than fierce Marxist class struggle, and the problem should be remedied within the capitalist system instead of the radical revolutionary tactics that lead to the dictatorship of the proletariat.

Horie was one of the most influential scholars among the supporters of trade unionism in 1910s and 1920s Japan, and Tan learned the concept "relief valve" from him to describe the function of social policy in avoiding violent revolutions. Tan's interest and belief in trade unionism could be certified in his other article about solving the general strike of

⁸⁵ Tan Pingshan (translation), "Laodong wenti zhi jieju" [The solution of labour problem], *Xincha*, vol. 1, issue 4, pp.601-609.

⁸⁶ It was very likely that his capability of reading Japanese was trained during his study from 1908 to 1910 in the Guangdong Senior Normal School, where some teachers from Japan engaged in teaching. See Douglas R. Reynolds, *China, 1898-1912: The Xincheng Revolution and Japan*, p.107.

⁸⁷ Tan Pingshan, "Laodong wenti zhi jieju", pp.35-41.

⁸⁸ Arthur Morgan Young, *The Socialist and Labour Movement in Japan*, Washington D.C.: University Publications of America, 1979, pp.7-12.

⁸⁹ Arthur Morgan Young, *The Socialist and Labour Movement in Japan*, pp.18-22.

university teachers in Beijing at the end of 1919.⁹⁰ He proposed that the government should help to establish the trade union for teachers and establish an institutional channel for peaceful negotiations. Clearly, Horie's studies on labour policy and trade unions deeply influenced Tan Pingshan. Given the significant and continuous Japanese impact on early Chinese socialism for decades in the early twentieth-century, it was no surprise that Tan could absorb some intellectual resources from Japanese leftist academia.

We can also see the influence from Japan when Tan read Marx, but this time it was through a Chinese theoretician graduating from Japan. We have mentioned that when Tan joined the revolutionary networks in Guangzhou, he read some articles on socialism in *Minbao* written by the *Tongmenghui* leaders. Among these leaders, Zhu Zhixin was the first to provide some details of Karl Marx and Marxism. Zhu studied at Hosei University in 1904-1906, where he developed strong interest of Western socialist thoughts. In fact, after the 1911 Revolution both Tan Pingshan and Zhu Zhixin were active in the Cantonese political circle, and it is very likely that Tan knew Zhu and his political ideas well.⁹¹

We can find more evidence from Tan and Zhu's texts to identify this connection. Tan Pingshan in his fourth article published in May 1919, "The Four Aspects of Democracy", talked about Marx and listed one by one the ten measures in the second section of the *Communist Manifesto*.⁹² Before the publication of this article, there had been only two Chinese authors translating Marx's ten measures: Zhu Zhixin and Cheng Shewo (1898-1991). Although Cheng, like Tan Pingshan, was a member of the *Xinchaoshe*, his translation differed much from Tan in terms of wordings. For example, in the third measure, "rights of inheritance" was translated by Cheng into "yichan" (heritage), but Tan borrowed the Japanese word "sōzoku" (succession) which could also be found in Zhu's translation. In the fourth measure, "confiscation" was translated into "chonggong" (confiscation) by Cheng, but both Tan and Zhu used the word "moshou" (forfeiture).⁹³

⁹⁰ Tan Pingshan, "Jiaoyuan daiyu wenti" [The welfare of teachers], *Tan Pingshan wenji*, pp.65-66. For the details of the teacher's strike from 1919 to 1920, see Xu Wenguo, "1919-1920 nian Beijing jiaoyujie suoxin yundong lunxi" [An analysis of the "Asking-for-salary" Campaign in Beijing educational circles from 1919 to 1920], *Beijing Shehui Kexue* [Beijing Social Science], 2007 (2): 96-101.

⁹¹ Zhu was appointed as the Minister of Audit, and Tan was elected as one of the ninety-six representatives in the provincial assembly. See Yuan Bangjian, *Tan PingshanZhuan*, pp.6-7.

⁹² Tan Pingshan, "De mo ke la xi zhi simian guan", pp.46-47.

⁹³ Tan Pingshan, "De mo ke la xi zhi simian guan", p.41; Zhu Zhixin, "De yi zhi shehui gemingjia xiaozhuan" [A brief biography of German social revolutionaries], *Zhu Zhixin ji* [The collected works of Zhu Zhixin], Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju,

It appears that Cheng translated from the English version because he gave original English words behind some translated terms, while Zhu referred to the Japanese version which was translated by Kōtoku Shūsui and Sakai Toshihiko (1871-1933).⁹⁴ Therefore, Tan Pingshan's translation demonstrated that his reading of Marxism was influenced by Zhu rather than Cheng.

However, was it possible that Tan translated directly from the Japanese text and did not ever refer to Zhu's article? We can basically negate this assumption. First, we can be sure that Tan knew Zhu's article well, given Tan's long connection with the *Tongmenghui*, *Minbao*, and Zhu. Second, Tan only emphasised the ten measures of Marx while ignoring the rest of the manifesto. But Kōtoku and Sakai translated the entire document. Interestingly, Zhu in his article, like Tan, spent much effort explaining the ten measures. The similarity between Zhu and Tan's articles was no coincidence. Finally, Kōtoku and Sakai's Japanese translation was quite loyal to the original meaning of Marx and Engels, but both Zhu and Tan distorted their revolutionary discourses.

According to Martin Bernal's study, Zhu Zhixin "seemed to be stressing Marx's more peaceful aspects".⁹⁵ Indeed, Zhu not only showed his preference for non-radical measures to solve class conflicts, but reconstructed Marxist revolutionary theory from his own republican and democratic perspectives. In Zhu's article, the word "proletarian" was deliberately replaced by "civilian", and "struggle" by "coordination", which channels Marxism towards republican democracy. The class conflict in the European capitalist society was converted by Zhu into disputes between the rich and poor, rulers and the ruled, and autocracy and democracy.⁹⁶ Thus, the key question here was transferred from the destined fall of capitalism and rise of communism, to the overthrow of despotism and elimination of political inequality between different social groups.

Furthermore, following the essay introducing Marxism, Zhu also wrote an article about Britain, in which he applauded the non-violent negotiations between the capitalists and

1979, p.14; She (Cheng Shewo), "Gongchandang de xuanyan" [The Communist Manifesto], *Meizhou Pinglun* [The weekly review], no.16, April 6, 1919.

⁹⁴ https://www.aozora.gr.jp/cards/001138/files/47057_57486.html

⁹⁵ Martin Bernal, *Chinese Socialism to 1907*, pp.116-117.

⁹⁶ Zhu Zhixin, "Deyizhi shehui gemingjia liezhuan", pp.11-12.

trade unions and cheered for the enfranchisement of workers that led to political equality.⁹⁷ In this way, Zhu's praise of British socialism and egalitarian democracy aroused Tan's interest, and Marxism here became a footnote of democracy. Further, Tan's interpretation of "democracy" was again different from Marx, as the latter stated right in front of the ten measures: "the first step in the revolution by the working class is to raise the proletariat to the position of ruling class to win the battle of democracy".⁹⁸ Marx meant here that the proletariat should first seize political power from the bourgeoisie, and the forthcoming "democracy" would surely be a proletarian democracy. Yet for Tan, the spirit of modern democracy lied in its egalitarianism, and any class monopolising the power should be brought down.⁹⁹ For Marx and Engels, the ten measures which were highlighted so much by Zhu and Tan, were in fact merely a tentative plan, and the dictatorship of the proletariat was far more fundamental than these specific strategies, like heavy progressive tax, free education for children, or abolition of the right of inheritance. In the preface of the 1872 German edition of the *Communist Manifesto*, even Marx and Engels themselves claim that "no special stress is laid on the revolutionary measures proposed at the end of Section II".¹⁰⁰ The different interpretations of the ten measures indicated an obvious bifurcation between Marx's original work and Tan's article.

Reading widely and discussing with friends for two years, Tan was now able to form a mature political view. He claimed that "democracy" (*De mo ke la xi*) was at the center of his thought and explained his comprehension of democracy from four aspects: political, economic, philosophical, and social. He did not regard Marxian revolutionary theory as something relevant to his project of political democracy, but only admitted the value of Marx's economic determinism and theory of exploitation. This was the reason why he mentioned Marx only when he discussed economic and social democracy.¹⁰¹ But even for

⁹⁷ Zhu Zhixin, "Yingguo xin zong xuanju laodongdang zhi jinbu" [The progress of the Labour Party in the new general election in Britain], *Zhu Zhixinji*, pp.41-42.

⁹⁸ Marx and Engels, *Communist Manifesto*, translated by Samuel Moore, Chicago: Charles H. Kerr & Company, 1888, p.37.

⁹⁹ Tan Pingshan, "Xiandai minzhi zhuyi de jingshen" [The spirit of modern democracy], *Tan Pingshan wenji*, p.54.

¹⁰⁰ Marx and Engels, *Communist Manifesto*, p.1.

¹⁰¹ Tan Pingshan, "De mo ke la xi zhi simian guan", pp.38-39.

economic and social democracy, Tan still regarded British social reform and labour protection rather than communism as the most desirable one.¹⁰²

So what about political democracy? Here Tan recommended strongly the Erfurt Programme of the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD), since it offered a perfect combination of egalitarian democracy and socialism.¹⁰³ In fact, Tan was said to be the first one who introduced and complimented the Erfurt Programme in China.¹⁰⁴ Definitely, what he sought was a certain form of social democracy:

“The origin of social democracy can be traced far backward, so its foundation is strong enough to develop one day into a full-fledged one. It also contains indisputable truth, which we humans will certainly need in the future.”¹⁰⁵

Drafted by Karl Kautsky (1854-1938), August Bebel (1840-1913), and Eduard Bernstein (1850-1932), the Erfurt Programme was actually a mosaic of the propositions of both “orthodox Marxism” and reformists. Of the two sections in the programme, the first one expressed the Marxist revolutionary ideal to overthrow capitalism in the future, while the second one, with a reformist tone, dealt with the immediate strategies for a worker’s party within the capitalist system.¹⁰⁶ What impressed Tan most was the second section written by Bernstein, who several years later publicly rejected social revolution and launched a revisionist movement in the SPD. Tan liked it so much that he included the entire section in his article.¹⁰⁷ Ironically, it was the very misunderstanding of Marxism, together with some socialist strands which denied orthodox Marxism, that made Marxism relevant to Tan.

Interestingly, Tan’s enthusiasm for German social democracy was in stark contrast with his gloomy description of Soviet Russia, which he thought had betrayed social democracy: “At first the Russian radicals called themselves social democrats, but now the nation and

¹⁰² Tan Pingshan, “De mo ke la xi zhi simian guan”, p.39.

¹⁰³ Tan Pingshan, “De mo ke la xi zhi simian guan”, p.46.

¹⁰⁴ Liu Hui, “Aierfute gangling ji Kaociji de jieshuo zaihua zaoqi chuanbo yu zhonggong de guanxi” [The spread of Erfurt Programme and Kautsky’s introduction in China and its connection with the CCP], *Zhonggong Dangshi Yanjiu* [CCP History Studies], 2015 (10): 55-56.

¹⁰⁵ Tan Pingshan, “De mo ke la xi zhi simian guan”, p.46.

¹⁰⁶ Carl E. Schorske, *German Social Democracy, 1905-1917: the Development of the Great Schism*, New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1955, pp.4-6.

¹⁰⁷ Tan Pingshan, “De mo ke la xi zhi simian guan”, pp.46-48.

people suffered so much from [Bolshevism] that they yielded to power and force. Still, they had no one to blame but themselves”.¹⁰⁸ He then expressed his admiration of the Bolsheviks in terms of their spirit, but still felt sorry about the dreadful situation in Russia.¹⁰⁹ Evidently, the rationale behind Tan’s sympathy - but surely not support - of the October Revolution was that he endorsed the attempt to demolish the political domination of the bourgeois, but did not appreciate the communists’ violence and suppression against other political forces.

Tan’s interest in but misunderstanding of Marxism was surely influenced by his reading on labour issues and socialism, like Horie and Zhu Zhixin’s articles, but also originated from his interaction with other intellectuals in the cultural field in Beijing. Since late 1918, there had been a shift of interest among the intellectuals from constitutionalism and high politics to the masses. In November Cai Yuanpei exalted the great contribution of Chinese labourers on the European battlefields in the Great War and raised the slogan that “the labourers were the most respectable” (*laogong shensheng*).¹¹⁰ Meanwhile, *Xinqingnian* in October 1918 released two articles of Li Dazhao, “The Victory of the Common People” and “The Victory of Bolshevism”.¹¹¹ Echoing Li’s cheerful shout, three months later *Xinchao* published its inaugural issue, in which the two editors-in-chief, Luo Jialun and Fu Sinian, claimed that the Russian Revolution was destined to transcend the French Revolution and became the most powerful new trend in the twentieth century.¹¹² Some outstanding intellectuals like Chen Puxian (1891-1957) and Chen Qixiu (1886-1960) soon followed the dynamic in 1919, and Marxism was thus heatedly discussed in Beijing cultural circles.¹¹³ In the *Xinwenxue yanjiuhui*, Shao Piaoping by this time had been also increasingly interested in the communist revolution and labour issues.¹¹⁴ As an active member of

¹⁰⁸ Tan Pingshan, “De mo ke la xi zhi simian guan”, p.48.

¹⁰⁹ Tan Pingshan, “De mo ke la xi zhi simian guan”, p.48.

¹¹⁰ Cai Yuanpei, “laogong shensheng” [Labourers are the most respectable group], *Cai Jiemin xiansheng yanxing lu* [The record of words and deeds of Mr. Cai Yuanpei], Jinan: Shandong Renmin Press, 1998, p.96.

¹¹¹ Li Dazhao, “Shumin de shengli” [The victory of the common people], in *Xinqingnian*, vol.5, no.5, pp.436-438, and “Buershiwei zhuyi de shengli” [The victory of Bolshevism], in *Xinqingnian*, vol.5, no.5, pp.442-448.

¹¹² Luo Jialun, “Jinri zhi shijie xinchao” [Today’s new tide in the world], in *Xinchao*, vol.1, no.1, pp.19-23; Fu Sinian, “Shehui geming: eguo shi de geming” [Social revolution: the Russian Revolution], in *Xinchao*, vol.1, no.1, pp.128-129.

¹¹³ See, for example, Yuan Quan (Chen Puxian), “Makesi zhi fendou shengya” [The life of Marx], in *Chen Bao* [The morning post], April 1-4, 1919; Chen Qixiu, “Makesi de weiwu shiguan yu zhencao wenti” [Marx’s historical materialism and the issue of chastity], in *Xinqingnian*, vol. 6, no.5, pp.500-504.

¹¹⁴ Luo Zhanglong provides in his memoir a detailed content of Shao’s speech on labour problems coverage. See Luo Zhanglong, *Chunyuan zaiji*, p.35. Shao published a monograph on Russian Revolution and Soviet government in 1920,

Xinchaoshe and *Xinwenxue yanjiuhui*, it was impossible that Tan Pingshan was not influenced by this strong tide.¹¹⁵ Several members in the society might also contribute to Tan's transfer: Mao Zedong (1893-1976), Gao Shangde (1896-1925), and Luo Zhanglong (1896-1995). As early CCP members, their communication with Tan Pingshan and Chen Gongbo might also be a catalyst.

Even so, Tan's main concern was not Marxism but democracy. He suggested that the core of democracy was characterised by "equality" and "liberty" whose origin could be traced back to the French Revolution. Tan, however, in his fifth article, "The Spirit of Modern Democracy", criticised the French Revolution for excluding the impoverished proletariat from the political arena.¹¹⁶ He argued that not a single class or group should enjoy the hegemony of political, economic, and social rights. Therefore, he continues, if someday the proletariat should monopolise the power, such dictatorship would still violate the spirit of modern democracy.¹¹⁷

Tan's emphasis on "democracy" and "liberty" embodied the influences from his teachers at Peking University. During the "New Culture Movement", Chen Duxiu and Hu Shi had been continuously advocating "Mr. Democracy" (*De xiansheng*) and liberal individualism in *Xinqingnian*.¹¹⁸ Even Li Dazhao, the father of Chinese Marxism, at this time regarded the October Revolution as the triumph of "humanism", "pacifism", "democracy" and "liberty".¹¹⁹

The frequent communications and influences between *Xinqingnian* and *Xinchaoshe* should not be underestimated, as shown in the memoir of Luo Jialun.¹²⁰ Hu Shi also recalled in a public speech in 1958 that the English name of the *Xinchaoshe*, *The Renaissance*, was decided after the members negotiated with Hu, and that *Xinchaoshe*, though following the path of

which demonstrated his interest in Russian Revolution at least from 1919.

¹¹⁵ Wang Fansen mentions in the biography of Fu Sinian that Cai Yuanpei, Li Dazhao, and Hushi provided special financial support to *Xinchaoshe*. Meanwhile, the personal relationship between Li and the members of *Xinchaoshe* was very close. See Wang Fan-sen, *Fu Sinian: A Life in Chinese History and Politics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000, p.24, 27.

¹¹⁶ Tan Pingshan, "Xiandai minzhi zhuyi de jingshen", p.51.

¹¹⁷ Tan Pingshan, "Xiandai minzhi zhuyi de jingshen", p.52.

¹¹⁸ See Chen Duxiu, "Xinqingnian zuian zhi dabianshu" [A defense against the crime imposed on *The New Youth*], *Xinqingnian*, vol. 6, no.1, pp.10-11; Hu Shi, "Yipusheng zhuyi" [Ibsenism], *Xinqingnian*, vol. 4, no.6, pp.489-507.

¹¹⁹ Li Dazhao, "Buershiwei zhuyi de shengli", p.443.

¹²⁰ Luo Jialun, "Yuanqi linli de Fu Mengzhen" [The energetic and righteous Fu Sinian], *Huainian Fu Sinian*, p. 52.

Xinqingnian, was more comprehensive and profound than the latter.¹²¹ For Hu, liberalism and individualism should be underscored in 1910s China to enlighten the people of their consciousness, responsibility, and dignity. Only when each individual in this country developed an independent judgment, fulfilled his potential and enjoyed full liberty could the country and the society achieve genuine independence, democracy and modernity.

Interestingly, based on his liberalist stance, Hu did not reject but embraced socialism, as Luo Zhitian indicates. Compared to his denunciation of socialism in the 1930s and 1940s, in the 1910s and 1920s Hu was actually a sympathiser of socialism and even communism.¹²² Luo connects Hu's "radical" inclination during the May Fourth period to the rise of the new liberalism (or social liberalism) in the Western world.¹²³ Since the mid-19th century, John Stuart Mill, Herbert Spencer, and Thomas Hill Green had been contemplating how to inherit the liberalist tradition of John Locke and Jeremy Bentham in an increasingly industrialised society, and they realised that individual liberty could only be secured through certain social reforms and public interventions. In this regard, these liberalists in Victorian Britain were prepared to accept some of the socialist propositions.¹²⁴ This view largely shaped John Dewey (Hu Shi's mentor at Columbia University)'s amicable attitude towards socialism, which further influenced Hu Shi and then *Xinchaoshe*.¹²⁵

Xinchaoshe was portrayed in the revolutionary historiography as a "society of the bourgeoisie" which propagated bourgeois liberalism and individualism and objected strongly to socialist revolution.¹²⁶ However, liberalism and socialism in this particular historical context were not mutually exclusive, and the majority of *Xinchaoshe*'s members at least endorsed a socialist egalitarian proposition, as shown in the articles of Fu Sinian,

¹²¹ Hu Shi, "Zhongguo wenyi fuxing yundong" [The Chinese renaissance movement], *Hushi sanwen jingxuan* [The selected essays of Hushi], Nanchang: Twenty-First Century Publishing House, 2013, p.423.

¹²² Luo Zhitian, *Hushizhuan: zaizao wenming zhi meng* [The biography of Hu Shi: a dream of civilisation reconstruction], Chengdu: Sichuan Renmin Press, 1995, pp.327-332. See also Fung Edmund S. K., *The Intellectual Foundations of Chinese Modernity: Cultural and Political Thought in the Republican Era*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010, pp.213-218; Peter Zarrow, "A Question of Civil Religion: Three Case Studies in the Intellectual History of 'May Fourth'", *Twentieth-century China*, vol.44, 2019 (2): 157.

¹²³ Luo Zhitian, *Hushi zhuan: zaizao wenming zhi meng*, pp.336-343.

¹²⁴ Luo Zhitian, *Hushi zhuan: zaizao wenming zhi meng*, pp.337-339.

¹²⁵ Luo Zhitian, *Hushi zhuan: zaizao wenming zhi meng*, pp.341-343.

¹²⁶ Zhang Yunhou, *Wusi shiqi de shetuan* [The societies during May Fourth era], Beijing: SDX Joint Publishing, 1979, vol.2, pp.44-45.

Luo Jialun and Tan Pingshan. Fu advocated “the free development of the individuals for the Common Welfare”, and Luo regarded the Russian Revolution as a success of socialism which accelerated the development of individuality.¹²⁷ As a member in *Xinchaoshe* who produced the most articles on socialism, Tan’s understanding of socialism inevitably contained some liberalist implications. For Tan, modern democracy and socialism suggested that each individual would have equal political, economic, and social rights to cultivate his potential and self-consciousness.¹²⁸ Liberty, in this way, played a crucial role, because it guaranteed that each individual would be free from any imposed oppression from other individuals or classes.¹²⁹ Tan’s opinion of “liberty” was reminiscent of Mill’s book, *On Liberty*:

“The object of this Essay is to assert one very simple principle... That principle is, that the sole end for which mankind are warranted, individually or collectively, in interfering with the liberty of action of any of their number, is self-protection. That the only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilized community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others.”¹³⁰

Agreeing with Mill, Tan preferred a limited freedom for each member of the community and was precautionary against any form of encroachment on peoples’ rights. Such stress on “negative liberty”, as defined by Isaiah Berlin, thus led to Tan’s social democratic proposition.¹³¹ During the May Fourth era, the boundary between social democracy and social liberalism in China was still quite blurred, and sometimes they were just interchangeable terms. Both of the two ideologies harboured a humanistic spirit and were hostile to oppression, and both of them cherished the enlightenment of individual consciousness and initiatives. They were sympathetic to the revolutionary determination of the Bolsheviks to pursue a classless society, but rejected firmly the new dictatorship and

¹²⁷ Fu Sinian, “Rensheng wenti faduan” [On life problems], *Xinzhao*, vol.1, no.1, p.15; Luo Jialun, “Jinri zhi shijie xinzhao” [Today’s new tide in the world], *Xinzhao*, vol.1, no.1, pp.19-23. Wang Fan-sen in his book argues that Fu was influenced by Mill. See Wang Fan-sen, *Fu Ssu-nien: A Life in Chinese History and Politics*, p.41.

¹²⁸ Tan Pingshan, “Xiandai minzhi zhuyi de jingshen”, pp.54-56.

¹²⁹ Tan Pingshan, “Xiandai minzhi zhuyi de jingshen”, p.55.

¹³⁰ John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty*, London: Longmans, 1872, p.6.

¹³¹ Isaiah Berlin, *Liberty: Incorporating Four Essays on Liberty*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002.

oppression arising in Russia, which violated the principle of liberty and democracy.

To conclude, Tan Pingshan and Chen Gongbo in their early years were experiencing a dramatic transformation of the Chinese society, and the significance and depth of this huge change went far beyond the political revolution in 1911 which overturned the monarchy. Since the late Qing period, a new educational system and hierarchy had begun to be established and consolidated, and a new cultural field, shaped by new forms of cultural capital and power, gradually took root in China. In this semi-institutionalised cultural field, intellectuals competed with each other for cultural power and influences with various strategies, and those occupying higher positions enjoyed more power in shaping the ethos and aura of the field. The official connection between politics and education was largely concluded after keju was abrogated, yet the two fields were still entangled and it was almost impossible for the intellectuals to cut off their political aspirations. Though via very different routes, Tan Pingshan and Chen Gongbo were finally admitted to the centre of the cultural stage. Though Chen kept a low profile for most of the time in the campus, Tan enthusiastically participated in this crowded field by publishing articles and making friends in a variety of student societies. In this process Tan had been very close to the core of the field, and his thought was in turn influenced by the heated discussions among national cultural leaders. His extensive reading and social networks transferred his interest to political issues, and he finally defined his political stance as a social democrat. Such stance was not only shaped by his passion towards trade unionism, but benefited from the social liberalism Hu Shi and his disciples in *Xinchaoshe* were then advocating.

Therefore, Tan's acceptance of social democracy was not merely through his own reflection, but very much shaped by his activities and interactions with others in the cultural field. Although Chen Gongbo did not take an active part in these clamours, as we will see in the next chapter, he formed a very similar political thought with Tan. When Chen Duxiu talked about Marxism in September 1920 that social democracy would become a formidable enemy of communism in China, he would never expect that Tan and Chen, two social democrats, were to establish together with him the communist

organisation in Guangzhou.¹³² It would also be a surprise to Chen Duxiu that social democracy turned out to be so weak in May Fourth and post-May Fourth China, and Tan and Chen's characteristic understanding of Marxism was completely forgotten in history. In the next chapter, I will try to excavate their interpretation of Marxism and discuss the connection and tension between Marxism and the May Fourth democratic tradition.

¹³² Chen Duxiu, "Tan zhengzhi" [Talking about politics], *Chen Duxiu zhuzuoquan* [The collected works of Chen Duxiu], Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 1993, vol.2, pp.161-162.

Chapter Two Back to Guangzhou (1920-1922)

In this chapter, we will follow Tan Pingshan and Chen Gongbo's steps from Beijing to Guangzhou in the summer of 1920, after which they inaugurated the first daily newspaper of the communists in China, *Guangdong Qunbao (The Social)*. From 1917 to 1922, both North and South China were plagued by constant turbulence. Inside China, two independent regimes were striving for legitimacy and international recognition, but neither of them could produce a stable government with competence to cope with the frequent domestic conflicts and diplomatic difficulties. Chinese intellectuals became increasingly disillusioned about finding a key to the political puzzle of how to build up a modern nation-state under the Republican political system.

The juxtaposition of the two regimes not only impeded the unification of the country, but eroded the legitimacy of both, and seriously eroded the authority of the ruling social elites and the entire establishment. The stigmatisation of the ruling group turned attention to the long forgotten masses, who became an ideological focus for the salvation of the nation, though a detailed Marxist class analysis was yet to be adopted.

The crisis of legitimacy of the establishment had a profound and lasting influence in radicalising a large number of Chinese intellectuals like Chen Gongbo and Tan Pingshan, who completely abandoned constitutionalism as a remedy for the current crisis after so many fractional struggles under the name of constitution. Chen and Tan in the summer of 1920 returned to their hometown where several months later the Cantonese army of General Chen Jiongmeng (1878-1933) recovered Guangdong from the Guangxi Clique (*guixi*). Since then, Chen and Tan began to propagate the ideology of social democracy and socialism, which they hoped could become the foundation of the new mass politics.

In this chapter, I argue that Chen Gongbo and Tan Pingshan stuck to their belief in social democracy and the enlightenment of the masses, in contrast to many communist leaders in Shanghai who understood Marxian theory of "the dictatorship of the proletariat" as the dictatorship of the few or a single person. They firmly held that only democracy could

awaken the political instincts of the proletariat and nurture their capacity to achieve a genuine proletarian rule. The two different interpretations of Marxism in Guangzhou and Shanghai reveal the tensions both among the early Chinese Marxists and between Leninist revolutionary theory and the May Fourth ethos.

I also argue that, relying on the cultural capital gained from their experience at Peking University, Chen and Tan were able to occupy high-ranking positions in the educational and cultural circle in Guangdong. They thereby promoted the building of a public space where the “new culture” could gain ground through rational discussions and debates. The establishment of the Cantonese Communist Party (*Guangdong gongchandang*) in early 1921 did not mean that it was committed to the spread of communist ideas through Bolshevik-style propaganda machines; on the contrary, they expected that the masses could be convinced of Marxist theory and socialist value through words, speeches, dramas, and songs in this public space which they believed to be free from any political interference. This view not only originated from Chen and Tan’s confidence in Marxian theories, but because they understood Marxism from a democratic dimension which believed in the consciousness and judgement of the people themselves. This democratic interpretation of Marxism turned out to be closer to the “orthodox Marxism” (especially Karl Kautsky’s proposition in the 1900s) than Lenin’s Bolshevism. Chen and Tan’s ideas conflicted with the communist leaders in Shanghai who dreamed of a forthcoming revolution of the Russian style. This fundamental difference finally led to their clash with the Shanghai leadership after Chen Jiongming expelled Sun Yat-sen in June 1922.

Before examining their political ideas and activities after graduation from Peking University, it is essential to provide some historical background of the political situation in China in 1917-1920, so that we can better understand the conversion of Chen and Tan to Marxism and their characteristic interpretation of it.

Juxtaposition of the two governments

The death of Yuan Shikai (1859-1916) signified his final failure to restore monarchy in

China, but this also paved the way for the following disputes between the Beijing government in the north and the military government in the southern provinces (Guangdong, Guangxi, Yunnan, Guizhou, and Sichuan).

In Beijing, after the war against Yuan, the vice president Li Yuanhong (1864-1928) came to power, and Duan Qirui (1865-1936), one of the most significant leaders of the Beiyang Bloc, was appointed as the premier. However, due to their intense power struggle and different opinions towards China's participation in the Great War, Duan instigated another Beiyang general, Zhang Xun (1854-1923), to expel Li. Zhang, a royalist, grasped the opportunity to restore the Qing regime in July 1917. Having reached the goal of expelling Li, the astute Duan immediately launched another attack against Zhang and overthrew the Manchu emperor. Duan thus enjoyed a reputation of "renewing the republic" (*zai zao gonghe*).

Nevertheless, Duan's ambition did not lie in a republican parliamentary politics, and he publicly refused to re-establish the 1912 Constitution (*linshi yuefa*) and the old parliament (*jiu guohui*) which had been dissolved by Yuan Shikai. As the designer of the republican political system, Sun Yat-sen could not accept Duan's refusal and turned to the southern generals for help. For these southern generals, such as Lu Rongting (1859-1928) and Tang Jiyao (1883-1927), Duan's policy to unify the country by force also threatened their interest. Facing a common enemy, the cooperation between Sun Yat-sen and the southern generals was soon achieved and the old parliament was reopened in Guangzhou in August 1917. In September, the parliament elected Sun as Generalissimo (*luhaijun dayuanshuai*) and Lu Rongting and Tang Jiyao as Marshals (*yuan shuai*), forming the "Constitution Protection Military Government" (*Hufa junzhengfu*). From 1917, therefore, there emerged two Chinese governments, each claiming its supreme legitimacy to rule the whole country. The unification of China thus became the main theme throughout the following ten years.

Despite the infamous bureaucratic and militaristic politics in the Beijing government, from the beginning the newly founded southern military government showed serious flaws as well. The triumvirate between Sun Yat-sen's KMT, the southern generals Lu Rongting (Guangxi Clique) and Tang Jiyao (Yunnan Clique), and the navy escaping from the north was the actual basis of the government. Even a small change in their relationship would

undermine the stability of the government. In practice, the southern generals had no interest in constitution and parliament, but rather used it as a legal entity to resist Duan's offensive. They only concentrated on their sphere of influence, and the military government and parliament to them were actually a financial burden and even a political threat.¹ Sun Yat-sen was acutely aware of the different political ends between the southern generals and himself, and he expected that there would be a war with them in the future. To prepare for this predictable conflict, he arranged for General Chen Jiongming (1878-1933), a senior *Tongmenghui* leader, to establish a base for the KMT in Fujian.

Apart from the underlying struggles between the leaders, the legal status of the recovered parliament and the southern military government was not without problems. Only around 200 representatives came from Beijing to Guangzhou, a number far less than the quorum. Whether such an incomplete parliament was allowed to produce a legitimate government remained a question. This crisis of legitimacy was further exacerbated by the negative attitude of the Great Powers, since they still regarded Beijing as the only legal government representing the sovereignty of the Republic. The attitudes of the Western diplomats cannot be underestimated, since they would only provide loans to the government they recognised.² Given the fragile financial status of the two governments, this foreign assistance was their lifeline.

After 1912 the Western countries demanded that the majority of Chinese maritime custom revenue should first be submitted to them to pay for the loan interest, based on their treaties with the Qing government after the Boxer Rebellion in 1900. The rest of the tariff, namely the "tariff residue" (*guanyu*), would be returned to the Chinese government. After strenuous negotiations in June 1919, the southern military government managed to acquire 13.6% of the *guanyu*. Yet its unstable legal status kept threatening its qualification for this revenue, which badly affected its normal expenditure and shook the political foundation of the regime. This vicious circle would remain a serious problem for the three successive southern governments until the mid-1920s, when a consolidated Guangdong

¹ Li Jiannong, *Wuxu yihou sanshinian zhongguo zhengzhishi* [A political history of the thirty years since 1898 in China], Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1965, pp.286-288.

² Anthony Chan, 1982, *Arming the Chinese: the Western Armaments Trade in Warlord China, 1920-1928*, Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, p.7.

National Government was founded after Sun Yat-sen's death.

The conflict between Sun Yat-sen and the southern generals soon broke out, and Sun, with huge frustration and indignation, finally resigned as Generalissimo and retreated to Shanghai in May 1918. There he devoted himself to theoretical reflection and discussion, preparing for his next political opportunity.³ The Guangzhou parliament instead elected Cen Chunxuan (1861-1933) as the chief commissioner of the military government. Sun Yat-sen (KMT), Lu Rongting (Guangxi Clique), Tang Jiyao (Yunnan Clique), Lin Baoyi (Navy), Wu Tingfang (1842-1922) and Tang Shaoyi (1862-1938) were chosen to be the other six commissioners. Serving as the governor of Guangdong and Guangxi (*liangguang zongdu*) in late Qing, Cen Chunxuan was previously the superior of Lu Rongting. Thus, the Guangxi Clique led by Cen and Lu dominated the government. Sun Yat-sen kept his position as one of the commissioners, but in fact the aim of this reshuffle was to deprive him of power.

In the north, after intense conflicts, Xu Shichang (1855-1939) was elected as the new president and Duan Qirui was forced to step down as premier in October 1918. Duan's resignation marked the end of his policy to unify China by force. A famous leader of the "doves" within the Beiyang Faction, Xu emerged as a moderate figure to promote a peace negotiation between the two governments. The US president, Woodrow Wilson (1856-1924), congratulated Xu's coming to power and expressed his sincere hope for a peaceful unification of China. Echoing Wilson's statement, Xu earnestly invited the southern military government to negotiate an armistice and discuss the possibility of unifying the country under a single government.

The two governments agreed to send their delegations to Shanghai, and a formal peace conference was eventually held in January 1919. The conference lasted intermittently for nearly a year, but the delegates from both sides found it impossible to reach an agreement on cancelling the northern parliament, stopping the military conflicts in Shaanxi, and cutting down some of the Beiyang troops. These debates on legal terms notwithstanding, the breakdown of the negotiation was mainly due to the dissatisfaction with regard to

³ In the resignation statement, Sun describe the military governors in the north and south as "jackals of the same tribe" [*Yi qiu zhi he*], showing that he had already lost hope with the southern generals in the military government. See Li Jiannong, *Wuxu yihou sanshinian zhongguo zhengzhishi*, pp.290-291.

political and financial interest distribution between different political forces.

When the conference finally fell into deadlock, both governments were in fact busy dealing with some more serious problems. For the military government, until early 1920, the Guangxi Clique had fallen out with all the other political forces. Wu Tingfang, Tang Shaoyi, the Yunnan Clique, and even many of the representatives all left Guangzhou. The exodus of the commissioners and representatives almost paralysed the government, not least because they also carried official seals and important documents to Hong Kong and Shanghai. The political crisis of the Guangxi Clique was soon followed by a financial crisis when the Great Powers declined the payment of *guanyu*, which destroyed the last hope of the southern military government. In August 1920, Chen Jiongming launched a strong attack on the military government in Guangzhou from Fujian. Three months later, Chen's Cantonese army completely occupied Guangzhou, and both Chen Jiongming and Sun's KMT returned to break new ground.

The situation in the north was no better. The Beiyang group broke up into three factions: Anhui (*wanxi*), Zhili (*zhixi*) and Fengtian (*fengxi*). A war first broke out in July 1920 between the Anhui and Zhili cliques. Although the former, under Duan Qirui, was quickly defeated within five days, there was no single figure who could hold the Beiyang Bloc together from then on, and the Beijing government fell into further disorder.

The juxtaposition of the two governments from 1917-1920 benefited neither of them. Their constant internal military conflicts exhausted financial resources and raised huge international debts. The futile peace conference in 1919 turned out to be an unfulfilled division of the spoils. More significantly, their attacks against each other eroded the legitimacy of both governments. With a bitter tone, Chen Duxiu exhorted the young Chinese students in December 1919 that they should have a "thorough awareness" (*chedi de juewu*) that it was hopeless to reckon on either government, since none of them respected sincerely the constitution and the will of people. The generals and politicians on both sides simply scrambled for their own interest by force and power.⁴

The chaos inside the country incurred external calamities. Apart from the well-known

⁴ Chen Duxiu, "Duanpai caolu anfu julebu" [The cliques of Duan Qirui, Cao Rulin, Lu Zongyu, and Anfu Club], *Xinqingnian*, vol. 7, no.1: 119-120.

diplomatic crisis over the Paris Peace Conference which later ignited the May Fourth Movement, China had also to cope with other intractable issues. The problem of Mongolia was one of them. Since late 1918, with the support of Japanese officers, the anti-Soviet Russian General Grigory Semyonov (1890-1946) planned for an independent Mongolian country, covering Buryat, Hulunbuir, Outer Mongolia, and Inner Mongolia.⁵ In early 1919, Semyonov initiated two conferences in Ulan-Ude, declaring the independence of Greater Mongolia and proposing to send a delegation to the Paris Conference for international recognition.⁶ Faced with this critical situation, Xu Shuzheng (1880-1925), the most outstanding general of the Anhui Clique and the closest subordinate of Duan Qirui, sent an army to Mongolia and put it under direct control of the Beijing government. However, after the defeat of the Anhui Clique in the summer of 1920, Xu was dismissed, and the fate of Mongolia became problematic again. Although Semyonov was defeated by the red army, his previous ally Baron Ungern-Sternberg (1886-1921) attacked the Chinese army in Kulun and occupied the city in February 1921.⁷ Ungern-Sternberg's army was later crushed by the red army as well, but the Chinese government was never able to control Outer Mongolia.

The diplomatic setback in Versailles and the political crisis in Mongolia deepened the disappointment and distrust among the public towards the government. On some occasions the political leaders in both governments tried to instigate the surge of nationalism to enhance their popularity, but more often they were threatened by the misuse of it. The May Fourth Movement was a good example. In recent years there have been some positive historical evaluations about the diplomatic effort of both governments in the north and south.⁸ However, the question here is: why did the contemporary Chinese intellectuals fail to share this positive feeling? An important reason lay in the crisis of political legitimacy, which prevented the public from believing that the governments and the diplomats were

⁵ See Li Yushu, *Waimenggu chezhi wenti* [The problem of cancelling autonomy of Outer Mongolia], Taipei: Academia Sinica, 1976, pp.123-124.

⁶ For the first conference, see Shen Yunlong, *Xu Shichang pingzhuan* [The biography of Xu Shichang], Taipei: Biography Press, 1979, p.517; for the second one, see Li Yushu, *Waimenggu chezhi wenti*, p.130.

⁷ Shen Yunlong, *Xu Shichang pingzhuan*, pp.618-619.

⁸ See, for example, Kawashima Shin, *Zhongguo Jindai Waijiao de Xingcheng* [The formation of Chinese modern diplomacy] (translation), Beijing: Peking University Press, 2012; Ma Jianbiao, *Chongpo Jiuzhixu* [Breaking the old order], Beijing: Social Science Academic Press, 2013; Tang Chi-hua, *Bali Hehui yu Zhongguo Waijiao* [The Paris Peace Conference and Chinese diplomacy], Beijing: Social Science Academic Press, 2014.

striving for the welfare of the country. The wordings like “traitor” (*maiguozei*) and “warlord” (*junfa*) had been widely used on newspapers and political slogans to describe the senior officials in the two governments.

For most of the political leaders, the constitution and parliament were no more than an ornament. Still playing a game of palace politics which was characterised by factionalism and clientelism, the generals and politicians were too obsessed with force and strength. The abstract, high-sounding legal provisions became merely hollow words. The stark contrast between the “high argument” and “low politics” in the constitutional practice, in Andrew J. Nathan’s phrase, ideologically undermined the legitimacy of the whole political system.⁹ Just as Jean-Jacques Rousseau wrote in *The Social Contract*:

“The Strongest is never strong enough to be always the master, unless he transforms strength into right, and obedience into duty... Let us then admit that force does not create right, and that we are obliged to obey only legitimate powers.”¹⁰

As Schoppa argues, when “there was little agreement on the source of political legitimacy, the ultimate arbiter in clashes” between different groups “was power, held most openly by the military”.¹¹ The naked political and military struggle among political elite and the serious legitimate crisis actually exposed the bankruptcy of the political ideology of the ruling groups. Ideology, in Terry Eagleton’s words, “has to do with legitimating the power”.¹² Since the late Qing, the existing political ideology was gradually losing the “traditional grounds”, while the “rational grounds” or “charismatic grounds” were yet to be established under the constitutionalist system, to borrow the term from Max Weber.¹³

Some Chinese intellectuals by this time had increasingly sensed the imperative to introduce a new ideology to offer legitimacy to a new political and social order, one that could not only provide a credible guidance to the current national crisis but follow the

⁹ Andrew J. Nathan, *Peking Politics, 1918-1923: Factionalism and the Failure of Constitutionalism*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976, p.222.

¹⁰ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract and Discourses*, London: Everyman’s Library, 1913, p.6.

¹¹ R. Keith Schoppa, *Blood Road: The Mystery of Shen Dingyi in Revolutionary China*, p.24.

¹² Terry Eagleton, *Ideology: An Introduction*, London: Verso, 2007, p.5.

¹³ Max Weber, *Economy and Society*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978, vol.1, p.215.

world tide. For Chen Gongbo and Tan Pingshan, it was social democracy that they had advocated since late 1910s that could play this role, and this further shaped their interpretation of Marxism after they established the communist organisation in Guangzhou in early 1921.

The birth of *Zhengheng*

At Peking University, Tan Pingshan and Chen Gongbo learned the prevalent jargon like democracy, socialism, and Marxism from the national cultural leaders in Beijing, many of whom were their teachers. However, they did not simply take these concepts for granted, but thought through these terms critically and actively integrated them into their existing intellectual frameworks. Meanwhile, they interacted and discussed frequently with friends, who in turn helped define clearly their stance.

The distinctive Cantonese culture made the network of the students from Guangdong at Peking University relatively closed to outsiders, and inside the Cantonese circle people developed strong ties between each other. We have been aware that there existed two active groups dominated by Cantonese students. One was an anarchist society, *Shi She*, led by Ou Shengbai (1892-1945), Yuan Zhenying (1894-1979), and Huang Lingshuang. The interest in anarchism among Cantonese students was not by accident. Guangzhou during the 1900s and 1910s was the most significant base in China, thanks to the effort of Liu Shifu (1884-1915) and his friends.¹⁴ A countryman of Sun Yat-sen, Liu was born into a wealthy family near Guangzhou. He devoted himself to the dissemination of anarchism and Esperanto in China. He was also known for plotting several assassinations against the senior officials of the Qing government in the 1900s. His political beliefs not only influenced the *Tongmenghui* and KMT, but Cantonese students like Yuan, Huang, and Ou. In Beijing, Cai Yuanpei, a KMT leader and senior anarchist, supported these young men and allowed them to edit the official journal of the Student Union of Peking University, *The Student Weekly of Peking University (Beijing Daxue Xuesheng Zhoukan)*.

¹⁴ Arif Dirlik, *Anarchism in the Chinese Revolution*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991, pp.14-15.

The backbone of the second group (around ten Cantonese students) was Tan Pingshan and Chen Gongbo. Different from their anarchist fellows who were hostile to politics and state power, the members of this group were quite zealous about reforming the Chinese political system.¹⁵ Between 1919 and 1920 they organised a formal society, the Society of Political Critique (*Zhengheng She*), and after graduation they ran a journal named after the society.¹⁶ Dirlik noted that some early Marxists, such as Mao Zedong (1893-1976), Yun Daiying (1895-1931), Shi Cuntong (1898-1970), Chen Yannian (1898-1927) and Qu Qiubai (1899-1935) all believed in anarchism before converting to Marxism.¹⁷ Chen and Tan never experienced such a transition. From the commencing issue of *Zhengheng*, they distanced themselves from anarchism.¹⁸

This view was dramatic compared to most of the Chinese intellectuals at that time, who were immersed in anarchist culture. Chen and Tan's teachers, such as Cai Yuanpei, Chen Duxiu, Li Dazhao, and Hushi, in 1918-1919 all renounced politics and advocated exclusively social and cultural reconstruction. The prevailing antagonism towards politics and obsession with utopian socialist experiments could be further exemplified by the formation of "Work-study Mutual Aid Corps" (*Gongdu huzhu tuan*) in Beijing and Shanghai.¹⁹ However, Chen and Tan never participated in these activities.

Although *Shi She* and *Zhengheng She* held different political views, they shared similar eagerness to reconstruct the society and mobilise the masses to overthrow the "warlordist

¹⁵ Chen Gongbo in his memoir described his intimate friends in university as all being from Guangdong and in total fewer than ten. Interestingly, his friends also mention the number "ten", so that we can ascertain who they are. Chen Boheng, a member of the *Zhengheng She*, recalled that the society comprised of ten Cantonese students. The other two members provided a more accurate member list. Chen Boheng, "Wo suo zhidao de Chen Gongbo" [What I know about Chen Gongbo], *Guangzhou wenshi ziliao* [Historical accounts of Guangzhou], No. 4, p.183; Xu Sida and Gao Chengyuan, "Wo suo zhidao de Chen Gongbo yiwen de buchong dingzheng" [Some corrections of Chen Boheng's article], *Guangzhou Wenshi Ziliao*, No. 11, p.180.

¹⁶ The first issue of *Zhengheng* reserved today in Beijing was published in March 1920. However, as early as January that year Chen Gongbo already advised authors to read *Zhengheng* in an article on the *Student Weekly of Peking University*. Therefore, it was very likely that they had published an issue of *Zhengheng* before January 1920 in Beijing, but did not receive extensive notice. So after graduation they reprinted it in March in Shanghai, which had a large audience and could produce more influence.

¹⁷ Arif Dirlik, *Anarchism in the Chinese Revolution*, pp.10-11.

¹⁸ See Chen Gongbo, "Zhongguo zhi weilai geming" [The future revolution in China], *Zhengheng*, no.1; Chen Gongbo, "Women weishenme hai tan zhengzhi" [Why do we still talk about politics?], *Zhengheng*, no.2; Tan Pingshan, "Zhongguo zhengdang wenti ji jinhou zuzhi zhengdang de fangzhen" [The issue of Chinese political party and the guideline of organising a party in the future], *Zhengheng*, no.2.

¹⁹ The "Work-study Mutual Aid Corps", influenced by anarchism, had a utopian illusion of establishing cooperatives enabling students to support their study life through working. The students' plan was to spend half a day learning together and the other half working together, and they regarded it as an alternative to capitalism. Soon, however, these corps in Beijing and Shanghai fell into financial, intellectual, and personal problems and were finally dissolved.

politics” (*junfa zhengzhi*). The two groups maintained a solid friendship on campus and sometimes even handed out leaflets together on the street in Beijing.²⁰ For this reason, we can find Chen and Tan’s articles as well as the advertisement of *Zhengheng* in *Beijing Daxue Xuesheng Zhoukan*. Their friendship persisted after they went back to Guangzhou, until Chen Duxiu and Ou Shengbai’s debates in the spring of 1921 damaged the relationship between Cantonese Marxists and anarchists.

The national crisis haunted Chen and Tan all the time, and they were more and more disappointed with the current political system. Chen Gongbo in 1919 published a brochure, *The Issue of Military Governors (Dujun wenti)*, in which he attacked strongly the system of provincial military governor.²¹ Chen enumerated the severe political, financial, and legal problems brought by military governors, and he saw this system as the origin of all the disasters China was experiencing.²² Following Chen, Tan in February 1920 also published an article in the *Beijing Daxue Xuesheng Zhoukan*, publicly condemning the military governors as “warlords” and castigating their crimes.²³

The same month that Tan’s article was published, they both graduated from Peking University and planned to go back to Guangzhou. In the 1920s, Shanghai was an indispensable transfer on the way from North China to the South (Beijing-Tianjin-Pukou-Nanjing-Shanghai-Hong Kong-Guangzhou). They stayed in the Shanghai International Settlement briefly, and the first issue of their journal, *The Political Critique (Zhengheng)* was released at this time. Despite its only two issues, *Zhengheng* can open a window, through which we can study their political views before becoming Marxists. Printed in a foreign concession and free from rigorous censorship from the government, the journal fully expressed their opinions.

The value of this short-lived journal lies also in its neglected role in the existing literature.²⁴ *Zhengheng*’s absence was partly due to its lack of conformity to the

²⁰ Zhu Qianzhi, a well-known anarchist student in Peking University recalled the joint activities of anarchists and many “Cantonese students from the Journalism Study Society”. Although he did not indicate exactly the names, we can almost make sure the Cantonese students were from Zhengheng Society. More importantly, in Chen Gongbo’s memoir, he and Ou Shengbai, together with several Cantonese friends, distributed leaflets in the winter of 1918. See Chen Gongbo, *Hanfeng ji*, p.198.

²¹ Chen Gongbo, *Dujun wenti* [*The issue of military governors*], Unknown publisher, 1919, pp.1-2.

²² Chen Gongbo, *Dujun wenti*, pp.3-8.

²³ Tan Pingshan, “Junfa wangguo lun” [The warlords are ruining our country], *Beijing Daxue Xuesheng Zhoukan*, no. 6.

²⁴ Few published works before 2013 about Tan Pingshan or Chen Gongbo pay much attention to the *Zhengheng*, though

framework of the traditional revolutionary historiography which tended to dismiss *Zhengheng* as an immature stage of their political thought. As we see, it was democracy rather than Marxism that occupied the central position in *Zhengheng*, so the journal was deemed as an immature stage of their political thoughts.²⁵ However, I argue here that the principle of democracy exalted in *Zhengheng* shaped deeply their understanding of Marxism later, which was quite different from the mainstream among the early Chinese communists and finally led to a serious quarrel between the Cantonese Marxists and Shanghai leaders in 1922.

The articles in *Zhengheng* deepened their criticism on the “warlords” and “politicians” in the two governments for their arbitrary interference in administration, jurisdiction, and diplomacy and ruthless repression of civil rights and freedom. Clearly, the two regimes in the north and south totally lost their solemnity and legitimacy in Tan and Chen’s eyes. Meanwhile, for the first time they began to seriously draft their own political programme.

Totally disillusioned with the political elite, they paid more attention to the enlightenment and education of the masses. For them, the uppermost problem was no longer the evil of the corrupt warlordism, but the need to renovate the mind of each individual. However, this renovation was achieved not through the isolation of the society from politics, as Chinese anarchists proposed; on the contrary, it was through the reconstruction of politics by inspiring the sociality and consciousness of the masses and introducing them into the political arena.²⁶ They attempted to create a genuine democracy in China and it should be a polity “of the people, by the people, and for the people”.²⁷ This did not necessarily imply that they were following the American political philosophy, as they brought in a class dimension. The “democracy” here underscored the active involvement of the labourers and peasants. The political participations of the masses in elections, in their opinion, could break the political monopoly of warlords, politicians, and capitalists and cultivate grassroots self-government.

they spare one or two sentences to it. See Yuan Bangjian, *Tan Pingshan zhuan*, pp.13-14; Chen Denggui, *Tan Pingshan zhuan*, pp.17-18.

²⁵ Yuan Bangjian, *Tan Pingshan zhuan*, pp.13-14.

²⁶ Chen Gongbo, “Nanbei heyi yu guomin de zijue” [Peace talks between the northern and southern governments and the citizens’ self-consciousness], *Zhengheng*, no.1.

²⁷ Tan Pingshan, “Zhongguo zhengdang wenti ji jinhou zuzhi zhengdang de fangzhen”, *Zhengheng*, no.2; Chen Gongbo, “Women zenyang qu zuzhi shizhengfu” [How do we organise the municipal government], *Zhengheng*, no.2.

Obviously, the Marxist theory of historical materialism and class struggle by this time had not captivated Chen and Tan, in spite of the class implications of their proposition. They included in *Zhengheng* a Chinese translation of the first chapter of *The Social Problem: A Reconstructive Analysis*, written by American sociologist Charles A. Ellwood (1873-1946).²⁸ Ellwood was one of the earliest PhD students of sociology in the US, graduating as a bachelor in 1896 from Cornell University and then obtaining his doctoral degree in 1899 from the first American department of sociology at the young University of Chicago (established in 1890), supervised by Professor Albion Small (1854-1926), George Mead (1863-1931), and John Dewey.²⁹ From the 1890s to 1920s, the European functionalism, advocated by Auguste Comte (1798-1857) and Herbert Spencer (1820-1903), still had strong influences in the US, and Ellwood was also deeply influenced by this school. In fact, functionalism remained as the mainstream of sociology in the entire first half of the twentieth century.³⁰

For Comte and Spencer, human society was very similar to the biological system, which likewise developed gradually various “organs” and experienced ceaseless evolution towards more complicated and advanced forms. Although sharing with Comte and Spencer the progressive evolutionism and functionalism, Ellwood was unsatisfied with their overemphasis on the similarities between humans and other species.³¹ For Ellwood, the members of human society had thoughts, emotion, and initiative. This society, therefore, could not be simply reduced to a biological community or mechanical equipment. The subjective elements of a society, such as knowledge, ideas, psychology, values, and beliefs, remained ill-researched. He advocated instead a psychological approach, to investigate the subjective and cultural dimensions which could strengthen or undermine the cohesion of a society, and he believed this revision could perfect functionalism as a sociological paradigm.

In the meantime, Ellwood was a Christian social reformer who expected that, based on

²⁸ Charles Ellwood, *The Social Problem: A Reconstructive Analysis*, New York: The Macmillan Company, 1919, pp.1-47.

²⁹ See David G. LoConto, “Charles A. Ellwood and the End of Sociology”, *The American Sociologist*, 2011, vol. 42, no.1: 112-128.

³⁰ Jonathan H. Turner, *The Structure of Sociological Theory* (seventh edition), California: Wadsworth Publishing Co., Inc, 2003, p.34.

³¹ See William F. Fine, *Progressive Evolutionism and American Sociology, 1890-1920*, Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1979, p.123.

his “reconstructive” framework, sociologists were able to identify and solve the new social problems emerging in the Western world after the Great War.³² The chapter translated by Tan Pingshan was excerpted from one of his most influential works. Interestingly, Tan did not translate verbatim Ellwood’s original text but rather paraphrased it.

Now we should take a look at the original text in his chapter. Ellwood first depicted a dismal and gloomy picture of the declining western world. He then blamed materialism, individualism, and egoism, which he believed to be the philosophical and psychological origins of the rampant militarism, imperialism, and extreme nationalism in the early twentieth-century Western world.³³ Different from those preferring a biological (eugenics) or economic (production and distribution) explanation to these problems, Ellwood underscored subjective elements, such as values and thoughts:

“Even now there are those who fail to see that the egoistic, materialistic, imperialistic doctrines which got such a hold of Western civilization in the nineteenth century, both in theory and in practice, were the chief cause of the War and remain the main source of present disorders. They claim to find more ultimate causes in purely objective biological and economic conditions. But those who see clearly must perceive that while biological and economic conditions may act as stimuli, the immediate roots of civilization are always in the mental attitudes and conscious values of individuals. The conduct of great masses of men is determined by their ‘mores’, that is, by the social standards set up and approved by the group; and these in turn are usually rooted in the values handed down in tradition from the past. Whether a given objective ‘cause’ will result in war or not, will accordingly depend altogether upon the ‘mores’ of a people.”³⁴

Ellwood in the book praised the contribution of western cultural heritage from the nineteenth century, yet lamented its inability to cope with the new social problems and its incompatibility with the social reality of the twentieth century, such as population explosion, rapid industrialisation, massive immigration, racial amalgamation, and the

³² See Stephen Turner, “A Life in the First Half-Century of Sociology: Charles Ellwood and the Division of Sociology”, in Craig Calhoun, ed., *Sociology in America: A History*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2007, pp.116-123.

³³ Charles Ellwood, *The Social Problem: A Reconstructive Analysis*, pp.4-5.

³⁴ Charles Ellwood, *The Social Problem: A Reconstructive Analysis*, pp.5-6.

strengthening interdependence between countries. In this regard, it did not suffice to analyse these social issues simply from an objective angle, and the dominant functionalist sociology, which regarded society basically as a machine, required some revisions. For Ellwood, human society, despite some resemblances with a mechanical device, was still distinctive in terms of the values, thoughts, and beliefs of its members, and it entailed a more systematic and full-fledged “scientific sociology” to explain and solve the newly emerged social problems.³⁵ Introducing a psychological dimension, Ellwood maintained that it was the heterogeneous values and beliefs among social members that contributed to the Western social chaos. Worse still, the fragmentation of social values was exacerbated by the worship of force and egoism and the abandonment of Christian spirit, mutual goodwill and cooperation.³⁶ Like Spencer, Ellwood treated this “re-barbarism” as a social degeneration.³⁷

Nonetheless, Ellwood explicitly objected to revolution as a remedy in that a revolution would only produce “irreparable injury” and easily provoke “reaction”, which could not rejuvenate the process of social evolution but damage social cohesion.³⁸ But revolution could not be avoided if the rulers simply suppressed the radicals by force and blocked “the normal course of social evolution”, since it could push the people to the extreme, who would finally “break the artificial dam” and leave “social ruin and the desolation behind it”.³⁹

Tan Pingshan kept the basic structure of Ellwood’s chapter, but did some revisions in the translation. He stressed in particular the section criticising egoism and militarism, while neglecting Ellwood’s praise of Christianity.⁴⁰ He also expanded the part advising the rulers not to block social progress. However, Tan distorted Ellwood’s opinions about revolution and wrote that if necessary a revolution should be launched despite its huge cost, though in another occasion he seemed to agree with Ellwood that a revolution was not so advisable

³⁵ Charles Ellwood, *The Social Problem: A Reconstructive Analysis*, p.15.

³⁶ Charles Ellwood, *The Social Problem: A Reconstructive Analysis*, pp.20-28.

³⁷ Herbert Spencer, “Re-barbarization”, *Facts and Comments*, New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1902, pp.187-188. Charles Ellwood, *The Social Problem: A Reconstructive Analysis*, p.30.

³⁸ Charles Ellwood, *The Social Problem: A Reconstructive Analysis*, p.33, 39.

³⁹ Charles Ellwood, *The Social Problem: A Reconstructive Analysis*, p.33.

⁴⁰ Tan Pingshan, “Xiandai xiyang shehui xianzhuang jiqi jiyong gaizao zhi yuanyin” [The current situation of the Western society and the reason why it should be reconstructed immediately], *Zhengheng*, issue 1, p.3.

as a progressive reform.⁴¹ His deliberate mistranslation demonstrated that his disillusion towards those in power already pushed him to justify revolution.

Ellwood clearly diverged from Marxism in at least two aspects. As a Christian, he highlighted spirit and belief as decisive elements making history, while downplaying the economic analysis of capitalism which played a central role in Marxian historical materialism. Interestingly, Ellwood's emphasis on ideas and psychology catered to the aura of the "New Culture Movement" which advocated the reconstruction of Chinese culture, value, and morality to solve the national crisis. It was this psychological interpretation that easily won the appreciation of Tan Pingshan and Chen Gongbo.

Meanwhile, Ellwood stressed harmony and coordination between different social institutions and groups, while Marx believed that history was driven by class conflict. Just as Craig Calhoun indicates, the early American sociology was born from a tradition shaped by a progressive and evolutionary approach aiming to reform rather than revolutionising society. This tradition was concerned mainly with how to maintain social cohesion and coordination in an industrialised country like the US.⁴²

However, to achieve a similar social cohesion and avoid a bloody civil war in China, the only feasible way was to petition to the authorities, hoping that the rulers could realise the imperative of abandoning the deceptive constitutional politics and adopting a democratic system based solidly on popular sovereignty. This was what Chen and Tan wrote in *Zhengheng*, but definitely they received no response from the politicians.⁴³ Social cohesion was more and more impossible, and a mass revolution seemed to be inevitable. After they returned to Guangzhou and opened a new paper, they began to have more sources about the global situation, which further opened up the possibility of a forthcoming revolutionary era to them. In this way, Marxism became relevant to Chen and Tan.

Mapping the world: *Guangdong Qunbao* and the advent of a revolutionary era

⁴¹ Tan Pingshan, "Xiandai xiyang shehui xianzhuang jiqi jiyong gaizao zhi yuanyin", p.14.

⁴² Craig Calhoun, 'Sociology in America: An Introduction', in Craig Calhoun, ed., *Sociology in America: A History*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2007, pp. 3-4.

⁴³ Chen Gongbo, "Zhongguo zhi weilai geming", pp.1, 7-8; Tan Pingshan, "Shijie junfa de mori" [The end of the warlords in the world], *Zhengheng*, no.1.

With regard to the international origin of Chinese Marxism, the existing scholarship often focuses on the influences of the October Revolution upon the intellectuals.⁴⁴ Indeed, the triumph of the Russian Revolution offered them an alternative to the existing Western capitalist, liberalist, and elitist politics. However, the experiences of Chen Gongbo and Tan Pingshan demonstrated that Soviet Russia was not the only source for their confidence for a communist prospect in China.

When tracing the origin of Chinese nationalism in the late 1890s and 1900s, Rebecca Karl suggests that historians should transcend the simplified dichotomy of “the West” and “China” and pay more attention to the non-western world which played an equally significant role in shaping the nationalist sentiment and imagination among Chinese intellectuals.⁴⁵ Countries like Poland, Turkey, Philippines, and the Transvaal Republic at the turn of the twentieth century, Rebecca argues, helped Chinese intellectuals in late Qing period to rethink the position of China in a globalised world characterised by Western imperialism and non-Western nationalism. Rana Mitter also discusses the global perspective of Chinese intellectuals during May Fourth period, who not only focused on the powerful and prosperous western Europe, but had strong interest in eastern Europe and the areas beyond Europe.⁴⁶ Similarly, in our case, when Chen Gongbo and Tan Pingshan began to be interested in socialism and Marxism, they again relied on a broad observation of the contemporary world, where non-Western as well as Western areas witnessed the surging tide of labour movement, the radicalisation of the socialist parties, and the emergence of the communist parties. As Hans van de Ven indicates, “Chinese communists were not ignorant of events outside of China, and most asserted a sense of being participants in world events”.⁴⁷

When Chen and Tan just returned to Guangzhou, they were astonished by the contrast between the vibrant cultural hubs like Beijing and Shanghai and the apparently isolated,

⁴⁴ Maurice Meisner, *Li Ta-chao and the Origins of Chinese Marxism*, pp.XIV-XV; Arif Dirlik, *The Origins of Chinese Communism*, pp.23-42.

⁴⁵ Rebecca Karl, *Staging the World: Chinese Nationalism at the Turn of the Twentieth Century*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2002, pp.9-11.

⁴⁶ Rana Mitter, *A Bitter Revolution: China's Struggle with the Modern World*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2004, pp.127-133.

⁴⁷ Hans van de Ven, *From Friend to Comrade: the Founding of the Chinese Communist Party, 1920-1927*, p.54.

lifeless, and apathetic Cantonese society. The May Fourth Movement did produce certain momentum to the stagnant atmosphere here, and indeed there were student demonstrations calling for the boycott of Japanese products. However, the nationalist sentiment soon disappeared due to the suppression of the military government, and the “new culture” burgeoning in Beijing and Shanghai did not take root in Guangzhou. Chen and Tan therefore decided to open a newspaper propagating the “new culture”, based on their previous study and practice of journalism in Beijing and Shanghai. *Guangdong Qunbao* (*The Social*) was thus born in October 1920, initiated by Chen Gongbo, Tan Pingshan, and Tan Zhitang (1893-1952), the nephew of Tan Pingshan who also graduated at the same time from Peking University.⁴⁸ Their anarchist friend Ou Shengbai introduced another two Cantonese socialists, Chen Qiulin (1893-1925) and Chen Yansheng to them. These were the five editors of *Qunbao*.

1920 was a year when the first group of Soviet envoys started their activities in China. The newly founded Far Eastern Republic in Siberia sent Ignatius Yourin to Beijing to negotiate the establishment of diplomatic relations.⁴⁹ The Comintern delegate Grigori Voitinsky (1893-1953) also travelled to Beijing and Shanghai to make contact with Chinese communists. The Russian connection with Guangzhou at this stage was less noticeable, but in August 1920, K. A. Stoyanovich and L. A. Perlin successively arrived and established a branch of the ROSTA (Russian Telegraph Agency, the forerunner of the TASS News Agency).⁵⁰ They soon got in touch with the Cantonese anarchists Liang Bingxian, Huang Lingshuang, and Ou Shengbai. Whether Stoyanovich and Perlin organised a Cantonese communist party with the anarchists deserves further investigation.⁵¹ Yet we are sure that it was through these anarchist friends that Chen

⁴⁸ Tan Zhitang graduated together with Chen Gongbo and Tan Pingshan, but he majored in English Literature at Peking University. See Wang Xuezheng and Guo Jianrong ed., *Beijing daxue shiliao, 1912-1937* [The historical materials of Peking University, 1912-1937], Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 1993, vol.2, issue 1, p.734, 737.

⁴⁹ For Yourin's mission and activities in Beijing, see Wang Yujun, *Zhongsu wajijiao de xumu: cong youlin dao yuefei* [The prelude of the Sino-Russian diplomacy: from Yourin to Joffe], Taipei: Institute of Modern History, Academia Sinica, 1978, pp.105-183.

⁵⁰ Ishikawa Yoshihiro mentions the relation between ROSTA and TASS in his book about the formation of the CCP. See Ishikawa, *The Formation of the Chinese Communist Party*, p.106.

⁵¹ Chen Gongbo submitted in 1921 a report to the central committee of the CCP, claiming that the Cantonese anarchists formed a Cantonese communist party before the CCP was established. Chen's report becomes the main source for several monographs dealing with the communist movement in Guangzhou. For Chen's report, see Chen Gongbo, "Guangdong gongchandang de baogao" [The report of the Cantonese communist party], *Yida qianhou de Guangdong dangzuzhi* [The Cantonese branch of the CCP before and after the first congress], Guangzhou: Guangdong Archive, 1981,

Gongbo and Tan Pingshan established a close connection with ROSTA, which offered *Qunbao* a reliable source about Soviet Russia and world revolutions.⁵² *Qunbao* opened a special column called “Luo si de dianxun” (ROSTA Telegraph), and it thus became the only Chinese daily newspaper reporting specially on world communist movements.

Indeed, one characteristic distinguishing *Qunbao* from other papers in Guangzhou was its emphasis on world news, but soon it drew some criticism that *Qunbao* spared too much space reporting foreign news which did not interest local people. Chen Gongbo responded that this was just one of the reasons why they ran the newspaper. He took an example that all the Cantonese people knew that they should oppose the Twenty-One Demands proposed by the Japanese government, but 99% of them knew nothing about what exactly these demands were. He teased that Guangzhou was so isolated that even the hurricanes from the Pacific Ocean would not visit this city.⁵³ When marking the papers of his students at the Guangzhou Civic University (*Guangzhou shimin daxue*), Chen found with surprise and disappointment that none of the five hundred papers could correctly enumerate the new countries emerging in Europe after the Great War. Their lack of knowledge of the contemporary global politics, in Chen’s opinion, could be partly attributed to the poor quality of the Cantonese newspapers which turned a deaf ear to the outside world.⁵⁴

Qunbao therefore actively reported world news so as to broaden the horizon of their readers and introduce the “new culture” into Guangzhou. But what was the “new culture” which should be spread in Guangzhou? Tan Pingshan offered a quite loose definition in the inaugural issue:

“With regard to the new culture, what criteria should we adopt for propagation? Briefly speaking, we are to spread any literature, art, institution, or religion (we use ‘religion’ in a broad sense, equivalent

pp.1-5. For the monographs, see, for example, Hans van de Ven, *From Friend to Comrade*, pp.64-65; Ishikawa Yoshihiro, *The Formation of the Chinese Communist Party*, pp.178-179; Yeh Wen-hsin, *Provincial Passages*, p.216. However, in the 1980s a Cantonese historian, Sha Dongxun, interviewed two of the seven anarchists, who by then were still alive, and both of them denied firmly their involvement in any form of communist party. See Sha Dongxun, *Yuehai jindai shitan* [On modern Cantonese history], Guangzhou: Huanan ligong daxue chubanshe, 1989, pp.37-38, 51-53.

⁵² Chen Gongbo, *Hanfeng ji*, p.203.

⁵³ Chen Gongbo, “Duiyu piping qunbao zhe de piping” [A critique responding to the critique on *Qunbao*], *Guangdong Qunbao*, Jan. 3, 1921.

⁵⁴ Chen Gongbo, “Guanyu yige jiaoyu wenti de taolun” [A discussion concerning an educational issue], *Guangdong Qunbao*, Sept. 10, 1921.

to a kind of belief) that will be profitable to the development of the collective living of human beings. In other words, we aim to propagate the literature, art, institution, and religion which promote the sociality of the people.”⁵⁵

Tan’s definition sounds like an objective and impartial one, free from any political bias or propaganda. Nevertheless, news about the socialist and labour movements in the world occupied most of the space in *Qunbao*. These reports were surely selected by the editors according to their interest. The news reports satisfied the curiosity of Chen and Tan about the prospect of the socialist revolutions outside China and in turn shaped their imaginations of the global situation which inevitably influenced China’s future. The rise of the Labour Party in Britain and its support for home rule in Ireland demonstrated the strength a working class party could have on important policy making.⁵⁶ The splits of the Independent Social Democratic Party of Germany (USPD) and the Socialist Party in France and the emergence of German and French communist parties seemed to predict a radical turn to the far left in all of Western Europe.⁵⁷

If the radicalisation of the industrialised areas in the Western Europe was still insufficient to promise a bright socialist future for China which had a very different economic and social structure, those underdeveloped countries at the periphery of Europe gave Chinese socialists more confidence. One report cheered the rapid expansion of the Portuguese Communist Party among the working class in March 1920.⁵⁸ At the end of the report, the author commented with regret:

“Portugal is an agrarian country dominated by small landlords, and its industry is still under development. The situation in China is similar. The communist party in Portugal is so strong but their

⁵⁵ Tan Pingshan, “Duiyu wenhua xuanchuan de wojian” [My opinion towards cultural propagation], *Tan Pingshan wenji*, pp.150-151.

⁵⁶ “Yingguo laodongdang zhi xin yundong” [A new movement initiated by the Labour Party in Britain], *Guangdong Qunbao*, Feb. 15, 1921.

⁵⁷ Ruoyu (Wang Guangqi), “Deguo gongchandang yanshuo dahui ji” [A record of the assembly of the German Communist Party], *Guangdong Qunbao*, Jan 6, 1921; “Faguo zhi shehuidang dahui” [The conference of the socialist party in France], *Guangdong Qunbao*, Jan. 7, 1921.

⁵⁸ The Portuguese Communist Party was actually established on March 6, 1921, and the report mistook the Portuguese Maximalist Federation as the communist party which was yet to be born.

Chinese counterpart is still in the cradle. What a shame!”⁵⁹

The Communist (Gongchandang), the monthly magazine published by the Shanghai communist cell, observed a similar boom of labour movements in Italy where the well-organised workers worked to rule and occupied closed factories. The article hoped that Chinese workers would learn much from their strategies and spirit.⁶⁰ Chen Gongbo and Tan Pingshan clearly read this article, as they reprinted some news from *The Communist* in *Qunbao*.

However, the “two red years” (1919-1920) in Italy culminated in September 1920, but finally suffered a disastrous failure. Depressed with the defeat, Amadeo Bordiga (1889-1970) and Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937) believed that only a Bolshevik-style revolution would work in Italy and thus created the Italian Communist Party in January 1921.⁶¹ *Qunbao* quickly reported its establishment.⁶² Interestingly, it was the widespread occupation of factories and the establishment of the communist party that impressed and motivated the Cantonese Marxists, while the fiasco of the Italian revolutionaries was deemed by Chen and Tan merely as a brief interlude during the climax of the world socialist movements.

The waves of revolution after the Great War across Europe confirmed to Chen and Tan that communism and the rule of the working class had become a world tide which sooner or later would reach China. Turkey as a bridge between Europe and Asia drew their attention. For the editors of *Qunbao*, the rise of the communist movement in Ankara in early 1921 promised a bright future that European communism was able to gain ground in Asia.⁶³ However, what Chen Gongbo and Tan Pingshan did not know was that the Turkish Communist Party (TKF) they reported on was a puppet party sponsored by the nationalist leader General Mustafa Kemal (1881-1938), in order to offset the Moscow-controlled Communist Party of Turkey (TKP). Facing the communist movement led by TKP, Kemal

⁵⁹ “Shijie geguo gongchandang xiaoxi huizhi” [The communist parties in the world], *Guangdong Qunbao*, Jan. 12, 1921.

⁶⁰ “Yidali laogong yundong zhi jijin” [The radicalisation of the Italian labour movement], *Gongchandang* [The Communist], no.2, p.47.

⁶¹ Martin Kitchen, *Europe between the Wars: A Political History*, Harlow: Longman, 2006, p.215.

⁶² “Yidali yu buerzhaweike zhuyi” [Italy and Bolshevism], *Guangdong Qunbao*, Feb. 14, 1921.

⁶³ “Tuerqi geming yundong zhi fengqi” [The rise of the revolutionary movement in Turkey], *Guangdong Qunbao*, Jan.17, 1921.

stated in a telegram that “the peace and unity of the Turkish people would be put in jeopardy”, and “the wisest step would be to get some reasonable friends to form a communist party under the guidance of the government”.⁶⁴ Ironically, Chen and Tan’s misunderstanding of the Turkish revolution consolidated their romantic imagination of a global communist tide from Europe to Asia.

“Following the tide, even a backward country can transform to an advanced one within two or three years”.⁶⁵ Here the criteria of “advancement” and “backwardness” for a country no longer depended on economic industrialisation, but whether to adopt an “advanced” ideology. This new understanding was shared by many of their readers who believed that an initially backward country like Russia could suddenly turn into a civilised and promising country as long as the new government adopted a socialist ideology and based its authority on the plebeian.⁶⁶ In this new spectrum, the underdeveloped European countries like Portugal and Italy had already set an example to China.

On the other hand, the editors of *Qunbao* were well aware of the necessity for Chinese people to pursue a unique way to achieve socialism. As Chen Qiulin elucidated:

“Socialism is a generalised term and there are different sects within. If we are to promote socialism in China, which path should we take? Personally speaking, the socialist route in a country depends on the specific national ethos there. A socialist revolution in Britain will inevitably follow the way of guild socialism, while in France it will surely take the form of syndicalism. The Russian communism and German state socialism are also the products of their national traits. Therefore, we have to find out a particular form appropriate to China if we are to advocate socialism.”⁶⁷

Chen Qiulin raised a question to which he had no answer, but Chen Gongbo and Tan Pingshan seemed to already find the answer, which mixed their long-cherished democracy with Marxian revolutionary theory.

⁶⁴ Bülent Gökay, “The Turkish Communist Party: the Fate of the Founders”, *Middle Eastern Studies*, vol.29, no.2, 1993, p.223.

⁶⁵ “Suweiai zhidu yu zhongguo” [The soviet system and China], *Guangdong Qunbao*, Feb. 20, 1921.

⁶⁶ Zhu Diexin, “Xuanchuan zhuyi di fangfa” [The methods of propagating an ideology], *Guangdong Qunbao*, Mar. 7, 1921.

⁶⁷ Chen Qiulin, “Pinglun zhi pinglun: shehui zhuyi yu zhongguo” [The comment for a comment: socialism and China], *Guangdong Qunbao*, Jan. 27, 1921.

Making sense of Marxism: dictatorship or democracy?

When examining the spread of Marxism in May Fourth China, we have to answer two basic questions: why did early Chinese Marxists become interested in Marxism and how did they understand it within a historical context largely different from its birthplace? As we know, Marxist theories were largely based on Marx and Engels' observations of the economic and political situation of mid-19th century Western Europe. Engels' investigation of the English working class showed vividly the close connection between the emergence of this class as the "vast majority of the English people" with the Industrial Revolution:

"We have already seen how the proletariat was called into existence by the introduction of machinery... In the place of the former masters and apprentices, came great capitalists and working-men who had no prospect of rising above their class. Hand-work was carried on after the fashion of factory work, the division of labour was strictly applied, and small employers who could not compete with great establishments were forced down into the proletariat. At the same time the destruction of the former organisation of hand-work, and the disappearance of the lower middle-class deprived the workingman of all possibility of rising into the middle-class himself... when master artificers were crowded out by manufacturers, when large capital had become necessary for carrying on work independently, the working-class became, for the first time, an integral, permanent class of the population, whereas it had formerly often been merely a transition leading to the bourgeoisie... Now, for the first time, therefore, the proletariat was in a position to undertake an independent movement. In this way were brought together those vast masses of working-men who now fill the whole British Empire, whose social condition forces itself every day more and more upon the attention of the civilised world. The condition of the working-class is the condition of the vast majority of the English people."⁶⁸

⁶⁸ Friedrich Engels, *The Condition of the Working-Class in England in 1844*, London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1892, pp.16-17.

Compare this description with China. Apart from some treaty ports, China right after the Great War neither experienced a comprehensive industrial revolution across the country nor developed a huge number of workers sufficient to transform the entire social structure. Benjamin Schwartz is right to point out that “Marxism in its pre-Leninist form must have seemed most irrelevant” to Chinese intellectuals.⁶⁹ In fact, some prestigious Chinese intellectuals like Liang Qichao (1873-1929) and Zhang Dongsun (1886-1973) already indicated that communism meant nothing to China before this country could reach the economic level of the developed Western world.⁷⁰ This irrelevance posed a question for the discussion and dissemination of Marxism in China and also questioned strongly the attempt to found a communist party in this country.

Therefore, once communist cells were established across China in 1920 and 1921, a crucial task for them was to prove that Marxism not only mattered to the country but was actually the only feasible way to save it. The members in Shanghai spent great efforts on this. In May 1921, Shi Cuntong published an influential article named “How do We Make a Social Revolution?” (*Women yao zenmeyang gan shehui geming?*) in *The Communist*.⁷¹ In the article Shi spent much space discussing the relevance of Marxism with China, and he frankly acknowledged that “Chinese capitalism had not fully developed, which deprived China of the necessary economic basis for communism”.⁷² This statement notwithstanding, he argued that communism was still the only hope for China, for two reasons. First, it would be ridiculous to advocate capitalism in China while the Western capitalist system was collapsing. When the “humanistic world” (*ren di shijie*) had been created by the Soviet Russia, a capitalist China would surely be excluded from this new world and thus have no hope of ascending to the ranks of the “advanced countries”. Second, Western capitalism had proved its immoral and inhuman nature and the only alternative which would ultimately lead to a “humanistic life” (*ren de shenghuo*) was

⁶⁹ Benjamin Schwartz, *Chinese Communism and the Rise of Mao*, p.7.

⁷⁰ Zhang Dongsun, “You neidi luxing er de zhi you yi jiaoxun” [Another lesson learned from the trip to the hinterland], *Shishi xinbao*, Nov. 6, 1920.

⁷¹ Shi by that time had left Shanghai and gone to Japan where he established with Zhou Fohai the communist cell in Japan. Both Shi and Zhou were members of the Shanghai communist cell and when they studied in Japan they kept in touch with their comrades in Shanghai and continued publishing articles on *The Communist*.

⁷² C. T. (Shi Cuntong), “Women yao zenmeyang gan shehui geming?”, *Gongchandang*[The Communist], no.5, p.13. The article was also printed on *Qunbao*. See *Guangdong Qunbao*, Sept. 3, 1921.

communism.⁷³

But how could China proceed to communism without a solid economic foundation? Shi Cuntong here distinguished the “economic inevitability” (*jingji de biran*) from the “people’s effort” (*renmen di nuli*).⁷⁴ A social revolution, according to Shi, required both material preparations and revolutionary spirit. Although the objective conditions were not ready in China, it would be a fallacy of “mechanism and fatalism” (*jixielun he suminglun*) to reject at once a revolutionary ideology like communism. For him, a great effort by the Chinese people to construct an adequate foundation could compensate for this economic deficiency.⁷⁵

So how did the people create this foundation? A moderate way would be to enlighten, educate, organise, and train the proletariat in China, expecting a mass revolution to overthrow the established power and achieve a large-scale social production. Shi, however, preferred a more radical Bolshevik approach, which required a revolutionary vanguard to seize promptly the political power first, and then used force to hold down counterrevolutionaries, abolish private property, and organise social productions.⁷⁶ Facing a densely populated agricultural country with fewer than one million workers who were largely illiterate and disorganised, Shi clearly had no hope for a bottom-up proletarian revolution in China.

The question how to relate Marxism to a country outside Western Europe in fact frustrated not only Chinese Marxists. When early Russian Marxists in the 1890s began to think seriously how Marxism could guide the revolution in Russia and what the role of the Russian Marxists should be, they found with equal bitterness that their revolutionary ideas had gone far ahead of actual economic and social conditions. Legal Marxists such as Peter Struve (1870-1944), like Liang Qichao and Zhang Dongsun in China, argued that capitalism should and would inevitably be developed in Russia. Struve predicted that the existing rural communes (*mir*) in Russia were destined to decline, rather than serve as the

⁷³ C. T., “Women yao zenmeyang gan shehui geming?”, pp.13-14.

⁷⁴ C. T., “Women yao zenmeyang gan shehui geming?”, p.10.

⁷⁵ C. T., “Women yao zenmeyang gan shehui geming?”, pp.14-16.

⁷⁶ C. T., “Women yao zenmeyang gan shehui geming?”, pp.16-23.

basis for socialism as expected by Russian populists.⁷⁷

However, revolutionary Marxists were not willing to wait and do nothing. Georgi Plekhanov (1856-1918) advocated the “dialectical materialism” which rejected a rigid fatalism. For Plekhanov, although Russia was not prepared for a proletarian revolution in terms of its objective elements, the intelligentsia who were equipped with Marxian philosophy could still make an effort to accelerate this historical process. Although the direction of history was determined by the forces of production and economic structure, its pace could still be driven by will and initiative.⁷⁸ Lenin further developed Plekhanov’s argument into an explicit political project, emphasising the roles of revolutionary ideas and a strictly disciplined revolutionary party in the forthcoming revolution.⁷⁹ Understandably, when Marxism was disembedded from the original 19th-century Western European context and integrated into an Eastern one where the objective conditions were totally different, the subjective initiative always needed to be stressed in order to transcend the backward and dragging reality.

In a country whose economic landscape further deviated from Marx’s initial conception than Russia, Chinese Marxists, like Shi Cuntong, inevitably placed spirit as a core element of the proposed revolution and emphasised the leading role of the intellectuals. To Chinese intellectuals, this was more a natural than a deliberate process, as the spirit and mind were always the core issues of Confucianism. The boundary between the Neo-Confucianism (*lixue*) and Wang Yangming’s School of Heart (*xinxue*) had been blurred since the late Qing, and the early twentieth-century China saw the two mixed, renovated, and transformed into a strong cultural and psychological basis for Chinese understandings of Western ideologies such as nationalism and socialism.⁸⁰ These Confucian elements led Chinese intellectuals to believe that the reconstruction of the whole society entailed a transformation and evolution of the people’s ideas and values.⁸¹ Meanwhile, these

⁷⁷ Richard Kindersley, *The First Russian Revisionists: A Study of “Legal Marxism” in Russia*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962, p.128.

⁷⁸ Simon Clarke, “Was Lenin a Marxist? The Populist Roots of Marxism-Leninism”, *Historical Materialism*, vol.3, Jan 1998, pp.18-19.

⁷⁹ Simon Clarke, “Was Lenin a Marxist? The Populist Roots of Marxism-Leninism”, pp.24-25.

⁸⁰ Wang Fan-sen, “Zhongguo jindai sixiang yu xueshu de xipu” [The traditional elements in thoughts in modern China], in *Zhongguo jindai sixiang yu xueshu de xipu* [The spectra of thoughts and scholarship in modern China], Taipei: Lingking Publishing, 2003, pp.134-135.

⁸¹ Lin Yu-sheng, *Zhongguo yishi de weiji* [The crisis of Chinese ideology], Guiyang: Guizhou renmin chubanshe, 1986,

“traditional” intellectual resources stressed the virtue and initiatives of an individual – often this implied an intellectual. Therefore, through self-cultivation and self-improvement one could fully develop their subjectivity. Sometimes the individual will was exalted to such an extent that the limits of material conditions could be largely ignored.⁸²

This voluntarism became a philosophical channel for some intellectuals to embrace Marxism and Bolshevism. Inspired by the triumph of Russian Revolution, Shi Cuntong believed that it was the minority with strong will and a good knowledge of scientific socialism who could fulfil the revolutionary cause. He even called himself a “fanatical believer” of a revolution led by the few (*shaoshuren geming*).⁸³ A logical conclusion of this elitist belief was to replace the “dictatorship of the proletariat” with the “dictatorship of the few” (*shaoshuren zhuanzheng*).⁸⁴ In an “economically and educationally backward country” like China, Shi even expected it to turn into the “dictatorship of one person” (*geren zhuanzheng*).⁸⁵ Here we are quite sure that Shi’s interpretation of the “dictatorship of the proletariat” had distorted considerably the initial implication of Marx and Engels, though the original Marxist texts had already left much room for different interpretations. Shi’s misunderstanding largely stemmed from his deep doubt of Chinese labourers: “how can we allow the unconscious, untrained, and disorganised proletariat to wield political power? Wouldn’t they ruin communism?”⁸⁶ In this case, it was not just the “will” that should play an overwhelmingly significant role, but particularly the “will” of the few or even a single person.

But how could Shi guarantee that a dictatorship, though in the name of the proletariat, would not degrade into an autocracy? After all, it was only five years ago that Yuan Shikai proclaimed himself emperor and only four years ago that Zhang Xun made an unsuccessful attempt to restore the Qing regime. Again, Shi responded by stressing the political ideas and personal will of the ruler. “Had Yuan Shikai been a democrat”, he wrote, “he would not

pp.45-51.

⁸² Wang Fan-sen, “Zhongguo jindai sixiang zhong de chuantong yinsu”, pp.152-159.

⁸³ C. T., “Women yao zenmeyang gan shehui geming?”, p.19.

⁸⁴ C. T., “Women yao zenmeyang gan shehui geming?”, p.19.

⁸⁵ C. T., “Women yao zenmeyang gan shehui geming?”, p.29.

⁸⁶ C. T., “Women yao zenmeyang gan shehui geming?”, p.20.

have dreamed of becoming an emperor.”⁸⁷ Clearly, in Shi’s opinion, once experiencing an intellectual revolution in his mind, a powerful revolutionary leader would not degenerate into a despot.

Shi was not alone among early Chinese Marxists. Zhou Fohai (1897-1948), who participated in the Shanghai communist cell and organised the cell in Japan together with Shi in early 1921, agreed that only force and dictatorship could defend the worker’s regime against reactionaries and help accelerate industrialisation. Zhou highlighted the importance of the “absolute”, “close-knit”, and “unanimous will” (*juedui de jinmi de yizhi de yizhi*), and this strong will would only be fulfilled when the masses submitted to a single person.⁸⁸ Equally, Zhou argued that despotism was a necessary evil, since it was impossible to hope for the emergence of a mature class consciousness and an organised labour movement from below in the near future in China.⁸⁹ Compared to Shi, Zhou’s depiction of the Chinese proletariat was even gloomier: they would commit all manners of crimes once the shackles upon them were removed, which necessitated an unchallengeable authority to discipline and tutor them.⁹⁰ Ironically, Marx imagined a wonderful world if the workers could get rid of their chains, but Zhou put the chains back to them.

Cai Hesen (1895-1931), one of the closest friends of Mao Zedong, also demanded a strong revolutionary leader. He was amazed that Lenin, who led a party with fewer than 100,000 members, was able to overthrow the bourgeois government. Like Mao, Cai was deeply immersed in the Confucian tradition in Hunan. For Cai, those who only cared about their personal reputation were hypocritical, and a genuine gentleman (*junzi*) should be free from moral constraints and prepared to do anything even evil that would benefit the public and the country. Lenin’s dictatorship and bloody revolution, in this way, was an excellent model of what a true gentleman should do.⁹¹

Shi, Zhou, and Cai’s perceptions of the relationship between the leaders and the masses were still deeply shaped by a Confucian framework of the dichotomy between gentlemen

⁸⁷ C. T., “Women yao zenmeyang gan shehui geming?”, p.30.

⁸⁸ Wu Xie (Zhou Fohai), “Eguo gongchan zhengfu chengli sanzhounian jinian” [The third anniversary of the establishment of the Russian communist government], *The Communist*, no.1, p.10.

⁸⁹ Wu Xie, “Eguo gongchan zhengfu chengli sanzhounian jinian”, p.12.

⁹⁰ Wu Xie, “Eguo gongchan zhengfu chengli sanzhounian jinian”, p.12.

⁹¹ Cai Hesen, “Cai Linbin gei Mao Zedong” [Cai Hesen to Mao Zedong], *Cai Hesen wenji* [The collected works of Cai Hesen], Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 1980, pp.7-8.

(*junzi*) and mean men (*xiaoren*), though the connotations had changed. Egalitarianism and humanism drove them to espouse Marxism, but this traditional dichotomy explained their profound distrust of the masses.

On the other hand, their self-identification as intellectuals and gentlemen nurtured strong confidence and heroism. The picture that a gallant, determined, and lonely revolutionary leader was leading the people towards a bright future conformed well to their imagination. The traditional Confucian dichotomy was thus integrated into a new revolutionary framework.

Yeh Wen-hsin's book analysed Shi Cuntong's obsession with the distinction between gentlemen and mean men and his romantic and fantastic heroism which he learned from classical Chinese novels.⁹² In fact, in Zhou and Cai's poems we can also sense the strong heroic and epic fantasy. Both of the following two poems were composed in 1918, reflecting the psychology of the young intellectuals when they encountered the political and cultural crises of their home country. Zhou recorded his poem in the memoir:

"I climb up the high mountain and drink the wine of the dragon,
Pull out my sword and sing wildly,
I would rather stand firmly in the middle of the river to face the surge,
Than to retreat to the remote gully between the mountains,
The angry waves obscure the mountains and rivers,
The boundless fallen leaves empty the universe,
In this endless river towards the east,
How many heroes were swept away in history?"⁹³

And here are several lines written by Cai Hesen:

"Dragons and snakes rise on the land,
Only a young man is left in the universe,

⁹² Yeh Wen-hsin, *Provincial Passages: Culture, Space, and the Origins of Chinese Communism*, pp.107-113.

⁹³ Zhou Fohai, *Wangyi ji* [All have passed], Shanghai: Gujin chubanshe, 1943, p.12.

The country is plagued with numerous turbulences,
Wind and rain see the departure of battleships...
I will be the one who restores the country,
And my comrades will face the calamity together with me...
Lean against a boat and reflect on the national crisis,
My will is to motivate the masses.”⁹⁴

The two poems depicted a similar scene that a hollow universe with gloomy sky and fierce wind contrasted with a lonely figure who confronted the tide completely on his own. The masses were missing in this picture but the young hero himself, or at best together with his comrades. The combination of revolutionary radicalism with traditional cultural elements thus gave rise to a re-understanding, or misunderstanding, of Marxism among early Chinese communists.

It should be noted that Shi, Zhou, and Cai’s articles were produced during the May Fourth period when concepts such as mutual assistance and self-government set the tone.⁹⁵ The anarchist calls for absolute freedom and the abolition of all authority and hierarchy also prevailed. Therefore, we can imagine that these communists’ worship of the “dictatorship of the few” and even the “dictatorship of one person” would surely grate on the ears of many May Fourth radicals. Zhou did feel the tension between their exaltation of Bolshevism and the May Fourth egalitarian aura. He had to concede that the “strongest and most valuable” criticism targeted the dictatorship of the proletariat, as this indeed contradicted with the principle of democracy and equality.⁹⁶

The praise of the October Revolution among Shanghai communists to some extent influenced their Cantonese comrades. In December 1920, Chen Duxiu accepted Chen Jiongming’s invitation and came to Guangzhou to promote educational reforms. Chen Duxiu brought the radical Shanghai style to the Cantonese circle, which did change Chen and Tan’s initial negative evaluation of the Russian Revolution and Lenin’s Bolshevism.

⁹⁴ Cai Hesen, “Shaonianxing” [A young man’s trip], *Cai Hesen wenji*, pp.20-21.

⁹⁵ The term “May Fourth period” can refer to different time ranges. Here I generally agree with Chow Tse-tsung’s classical definition of “May Fourth Movement”, which lasted from 1917 to 1921. See Chow Tse-tsung, *The May Fourth Movement: Intellectual Revolution in Modern China*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960, p.6.

⁹⁶ Wu Xie, “Eguo gongchan zhengfu chengli sanzhounian jinian”, p.7.

For instance, Tan in early 1922 suggested that the Hong Kong seamen on strike should apply for a membership of the Comintern and receive direct guidance from Lenin.⁹⁷ Meanwhile, since early 1921 Chen and Tan had completely given up their hope for the authorities to promote political reform. Instead they turned to the masses for a new drive to save the country. The social cohesion and the coordination between different classes advocated by Ellwood and the functionalist sociology became increasingly an ill-timed proposition, which could do nothing but to maintain the *status quo*. To mobilise the masses, they needed a philosophy of struggle. Marxist theory of class struggle and historical materialism became appealing to them.

But did Chen and Tan share without reservation all the political views of the Shanghai communist leaders? Indeed, like their Shanghai counterparts, the deep-rooted Confucian heroism and voluntarism shaped Chen and Tan's revolutionary passion as well. Tan's worship of Wen Tianxiang (1236-1283), a national hero resisting Mongolian invasion, could be traced back to the days when he studied at Dongzhou Shuyuan in the early 1900s.⁹⁸ Chen also admitted that the Chinese historical novels helped foster his adventurous and heroic character, as we mentioned in the first chapter.⁹⁹ Tan and Chen agreed with Shi Cuntong and Zhou Fohai that the blind and sometimes irrational mass psychology would turn the rule of the people into mob rule.¹⁰⁰

However, Chen and Tan's turning to the left did not mean that they harboured the same understanding of the dictatorship of the proletariat as their Shanghai comrades. In contrast to those eager to establish a Leninist party and achieve the "dictatorship of the few" as soon as possible, Chen and Tan insisted on the May Fourth democratic tradition. Their personal experiences and deep reflection in the 1911 Revolution made them realise that a revolution without genuine mass participation would easily degenerate into oligarchy or autocracy. They never gave up their suspicion of the individual dictatorship. Meanwhile, they still stuck to Hu Shi's social liberalist view of enlightening the masses and developing

⁹⁷ Tan Pingshan, "Huansong haiyuan" [Say goodbye to the seamen], *Guangdong Qunbao*, Mar. 8, 1921.

⁹⁸ Yuan Bangjian, *Tan Pingshan zhuan*, pp.3-4.

⁹⁹ Chen Gongbo, *Hanfeng ji*, p.30.

¹⁰⁰ Chen Gongbo, "Qunzhong xinli de duoxing" [The inertia of mass psychology], *Guangdong Qunbao*, June.29, 1921; Tan Pingshan, "Zhongxuesheng zhi xunlian guanli wenti" [The training of the middle school students], *Tan Pingshan wenji*, pp.195-196.

their individuality. In fact, *Qunbao* never used the term “the dictatorship of the proletariat” (*wuchan jieji zhuanzheng*) but “the rule of the proletariat” (*wuchan jieji zhizheng*). This nuance revealed how cautiously they treated any form of dictatorship, even though the power was wielded by the glorified labourers.

Admittedly, Chen and Tan agreed that spirit and will were of great significance to the revolution of a backward country, but to them it was the will and knowledge of the masses rather than of a limited group of leaders that could lay a solid socialist foundation. They maintained that the ability to participate in politics and the sociality to live a collective life were inherent in human beings, and the task of the intellectuals was just to awaken the nature of the people.¹⁰¹ This was the reason why they gave their newspaper the English name “*The Social*”.¹⁰² They thus believed that the ignorance and fault of the common people originated not from their lack of talent and ability but lack of an equal right to education and political activities.¹⁰³ In their opinion, once the consciousness of the masses was awakened to the idea that politics should not be monopolised by the few, the Chinese workers would actively begin to ask for political rights.

Chen and Tan’s praise of Soviet Russia was thus different from Shi Cuntong or Cai Hesen. They did not focus on how the Bolshevik leaders disciplined the party members or how the party suppressed the counterrevolutionaries, but how people elected and supervised their representatives in the grassroots soviet organisations and how they attempted to equalise salaries between party members and ordinary workers.¹⁰⁴ The bottom-up democracy and mass politics, of which they had been deeply convinced since 1919, shaped their understanding of the Russian Revolution.

The dimension from which they interpreted the communist revolution arouses some interest, because it was Chen and Tan rather than Shi Cuntong, Zhou Fohai, Cai Hesen, or Chen Duxiu, who understood the “dictatorship of the proletariat” in a way Marx and Engels would endorse. In the introduction to Marx’s *The Civil War in France* in 1891, Engels emphasised the two characteristics of the Paris Commune mentioned by Marx,

¹⁰¹ Tan Pingshan, “Duiyu wenhua xuanchuan de wojian”, pp.151-152.

¹⁰² Tan Pingshan, “Duiyu wenhua xuanchuan de wojian”, pp.150-151.

¹⁰³ Tan Pingshan, “Zenyang keyi shi laodong jiaoyu fada?” [How to develop the education of the labourers?], *Guangdong Qunbao*, Jan.1, 1921.

¹⁰⁴ “Eluosi suweiai zhi xuanju yu zuzhi”, *Guangdong Qunbao*, Jan. 15, 1921.

which distinguished the workers' government from all the previous ones in history. Engels believed that the two aspects could prevent the state from degenerating from the servant to the master of the society, and they were just what Chen and Tan underlined:

“In this first place, it filled all posts – administrative, judicial, and educational – by election on the basis of universal suffrage of all concerned, with the right of the same electors to recall their delegate at any time. And in the second place, all officials, high or low, were paid only the wages received by other workers... the state is nothing but a machine for the oppression of one class by another, and indeed in the democratic republic no less than in the monarchy; and at best an evil inherited by the proletariat after its victorious struggle for class supremacy, whose worst sides the proletariat, just like the Commune, cannot avoid having to lop off at the earliest possible moment, until such time as a new generation, reared in new and free social conditions, will be able to throw the entire lumber of the state on the scrap-heap. Of late, the Social-Democratic philistine has once more been filled with wholesome terror at the words: Dictatorship of the Proletariat. Well and good, gentlemen, do you want to know what this dictatorship looks like? Look at the Paris Commune. That was the Dictatorship of the Proletariat.”¹⁰⁵

Interestingly, it was hardly possible for Chen and Tan to get a full copy of Marx's *The Civil War in France* in 1921 Guangzhou, nor could they ever read Engel's introduction.¹⁰⁶ Yet their interest in Soviet Russia coincided with Marx and Engels's positive assessments of the Paris Commune in terms of its electoral and salary systems. For Engels (and for Marx as well), the dictatorship of the proletariat was by no means a regime ruled, as claimed by the Shanghai communists, by the few or a single person. There was even a question whether, for Marx and Engels, this dictatorship should take the form of a Bolshevik party-state system.¹⁰⁷ Marx and Engels (and Lenin might also agree on this) deemed the state apparatus as an evil which would ultimately be discarded into the dustbin

¹⁰⁵ Frederick Engels, "Introduction to the German Edition", in Karl Marx, *The Paris Commune*, New York: New York Labor News Company, 1920, pp.19-20.

¹⁰⁶ Chen Gongbo mentioned that the only materials they could get in Guangzhou at this time were the *Communist Manifesto*, John Spargo's *Karl Marx: His Life and Work*, and several pamphlets mailed from Shanghai. See Chen Gongbo, *Hanfeng ji*, p.217.

¹⁰⁷ Robert C. Tucker, *The Marxian Revolutionary Idea*, London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1970, pp.78-79.

of history. In this way, it was the Paris Commune instead of Bolshevik party-state system that best defined the “dictatorship of the proletariat”.

The divergence between Cantonese and Shanghai Marxists loomed large here. In Shanghai, Chen Duxiu, Cai Hesen, Shi Cuntong, and Li Da on different occasions all expressed their strong disgust with the term “election” and “democracy” and denounced the “betrayal” of the SPD for their mobilisation of German labourers in elections.¹⁰⁸ In Chen Duxiu and Cai Hesen’s opinion, there was little difference between Eduard Bernstein and Karl Kautsky, since both of them urged the workers to vote in the “bourgeois” elections. Shi Cuntong also maintained that it was Bolshevism instead of Kautsky’s “orthodox socialism” (*zhengtongpai shehuizhuyi*) that deserved the title “genuine Marxism” (*chuncui de makesi zhuyi*).¹⁰⁹ Kautsky’s proposition, in their opinion, was nothing but to surrender to the capitalist.¹¹⁰

On the other hand, Cantonese Marxists definitely rejected this judgement. As we have discussed in Chapter One, the Erfurt Programme, authored by Kautsky and Bernstein, left Chen Gongbo and Tan Pingshan a very positive impression of German social democracy. By the time Chen and Tan established the communist cell in Guangzhou in early 1921, Bernstein’s renunciation of the revolution had surely lost its charm, but Kautsky’s combination of democracy, revolution, and Marxism offered a providential framework which still appealed greatly to Chen and Tan:

“This conquest of political power (through democracy) by the proletariat is of the highest value exactly because it makes possible a higher form of the revolutionary struggle. This struggle is no longer, as in 1789, a battle of unorganised mobs with no political form, with no insight into the relative strength of the contending factors, with no profound comprehension of the purposes of the struggle and the means to its solution; no longer a battle of mobs that can be deceived and bewildered by every rumour or accident. It is a battle of organised, intelligent masses, full of stability and

¹⁰⁸ Chen Duxiu, “Tan Zhengzhi” [Talking about politics], *Chen Duxiu zhuzuoxuan* [Selected works of Chen Duxiu], vol.2, pp.161-164; Cai Hesen, “Cai Linbin gei Mao Zedong” [Cai Linbin (Hesen) to Mao Zedong], *Cai Hesen wenji* [Collected works of Cai Hesen], pp.64-66; Cuntong, “Makesi di gongchan zhuyi” [The Marxist communism], *Yida qianhou*, vol.1, p.328.

¹⁰⁹ Cuntong, “Makesi di gongchan zhuyi”, p.328.

¹¹⁰ Chen Duxiu, “Shehui zhuyi piping” [A critique of socialism], *Chen Duxiu zhuzuoxuan*, vol.2, pp.253-255; Cai Hesen, “Cai Linbin gei Mao Zedong”, p.64.

prudence, that do not follow every impulse or explode over every insult, or collapse under every misfortune. On the other hand, the elections are a means to count ourselves and the enemy, and they grant thereby a clear view of the relative strength of the classes and parties, their advance and their retreat. They prevent premature outbreaks and they guard against defeats... They are also of value as a means of practically familiarising the proletariat with the problems and methods of national and municipal government and of great industries, as well as to the attainment of that intellectual maturity which the proletariat needs if it is to supplant the bourgeoisie as ruling class. Democracy is also indispensable as a means of ripening the proletariat for the social revolution. But it is not capable of preventing this revolution. Democracy is to the proletariat what light and air are to the organism; without them it cannot develop its powers.”¹¹¹

This classic written by Kautsky, *The Social Revolution* (1902), was widely read among the editors and finally translated and serialised in *Qunbao* in early 1922.¹¹² Chen Gongbo suggested five major reforms which could renovate the politics in Guangdong, including the abolition of military governor, the reform of provincial government and assembly, and the development of municipal and county democratic self-government. He then added that “in this sense German social democracy may provide a model if we are to make a peaceful revolution (*pinghe geming*)”.¹¹³ When the provincial assembly prepared for its re-election, Chen urged the labourers to campaign for their voting rights, as “the more people vote, the more consolidated the solidarity and power of the plebeian was”.¹¹⁴ Tan Pingshan also claimed that, though the parliament and assemblies were not the ultimate targets for Marxists, these elections still mattered if the workers were to defeat the bourgeoisie and grasp power:

“We are living now in Guangdong where people can enjoy some political freedom, and we should definitely make use of this opportunity to mobilise and enlighten the masses, so that their inherent

¹¹¹ Karl Kautsky, *The Social Revolution*, Chicago: Charles H. Kerr & Company, 1916, pp.80-82.

¹¹² “Shehui geming” [The social revolution], Guangdong *Qunbao*, March 8, 1922. The translator was Liang Kong, Tan and Chen’s classmate at Peking University and a teacher of the Guangdong Provincial School of Publicists (Guangdong shengli xuanjiangyuan yangchengsuo). Chen Gongbo was the principal of the school.

¹¹³ Chen Gongbo, “Gonghuifa neng buneng chengli?” [Can the trade union law be passed?], *Laodong yu funu* [Labour and Women], supplement of *Qunbao*, Mar. 11, 1921.

¹¹⁴ Chen Gongbo, “Wei gaizao shenghui gao laodong funu he xuesheng”.

ability of organising themselves in politics can be recovered. In this way, they will realise the importance of political power. I particularly want them to get some political training, preparing for the rule of the proletariat in the future.”¹¹⁵

In a declaration the Cantonese Marxists drafted for the union of Cantonese building workers, they highlighted universal suffrage as an indispensable channel towards communism:

“Mr. Marx, the first mentor of the labourers, in his *Communist Manifesto* tells us that to achieve happiness we should first seize political power! Completely seize political power! Now this voting right is only a part of political power, but it was the first step towards happiness. Brothers, move! Do not hesitate!”¹¹⁶

Unsurprisingly, we can find similar discussions of the connection between universal suffrage and the road to political power in Kautsky’s monograph.¹¹⁷ But here comes a question: since the October Revolution did not take Kautsky’s approach and the acrimonious debate between Lenin and Kautsky was so well-known, how did Chen and Tan coordinate their preference to German social democracy with their praise of the Russian Revolution?

We cannot find any answer from the historical documents they left, but their ambivalence was reflected more or less from their sincere hope for the cooperation between social democracy and Bolshevism. The proposed merger of the Berne International (the reconstructed Second International), Vienna International (known as the Second and a Half International), and the Comintern (known as the Third International) in Europe drew their close attention. In 1922 the three Internationals negotiated seriously on their merger, or at least cooperation, but finally the tripartite conference broke down after intense quarrels. We can find several detailed reports in *Qunbao* which kept an eye on the

¹¹⁵ Tan Pingshan, “Wei yundong puxuan yundong zhe jin yiyao”.

¹¹⁶ “Tumu jianzhu gonghui zhi puxuan xuanyan” [The declaration of the union of building workers for universal suffrage], *Guangdong Qunbao*, Apr. 15, 1922.

¹¹⁷ Karl Kautsky, *The Road to Power*, Chicago: Samuel A. Block, 1909, pp.51-55.

negotiations during 1921-22.¹¹⁸ The failure of the cooperation between Bolshevism and social democracy not only revealed the irreconcilable contradiction between the two strands in Europe but foreshadowed the forthcoming debate in the summer of 1922 between the Cantonese Marxists and the CCP central committee which was established after the 1921 first CCP congress in Shanghai. We will examine this debate in the next chapter.

Creating a public space in Guangzhou

In order to propagate their political ideas, Chen Gongbo and Tan Pingshan made a great effort to build up a new cultural space in Guangzhou, where they hoped the “new culture” could reach to the local petty intellectuals and the masses. The creation of this new cultural space included at least three aspects: a public forum dominated by rationality, a new educational system free from political forces, and the renovation of mass culture.

The days in Beijing convinced Chen and Tan that a cultural field where new ideas could enjoy an equal right to be expressed was crucial to the cultural reconstruction in Guangdong, and cultural capital and reputation played a key role in this field. From the beginning, *Qunbao* appeared in Guangzhou as a challenger against the local cultural and educational authority. In a letter to Hu Shi before opening *Qunbao*, Chen Gongbo complained bitterly that the social ethos in Guangzhou was so corrupted that only prostitution, gambling, and the worship of money could prevail, and he expected that the emergence of *Qunbao* could introduce new culture and renovate the cultural atmosphere there.¹¹⁹ He therefore invited prestigious cultural leaders Cai Yuanpei, Hu Shi, and Chen Duxiu to write articles for the commencing issue of *Qunbao*, and the support from these celebrities did improve the reputation of this newborn newspaper. The educational

¹¹⁸ “Erban guoji tuanti yanjiang dahui” [The mass gathering of the Second and a Half International], *Guangdong Qunbao*, Sept. 7, 1921; “Guoji shehuidang shixing lianhe zhi xiansheng” [An early call for the merger of international socialist parties], *Guangdong Qunbao*, Mar. 8, 1922; “Sanda shehuidang zhi laogonghui” [The conference of the three Internationals], *Guangdong Qunbao*, Apr. 10, 1922.

¹¹⁹ “Chen Gongbo zhi Hu Shi” [Chen Gongbo to Hu Shi], *Hu Shi laiwang shuxin xuan* [The selected letters of Hu Shi with others], Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1979, vol.1, pp.107-108.

background of the editors at Peking University also lifted *Qunbao*'s popularity.

As *Qunbao* grew increasingly influential, Chen and Tan showed their intention to establish a modern public forum in Guangzhou, where different theories, ideas and arguments could be debated and compete in order to convince the readers in a rational and dispassionate way. They deliberately initiated debates on some controversial issues, such as universal suffrage, gender equality in education, and the abolishment of Confucian worship. Facing the criticism from other Cantonese newspapers that *Qunbao* was too polemical, Chen Gongbo responded that their critiques were simply out of rational judgement and that only debates could promote the enlightenment of the people.¹²⁰ An article on *Qunbao* made a distinction between a “critique” and “abuse”, with the former a logical discussion and rational pursuit of the truth and the latter merely an unscrupulous and hysterical personal attack.¹²¹ *Qunbao*'s statement reminds one of Václav Havel (1936-2011) and his famous “Eight Rules of Dialogue” during the 1989 Velvet Revolution, though in a very different historical context:

“1. Your opponent is not an enemy but a partner in search of truth. The goal of our discussion is truth, in no case intellectual competition. Participation in dialogue assumes a triple respect: toward truth, toward the other, and toward the self. 2. Try to understand each other. If you do not correctly understand the opinion of your opponent, you can neither refute his claims nor accept them... 6. Don't undercut the personal dignity of your opponent. Whoever attacks the person of his opponent, rather than his thought, loses the right to participate in dialogue. 7. Don't forget that dialogue requires discipline. In the end it is with reason, never with emotion, that we form our claims and judgements. He who is unable intelligibly and calmly to express his opinion cannot conduct a worthwhile conversation with others.”¹²²

The seemingly dispassionate rhetoric these Czech dissidents adopted did not indicate that they were indifferent to values; it was rather the opposite. Havel and the Civic Forum (Občanské fórum) attempted in 1989 to exploit these dialogues and debates as one of their

¹²⁰ Chen Gongbo, “Duiyu piping Qunbao zhe de piping”, *Guangdong Qunbao*, Jan.3, 1921.

¹²¹ “Manma” [Abuse], *Guangdong Qunbao*, Jan.31, 1921.

¹²² Quoted in James Krapfl, *Revolution with a Human Face: Politics, Culture, and Community in Czechoslovakia, 1989-1992*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013, pp.91-92.

weapons to propagate their liberalist political opinions, discredit the establishment, and eventually overthrow the communist regime. They succeeded. They believed that reason and rationality would themselves reveal the absurdity of the regime, thus bringing down its legitimacy. Similarly, Chen Gongbo, Tan Pingshan, and the other editors advocated a rational manner for public dialogues not because they themselves had no stance. They confidently believed that these debates would ultimately end up with a triumph of the “new culture” and truth. More specifically, it would be a triumph of socialism and the proletariat. Using a similar strategy, Havel tried to get rid of a corrupt communist government while Chen and Tan hoped to exalt socialism and Marxism. Considering the large-scale propaganda of the CCP to spread communism during Nationalist Revolution and after, this Cantonese approach of rational debates was of particular value.

Chen and Tan also strived to establish an “independent education”. Working under the Guangdong Educational Committee (*Guangdong jiaoyu weiyuanhui*), they wrote several articles calling for the financial and organisational independence of education. Tan lamented that in 1920 the Beijing government suppressed student movements and interfered with educational administration. According to Tan, the political manipulation and interference was the major cause of the decline and corruption of the current education system, and a new education in Guangdong should by no means degenerate into a partisan one (*yidang yipai de jiaoyu*).¹²³ He therefore advocated that the funding, institution, and personnel in the new educational system should be guaranteed and free from any political interference.¹²⁴

Chen Gongbo echoed Tan, arguing that anyone in charge of education in Guangdong should stay away from any political party. For Chen, the aim of education was to nurture the rationality of the people, while political propaganda never escaped bias and emotional instigation. The academic study in educational institutions was to benefit the public, while the political parties always attempted to direct the education to serve the interest of certain groups. In this regard, the two spheres were essentially incompatible.¹²⁵ Obviously, Chen

¹²³ Tan Pingshan, “Jiaoyu duli” [The independence of education], *Guangdong Qunbao*, Jan.8, 1921.

¹²⁴ Tan Pingshan, “Jiaoyu duli” [The independence of education], *Guangdong Qunbao*, Jan.8, 1921.

¹²⁵ Chen Gongbo, “Jiaoyu duli de zhenyi” [The real meaning of the independence of education], *Guangdong Qunbao*, Jan.13, 1921.

and Tan's belief in an independent education system was closely connected with their advocacy of rational debate, and their statements were by no means a disguise for the communists to permeate into educational and cultural systems, but a sincere hope that democracy and socialism were self-evident truths which did not need any political propaganda to instil in the students.

Apart from educated young people, Chen and Tan were also concerned with the masses, especially the workers. This led them to make an attempt to renovate the local Cantonese culture with the spirit of enlightenment. Soon after its birth, *Qunbao* began to attack the traditional Cantonese Opera (*Yueju*) and Cantonese folk songs (*Yueou*). In contrast, the editors glorified the iconoclastic and anti-capitalist "new" operas and songs.¹²⁶ Chen Gongbo not only wrote several opera reviews to denounce the capitalised operation (such as financial supporters behind the actresses and various ways of self-promotion) and the obscene suggestions of the old Cantonese opera, but encouraged young students to produce new compositions.¹²⁷ Chen and Tan also themselves wrote a new drama, *Bihai lianxiang*, a tragedy revealing the absurdity of patriarchy and arranged marriages, hoping to initiate a tide of new socialist opera in Guangzhou.¹²⁸

They also noticed the function of *Yueou* in propagating socialist values to the masses. Rising in late Qing period in the Pearl River Delta, *Yueou* was initially composed to express affection and sorrow between young lovers, though in some occasions these folk songs were also produced as satire condemning social inequalities. *Qunbao* strengthened its critical elements while downplaying the theme of love. One of the most intriguing "new songs" (*xin Yueou*) was named "Money" (*Qian*):

"Money: someone says you are the root of all evil (*wan e zhi yuan*),

Those having you become heavy-jowled and pot-bellied,

¹²⁶ Cecil Clementi, who later became the Governor of Hong Kong, translated a collection of *Yueou* into English in 1904 and he used "Cantonese love-songs" to translate "*Yueou*". Clementi's translation accurately reveals the function of *Yueou*. See Clementi, *Cantonese Love-Songs*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1904.

¹²⁷ Chen Gongbo, "Wo kan Li Xuefang de suojian" [My comments on Li Xuefang], *Guangdong Qunbao*, Jan.24, 1921; Chen Gongbo, "Piping Guangzhou de pingju zhe" [Criticising the Cantonese Opera critics], *Guangdong Qunbao*, Feb.12, 1921; Chen Gongbo, "Wo duiyu xinju de yijian" [My suggestions to the new Cantonese Opera], *Guangdong Qunbao*, June 9, 1921.

¹²⁸ "Guangdong shehuizhuyi qingniantuan chengli huizhi" [Recording the establishment of the Cantonese Socialist Youth League], *Guangdong Qunbao*, Mar.16, 1922.

Those without you can only live a shabby life.

I find that you can neither satisfy my hunger nor keep out the cold,

You are the most useless stuff ever in the world, but also the most hazardous abyss.

Thieves and prostitutes originate from you!

The capitalists are captivated by you!

Why not open your eye and take a look at the poor?¹²⁹

I will never make friends with you, but only wish no one will cost his life in your vortex!¹³⁰

The song might remind us of a passage in Marx's *Economic and Philosophic Manuscript* (1844), where he quoted a passage of monologue from Shakespeare's *Timon of Athens*, an acrid sarcasm towards money:

“Gold? Yellow, glittering, precious gold? No, Gods,

I am no idle votarist!...

Thus much of this will make black white, foul fair,

Wrong right, base noble, old young, coward valiant.

... Why, this

Will lug your priests and servants from your sides,

Pluck stout men's pillows from below their heads:

This yellow slave

Will knit and break religions, bless the accursed;

Make the hoar leprosy adored, place thieves

And give them title, knee and approbation... ”¹³¹

Although we have no information how the readers of *Qunbao* felt about these new operas and folk songs, at least they showed the effort of the Cantonese Marxists to exploit various channels to enlighten the people and save them from the old ignorant culture.

¹²⁹ The “eye” here is a pun, since each of the Chinese copper coin (*tongqian*) has a square “eye” in the middle.

¹³⁰ “Qian” [Money], *Guangdong Qunbao*, June 23, 1921.

¹³¹ Karl Marx, “The Power of Money”, in Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, London: Lawrence & Wishart, 2010, vol.3, p.323.

However, the competition in the cultural field was more complicated than a simple dichotomy between the “old” and “new”. Totally out of their expectation, the most intense debate that *Qunbao* was involved in turned out to be between the two “new” newspapers.

Their opponent was *Guangzhou Chenbao* (*Guangzhou Morning Post*), the official newspaper of the KMT in Guangdong. In the eyes of *Qunbao*'s editors, *Guangzhou Chenbao* should surely be categorised into the progressive “new culture” group and they should have stood side by side against the conservative “old”.¹³² The collision had its origin in the secret struggle between Sun Yat-sen and Chen Jiongming after they returned to Guangzhou. Chen attempted to reorganise an old Cantonese newspaper for his own use, but Sun's subordinate, Xia Zhongmin, stole a march on Chen and quickly transformed it into the *Guangzhou Chenbao*.¹³³ Since Chen Jiongming had a long friendship with the Cantonese socialists like Chen Qiulin, Ou Shengbai and Huang Lingshuang, people began to regard *Qunbao* as Chen Jiongming's official paper. The close relationship between the famous Marxist Chen Duxiu and Chen Jiongming also strengthened the impression that Chen Gongbo and Tan Pingshan, the students of Chen Duxiu, had some unknown connection with Chen Jiongming.

Chen Gongbo and Tan Pingshan tried their best to stay away from party politics and factional struggles. They concentrated on cultural reconstruction, hoping to enlighten the people and proceed step by step towards the rule of the proletariat. However, the cultural field was never a self-standing sphere, and they underestimated the strong connection between culture and politics in May Fourth China. Their cultural activities were inevitably deemed as something political, and their fate was presented to them in an unexpected way after the conflict between Sun Yat-sen and Chen Jiongming finally broke out in the summer of 1922.

¹³² “Mantan” [Ramble], *Guangdong Qunbao*, Mar.4, 1921.

¹³³ Chen Gongbo, “Wo yu gongchandang”, *Hanfeng ji*, p.202.

Chapter Three Between Sun and Chen (1922)

The relationship between General Chen Jiongming and the Cantonese Marxist group has bewildered historians for decades. At midnight on June 16, 1922, the long-standing conflicts between Sun Yat-sen and Chen Jiongming finally broke out. Commanded by General Ye Ju (1881-1934), Chen's army attacked Sun's temporary presidential office on the Yuexiu Hill, while Sun and his entourage fled hastily to a battleship.¹ The incident led to an intense quarrel between the Cantonese Marxists and the central committee of the CCP in Shanghai. The Cantonese members were said to have "followed Chen Jiongming and opposed Sun Yat-sen" (*fuchen fansun*), but they never acknowledged this. They insisted that there was no collaboration with Chen before and after the coup. With the two contradictory statements, the quarrel became a historical mystery and until now there has been no definite answer from the academics.

This chapter revisits this important debate about the "June 16th Incident" and solves the conundrum based on an analysis of comprehensive historical documents relevant to the CCP, the KMT, Chen Jiongming, and the Cantonese Marxists. I argue that there is no single "correct" answer and that the statements from both sides are reasonable and understandable, depending on the different stances the two sides took. It does not matter so much whether Chen Gongbo and Tan Pingshan "followed" Chen Jiongming, since there can be different interpretations of the term; the significance of revealing the mystery is that the incident reveals the two different political views which resulted from different understandings of Marxism. Through this case, we can also see the tension between the two social identities among early Chinese Marxists. I argue that it was the different logic behind the two identities that led to this tragedy, and the identity crisis would not only persist throughout the life of our protagonists, but the entire twentieth-century Chinese revolution.

The incident was a crucial watershed for both our protagonists and the CCP as a whole.

¹ After Sun's death in 1925, the ship was renamed "SS Zhongshan" (*zhongshan jian*), partly because of the "June 16th Incident".

As a consequence, Tan Pingshan left Guangdong and Chen Gongbo angrily quit the party and went to Columbia University for further study. With regard to the CCP, after the incident the communist leaders in Shanghai abandoned their hope of establishing an autonomous communist regime in South China. The party joined the Comintern and sided with Sun Yat-sen. The road outlined by the Cantonese Marxists faded and was forgotten in history, replaced by a new guideline provided by the Comintern. The approach of nurturing self-government among labourers in preparation for the rule of the proletariat was rejected, replaced by a Russian model which reckoned on a strictly disciplined party to organise and lead the masses. The aim of avoiding capitalism and heading directly for socialism was denied, replaced by a two-stage revolution. The CCP had to first cooperate with the KMT, which they deemed as a bourgeois democratic party.

June 16th 1922: the breakup between Sun Yat-sen and Chen Jiongming

Now we have to go back to early 1921. Soon after Chen Jiongming's army took Guangzhou from the Guangxi clique, Sun Yat-sen and many KMT leaders returned from Shanghai to Guangzhou. For Chen Jiongming, after years of war, it was imperative to recover the economy and consolidate a revolutionary base in Guangdong. Chen spent much effort promoting economic prosperity and public works, increasing revenue, establishing municipal administration, developing education and local self-government, and demobilising the army. For Chen, to build a "model province" was a prerequisite to renovate and unify the whole country.

Sun Yat-sen, however, thought otherwise. Regardless of the strong objection, Sun was eager to establish a new *de jure* Chinese government to replace the Beijing government in the international community. According to Sun's plan, the new government could not only legalise his request for *guanyu* and relieve the huge financial pressure in Guangdong, but justify his conquest of the entire country. The parliament in Guangzhou eventually elected him as the "extraordinary president" (*feichang dazongtong*) in April 1921. It was "extraordinary" because the attendance of the parliament did not reach the legal threshold

for a quorum. Obviously, the presidency actually lacked the ability to govern the territories beyond Guangdong as well as sufficient legitimacy. The great efforts of Sun's lobbyists in Western countries turned out to be futile and the government was not even recognised as a *de facto* government by the Great Powers.² On the contrary, Sun's activities were deemed by Western politicians and diplomats as a threat to the integrity and stability of China.

Worse still, Sun Yat-sen's insistence on an expedition against the north collided with Chen Jiongmíng's policy to concentrate on Guangdong. Finally this divergence led to Sun's escape on the morning of June 16th, 1922. Anxious and furious, once embarking on the battleship, Sun ordered the crew to bombard the urban district of Guangzhou, causing mass casualties and panic among citizens and foreigners.³ Since Guangdong was almost the only place Sun controlled, he could not afford to lose it. However, after two months of gunfire Sun's land armies were defeated by Chen Jiongmíng, and the fleet also ceased to support Sun. Similar to four years earlier, with resentment and bitterness, he had to leave for Shanghai again. What made it different this time was that Sun lost most of his armies and was unable to take Guangdong back without support from outside.

Sun also lost the support from public opinion, as most of the major newspapers in China asked him to resign as the "extraordinary president". In North China, Xu Shichang had stepped down as president in May, so Sun's resignation would remove the last barricade towards a negotiation about unification between the north and south. Even some senior members of KMT such as Cai Yuanpei and Zhang Taiyan endorsed this request. Social organisations in Guangzhou also published their declarations against Sun in the newspapers.⁴

Sun attempted to win himself a decent reputation among foreign media, but seemed to fail as well. He sent to the Reuters a statement which was subsequently published in *The North China Herald*. The statement described Sun as an activist promoting the reunification of China while claiming that it was Chen Jiongmíng who deliberately

² Alston to Curzon, April 11, 1921. In Robert L. Jarman ed., *China: Political Reports, 1911-1960*, Slough: Archive Editions Ltd., 2001, vol.1, p.462.

³ CECR, vol.6, June 19, 1922; "Guangdong turan kaizhan" [A sudden war in Guangdong], *Shen Bao*, June 22, 1922.

⁴ "Yue gejie haori fa sandian" [Three telegrams from various organisations in Guangdong], *Shen Bao*, June 22, 1922; "Sun Chen buxia chongtu jiangliao" [The conflict between Sun Yat-sen and Chen Jiongmíng was about to be concluded], *Dagong Bao* (Changsha), June 26, 1922.

thwarted this great cause.⁵ Sun knew very well that Britain, France, and the U.S. had been advocating for years a unified and stable China, and he wished to leave foreigners an impression that Chen was to be blamed for dividing the country. Yet he omitted that it was he himself who refused to join the north to attend the Washington Conference in 1921 and who collaborated with Duan Qirui (1865-1936) and Zhang Zuolin (1875-1928), two Northern warlords, to openly object to the Beijing government in 1922. *The Weekly Review of the Far East*, an American journal in Shanghai, quickly replied that Chen Jiongming was not at all against the unification of China and the conflicts in Canton had nothing to do with this.⁶ Instead, when talking about Sun's defeat the journal wrote quite acidly and ironically:

“If the reports are true that Dr. Sun Yat-sen has been again entirely eliminated from the field of Chinese politics, he will now have an opportunity to spend many days in quiet contemplation upon the ingratitude of republics. The new Peking government under President Li Yuan-hung [Li Yuanhong] is working feverishly to put into effect about everything that Dr. Sun has been advocating since the Old Parliament was kicked out in 1917. In fact about everything Dr. Sun has been working for has been adopted with the single exception of Dr. Sun himself. There is, of course, one other exception: the Central government is not expected to take over the scheme which Dr. Sun attempted to inaugurate in Kwangtung [Guangdong] province of issuing paper currency without specie reserve but backed by public works... ... Of one thing Dr. Sun Yat-sen may be proud and that was the effectiveness of his propaganda in the United States. It certainly was the reflex [sic] of this propaganda back upon China that put Peking on the defensive and finally forced the adoption of the principles for which he fought and talked – or rather talked and talked.”⁷

On the other hand, the press was friendlier to Chen Jiongming. The criticism of his drastic approach to oust Sun did not overshadow the widespread praises upon him as a

⁵ “Sun Yat-sen’s Story of Canton Coup”, *The North China Herald*, Aug. 19, 1922.

⁶ Wong Hin, “The Real Difference between Sun Yat-sen and Chen Chiung-ming”, *The Weekly Review of the Far East*, Aug. 19, 1922.

⁷ *The Weekly Review of the Far East*, June 24, 1922.

prestigious political leader. Although the official newspapers of the KMT, like the *Minguo Ribao* (*Republican China Daily*) in Shanghai, kept up their constant attacks against Chen Jiongming after the coup, the mainstream Chinese and English newspapers remained impartial or even favourable to him. *Shuntian Shibao* (*Shuntian Times*) in Beijing spoke highly of him as a sensible statesman while denouncing Sun Yat-sen as greedy for presidential power.⁸ Both *Shenbao* (*Shanghai News*) in Shanghai and *Dagong Bao* (*L'impartial*) in Changsha used positive words reporting Chen's side. The compliments were further shared by some influential English newspapers. Rodney Gilbert, a reporter of *The North China Herald* who was acquainted with the high politics in Guangdong and had interviewed Chen in 1921, commended Chen's courage in violating personal patronage, "one of the most vicious traditions" in China, and overthrowing his superior when Sun's ambition threatened national interests.⁹ *The Times* called Chen "the strongest personality in South China" who "had no difficulty in eliminating the misguided Sun".¹⁰ *The New York Times* in the U.S. also praised him as "a man of iron will and forceful, determined character".¹¹

A tough decision: the communists between Sun and Chen

Facing the voices favourable to Chen Jiongming, how did the communists react to the split between Sun and Chen? Particularly, how did the Cantonese Marxists appraise the incident? Did the Comintern play a role in this debate?

As we will see, it was a complicated story which led to heated debates within the CCP and the Comintern. According to a prevalent story, the CCP Central Committee in Shanghai decided promptly after the incident to side with Sun Yat-sen and his party, while the Cantonese CCP leaders stubbornly supported Chen Jiongming, irrespective of the serious warnings from Shanghai. For example, during the Third Congress of the CCP in

⁸ "Sun Chen zhi zhiqu butong" [The goals of Sun Yat-sen and Chen Jiongming differ], *Shuntian Shibao*, June 18, 1922.

⁹ Rodney Gilbert, "The Curse of Patronage: Chen Chiung-ming and Dr. Sun: What Chen really did in", *The North China Herald*, July 15, 1922.

¹⁰ David Fraser, "The Next Stage in China", *The Times*, June 29, 1922.

¹¹ "General Chen Rises as Power in Canton", *The New York Times*, July 10, 1922.

June 1923, Chen Duxiu mentioned that “our comrades in Guangzhou made some severe mistakes on the issue of Chen Jiongming, and recently they were correcting them”.¹² Cai Hesen in an article critically reviewing early communist history written in 1926 noted that in 1922 “the Cantonese branch of the CCP already became Chen Jiongming’s tool”.¹³ Similar descriptions also appeared in the memoirs of Zhang Guotao, Chen Tanqiu, and Bao Huiseng.¹⁴ These testimonies seem to have corroborated the “mistake” of Chen Gongbo and Tan Pingshan.

However, several Cantonese communists, including Chen Gongbo, Tan Zhitang, and Tan Tiandu (1893-1999), firmly denied the charge.¹⁵ Like Akira Kurosawa’s classic film, *Rashōmon*, in this case different parties have totally contradictory statements on the same incident. A historical mystery was thus produced.

The mystery became an obstacle when Chinese historians attempted to investigate what actually happened in the CCP in the summer of 1922. Martin Wilbur first noticed this issue in 1960 and, after tracing some clues from various sources, he concluded that “on this matter, which apparently was the issue which precipitated Chen’s separation from the Communist Party, the limited evidence is simply contradictory”.¹⁶ Both Hans van de Ven and Chan Lau Kit-ching in the 1990s describe the quarrels between Shanghai and Guangzhou, but neither of them provides a definite answer.¹⁷ In a Chinese biography of Chen Gongbo, Shi Yuanhua speculated that the Cantonese communists did follow Chen Jiongming, because there were some news reports advantageous to Chen on *Qunbao* in

¹² Chen Duxiu, “Chen Duxiu zai zhongguo gongchandang disanci quanguo daibiao dahui de baogao” [Chen Duxiu’s report on the third congress of the CCP], *Erda he sanda: zhongguo gongchandang diersan ci daibiao dahui ziliao xuanbian* [The second and third congresses of the CCP: the selected documents of the second and third congresses, STCC], Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 1985, p.173.

¹³ Cai Hesen, “Zhongguo gongchandang shi de fazhan (tigang)” [The development of the CCP history (an outline)], *Cai Hesen de shierpian wenzhang* [The twelve articles by Cai Hesen], Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, p.39.

¹⁴ Besides Chen Duxiu and Cai Hesen’s reports shown in Note 12 and 13, there are several other sources telling a similar story to the disadvantage of the Cantonese Marxists. See, for example, Zhang Guotao, *Wo de huiyi*, vol.1, Beijing: Dongfang chubanshe, 1991, pp.237-238; Chen Tanqiu, “Diyici daibiao dahui de huiyi” [My memory of the first congress of the CCP], *Yida qianhou*, vol.2, pp.285-291. Bao Huiseng, “Guanyu guangdong dangzuzhi lishi qingkuang de huiyi” [The memory about the history of the CCP Cantonese branch], *Yida qianhou de guangdong dang zuzhi*, pp.126-128.

¹⁵ Chen Gongbo, “Wo yu gongchandang”, pp.214-228; Tan Zhitang, “Guanyu Guangdong gongchandang de chengli” [About the establishment of the Cantonese communist party], *Yida qianhou de Guangdong dangzuzhi*, p.114; Tan Tiandu, “Huishou wangshi huadangnian” [Recalling the past], *Guangzhou dangshi ziliao* [The historical materials of the Cantonese branch of the CCP], vol.1, pp.9-10.

¹⁶ Martin Wilbur (ed.), *The Communist Movement in China: An Essay Written in 1924 by Chen Kung-po*, New York: Columbia University East Asian Institute Series, 1960, pp.7-10.

¹⁷ Hans van de Ven, *From Friend to Comrade: The Founding of the Chinese Communist Party, 1920-1927*, pp. 102-103. Chan Lau Kit-ching, *From Nothing to Nothing: Chinese Communist Movement and Hong Kong, 1921-1936*, London: C. Hurst & Co Publishers Ltd., 1999, p.27.

May, right before the June 16th Incident.¹⁸ Sang Bing shared Shi's opinion, adding that the close relationship of Tan Pingshan and Chen Gongbo with Chen Jiongming stemmed from Chen Duxiu's early friendship with this general. In Sang's opinion, it was because Chen Duxiu abruptly broke with Chen Jiongming and turned to Sun Yat-sen that his Cantonese subordinates unfortunately became the victim of this sudden change.¹⁹

The reasons why this issue became a mystery for decades lie mainly in three aspects. First, the key materials that can substantiate or falsify the statements from two sides are lacking, as Wilbur complained. For example, *Qunbao* between June 1st and July 10th (the day it was closed down by the authorities) cannot be found, so it is very difficult for us to know exactly the tone and stance the newspaper took after the incident. Historians are equally bewildered with where the rumour which blamed the Cantonese Marxists was produced and how the CCP leaders in Shanghai learned about it. Chen Gongbo mentioned that a Hong Kong newspaper, *Xiangjiang Chenbao* (*Hong Kong Morning Post*), added him in a list of the people collaborating with Chen Jiongming. He condemned the list as a ridiculous one, since it included several of Sun Yat-sen's followers who fought with Chen Jiongming after the incident.²⁰ Similarly, now we cannot find any copy of *Xiangjiang Chenbao* which was published in 1922, so Chen Gongbo's comment cannot be verified.

Another problem originates from historians' heavy dependence on the memoirs which inevitably contain subjectivities, inaccuracies, distortions, and cover-ups. The distortions are particularly obvious when tellers deal with those figures who have been stigmatised, and Chen Gongbo is a good example. When recalling in 1953 the days working with Chen in the early 1920s, Bao Huiseng rebuked Chen as an ambitious careerist, while Tan Tiandu disdained him as an indulgent and hypocritical opportunist who was doomed to degenerate and became a traitor in the 1940s.²¹ Memoirs like these can tell us nothing apart from how eagerly these survivors of the countless party purges tried to distance themselves from a renegade. Unfortunately, when trying to figure out the relationship between Chen

¹⁸ Shi Yuanhua, *Chen Gongbo quanzhuan* [A complete biography of Chen Gongbo], Taipei: Daoxiang chubanshe, 1999, pp.74-76.

¹⁹ Sang Bing, "Chen Jiongming shibian qianhou de Hu Shi yu Sun Zhongshan" [Hu Shi and Sun Yat-sen around the Chen Jiongming Incident], *Jindaishi Yanjiu* [Modern Chinese History Studies], 2001 (3), pp.82-98.

²⁰ Chen Gongbo, *Hanfeng ji*, pp.225-226.

²¹ Bao Huiseng, *Bao Huiseng huiyilu* [The memoir of Bao Huiseng], Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 1983, p.22; Tan Tiandu, "Huishou wangshi huadangnian", p.9.

Jiongming and the Cantonese Marxists, these memoirs become the source historians used most frequently.

More importantly, the existing studies take a perspective too narrow to provide anything other than sporadic and confusing historical details, and we should expand our horizon from the days right before the incident to the whole period of Chen Jiongming's rule in Guangdong (1921-1922), during which the Cantonese Marxists closely observed and actively evaluated Chen's political project. The significance of solving the riddle is actually far more than making clear these historical details. The riddle deserves much attention, as it reveals the distinctions and tensions among the Chinese Marxists in its early stage. It relates closely to the crucial transformation of Marxism in China organisationally, intellectually, and socially.

From the perspective of the organisational structure of the CCP, as Hans van de Ven maintains, the outbreak of the conflict marked the attempt of the Shanghai leaders to transform the party from a loosely organised study society held together by personal friendship, to a Leninist party defined by centralised power and iron discipline. By contrast, the Cantonese members were resisting this centralised power.²² If van de Ven talks about this incident mainly from the organisational dimension, he seldom touches the intellectual and social ones. As I will demonstrate in the next two sections, the collision between Shanghai and Guangzhou was also a mirror of the different understandings of European Marxism in early 1920s China. Meanwhile, the quarrel revealed the tension of the different social identities among the Marxists between being an "intellectual" and a "revolutionary". The transformations of the three aspects were intersectional, intertwined, and interactive, which ushered in a new revolutionary epoch quite different from the May Fourth period.

Having reviewing both the contributions and problems of the existing scholarship, we will now begin our analysis, based on an examination of the historical documents from various sources, including the newspapers and reports of the CCP, KMT, and the Comintern. Memoirs will be used as well, but only as supplements to bolster the core materials.

Right after the coup, Zhang Tailei (1898-1927), who then engaged in the youth

²² van de Ven, *From Friend to Comrade*, pp.102-103.

movement in Guangzhou, wrote to Shi Cuntong, the secretary of the Socialist Youth League (SYL) in Shanghai, asking whether the league should have any public declaration with regard to the incident, but received no response.²³ In fact, not only the SYL but the central committee of the CCP was still irresolute about which side to back.²⁴ After all, the CCP leaders could not find any guidance from the classic Marxist texts to deal with the current situation, which left much room for different interpretations.

When historians investigate the interaction between the CCP and Chen Jiongming, the close relationship between Chen Jiongming and Chen Duxiu is often mentioned, which could be traced back to late 1920. Upon taking possession of Guangzhou, Chen Jiongming earnestly invited Chen Duxiu to promote education in Guangdong and gave him full support.

The reputation of Chen Jiongming as a “socialist general” had risen rapidly since 1919. His temporary base in Zhangzhou was credited as the “Russia in South Fujian” (*minnan de eluosi*). This praise for a time misled Chinese political and cultural circles to believe that Chen was an enthusiastic follower of Lenin and Bolshevism.²⁵ Even some Western observers regarded Chen as a Bolshevik, as shown in the Shanghai Municipal Police Files.²⁶ Indeed, Chen did write a letter in May 1920 to Lenin, humbly calling him “my teacher” and claiming that a new China would “walk with the new Russia hand in hand”. In the letter he further stated that Bolshevism would “bring happiness to the human beings” and he would “spare no effort to facilitate this institution in the world”.²⁷ His overblown rhetoric thus produced an illusion that it was very likely for the Chinese communists, including both Chen Duxiu and Cantonese Marxists, to establish a solid base under Chen Jiongming’s rule.

The Russian communists were equally excited about Chen Jiongming’s courtship. Li

²³ Zhang Tailei, “Chunmu zhi wenliang xin” [The letter from Zhang Tailei to Shi Cuntong], *GRHD*, vol.2, pp. 9-10.

²⁴ The “Chinese Socialist Youth League” was created as a peripheral organisation of the CCP, whose name was changed into the “Chinese Communist Youth League” in 1925. The organisations like this were the fruits of Lenin’s thoughts of the “united front”, helping the communist party to expand its influence in various social groups and absorb competent activists into the party.

²⁵ Rushan, “You zhang jianwen ji” [A record of the journey in Zhangzhou], *Beijing daxue xuesheng zhoukan* (*La studentaro de la s’tata pekin-universitato*) [The Student Weekly of Peking University], issue 14, p.20.

²⁶ “Whereabouts of G Kun. Alias Zung Bai Koong”, May 20, 1920, Shanghai Municipal Police Files, IO Files, No.3262.

²⁷ Chen Jiongming, “Zhi liening han” [A letter to Lenin], *Chen Jiongming ji*, vol.1, pp.442-443.

Yuzhen even argues that the Comintern had a plan in 1921 and early 1922 to overthrow Sun's southern government and bolster a pro-Russian government led by Chen Jiongming and Chen Duxiu.²⁸ Though Li's conclusion merits further investigation, there is no denying that the Comintern did think highly of this socialist general who led an army of more than 20,000 soldiers.

After taking Guangzhou in November 1920, however, Chen Jiongming gradually showed a different stance from Marxists. Beyond doubt, he agreed that capitalism should be brought down and Chinese workers should form unions to struggle for their interests. Yet Chen's understanding of labour movement was by no means in accordance with the Marxist theory of class struggle. On the contrary, Chen expected that the government should arbitrate and coordinate the conflicts between employers and employees, and the two sides should work harmoniously with a spirit of mutual understanding.²⁹

With the deteriorating relationship between Sun Yat-sen and Chen Jiongming in early 1922, the CCP leaders found it more and more imperative to choose between the two. The problem was that a majority of CCP members did not favour Sun Yat-sen's KMT at all. As early as the summer of 1921, at the First National Congress of the CCP, a majority of the delegates already dismissed Sun Yat-sen's government in Guangzhou as a bourgeois one, which was no better than Xu Shichang's rule in Beijing.³⁰

Another piece of evidence can be found in a report of the KMT. When the KMT and CCP began to strengthen their cooperation in 1923, Deng Zeru (1869-1934), a senior KMT leader, wrote a letter to Sun and strongly objected to accommodating a party which only a year ago was still challenging Sun's political ideas. Chen Duxiu, according to Deng's letter, once claimed that he would never join the outdated KMT and that Sun's theories of Three People's Principles (*sanmin zhuyi*) and Five-Power Constitutions (*wuquan xianfa*) had no theoretical basis.³¹ Clearly, though Chen Jiongming had already "turned right" in the

²⁸ Li Yuzhen, *Sun Zhongshan yu gongchan guoji* [Sun Yat-sen and the Comintern], Taipei: Institute of Modern History of Academia Sinica, 1996, pp.138-140.

²⁹ Chen's opinion on labour movement can be found in several signed official documents in 1921 and 1922. See *Chen Jiongming ji*, vol.2, p.627, 861, 938.

³⁰ Among the 13 delegates attending the congress, both Chen Gongbo and Bao Huiseng in their memoirs mentioned that the issue of Sun Yat-sen was discussed and most delegates rejected any cooperation with Sun in the future. See Chen Gongbo, *Hanfeng ji*, p.207; Bao Huiseng, "Huiyi zhonggong diyici quanguo daibiao huiyi" [Recalling the first congress of the CCP], *Bao Huiseng huiyilu*, p.25.

³¹ Sun Yat-sen, "Pi Guangdong zhibu Deng Zeru deng tanhe gongchandang wen" [A reply to the impeachment initiated

opinion of some communists, Sun Yat-sen was far from an ideal option either.³² Therefore, when the Soviet delegate Maring (Henk Sneevliet, 1883-1942) showed great fervour in April 1922 persuading Chen Duxiu to cooperate with Sun, Chen Duxiu refused the proposal decisively.³³

Having to choose between Sun Yat-sen and Chen Jiongming haunted Chen Duxiu so much that he decided to visit Chen Jiongming for the last time in May 1922, trying to persuade him to support communism in Guangdong. Chen Jiongming by this time had resigned from Sun's government and retreated to his villa in the middle of the West Lake in Huizhou, plotting the military operation against Sun Yat-sen with his subordinates. According to Liang Bingxian who overheard their talk next door, Chen Duxiu tried to persuade Chen Jiongming to join the CCP and establish a communist base in Guangdong. However, Chen Jiongming made it clear that the labour movement should not be involved in political struggles and implied that Marxist political economics was unsound. He further indicated that the education of the workers was the priority and they should not be manipulated by any political force.³⁴ The reply cut off Chen Duxiu's last hope to collaborate with Chen Jiongming. But right before returning to Shanghai, in a private talk with Chen Gongbo, Chen Duxiu was still hesitant whether to side with Sun.³⁵

As expected, the collision between Sun and Chen finally turned into an open military conflict on June 16th. Nevertheless, Chen Duxiu still lamented in a letter to Grigori Voitinsky at the end of June that Chen Jiongming surely had "no knowledge or belief of socialism" but that it was "equally hopeless to reckon on the cooperation with Sun Yat-sen".³⁶ The CCP leaders eventually made up their mind to enlist in the KMT in mid July. The party published a declaration, which for the first time criticised Chen Jiongming for launching a "reactionary" coup to expel the "democratic force" of Sun Yat-sen.³⁷ The

by Deng Zeru and others in the Cantonese branch], in Qin Xiaoyi (ed.), *Guofu quanji* [Complete works of Sun Yat-sen], Taipei: Jindai zhongguo chubanshe, 1989, vol.6, p.483.

³² Maring (Henk Sneevliet), "Malin gei gongchan guoji zhixingju de baogao" [A report to the Comintern by Maring], *STCC*, p.117.

³³ Chen Duxiu, "Chen Duxiu zhi wutingkang de xin" [The letter from Chen Duxiu to Voitinsky], in *STCC*, p.36.

³⁴ Haiyu guke (Liang Bingxian), *Jiefang biele* [An alternative record of the "liberation of China"], Taipei: Wenhai chubanshe, 1968, p.39.

³⁵ Chen Gongbo, "Wo yu gongchandang", *Hanfeng ji*, p.222.

³⁶ "Chen Duxiu zhi wutingkang de xin" [The letter from Chen Duxiu to Voitinsky], *STCC*, p.55.

³⁷ "Zhongguo gongchandang dierci quanguo dahui xuanyan" [The declaration of the second congress of the CCP], *STCC*, p.101.

CCP then escalated its sharp rhetoric against Chen in the next few months, scolding him as “the king of Guangdong”, a “feudal warlord”, and consequently, “the imperialists’ running dog” and “the traitor of the Chinese people”.³⁸

The attitude of the Comintern was even vaguer. Contrary to Yokoyama Hiroaki’s study which believes that the Comintern pushed forward the breakup between the CCP and Chen Jiongming, I argue that the Comintern did not give up on Chen Jiongming until September, two months after the CCP changed its tone.³⁹

Three months before the incident, Vladimir Vilenskii (1888-1932), who was in charge of the foreign affairs in the Far East for the Sovnarkom (Council of People’s Commissars), still complimented Chen as “the most prestigious general of the Chinese bourgeoisie”.⁴⁰ Even when the CCP began to attack Chen in July, Maring still suggested to the Comintern that the headquarters of the CCP be moved to Guangzhou and seek support from Chen.⁴¹ Voitinsky, although sometimes quarrelling with Maring, also spoke highly of Chen at this time in *Pravda (The Truth)* and ascribed the coup to Sun’s own incorrect policies in siding with Zhang Zuolin and the “Japanese imperialists”.⁴² However, after Chen Jiongming revealed in a Hong Kong newspaper in September Sun’s secret proposal to ally with Russia and Germany, the Russians deemed this as a posture of Chen to side with Britain. The Comintern swiftly withdrew their words of flattery and immediately fell in line with their Chinese comrades in Shanghai. In November Maring harshly condemned Chen as “an autocratic warlord” and “a cat’s paw of the British” in the newly published CCP official journal, *Xiangdao (The Guide Weekly)*.⁴³

³⁸ Cai Hesen, “Wuli tongyi yu liansheng zizhi” [The unification of China with force and federalism], *Xiangdao* [The Guide Weekly], Sept. 20, 1922; Cai Hesen, “Zhong de e sanguo lianmeng yu guoji diguo zhuyi ji Chen Jiongming zhi fandong” [The triangle alliance of China, Germany, and Russia, the international imperialism, and the reactionary Chen Jiongming], *Xiangdao*, Oct. 4, 1922; Cai Hesen, “Guoren yingdang gongqi de Chen Jiongming” [Chen Jiongming who should be discarded by the Chinese people], *Xiangdao*, Nov. 2, 1922.

³⁹ Yokoyama Hiroaki, *Sunan de sunwen: youzou dongya de ducaizhe yu zhiye gemingjia* [The face without makeup of Sun Yat-sen: a dictator and professional revolutionary wandering in East Asia] (translated version), Taipei: Baqi wenhua, 2016, pp.239-250.

⁴⁰ “Vilenskii Sibiriakov to Lenin”, *Lian gong bu gongchan guoji yu zhongguo guomin geming yundong, 1920-1925* [Documents of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, the Comintern, and Chinese Revolution] (DCCCR), Beijing: Beijing tushuguan chubanshe, 1997. For more details of Vilenskii, see Allen S. Whiting, *Soviet Policies in China, 1917-1924*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1953, p.290.

⁴¹ *STCC*, p.119.

⁴² *Voitinsky zai zhongguo de youguan ziliao* [The materials of Voitinsky in China], Beijing: China Social Science Press, 1982, p.11.

⁴³ Sun Duo (Maring), “Wu Peifu he Chen Jiongming” [Wu Peifu and Chen Jiongming], *Xiangdao*, Nov. 8, 1922.

Chen's image, in the eye of Chinese and Russian communists, thus changed from a patriotic bourgeois general, to a feudal landlord and an accomplice of British imperialism, while Sun was recognised as a revolutionary leader of the Chinese bourgeoisie. Given the comments of the mainstream media on Sun Yat-sen and Chen Jiongming, it was hard to find such a dogmatic evaluation based on a crude class analysis gaining wide recognition. Even inside the party, the Cantonese leaders like Tan Pingshan and Chen Gongbo retained their own thoughts, which resulted in the most serious debates inside the CCP since its establishment. The conflict irritated the Cantonese members so much that they even threatened to declare independence from the central committee.

The mystery of “following Chen Jiongming and opposing Sun Yat-sen”

According to historical archives and memoirs, the central committee in Shanghai charged Cantonese Marxists with “following Chen Jiongming and opposing Sun Yat-sen” (*fu Chen fan Sun*). As a result, Chen Duxiu punished Tan Pingshan and Chen Gongbo; the former was removed from his position as leader and the latter dismissed from the party. However, the Cantonese Marxists denied any collusion with Chen Jiongming, and whether the Cantonese Marxists were treated unjustly remained an enigma.

Indeed, the Cantonese branch disagreed with Shanghai on how to evaluate Chen Jiongming. In the opinion of Chen Gongbo and Tan Pingshan, Sun and Chen's conflict was in no way a manifestation of class struggle. Chen Jiongming to them was neither a heroic bourgeois statesman nor a regressive feudal stumbling block to the forthcoming revolution. Meanwhile, the two years of Chen's rule in Guangdong made it clear that the “socialist general” was not a spokesman solely for the proletariat. The Cantonese leaders already realised that Chen Jiongming was not a fellow traveller with Marxists. As a pragmatic politician, Chen depended heavily on support from nearly all social groups, from merchants, workers, intellectuals, to foreigners, and there was no reason for him to side exclusively with the proletariat. Intellectually his socialist idea was closer to Peter Kropotkin (1842-1921)'s anarchism than Marxism, advocating mutual cooperation rather

than struggles between different classes. Chen Jiongming's frequent communications with the Cantonese anarchists further proved his anarchist stance. Chen Jiongming's contact with some anarchists, like Liang Bingxian and Ou Shengbai, was well known since the period when he administered Zhangzhou. His interest in anarchism could actually be traced back to the collapse of the Qing, when he and Liu Shifu (1884-1915) organised the "Shina Assassination Squad" (*Zhina Anshatuan*) to target the senior officials of the Qing government.⁴⁴

However, unlike Chen Duxiu, Tan Pingshan and Chen Gongbo did not lose hope in Chen Jiongming simply because of his rejection of class struggle, since they saw a promising prospect for the proletariat to come to power through Chen's reforms in Guangdong. Tan Pingshan and Chen Gongbo expressed special interest towards the new policies under Chen's rule, such as the local elections of magistrates and provincial and municipal senators, the modernisation of the educational system, and the legalisation of labour movement. Although Chen turned his back on the political mobilisation of workers, the Cantonese Marxists regarded these reforms as an indispensable stepping stone for the communist revolution in the future, as workers were thereby able to build up strong organisations, foster class consciousness, and receive political training. As we have illustrated in the last two chapters, Tan Pingshan and Chen Gongbo's understanding of the "dictatorship of the proletariat" by this time complied more with orthodox Marxism than Lenin, expecting a gradual, incremental process instead of a fierce, violent war. They shared Kautsky's emphasis on democratic elections and self-government of the working class on "the road to power", instead of following Lenin's path to build a rigorously disciplined party in which the communist cadres acted as revolutionary elites and led the masses.

All across the country, Chen Jiongming seemed to be the only provincial governor who could not only provide stable rule, but also promote widespread discussions of socialism and advocate labour protection. In Tan Pingshan's opinion, "although the current

⁴⁴ See Kuo Ting-yeed., *Mo Jipeng xiansheng fangwen jilu* [An oral history of Mo Jipeng], Taipei: Institute of Modern History, Academia Sinica, 1997, pp.26-27.

Guangdong government cannot be called a socialist one, it helps the workers a lot”.⁴⁵ Meanwhile, the new local elections launched from 1921 gave Tan certain hope for the future political participation of the lower class people: “we Cantonese people are so lucky to easily obtain what people in other provinces are desperately struggling for”.⁴⁶ In early March, 1922, the provincial assembly was to be re-elected, and we can see in *Qunbao* frequent outcries of Chen Gongbo and Tan Pingshan for a revision of the electoral law in the following 40 days. For Chen and Tan, the provincial assembly was the only institution in Guangdong that had not achieved direct election and universal suffrage, which went against the democratic spirit of Chen Jiongmings’ political reforms.⁴⁷

Take the communist leaders in Shanghai as a contrast. As we have discussed in the second chapter, most of them simply equated democracy and elections to capitalist politics, which placed democracy and revolution as an absolute contradiction. Though in 1921 Chen Duxiu maintained a close relationship with Chen Jiongmings, he never expressed any interest or wrote any article about the local elections of Guangdong. On the contrary, when visiting Guangzhou for the second time in May 1922, Chen Duxiu turned up his nose at the people’s praise of the democracy and freedom under Chen Jiongmings’ rule. For him, these superficial observations failed to realise that the Cantonese people only enjoyed an illusory freedom, “a freedom of the slaves” (*nuli de ziyou*), and only blood could bring real freedom.⁴⁸ Clearly, an election would trap the workers into a capitalist politics and only a fierce class war could lead to communism.

Chen Gongbo agreed that a real Marxist should not act as Ferdinand Lassalle (1825-1864) had done with regard to the Prussian state, which had led the workers to bow towards the ruler.⁴⁹ However, as is discussed in Chapter Two, Chen and Tan rejected the idea that the elections meant nothing to Marxists and the workers. Instead, their attitude

⁴⁵ Tan Pingshan, “Gang zhengfu qiangbi huagong” [The Hong Kong government shot Chinese workers], *Guangdong Qunbao*, Mar. 6, 1922.

⁴⁶ Tan Pingshan, “Difang zizhi yu yiwu jiaoyu yanchang” [Local self-government and the extension of compulsory education], *Guangdongsheng jiaoyuhui zazhi*, vol.1, no.1, July 1921, p.132.

⁴⁷ Chen Gongbo, “Women weishenme yao zhuzhang gaizao shengyihui” [Why do we ask for a reform of the provincial assembly], *Guangdong Qunbao*, March 17 and 18, 1922; Tan Pingshan, “Wei yundong puxuan yundong zhe jin yiyen” [A few words for those who request for universal suffrage], *Guangdong Qunbao*, Apr. 14, 1922.

⁴⁸ Chen Duxiu, “Zhen ziyou yu nuli de ziyou” [The real freedom and the freedom of the slaves], *Guangdong Qunbao*, May 25, 1922.

⁴⁹ Chen Gongbo, “Wei gaizao shenghui gao laodong funu he xuesheng” [To the labourers, women, and students for the reform of the provincial assembly], *Guangdong Qunbao*, Mar. 25, 1922.

was very similar to what Kautsky advocated in *The Social Revolution*, and Chen Jiongming's federalist self-government policy (*liansheng zizhi*) in Guangdong offered them a timely political and legislative circumstance which to some extent resembled the situation in early 1900s Germany, despite a very different economic and cultural context.⁵⁰ Tan Pingshan in June 1921 wrote specially an article supporting the federalist self-government movement.⁵¹ For the Cantonese Marxists, Kautsky's theory gave them an applicable guideline to achieve the proletarian revolution in the tide of the movement that was sweeping China in the early 1920s.

At the same time, *Qunbao* criticised Sun Yat-sen's government in terms of its rejection of democracy and suppression of free speech. For the editors of *Qunbao*, behind the glorious political slogans like popular sovereignty, democracy, and equality, Sun actually believed in elitism and autocracy.⁵² Given that Chen Gongbo and Tan Pingshan had joined the KMT in the 1900s, they were quite clear about Sun's dictatorship in the KMT since 1914. Compared to Chen Jiongming's practical plans to nurture self-government among the people, for the Cantonese leaders, these hypocritical high-sounding words from Sun sounded particularly harsh.

The confidence of Chen Gongbo and Tan Pingshan in Chen Jiongming was not unreasonable. During his two-year rule in Guangdong, his benevolence towards the poor, his respect of people's political freedom and his project to enlighten the masses and purify corrupt morals were widely acknowledged by all walks of life. The Cantonese Anarchists decided with delight to restore their journal in Guangzhou after the Guangxi army was ousted, since "the current situation in Guangdong is better than before, and those in power are willing to respect the public opinions and freedom of the people".⁵³ Jiang Menglin (1886-1964), the acting principal of Peking University, visited Guangzhou in 1921. In a speech he particularly praised Chen Jiongming's political and municipal reforms which he thought could turn Guangdong into a model province in the future.⁵⁴ Gao Yuhan

⁵⁰ Karl Kautsky, *The Social Revolution*, pp.80-83.

⁵¹ Tan Pingshan, "San lun liansheng zhengfu" [The three criticism towards the federalist government], *Guangdong Qunbao*, June 6, 1921.

⁵² Yansheng, "Wo de guanchadian cuole" [My previous observation was wrong], *Guangdong Qunbao*, Jan. 19, 1921.

⁵³ "Minsheng zazhi fuban" [The restoration of the Journal *Minsheng*], *Guangdong Qunbao*, Mar. 8, 1921.

⁵⁴ "Jiang Menglin xiansheng yanshuoci" [The speech of Mr. Jiang Menglin], *Guangdong Qunbao*, Sept. 28, 1921.

(1887-1948), a socialist and a prestigious figure advocating “new culture” from Anhui, was among the many visitors impressed with the thriving atmosphere in Guangzhou. Gao came to attend the seventh congress of the National Union of Provincial Educational Association (*Quanguo shengjiaoyuhui lianhehui*) in Guangzhou in October 1921. After observing the labour movement, educational reform, and municipal construction there, Gao could not help cheering for these achievements under Chen Jiongming (Chen Jingcun) in his diary:

“I will not regard Mr. Chen Jingcun (Chen Jiongming) as a general, nor a politician. I only see him as a protector of humanism. He does not have any bad hobby, and does not love money either. His everyday life is no different from the common people. This shows his personal virtue. He spared no effort to serve the public, and this shows his public virtue. When the situation became unfavourable to him (in 1918), he was willing to condescend and station his army in Zhangzhou, two years after which his army finally came back and dispelled the Guangxi warlords. This shows his endurance, shrewdness, and wisdom. Even when the government badly needed money for military expenditure, he rejected stoutly to legitimise in Guangzhou the gambling industry which could have brought to the revenue more than ten million yuan. This shows his greatness. Looking through all the political and military figures across China, who else could deserve these compliments besides Chen Jingcun! Who else could deserve them besides Chen Jingcun!”⁵⁵

Gao’s wholehearted glorification of Chen Jiongming was also shared by John Dewey who visited Guangzhou in April and May 1921. After criticising the prejudice and distortion resulting from the omnipresent political propaganda of both Peking and British government against the Guangdong authorities, Dewey enumerated with admiration the comprehensive reforms under Chen Jiongming’s guidance:

“The abolition of gambling and gambling revenue already mentioned; the continuation of the policy of modernizing the city and improving its transportation facilities; the creation of a municipal government on modern lines—in general, the American commission form—with trained administrators, the only one of the kind in China; definite and workable plans for popular participation in local

⁵⁵ Gao Yuhuan, *Guangzhou jiyou* [My visit to Guangzhou], Shanghai: Yadong tushuguan, 1922, pp.230-231.

government, partly through personal voting, partly by suffrage of guilds-the latter being the ‘soviet’ plan heralded by the adverse press; the reform of the magistracies and magistrates throughout the province, including a plan for a school for the training of magistrates; the establishment of a department of public health and sanitation under the care of the one of the very best trained men in public health in China... These reforms and others which might be mentioned are local and provincial. They touch the claims for sympathy and support of Governor Chen and his adherents rather than claims of the new so-called national government under Dr. Sun.”⁵⁶

Clearly, for some observers Chen Jiongming had made a greater contribution to Guangdong than Sun Yat-sen, and the time between 1920 and 1922 was surely the zenith of Chen’s reputation in China. In October 1922 *The Weekly Review of the Far East* called a vote from their readers for the “twelve greatest living Chinese”.⁵⁷ Chen’s name was for a time among the twelve highest votes and finally ranked the fifteenth, right after Liang Qichao.⁵⁸ Interestingly, when the voting result was eventually released in January 1923, Chen’s rule of Guangdong happened to have been ended by the counterattack of Sun’s allies. Although the poll’s validity can be questioned, at least it can reflect Chen’s popularity among foreigners and educated Chinese across the country.

Chen Gongbo and Tan Pingshan’s support for Chen Jiongming was thus understandable, but it did not mean that the Cantonese Marxists embraced him without reservation. Far from it. As time went by, they were in fact increasingly disappointed about many of his reforms. The local elections proceeded not so well as expected, since the social elite (gentry, leaders of social organisations, etc.) still controlled and manipulated the voting. The electoral registrations were often inaccurate. Vote buying could be seen everywhere. The candidates unscrupulously defamed each other by any means they could think of. The majority of the masses, by contrast, were still left unaware of the significance of these elections. Naturally, they were indifferent to the outcomes.⁵⁹ Chen Gongbo was so

⁵⁶ John Dewey, “Impressions from Canton”, *The Weekly Review of the Far East*, June 11, 1921.

⁵⁷ “Who are the twelve greatest living Chinese?”, *The Weekly Review of the Far East*, Oct. 7, 1922.

⁵⁸ “The twelve greatest living Chinese”, *The Weekly Review of the Far East*, Jan. 6, 1923.

⁵⁹ Reports of the chaos and problems during the election campaigns can be easily found on *Qunbao*. See, for example, “Xuanju wubi an kaishi shenxun” [The case of electoral fraud on trial], *Guangdong Qunbao*, June 7, 1921; “Gongjie choubai shi canshi xuanju jinwen” [Recent news about the preparation for the municipal elections among labour

frustrated that he wrote openly that he “disagreed with the current politics and was not willing to participate in the elections within the existing political framework, since these elections would only benefit the privileged class rather than the common people”.⁶⁰ Compared with the increasingly depressing political reality, Chen and Tan’s imagination that an enlightened, well-trained, and well-organised working class ruled the society with initiative and solidarity seemed to be a distant, if not illusory, dream.

In the meantime, Chen Jiongming’s close relationship with the Cantonese merchants also raised some questions. Chen had a long friendship with some Hong Kong and Cantonese commercial tycoons, such as Robert Hotung (He Dong, 1862-1956), Toney Afong (Chen Xiru, 1859-1936), Lau Chu-pak (Liu Zhubo, 1867-1922), and Chen Lianbo (1884-1944).⁶¹ The loans from Cantonese merchants to the military actions and comprehensive municipal reforms were crucial, considering the tight fiscal situation throughout Chen Jiongming’s rule, and he consciously maintained the network with business elites. Afong became Chen’s relative by marriage and even bought the whole equipment of an American arsenal for Chen Jiongming.⁶² After expelling Sun Yat-sen in June 1922, Chen Jiongming managed to convince the provincial assembly to elect Afong as the governor of Guangdong. Looking through the history of Republican China, it was extremely rare to see a businessman becoming a provincial governor, which suffices to show the intimate relationship between the two.

The backing from businessmen had its cost, as they were always expecting corresponding rewards from the governor. In April 1921, Chen Lianbo promised to lend a million Yuan to the provincial government. In return, he was appointed as the Master of the Mint and thus controlled the financial power of the province.⁶³ Four months later, at the request of Chen Lianbo and some Cantonese merchant leaders, Chen Jiongming allowed them to establish a stock and commodities exchange in Guangzhou. The request aroused

organisations], *Guangdong Qunbao*, June 20, 1921.

⁶⁰ Chen Gongbo, “Zai ping shixuanju bing da mou jizhe” [The second comment upon the municipal election with a response to a certain journalist], *Guangdong Qunbao*, June 9, 1921.

⁶¹ Stephanie Po-yin Chung, *Chinese Business Groups in Hong Kong and Political Change in South China, 1900-1925*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1998, p.84.

⁶² Rodney Gilbert, “Chen Chiung-ming’s Arsenal: Thrilling Story of How a Big Plant Got to Canton from America,” *North China Herald and Supreme Court & Consular Gazette*, Jan. 22, 1921.

⁶³ *Chen Jiongming yu yuejun yanjiu shiliao* [The historical materials of Chen Jiongming and the Cantonese army], Unknown publisher, 1994, vol.2, p.31.

widespread objections from various social groups, and *Qunbao* joined the protests. Having observed in Shanghai the swiftly inflated financial bubbles when attending the first congress of the CCP, Chen Gongbo predicted that this projected exchange would be no better than Shanghai. For Chen Gongbo, stock exchanges in backward China would only produce speculation and disorder rather than real industrialisation and prosperity. More importantly, they were only the derivatives of Western capitalism, which a socialist should definitely oppose.⁶⁴ Chen Gongbo's outcry even provoked a minor confrontation with Chen Lianbo and his journalist friends.⁶⁵ Despite the strong protests, finally Chen Jiongming signed a proclamation to back the merchants and rebuke the sceptics like Chen Gongbo:

“The stock and commodities exchange can not only promote economic development but benefit the people's savings. Also, it can activate finance and business, so there is no metropolitan area in the world which does not have an exchange... We Cantonese people lack economic knowledge, so there are often doubts and misunderstandings around establishing an exchange... If there is still anyone thwarting this, the police should promptly arrest him so as to reassure the merchants.”⁶⁶

On the other hand, Chen Jiongming did not want to lose the support from the proletariat. From a pragmatic perspective, the workers were critical of Chen's government in terms of his political prestige and construction projects. Since the days in Fujian, Chen had been widely known as a protector of the interest of the labourers, which provided much legitimacy to his rule in Guangdong. Conflict with the workers would surely harm his reputation. In the meantime, economic construction and public projects in Guangzhou required a large number of workers. During war time, worker organisations from transportation, the power station, the arsenal and factories could offer necessary backup to his military actions, as demonstrated during the two wars against the Guangxi armies in 1920 and 1921.

⁶⁴ Chen Gongbo, “Wo duiyu jiaoyisuo de yijian” [My opinion about the exchanges], *Xin qingnian*, vol.9, no.5, p.6.

⁶⁵ Chen Gongbo, “Lun jiaoyisuo bing zhiwen Guo Weimie” [Discussing the exchange and questioning Guo Weimie], *Guangdong Qunbao*, Aug. 13, 1921.

⁶⁶ Chen Jiongming, “Sheli Guangzhou zhengquan wupin jiaoyisuo bugao” [The proclamation of establishing Guangzhou stock and commodities exchange], *Chen Jiongming ji*, p.690.

Under such circumstance, Chen Jiongming always tried to strike a balance between capital and labour, rather than to be exclusively a labour leader. *Qunbao* sharply condemned Chen Jiongming's attempt to coordinate labour-capital relations, arguing that the capitalists would anyhow keep exploiting the workers unless the entire capitalist system was abolished and a moderate coordination would only provoke more conflicts.⁶⁷

It was therefore clear that Chen Gongbo and Tan Pingshan were neither die-hard opponents nor loyal followers of Chen Jiongming. The Cantonese Marxists did place some hopes in his reforms, but were realistic that Chen Jiongming was not a Marxist. Moreover, his socialist ideal often had to give way to practical political considerations. An “anarchist governor” was already a self-contradictory term, let alone a governor allying with wealthy businessmen and powerful gentry. Chen Jiongming kept stating that the warlords, politicians, bureaucrats, and political parties were the “four devils” plaguing China, but ironically Tan Pingshan found Chen himself to be a mixture of a warlord, a politician, and a bureaucrat.⁶⁸

Even if the Cantonese Marxists could discover something valuable in General Chen Jiongming's project, by June 1922 Chen Duxiu had come to regard him more as a hypocritical bureaucrat than a wholehearted socialist. This was the reason why Chen Duxiu dismissed Chen Jiongming as someone having “no knowledge or belief of socialism”.⁶⁹ The divergence between the Marxists in Shanghai and Guangzhou thus took form, resulting from their different judgements on Chen Jiongming. More deeply, this distinction derived from their different comprehensions of Marxism and different imaginations of what the “dictatorship of the proletariat” should be like and how it could be achieved in early 1920s China. The script of the debate between Kautsky and Lenin in Europe thus re-emerged in the East, though with different figures and contexts.

Behind the mystery: intellectual vs. revolutionary

⁶⁷ Tan Pingshan, “Laozi tiaoxie lun pochán bing jinggao guangzhou jiqi gongren” [The collapse of the coordination of the labour-capital relations and some words to the Cantonese machine workers], *Guangdong Qunbao*, June 3, 1921.

⁶⁸ Dijin (Tan Pingshan), “Ji Sun Chen zhi zheng” [On the conflicts between Sun and Chen], *Nuli Zhoubao* [The Endeavour], Aug. 20, 1922. Tan's recollection could be bolstered by a news report on *Huazi Ribao* [The Chinese Mail]. See “Chen Jiongming yu qu sixiong” [Chen Jiongming aimed to get rid of the four devils], *Huazi Ribao*, June 9, 1922.

⁶⁹ “Chen Duxiu zhi wutingkang de xin” [The letter from Chen Duxiu to Voitinsky], *STCC*, p.55.

Since we have been very clear about the observation of these Cantonese leaders towards Chen Jiongming, now we have to answer the question: where did the rumour against them originate?

After the June 16th Incident, Tan Pingshan left Guangzhou for Shanghai and attended the Second Congress of the CCP in July. There he learned about the updated resolution of the central committee on the Sun-Chen conflict: the CCP leaders in Shanghai decided to organise a united front with Sun's KMT and condemn Chen's coup. Tan did not protest against the decision and compliantly travelled to Beijing at the request of Chen Duxiu, leaving his companions in Guangzhou totally at a loss how to respond to the incident.

The war between Sun and Chen in Guangzhou almost paralysed the postal system, and Chen Gongbo and other Cantonese comrades thus had much difficulty in contacting the central committee. Not only Chen Gongbo's memoir but Zhang Tailei's letter to Shi Cuntong proved that the communication between Shanghai and Guangzhou was largely blocked.⁷⁰ Soon the rumour came out in Shanghai that the Cantonese CCP leaders were helping Chen Jiongming and opposing Sun Yat-sen. Some senior KMT leaders even sternly interrogated Chen Duxiu at a meeting as to whether the communists were sincerely pursuing cooperation with the KMT.⁷¹ Under this great pressure, Chen Duxiu had to send Zhang Tailei back to Guangzhou (Zhang had returned to Shanghai soon after writing the letter to Shi), to investigate the specific situation there. Here Chen Gongbo has left us a detailed recollection. It is a bit long but very valuable to our analysis:

“Just at this time, arranged by the CCP in Shanghai, Zhang Tailei carried a letter by Chen Duxiu to me. Zhang hoped that I could leave Guangzhou for Shanghai very soon, because there was a widespread rumour that I was helping Chen Jiongming. Having read the letter, I really foamed with rage and asked where the rumour came out. Zhang said that many KMT members in Shanghai told the CCP about this, and similar reports were also published in a newspaper in Hong Kong. I asked for

⁷⁰ Chen Gongbo. “Wo yu gongchandang”, *Hanfeng ji*, p.223; Zhang Tailei, “Chunmu zhi wenliang xin” [A letter from Zhang Tailei to Zhang Wenliang], GRHD, p.9.

⁷¹ Ma Chaojun, *Ma Chaojun Fu Bingchang koushu zizhuan* [The oral history of Ma Chaojun and Fu Bingchang], Beijing: Zhongguo dabaiké quanshu chubanshe, 2009, pp.46-47.

an exact name producing the rumour and pointed out that the newspaper was actually the *Hong Kong Morning Post* (*Xiangjiang Chenbao*). The paper put Gu Yingfen at the top of the list, with me on the sixth or seventh place. However in the first place Gu Yingfen was not a follower of Chen Jiongming at all and he even went to Jiangmen after the incident to lead a counterattack against Chen. I was never a subordinate of Chen Jiongming, nor did I ever ask for his patronage or even saw him on any occasion... Zhang further advised me to go to Moscow instead of heading for the US. I was too furious to explain why I planned to study in the US. I only complained that both Chen Duxiu and Tan Pingshan who just went to Shanghai should know whether I sided with Chen Jiongming, but why did they keep silence? They did not deserve to be called friends or even good persons. My plan to go to the US had been decided when Chen Duxiu stayed in Guangzhou, so why did he break his promise (to allow me to go to the US)? Was he making fun of me? I rebuffed Zhang Tailei's suggestion and asked him to take a letter to Chen Duxiu... asking whether he still remembered my opinion on the Sun-Chen issue. At the end of the letter, I also reproached Pingshan that we had been friends for so many years and he should have known my stance very clearly. I wonder why he never spoke up for me in face of that nonsense."⁷²

Chen Gongbo mentioned that the CCP leaders in Shanghai learned about the rumour from two sources: the KMT members in Shanghai and the *Xiangjiang Chenbao*. Examining the *Shanghai Republican China Daily* (*Shanghai Minguo Ribao*), the official newspaper of the KMT, there are indeed several reports about the collaboration of Chen Gongbo and *Qunbao* with Chen Jiongming right after the coup.⁷³ These reports should be the origin of the rumour in Shanghai, but how did the journalists obtain information so quickly from Guangzhou whose connection with Shanghai was obstructed so seriously? Did they get the information from the *Hong Kong Morning Post*?

A scrutiny of the contents of these reports gives some clues. On August 11th, there was an advertisement on the *Shanghai Minguo Ribao* about a newly published book named *The History of Chen Jiongming's Betrayal* (*Chen Jiongming panguo shi*), and the authors were

⁷² Chen Gongbo, "Wo yu gongchandang", *Hanfeng ji*, pp.225-226.

⁷³ For example, "Guangzhou yanlunjie heian zhi yiban" [A glimpse of the darkness in the Cantonese public media], June 30, 1922; "Chen Jiongming yu shehui jueyuan" [Chen Jiongming has been isolated from the society], July 20, 1922; "Panjun yali xia zhi Guangzhou yanlunjie" [The Cantonese public media under the pressure of the insurgent troops], July 25, 1922. All in *Shanghai Minguo Ribao*.

“the editorial board of the *Hong Kong Morning Post*”.⁷⁴ We can thus find certain connection between the two newspapers. More interestingly, a report in the *Shanghai Minguo Ribao* about Chen Gongbo appeared as a section in the fourteenth chapter in the book.⁷⁵ Clearly, it was the *Xiangjiang Chenbao* that produced and spread the rumour.

But why did the editors in the *Xiangjiang Chenbao* keep connecting Chen Gongbo with Chen Jiongming? And who was running this newspaper?

Until now, no copy of the newspaper has been discovered.⁷⁶ Fortunately, a special issue commemorating its sixth anniversary has been preserved in the library of Hong Kong University. An article by Li Gongci (1895-1935) in the issue reveals that the paper was established in March 1919 by Xia Zhongmin, Feng Ziyou (1885-1922), and Zhu Zhixin, all of whom were Sun Yat-sen’s loyal followers.⁷⁷ It also mentioned that Xia Zhongmin in 1920 opened the *Guangzhou Chenbao*, a subsidiary paper of the Hong Kong one, which was banned by Chen Jiongming’s army after the incident in 1922. Li lamented that the *Xiangjiang Chenbao* at that time became “the only one fortress denouncing Chen Jiongming’s crime”.⁷⁸ Another article written by Zhao Shilong mentioned that Xia Zhongmin was arrested in Guangzhou right after Sun Yat-sen’s escape. He was tortured to death and thrown into the Pearl River.⁷⁹

The logic here became clear. In the second chapter we have described the frequent quarrels between *Guangzhou Chenbao* and *Guangdong Qunbao*, as well as the antagonism between Xia Zhongmin and Chen Jiongming. For Xia’s followers, “*Qunbao* was merely Chen Jiongming’s tool, so it came as no surprise to us that the paper always confused right and wrong to pledge loyalty to its master”.⁸⁰ Some communists like Zhang Tailei even believed the saying that “*Qunbao* is still Chen Jiongming’s official newspaper”.⁸¹

⁷⁴ “Chen Jiongming panguo shi chuban yugao” [The notice of the forthcoming book *The History of Chen Jiongming’s Betrayal*], *Shanghai Minguo Ribao*, Aug. 11, 1922.

⁷⁵ “Panjun yali xia zhi Guangzhou yanlunjie” [The Cantonese public media under the pressure of the insurgent troops], *Shanghai Minguo Ribao*, July 25, 1922; Li Shuixian, *Chen Jiongming panguo shi*, 1922, pp.140-141.

⁷⁶ Yang Guoxiong, *Zhanqian xianggang baoye* [The newspapers in Hong Kong before the Second World War], Hong Kong: Joint Publishing, p.173.

⁷⁷ Gongci (Li Gongci), “Benbao liuzhounian zhi jingguo” [The six years of this newspaper], Mar. 24, 1925, *Xiangjiang Chenbao liuzhounian jinianhao* [A commemorative issue of the sixth anniversary of the *Hong Kong Morning Post*].

⁷⁸ Gongci, “Benbao liuzhounian zhi jingguo”, *Xiangjiang chenbao liuzhounian jinianhao*, Mar. 24, 1925.

⁷⁹ Shilong (Zhao Shilong), “Xia Zhongmin xunnan qingxing zhiyi” [An investigation of the death of Xia Zhongmin], *Xiangjiang chenbao liuzhounian jinianhao*, Mar. 24, 1925.

⁸⁰ “Guangzhou yanlunjie heian zhi yiban”, *Shanghai Minguo Ribao*, June 30, 1922.

⁸¹ Zhang Tailei, “Chunmu zhi wenliang xin”, GRHD, vol.2, p.10.

However, Tan Pingshan and Chen Gongbo did not really follow Chen Jiongming, as we have examined. The reports in *Qunbao* about Chen Jiongming after the incident further corroborate our argument.

Although *Qunbao* after June has been unavailable to us, we can still find two of its reports quoted by the *Shanghai Minguo Ribao*. The first piece wrote that “faced with all the criticism and accusation about the coup, Chen Jiongming kept silence and tried his best to pacify the situation”, while the second one stated that “the betrayer Chen Jiongming who planned the June 16 coup has to face the public now despite his shame”.⁸² The first report took a stand slightly favourable to Chen Jiongming, but the tone was not at all against Sun Yat-sen. The second one directly blamed Chen as a shameful betrayer. Given the strict news censorship executed by Chen Jiongming’s army after they gained control of Guangzhou, it is unfair to call *Qunbao* “Chen’s tool” on the basis of these balanced reports.

Evidently, the rumour against *Qunbao* was in fact coined by Xia Zhongmin’s subordinates in Hong Kong who had long resented both Chen Jiongming and *Qunbao*. No wonder Chen Gongbo was so furious and aggrieved about the unjust charge from the CCP Central Committee. His blame of Tan Pingshan, who remained silent all the time, appeared to be understandable.

Yet Tan felt no better than Chen about the accusation. Once arriving in Beijing, Tan paid a secret visit to his teacher Hu Shi and vented his grievance.⁸³ Hu was just very intrigued with what happened between Sun and Chen in Guangdong, and Tan offered a timely source to him. Hu at this time was running a political weekly paper, *Nuli Zhoubao* (*The Endeavour*), with another two liberals, Gao Yihan (1885-1968) and Ding Wenjiang (1887-1936). The weekly endorsed the federalist self-government movement, which resonated with Tan’s view. The conversation went so well that Hu eagerly asked Tan to write an article for *Nuli Zhoubao*, describing and commenting on the conflicts of Sun Yat-sen and Chen Jiongming.

The article was finally published in August, a month after the resolution of the CCP in Shanghai against Chen. Interestingly, one of the political tasks of the CCP at that time was

⁸² “Xianggang teyue tongxin” [News from Hong Kong], *Shanghai Minguo Ribao*, July 10, 1922.

⁸³ The meetings between Hu and Tan are recorded in Hu Shi’s diary. See *Hu Shi riji quanbian* [A complete compilation of Hu Shi’s diary], Hefei: Anhui jiaoyu chubanshe, 2001, p.756, 762.

to nullify the influence of *Nuli Zhoubao* and object to Chinese Federalism, but Tan as a senior communist wrote an anonymous article for Hu Shi. We can therefore imagine how dissatisfied Tan felt with the decision of his comrades in Shanghai.

In the article Tan avoided the rigid class analysis adopted by the Shanghai communists, but instead made an elaborate analysis of the arbitrary and bigoted characters of Sun and Chen. He also offered a vivid retrospective of the complicated and nuanced relationships of Chen Jiongming with Sun and his followers (Hu Hanmin, Xu Chongzhi, and Feng Ziyou) since 1911. Clearly this was far from a Marxist analysis, but surely more convincing to Hu Shi, who praised the article as a very “impartial” one.⁸⁴

Tan’s article indeed leaves readers with a detached and dispassionate impression. It spoke highly of Chen Jiongming’s devotion and contribution to the local construction in Guangdong since the 1911 Revolution, but criticised Chen’s insidious rebellion against Sun harshly, which Tan thought was too vicious and destructive. Chen, in Tan’s opinion, should be held responsible for the huge casualties and chaotic situation in Guangdong after the incident.⁸⁵

On the other hand, Tan’s comments on Sun Yat-sen were even more negative. Sun was condemned for his stubborn campaign to be “extraordinary president”, which caused serious diplomatic problems and incurred unnecessary military offenses to Guangdong from other provinces in 1921. Tan Pingshan also expressed deep dissatisfaction with Sun’s hit-or-miss northern expedition, which led to nothing but meaningless losses and conflicts. Throughout the article Tan did not analyse Sun and Chen with any Marxist term or theory but rather focused on their own personalities as well as thoughts. The coup, in Tan’s opinion, could be largely attributed to the stubbornness and parochialism of both. Both of them were so arbitrary and exclusive that neither was willing to compromise in terms of political stance and personnel appointment. The severe clashes between their followers exacerbated the existing tension between them.⁸⁶

Frankly speaking, the class analysis adopted by the Shanghai communists was too far-fetched. For the period of 1921-1922, there was no clear demarcation between Sun and

⁸⁴ Hu Shi, “Zhe yi zhou” [This week], *Nuli zhoubao*, Aug. 20, 1922.

⁸⁵ Dijin (Tan Pingshan), “Ji Sun Chen zhi zheng” [On Sun-Chen’s conflict], *Nuli zhoubao*, Aug. 20, 1922.

⁸⁶ Dijin, “Ji Sun Chen zhi zheng”.

Chen in terms of their class basis. From their policies towards workers and businessmen, it was difficult to point out any obvious difference. Chen Jiongming encouraged the Cantonese workers to form their own trade unions to strive for economic interest. He enjoyed a good reputation among labourers, which Soviet delegate C.A. Dahlin also recognised.⁸⁷ Similarly, Sun Yat-sen and his followers supported and accommodated the seamen leaving Hong Kong to strike in 1922. We have seen the close connection of Chen with the Cantonese merchants, but actually Sun also maintained personal networks among Hong Kong and Southeast Asian commercial circles for a long time. The wealthy among the Chinese diaspora had funded his revolutionary activities since the 1890s. In the early 1920s, Sun relied heavily on Li Yutang (1851-1936) and Yang Xiyan (1868-1929), two Cantonese businessmen, as his fundraisers.⁸⁸

Sun and Chen's pragmatic attitudes towards other political forces were largely similar as well, though the former was often believed to be an impractical "dreamer" by foreigners. Both of them maintained a rapprochement with the Soviet government, seeking for possible financial and military backup. They also searched for potential allies among Britain, Japan, Germany, and the US. Domestically, both of them actively searched for potential allies among the "warlords". Duan Qirui and Zhang Zuolin saw eye to eye with Sun, while Chen flirted with Zhao Hengti in Hunan and Lu Yongxiang in Zhejiang to promote the federalist movement. Chen later got in touch with Wu Peifu to deal with the triangular alliance of Duan, Zhang, and Sun.

Therefore, if Chen Jiongming can be labelled as a "feudal warlord" and "imperialist running dog" by his connection with the warlords and the Great Powers, Sun equally deserves these titles. If Sun can be called a "bourgeois revolutionary leader", there was little reason Chen should be deprived of this honour, and, as we know, the Russian delegates already used the term more than once to compliment him.

Now we can try to answer the question whether the Cantonese Marxists "followed" Chen Jiongming and "opposed" Sun Yat-sen. Before that, we have to first answer another

⁸⁷ C.A. Dahlin, *Zhongguo huiyilu, 1921-1927* [*Chinese memoirs, 1921-1927*], Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 1981, p.84.

⁸⁸ Stephanie Po-yin Chung, *Chinese Business Groups in Hong Kong and Political Change in South China, 1900-1925*, pp.82-90.

question: what did they mean by using the terms “follow” and “oppose”?

Certainly, we are not to answer it from the dimension of linguistic or semantics. We ask the question because a single political action can have different meanings in the eye of different groups. Studying Chinese Bolshevism, Jarkko Haapanen has indicated that the “truth” can have different versions, depending on how people interpret it. Once understood as an undesirable “radicalism”, Bolshevism later became a prevalent ideological discourse in China.⁸⁹ Similarly, the stance of Cantonese Marxists could have a different meaning to the Shanghai CCP leaders.

At the beginning, the central committee in Shanghai was more or less convinced by the rumour that Tan and Chen’s *Guangdong Qunbao* was purely a megaphone of Chen Jiongming and thereby punished the Cantonese leaders, but several years later Chen Duxiu and Cai Hesen realised that the relationship between the Cantonese comrades and Chen Jiongming had not been so close. However, they still left their conclusion unchanged. When Cai Hesen reviewed the CCP’s history in 1926, he still insisted that “Chen Gongbo did a great favour to Chen Jiongming in spite of his objection to the latter”.⁹⁰

But how could one both oppose and help someone at the same time? Only after examining carefully the difference between Shanghai and Guangzhou can we understand the logic of Cai’s seemingly self-contradictory judgement. Chen Gongbo and Tan Pingshan stood all the time outside the Sun-Chen conflict, trying to avoid making any unfair comment on either side. Their admiration of Chen Jiongming was based on impartial and rational analysis rather than personal patronage, and they knew very well that this “socialist general” would in no way sponsor a communist revolution in Guangdong. However, in the opinion of the Shanghai leaders, Chen and Tan’s being impartial *per se* was a partial action when the CCP had already decided to cooperate with the KMT. We can find similar views in a letter from the Comintern to the Chinese SYL during the Anti-Christian Movement, when many young students objected to a political interpretation of Christianity:

⁸⁹ Jarkko Haapanen, “The Concepts of Bolshevism and Radicalism in the May Fourth Movement Radicalization”, *Journal of the History of Ideas in East Asia*, vol. 5, p. 281.

⁹⁰ Cai Hesen, “Zhongguo gongchandang shi de fazhan” [The development of the CCP history], *STCC*, p.490.

“We should point it out to the Chinese youth that, under current situation, advocating ‘being aloof and beyond politics’ *per se* means something political, a kind of politics which helps imperialists and reactionaries.”⁹¹

Obviously, once Sun became an ally, the Shanghai leaders could not tolerate even a tiny praise of Chen Jiongming, and naturally Tan and Chen’s even-handed attitude became untimely, which meant nothing but “following” an enemy.

In addition to the different understandings of Marxism, the quarrel between Shanghai and Guangzhou also stemmed from the different social identities among the early Chinese communists. Undoubtedly Tan Pingshan and Chen Gongbo, like Chen Duxiu and Cai Hesen, were CCP leaders, yet their self-identifications differed greatly. In Guangzhou, Tan and Chen appeared as prestigious cultural celebrities, occupying high-ranking positions. Both of them were members of the Guangdong Educational Committee (*Guangdong jiaoyu weiyuanhui*) and professors in the advanced colleges in Guangzhou. Chen Gongbo also served as the principal of the School of Propagandists and the lecturer in philosophy at the Citizen University. Meanwhile, their *Guangdong Qunbao* was the most influential newspaper which initiated the “New Culture Movement” in Guangdong. Tan and Chen were thus able to wield the cultural power to represent the public opinion on various public issues. They were regarded mainly as educators and journalists, and they also viewed themselves as intellectuals who were detached from the *realpolitik*. This could partly explain why their opinions on Sun and Chen were in conformity with other mainstream newspapers, as *Qunbao* observed the incident from a similar standpoint.

By contrast, settling in Shanghai after August 1921, Chen Duxiu resigned from all the posts in government and university, concentrating on the revolutionary work of the CCP. Cai Hesen and his wife Xiang Jingyu (1895-1928) also had no connection with these official institutions once they returned from France, but served as senior leaders inside the party. As early as 1920, Cai Hesen in Montargis already rejected the typical student life and studied exclusively how to make a Bolshevik revolution in China. He advocated explicitly to Mao Zedong that they should organise a Leninist communist party to initiate a

⁹¹ DCCCR, p. 258.

Bolshevist revolution in China.⁹² In short, Chen Duxiu and Cai Hesen by 1922 had transformed themselves into revolutionaries, whereas Chen Gongbo and Tan Pingshan had not made this transition.

What was revolutionary life like? Early Russian Marxists gave a vivid explanation. Pavel Axelrod (1850-1928) recalled the early days when he worked with Georgi Plekhanov and Vera Zasulich (1851-1919) to organise the “Emancipation of Labour”, the first Russian Marxist group. They had by that time realised what a revolutionary was supposed to be:

“He who wishes to work for the people must abandon the university, forswear his privileged condition, his family, and turn his back even upon science and art. All connections linking him with the upper classes of society must be severed, all of his ships burned behind him; in a word, he must voluntarily cut himself off from any possible retreat. The propagandist must, so to speak, transform his whole inner essence, so as to feel at one with the lowest strata of the people, not only ideologically but also in everyday manner of life.”⁹³

Considering the dichotomy of “politics” and “society” which was quite prevalent in May Fourth China, we can easily classify the revolutionaries as inhabiting the political sphere, while including the intellectuals in the realm of society. So what did this difference mean to them?

Just as German political philosopher Carl Schmitt acutely indicated in 1932, “the specific political distinction to which political actions and motives can be reduced is that between friend and enemy”.⁹⁴ In politics people tended inevitably to categorise others into the two groups - “friend” and “enemy”, though there could be frequent conversions between the two over time. Schmitt made an interesting comparison of the rules in economic, intellectual, and political domains. In economic fields, there were no enemies but “only competitors”, while in the academic and intellectual sphere there were only

⁹² Cai Hesen, “Cai Linbin gei Mao Zedong” [Cai Hesen to Mao Zedong], pp.49-54.

⁹³ Samuel H. Baron, *Plekhanov: The Father of Russian Marxism*, Redwood: Stanford University Press, 1963, p.15.

⁹⁴ Carl Schmitt (translated by George Schwab), *The Concept of the Political*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007, p.26.

“debating adversaries” instead of real enemies.⁹⁵

We have analysed in the second chapter that Chen Gongbo and Tan Pingshan aimed to construct a public space distant from politics. They vigorously discussed the issues such as Marxism, educational reform, and self-government on *Qunbao* in a dispassionate position and talked in a scholarly fashion. This space, according to their imagination, could be a forum where the discussions were led only by rationality. However, their “debating adversaries”, such as Xia Zhongmin and Zhao Shilong, thought otherwise. From the beginning, their *Guangzhou Chenbao* was not a commercialised paper, but the official KMT propaganda organisation for political aims. For Xia and Zhao, one could either be an ally or an opponent, without a third possibility. Once *Qunbao* challenged the authority and views of Sun Yat-sen and his followers, it was at once labelled as “the others”, the political enemy and the tool of Chen Jiongming. Thus came out the rumour. The different ways of thinking between politicians and intellectuals were the real origin of Tan and Chen’s tragedy.

Similarly, in the eye of revolutionaries, the most significant task was to define friends and enemies, so as to make specific revolutionary strategies. In Mao Zedong’s famous article “Analysis of the Classes in Chinese Society” (*Zhongguo shehui gejieceng de fenxi*), drafted during the Nationalist Revolution, the first line read: “Who are our enemies? Who are our friends? This is a question of the first importance for the revolution”.⁹⁶ To become a revolutionary in the political struggle, one had to realise that all the individuals, groups, and classes could be and should be reduced to a simple dichotomy of friend and enemy.

Different from intellectuals, revolutionaries were not obsessed with abstract philosophical exploration but rather looked for definite political goals and the corresponding revolutionary strategies. By the same token, intellectuals and revolutionaries evaluated political events with very different logics. On the Second National Conference of the CCP, the central committee explicitly identified the party as a “mass party struggling for the proletariat”, but not “a study society”.⁹⁷ The party members were not “intellectuals

⁹⁵ Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, p.28.

⁹⁶ Mao Zedong, “Analysis of the Classes in Chinese Society”, *Selected Works of Mao Tse-tung*, Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1965, vol.1, p.133.

⁹⁷ STCC, p.85.

who give lectures” and thus “there was no need to go to university, study society, or library”.⁹⁸ It also confirmed the Leninist “democratic centralism” within the party, which implied that the CCP branches in other cities should obey all the decisions made by the central committee. Tan Pingshan and Chen Gongbo’s dispassionate observation of an intellectual style thus contradicted with this resolution and was deemed as a serious mistake. On the contrary, the Leninist class analysis, albeit an implausible framework, provided a clear picture of the Chinese politics and a definite tactic to guide revolutionary practice.

Perhaps Tan Pingshan and Chen Gongbo did not realise at that time that class analysis would increasingly become the dominant ideological tool legitimising the communist political actions and propaganda in the following years. Such analysis would become more and more absolute in claiming that every political force had a class basis and every political event had an implication of class struggle. As a result, in the autumn of 1922 Tan Pingshan was required to leave the position in Guangzhou for Beijing and Chen Gongbo, regardless of the warning from Shanghai, started a new career at Columbia University as an intellectual and continued his study of Marxism. They would have a reunion in 1925 when Chen came back to Guangzhou and by that time both of them had changed their understanding and self-identity.

⁹⁸ *STCC*, p.85.

Chapter Four Revolutionary or Politician? (1923-1928)

This chapter focuses on Chen Gongbo and Tan Pingshan's political activities after Chen Jiongming's brief rule in Guangzhou came to an end. Under the guidance of the Comintern, the KMT and CCP established an alliance and initiated what became known as the "Nationalist Revolution" (*Guomin geming*). I will pay special attention to the identity crisis of Chen and Tan during the revolution and thereby uncover a significant paradox underlying the Chinese revolution that has not been noticed and settled. I argue that after Chen and Tan successively transformed from intellectuals to revolutionaries, they had to tackle yet another identity dilemma between revolutionary and politician, and this dilemma originated from a fundamental tension between revolution and governance. Since the French Revolution, a number of European revolutionary theoreticians have attempted to resolve this paradox, but neither in theory nor in practice has it been completely overcome. Like a spectre haunting mass revolutions all over the world, in 1920s South China the paradox kept perturbing Chen Gongbo and Tan Pingshan. They attempted to build up a strong revolutionary party to transcend the paradox and save the revolution.

The revolutionary historiography in mainland China often uses a left vs. right framework to analyse the political activities and ideologies during the Nationalist Revolution. According to this framework, those belonging to the left wing of the KMT (including the CCP) bolstered the revolution and those from the "reactionary" right wing were hostile to the mass movement.¹ By contrast, the traditional historical studies of the 1920s revolution in Taiwan often adopt a KMT vs. CCP framework, in which the CCP was often described as a destroyer as the KMT under Sun Yat-sen and Chiang Kai-shek led the revolution to success.² Although there have been some successful attempts revising the initial rigid left-right and KMT-CCP models, they still cannot completely escape from

¹ See Zeng Qingliu, *Guangzhou guomin zhengfu* [The Nationalist Government in Guangzhou], Guangzhou: Guangdong renmin chubanshe, 1996; Huang Xiurong, *Guomin gemingshi* [History of the Nationalist Revolution], Chongqing: Chongqing chubanshe, 1992.

² See Li Yunhan, *Cong ronggong dao qingdang* [From accommodating the CCP to purging the KMT], Taipei: Zhongguo xueshu zhuzuo jiangzhu weiyuanhui, 1966; Jiang Yongjing, *Baoluoting yu wuhan zhengquan* [Borodin and the Wuhan government], Taipei: Zhuanji wenxue chubanshe, 1972.

these perspectives.³

However, our study reveals some problems with both these frameworks. In the left-right model, both Chen and Tan were categorised as leaders of the left wing, but in fact they were often hesitant to support mass movements. Likewise, in the second framework Chen and Tan belonged to opposite sides (the KMT and CCP), but in fact they often showed very similar views towards the revolution. Rather than clinging firmly to a single political line, they often judged the situation with ambivalence and vacillation. My discussion of their revolutionary identities, therefore, depicts a more dynamic and complicated picture.

In order to understand better Chen and Tan's activities, this chapter will first describe briefly their experiences from 1923 to 1928 as a historical background, followed by a detailed account of their identity crisis in the Nationalist Revolution. This will be followed by a discussion on how Chen and Tan strived to overcome their personal dilemma as well as the crisis of the revolution as a whole, which I argue was not so successful as they had expected.

Chen and Tan during the Nationalist Revolution

After the June 16th Incident in 1922, Chen Gongbo and Tan Pingshan stepped upon two different paths. Sticking to his independent and critical thinking as an intellectual and attempting to make a thorough investigation of Marxism, Chen neglected the instruction from the CCP and arrived in Shanghai, where he waited for a month and found a ship to the United States. There he was admitted to Columbia University and studied political economics and Marxism until the spring of 1925. As a result, he was dismissed by the party.

As we will analyse in the next chapter, entering Columbia University was a deliberate

³ See, for example, Martin Wilbur, *The Nationalist Revolution in China, 1923-1928*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983; Tony Saich, *The Origins of the First United Front in China: The Role of Sneevliet*, Leiden: Brill, 1991; Wang Qisheng, *Dangyuan dangquan yu dangzheng : 1924-1949 zhongguo guomindang de zuzhi xingtai* [Party members, party power, and party struggle: the KMT organisation in 1924-1949] Shanghai: Shanghai shudian, 2003; Yang Kuisong, *Guo Mindang de liangong yu fangong* [The KMT policies of cooperating and opposing the CCP], Beijing: Shehui kexue wenxian chubanshe, 2008.

decision for Chen, and his evaluation of Marxism experienced a dramatic change there. After graduation, he travelled around Europe. The visits to Britain, France, and Italy gave him an opportunity to observe mid-1920s European society, where capitalism had gradually recovered from the surging revolutionary wave after the Great War. The imagined idea of an overwhelming global communist revolution established during the period of *Qunbao* began to fade, and the question of how China could survive in this new capitalist global landscape became a new problem for Chen Gongbo, which formed an empirical basis for the change of his political thought after 1925.

By contrast, though deeply dissatisfied with the charge from the CCP Central Committee in Shanghai, Tan Pingshan finally decided to admit his “mistake” and stay within the party. When attending the second CCP congress, Tan realised that the party would change its organisational structure and ideology dramatically, transforming itself into a rigorously disciplined Leninist party. A party member like him had to change into a revolutionary who worked and lived solely for the revolutionary cause. After the congress, Tan was transferred to Beijing, where the party arranged for him to work as the inspector of the Beijing Police School (*Beijing jingjian xuexiao*) until August 1923.⁴

The initial conception of the CCP central committee in July 1922 was to negotiate with the KMT about an inter-party “democratic united front” (*minzhu de lianhe zhanxian*).⁵ The instruction from the Comintern in August 1922, however, demanded that CCP members join the KMT. Sun Yat-sen was also apathetic about the proposed united front with what he regarded as an unimpressive small party.⁶ After the Westlake meeting in August, the CCP decided to accept the instruction from Moscow, though most of the party leaders were deeply doubtful about cooperating with a “bourgeois” party.⁷ The Joffe-Sun Yat-sen Declaration in January 1923 further consolidated this intra-party cooperation. This political alliance changed the political career of Tan Pingshan, and soon he was instructed by the CCP central committee to come back to Guangzhou from Beijing. Indeed, as a senior member of both *Tongmenghui* and the KMT, Tan was undoubtedly one of the most

⁴ Yuan Bangjian, *Tan Pingshan zhuan*, p.34.

⁵ *STCC*, p.67.

⁶ *STCC*, p.122; Zhang Guotao, *Wo de huiyi*, vol.1, pp.238-239.

⁷ Zhang Guotao, *Wo de huiyi*, vol.1, pp.242-243.

appropriate persons to communicate with Sun Yat-sen on behalf of the CCP.⁸ Compared to Chen Gongbo, Tan was after all less involved in the quarrels between *Qunbao* and Sun's followers under Chen Jiongming's rule in 1921-1922, and this unpleasant incident was only a short episode in the long story of Tan's close connection with the KMT.

In March 1923, after half a year of self-abasement within the CCP, Tan finally returned to Guangzhou and a new role was waiting for him. His reunion with his old Cantonese comrades like Feng Jupō (1899-1957), Yang Pao'an (1896-1931), and Zhang Shanming (1900-1928) might have been comforting, but his most intimate friend, Chen Gongbo, had left. In April 1923 Tan, together with Chen Duxiu, was appointed by Sun Yat-sen as the member of the Propaganda Committee. Later, Tan further took the responsibility of helping with the reorganisation of the KMT.

In January 1924, the First KMT National Congress marked the official intra-party cooperation between the KMT and CCP. The congress elected Tan Pingshan as one of the three members of the standing committee of the KMT Central Executive Committee (KCEC, *guomindang zhongyang zhixing weiyuanhui*). The other two members were prominent KMT leaders Liao Zhongkai and Dai Jitao. The KMT was thoroughly reorganised during the congress based on the party system of Soviet Russia, and the KCEC became the top institution in the party in the early period of the Nationalist Revolution.⁹ Although Sun Yat-sen still held supreme power within the party, Tan's position in the KCEC demonstrated that he had entered the core circle of decision making. Meanwhile, he also took charge of the Department of Organisation (*Zuzhibu*), exercising power over personnel. Tan thus reached the peak of his political career.

As the head of the Department of Organisation, Tan immediately appointed a group of communists in the newly established departments and local KMT branches. All of his old subordinates in the CCP Cantonese branch were arranged in key positions. Feng Jupō, Tan's brother-in-law and most important assistant became secretary of Ministry of Workers. Peng Pai (1896-1929), Yang Paoan, and Zhang Shanming were appointed respectively as

⁸ Tan Lumei holds a similar opinion that Tan's promotion during the KMT-CCP cooperation was largely due to his identity as a member of the KMT since the period of *Tongmenghui* in the 1900s. See Tan Lumei, *Bei maizang de zhongguo gongchandang shi*, pp.98-99.

⁹ Wang Qisheng, "zhongzhenghui yu guomindang zuigao quanli de lunti, 1924-1927" [The Central Political Committee and the transition of high-level power in the KMT, 1924-1927], *lishi yanjiu* [Historical research], 2008 (3): 64-65.

secretaries in the Departments of Peasants (*Nongminbu*), Organisation, and Youth (*Qingnianbu*).¹⁰ Sun's death in March 1925 did not affect the status of Tan much in the KMT; Borodin, the *de facto* leader, still relied on Tan as an important assistant and intermediary with the CCP Guangdong branch.

On the other hand, when Chen Gongbo returned to Guangzhou in the summer of 1925, the political situation in Guangzhou had entered a new stage after Sun Yat-sen's death. Without a charismatic authority like Sun, different factions in the KMT soon fell into intense power struggles. Prestigious figures like Hu Hanmin, Wang Jingwei, Liao Zhongkai, and Dai Jitao all for a time became candidates for the chairman of the soon-to-be-established Guangdong Nationalist Government. Hu Hanmin was the acting Generalissimo in Guangdong when Sun travelled in November 1924 to Beijing (where he died), and it appeared that Hu would naturally become the chairman. Dai Jitao was a senior theoretician in the party and served as Sun Yat-sen's secretary since the early 1910s, and it would have been no surprise to people as well if Dai came to power. However, Hu and Dai did not win the trust of Borodin on pushing forward the Nationalist Revolution and maintaining close relations with Soviet Union and Chinese communists. By contrast, Wang Jingwei and Liao Zhongkai had a closer relationship with Borodin and they were regarded as the pillars of the "left wing of the KMT" (*Guomindang zuopai*). Wang finally took the position of chairman and Liao remained a crucial leader in the new government responsible for military, financial, and organisational issues. Hu and Dai gradually lost their power.

Chen Gongbo's long connection with Wang and Liao and his socialist stance soon dragged him into the political vortex. In fact, as early as 1919 when Chen published the book *Dujun wenti* Wang and Liao had been already impressed with his talent in politics.¹¹ It was likely that when Chen studied at Peking University he connected with Wang and Liao.¹² According to Chen Gongbo's memoir, his initial plan after returning was to

¹⁰ Almost all the ministers were previously Sun Yat-sen's followers in the KMT. However, nearly all the secretaries were occupied by the CCP. Seen from the outside, the rank of a secretary was lower than the minister; however, these communist secretaries were in fact responsible for the specific affairs in the ministries.

¹¹ Shi Yuanhua, *Chen Gongbo quanzhuan*, p.44.

¹² Chen Gongbo, *Han Fengji*, p.196. Chen mentioned that the central committee of the KMT in Shanghai hoped to get in touch with Hu Shi through Chen Gongbo.

continue his academic career in Guangdong, but Liao Zhongkai urged him to join the government and contribute to the Nationalist Revolution.¹³ Understandably, after securing their leadership within the party, Wang and Liao were in urgent need of Chen's assistance. After all, many senior party members still opposed or doubted the "radical" new policy to transplant the Soviet system and mobilise the masses. Now the option between politics and academia in 1922 was once more presented to Chen. He recalled:

"What matters most is to have self-knowledge. I do not deny my interest in politics, but my character does not fit it. I have both rich emotions and penetrating rationality, but the former sometimes overwhelmed the latter. Politics necessitates dispassionate and even heartless actions, but my character prevents me from that... I had planned to live an exquisite life, enjoying delicious food and a spacious house and immersing myself in scholarship, but once I was determined to engage in politics, my philosophy of life would at once change accordingly."¹⁴

Chen finally decided to accept Liao's invitation, and as he expected, his life changed thoroughly. When writing down these lines in the winter of 1943, Chen might have tasted the bitterness of getting trapped in politics, as he had to withhold his frustration and antipathy and very reluctantly followed Wang Jingwei to cooperate with the Japanese army and establish a puppet regime in Nanjing. Yet dating back to 1925, the political avenue appeared to him a road towards a glorious and glittering future, a revolutionary future. With the strong recommendations from Wang and Liao, Chen was appointed at once as the Director of Political Bureau under the Military Committee (*Junshi weiyuanhui zhengzhibu zhuren*) and the head of the Department of Workers and Peasants (*Nonggongting*) in the provincial government of Guangdong. The second KMT congress in January 1926 further elected him into the KCEC and he also entered the KMT Central Political Committee (KCPC) as an alternate member.¹⁵ Chen Gongbo also took over the Department of

¹³ Chen Gongbo, *Han Fengji*, pp.242-243.

¹⁴ Chen Gongbo, *Han Fengji*, pp.241-244.

¹⁵ The relation between KCEC and KCPC after the reorganisation of the KMT kept changing. Generally speaking, KCEC was the top institution in early 1924, and, established in July 1924, KCPC began to increase its influence in the party. An excellent study of this is written by Wang Qisheng. See Wang Qisheng, "zhongzhenghui yu guomindang zuigao quanli de lunti, 1924-1927", pp.63-80.

Peasants after the congress. Like Tan Pingshan, Chen Gongbo was soon seated among the KMT top leaders.

Revolutionary vs. politician: a dilemma in Guangdong

The Nationalist Revolution gave Tan Pingshan and Chen Gongbo a great chance for their political career, but at the same time they also began to feel the tension of their dual identities between as revolutionary leaders and politicians.

The Nationalist Government in Guangdong (1925-1926) and then in Wuhan (1927) often claimed to be a “revolutionary government”, and revolution thus became the fundamental legitimacy the two governments were based upon. Yet there could be an inherent tension between “revolution” and “government”, which has not been contemplated carefully by both contemporary political leaders and historians. A revolution means a drastic transformation of the political or social power structure, or both, which entails chaos, violence, and in extreme cases even life-and-death struggles between different groups.

On the other hand, a government, regardless of its specific form and principle, will ultimately work towards a relatively stable condition, under which a certain way of governance takes form. No matter for the Enlightenment philosophers of social contract theory, or for the 18th-century thinkers like Hegel and Marx, the government (or state) is created as an institutional entity to solve the various conflicts among the people and avoid disordered violence. For Thomas Hobbes and John Locke, a government is needed to protect the people’s natural rights and avoid the condition of “the war of all against all”. For Hegel, the state, positioned above civil society and family, is the synthesis of the latter two and the incarnation of universality and rationality which can thus overcome the limits of particularity and the threats of individual selfishness. For Marx and Engels, a government is controlled by a certain ruling class as a tool to cope with the challenges from other classes. The government, in this regard, will only disappear when the class struggle terminates and the classless communist society arises.

In any case, a government serves as an institution providing stability and order, while a revolution often breaks social cohesion and splits the community. Therefore, what should a “revolutionary government” look like? More specifically, for a political activist like Tan Pingshan and Chen Gongbo, is it possible for an individual to be both a revolutionary and a government leader at the same time?

These questions are not meaningless interrogations, as Tan and Chen experienced a similar thorny dilemma when working in the government in Guangzhou and Wuhan. As a revolutionary force the Nationalist Government claimed to be aligned with the masses and fight stoutly against the existing establishment - the “warlords” and the “imperialists” behind them. Meanwhile, as a government it was responsible for keeping order, collecting financial resources, coordinating conflicts, and engaging in diplomatic activities. Its leaders enjoyed huge power and authority, especially after the winter of 1925 when the revolutionary army defeated utterly Chen Jiongmings’ troops and basically controlled the whole province of Guangdong. Under such circumstances, the tension between revolution and governance became more obvious, as seen in the midst of the Canton-Hong Kong Strike in 1925-1926.

In order to echo the outbreak of the May 30th Incident in Shanghai, the Nationalist Government in June 1925 supported mass demonstrations and protests against the British Canton Consulate located in Shameen, Guangzhou. The situation became so intense and turbulent that British troops and battleships fired at the masses and caused serious casualties on June 23. The Canton-Hong Kong Strike broke out immediately before the Shakee Massacre, and, with the intensification of the situation in Guangdong, developed rapidly into a general strike across all the industries in Hong Kong. The Congress of Striking Workers (*bagong gongren daibiao dahui*) and its standing organ – the Strike Committee (*bagong weiyuanhui*) - were soon established to lead the boycott and blockade against Hong Kong. Although the majority of the strike leaders were communists, the Nationalist Government, the KMT, and the nationalist army all claimed to support the boycott. Deng Zhongxia (1894-1933), a prestigious communist leader who led the strike, acknowledged that without the assistance of the KMT the movement would have gone

bankrupt in a week.¹⁶ In fact, the financial aid from the government to the strike accounted for more than half of the total amount.¹⁷

During the sixteen months of the boycott, the strike committee gradually developed a fully-fledged organisational structure, in the name of helping the striking workers and confronting the British imperialists. It had its own administration (seven bureaus), court, prison, construction team, hospital, propaganda school, canteen, dormitory, and picket corps (over 2,000 members) on both land and water, and gradually overlapped with the governmental agencies. After the government eliminated the threat from Chen Jiongming in the Eastern and Southern Guangdong and unified the whole province in December 1925, the corps were deployed by the strike committee across thousands of miles of coastline from Beihai to Shantou, almost covering all the coastal regions of Guangdong.¹⁸

The antagonism from the Nationalist Government grew stronger and stronger and the strike committee was even condemned as “the second government” (*di'er zhengfu*).¹⁹ Although the charge was from the opposition, Deng Zhongxia admitted it was basically true when he recalled the situation:

“Indeed, the strike committee was actually equal to a government. It had absolute power and could deal with all the affairs related to the strike. Even the Guangdong government could not interfere. Therefore the Hong Kong imperialists referred to the committee as the ‘second government’.”²⁰

As a revolutionary, Deng felt no shame that the power of the strike committee surpassed the government; to him it was to assist the government to facilitate the Nationalist Revolution and defeat the British imperialism and counterrevolution. Even in 1930 he still felt sorry that the strike committee’s court did not have power to execute criminals directly. The court did once try to impose the death penalty on some suspects, but was stopped by

¹⁶ Deng Zhongxia, *Zhongguo zhi Gong yundong jianshi (1919-1926)* [A brief history of the Chinese labour movement, 1919-1926], Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 1953, p.239.

¹⁷ Deng Zhongxia, *Zhongguo zhi Gong yundong jianshi (1919-1926)*, p.240.

¹⁸ Deng Zhongxia, “Yinianlai shenggang bagong de jingguo” [The Canton-Hong Kong Strike over the past year], *Deng Zhongxia wenji* [The collected works of Deng Zhongxia], Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 1983, p.278.

¹⁹ Zhang Guotao, *Wo de huiyi*, vol.2, p.74.

²⁰ Deng Zhongxia, *Zhongguo zhi Gong yundong jianshi (1919-1926)*, p.228.

the government for the sake of “respecting the law and safeguarding human rights”.²¹ In Deng’s opinion, “the strike happened in an emergency period, and these traitors (*guozei*) should not be pardoned by the existing law”.²²

However, the officials in the government thought otherwise. On October 21st 1925, Chen Gongbo rushed to Jiangmen to inspect and discipline a squad of the picket corps for “their recent illegal actions”.²³ These “illegal actions” turned out to be the fact that the squad withheld the forfeit which should have been submitted to the government. As a result, all the members of the squad were executed, their property confiscated.²⁴ A month later, the government made another accusation that the strike picket corps enlisted “bad characters as its members” and did “bad matters towards the people”, and the police chief soon disarmed a group of around 100 members of the corps.²⁵ The incidents were only two of the many conflicts between the government and the strike committee, and the situation became so serious that during the March 20th Incident Chiang Kai-shek’s army sealed up the strike committee’s headquarter and disarmed the whole corps. Although the strike committee and its affiliated organisations resumed after Chiang and the CCP cleared up their “misunderstanding”, the strike never managed to recover the same momentum as before.

Chen Gongbo began to realise that he was sandwiched between the expanding workers’ movement and the government in which many politicians and generals did not sincerely support the strike. As a revolutionary and a socialist Chen bolstered the strike, and his reputation as a protector of the labour movement was well-known among the striking workers. After the assassination of Liao Zhongkai in August 1925, the shadow of terror and panic mantled the whole city of Guangzhou. Facing the attack against the leftist Kuomintang leaders, Chen considered resigning as the director of the Department of Workers and Peasants in February 1926, the Hong Kong strike committee (*Quangang gongtuan bagong weiyuanhui*) and the leaders of over a hundred trade unions in Hong Kong and Guangzhou petitioned to the government, asking for Chen to stay:

²¹ Deng Zhongxia, *Zhongguo zhigong yundong jianshi (1919-1926)*, p.229.

²² Deng Zhongxia, *Zhongguo zhigong yundong jianshi (1919-1926)*, pp.229-230.

²³ CECR, vol.9, Oct. 23, 1925.

²⁴ “Yancheng Jiangmen zuobi jiuchadui zhi tonggao”, *Guangzhou Minguo Ribao* [Guangzhou Republic Daily], Oct. 21, 1925.

²⁵ CECR, vol.9, Nov. 19, 1925.

“We heard that Chen Gongbo, the director of Department of Peasant and Worker, planned to resign, which was extremely astonishing to us. Since the assassination of our Minister Liao Zhongkai, Director Chen, regardless of his own safety and interest, has been the only one who can inherit Minister Liao’s spirit and stoutly guide peasants and workers (*qi neng ji zhi zhenzheng wei laogong yundong nuli buxi xisheng zhe er zhongshi de zhidao women nonggong zhe, wei Chen tingzhang yiren eryi*). Now he is both our protector (*baohuzhe*) and tutor (*daoshi*), and we labourers all regard him as our kind mother (*cimu*)... At present it is imperative to train peasants and workers, and only Director Chen can take the important responsibility. He is so hardworking and honest that we cannot imagine that any successor can match him. If he is replaced by someone unfit for the position (*buxiaozhe*), the prospect of our movement will be in jeopardy.”²⁶

Unions backed both by the KMT and CCP signed this petition. Obviously, Chen enjoyed high prestige among the workers. However, as a senior official Chen’s ultimate goal was to solve the strikes rather than instigate them, to help consolidate the government rather than stir up disputes. For some revolutionary cadres (especially the communists), however, the more the strikes were provoked, the easier it was to absorb grassroots members and expand their influence among the masses. These activities surely annoyed Chen:

“The communists forgot that they were then cooperating with the KMT and they claimed to support the nationalist revolution. Guangzhou was administered by the Nationalist Government, and provoking so many strikes simply meant inciting the people to attack the government. Moreover, one of the key functions of a government is to keep order, but the order had been totally broken when every union struck every day. Eventually, the CCP was deemed by the masses as a revolutionary party while the KMT a conservative one.”²⁷

Facing aggressive communist actions, the KMT labour leaders did not simply sit back, and they showed even more radicalism than the communists in fomenting strikes.

²⁶ FMA, No.14923.

²⁷ Chen Gongbo, *Kuxiao lu*, Beijing: Xiandai shiliao biankanshe, 1981, p.27.

Therefore, both the two parties were competing fiercely to win over workers and sometimes even incited the masses to fight against each other.²⁸ The constant disorder contradicted Chen's plan to educate, organise, and unite trade unions under a single flag – the KMT's flag. Chen once angrily enumerated the shortcomings of the labour movement at a press conference:

“The plans of the Kuomintang concerning labour movement are not yet fully carried out. The Majority of the labour leaders in the Kuomintang do not observe the discipline of the party... The present union still bears the nature of the old guild system, only for the self-interest for certain classes and not for general... Most of the labour unions use force to compel people to join them.”²⁹

Meanwhile, the soaring power of the Canton-Hong Kong Strike Committee alerted Chen about its potential threat to the authority of the government. To Chen, Su Zhaozheng (1885-1929), the chairman of the committee, “almost became the head of a proletarian government”.³⁰

Chen's sympathy for the mass movement and his insistence on a systematic organisation rather than blind incitement of workers and peasants only deepened his ambivalence between being a revolutionary or a politician. To make matters worse, it brought him embarrassment from both the KMT and CCP. As he recalled, the communists tried to make use of him but never relaxed their surveillance of his work, while many KMT leaders equalled him to a communist and often marginalised him.³¹ Chen's observation of the CCP can be verified by a document by the communists in September 1926, which concluded that Chen “was very untrustworthy” and “should be brought down” sooner or later.³²

The rivalry between the government and labour organisations gradually surfaced in 1926, but the strike committee still tried every means to keep the momentum, despite the fact that since July the government had already prepared to put an end to the strike. In August Deng Zhongxia remained optimistic that “the objective and subjective conditions for the strike

²⁸ Chen Gongbo, *Hanfeng ji*, pp.239-240.

²⁹ CECR, vol.9, July 6, 1926.

³⁰ Chen Gongbo, *Hanfeng ji*, p.239.

³¹ Chen Gongbo, *Hanfeng ji*, p.240.

³² *Zhonggong zhongyang wenjian xuanji* [The papers of the Central Committee of the CCP, PCCC], vol.2 (1926), p.363.

still existed”, and implied that all the patriots should unconditionally support the strike until the “final victory” rather than make a compromise with the Hong Kong government.³³ On September 21st, the Congress of Striking Workers held a conference to encourage the workers’ morale by reporting the revolutionary achievement of the on-going strikes in Shanghai.³⁴

The Strike Committee, however, had to publish a declaration on October 1st that the strike and boycott would be cancelled.³⁵ According to Hua Gang’s famous study of the Nationalist Revolution, this sudden turn was attributed to the Hong Kong government which was recruiting workers from Southeast Asia to nullify the strike. Hua further explained that the Strike Committee was to transfer the movement from Guangzhou to Hong Kong after it called off the strike.³⁶ Admittedly, on October 10th, the mass rally organised by the strike committee did state that cancelling the blockade was to help regain Hong Kong in the future.³⁷ Yet the movement was never transferred to Hong Kong, nor was there any practical action for its resurgence. There was even no proposal about the renewal of the strike any more. Hua’s account seems to be far-fetched.

A scrutiny of some relevant historical materials will lead to a different conclusion: it was the Guangdong government that put an end to the strike. After negotiating with the strike leaders and communicating with the British side, the government promised to impose a surtax of 2.5% upon foreign goods for compensating the strike workers and concluding the movement.³⁸ A document from the British government also shows that it was the Nationalist Government that proposed the taxation, and Austen Chamberlain (1863-1937), the foreign minister, deemed it “reasonable in form and probably copied from similar legislation in other countries”.³⁹ The Foreign Office also mentioned that “the [Guangdong] government have temporarily stopped the functioning of the inspection corps”.⁴⁰ A report

³³ Deng Zhongxia, “Yinianlai shenggang bagong de jingguo”, in *Deng Zhongxia wenji*, p.296.

³⁴ “Gongdaihui zong daibiao huiyi ji”. [A report of the worker congress], *Guangzhou Mingguo Ribao*, September 21, 1926.

³⁵ “Dui shenggang bagong biangeng zhengce xuanchuan dagang” [An outline of propaganda on the changing policy of the Canton-Hong Kong Strike], *Guangzhou Mingguo Ribao*, Oct. 1, 1926.

³⁶ Hua Gang, *Zhongguo dageming shi, 1925-1927* [The history of the Nationalist Revolution in China, 1925-1927], Beijing: Wenshi ziliao chubanshe, 1982, pp.184-185.

³⁷ Deng Zhongxia, *Zhongguo zhigong yundong jianshi (1919-1926)*, pp.252-253.

³⁸ CECR, vol.10, Sept. 20, 1926.

³⁹ “China”, C.P. 399 (26), CAB/24/182, p.2.

⁴⁰ “China”, C.P. 399 (26), CAB/24/182, p.2.

in *The North China Herald* also demonstrated that the Guangdong government arranged for the cancellation of the boycott, though the strike committee attempted to maintain it.⁴¹

After repeated negotiations with the Nationalist Government, the Congress of Striking Workers had to agree to the surtax scheme, and the strike leaders urged the government to keep its promise to accommodate the workers after they ended the strike.⁴² However, the policy change was so abrupt and so incompatible with their previous anti-British propaganda that the Strike Committee had to spend much effort explaining to the workers, or at least finding an excuse that made sense. Since the end of September the strike committee had already begun this work, explaining to the masses that “only the form of struggle has changed and the destiny of the British imperialism is still in our hands” and stressing “it is wrong to believe that we have failed”.⁴³

When rumours came out suspecting that the strike was prohibited by the government, the Committee released a declaration reiterating the government’s consistent support to the movement:

“Some people have attributed the policy change to the government which they claimed has betrayed the workers on strike... We are confident that the attitude of the government towards the strike has not changed a bit. The government does not intend to cancel the boycott, nor use it as an expedient for the sake of diplomatic benefit. Neither does the government cease to support the workers... We believe that the government will take the responsibility to provide a job for every worker.”⁴⁴

The declaration was defending the government, but reading between the lines we can sense the grievance of the Committee. It was said that at the end of September Chiang Kai-shek who was at the front line of the Northern Expedition (*beifa*) already sent a telegraph to the Nationalist Government requiring that the strike be called off “at any cost”,

⁴¹ “Promoters of the Boycott”, *The North China Herald*, Oct. 9, 1926.

⁴² “Shenggang bagong gongren daibiao dahui dui bagong biangeng zhengce zhi jueyi” [The resolution of the strike workers congress about the policy change], *Gongren Zhilu* [The Workers’ Road], no. 452, Oct. 1, 1926.

⁴³ Da Ren, “Weishenme yao gaibian zhengce?” [Why should we change the policy?], *Gongren Zhilu*, no. 448, Sept. 27, 1926.

⁴⁴ “Gongren yundong xuanchuan weiyuanhui dui shenggang bagong biangeng zhengce xuanchuan dagang” [The outline of the propaganda for the policy change of the Canton-Hong Kong Strike], *Guangzhou Mingguo Ribao*, Oct. 1, 1926.

and the government agreed with Chiang.⁴⁵ When the strike eventually stopped on October 10th, a speech by Eugene Chen, the acting Foreign Secretary of the government, on cancelling the strike was exposed to the public. Totally different from the Strike Committee's declaration, Eugene Chen talked baldly that it was the government that resolutely and correctly terminated the boycott and the Strike Committee could do nothing but obey. If anyone, he asserted, dared to sabotage the commercial activities between Guangzhou and Hong Kong after October 10th, the government would punish him seriously. He also hoped that the British government would change the gunboat policy, which would pave the way for a rapprochement between the Guangdong government and Hong Kong in the future.⁴⁶

Those studying the 1920s Sino-British relations should be very familiar with Eugene Chen, who was often pictured by the British newspapers as a nationalist, if not communist, diplomat who harboured deep antagonism towards the British Empire. In Chinese revolutionary historiography, Chen was also described as an anti-imperialist and leftist revolutionary diplomat. Admittedly, Eugene Chen advocated revolutionary diplomacy to abolish the "unequal treaties" imposed on China, but the radical, long-standing strike, in his opinion, was detrimental to the general strategy of the government and the revolution as a whole.⁴⁷

Clearly the Nationalist Government could not tolerate a second authority challenging its position in the revolution, even though it was a revolutionary mass organisation. More importantly, the tension between the government and strike committee revealed the inherent contradiction between revolution and governance. In the past, the collisions between the government and mass organisations during the Canton-Hong Kong Strike were often understood in the framework of bourgeoisie-proletariat or right-left conflicts.⁴⁸ The CCP at that time also regard it as such, believing that the left-wing KMT leaders and

⁴⁵ CECR, vol.10, Sept. 25, 1926.

⁴⁶ "Benbao jizhe yu Chen Youren tongzhi tanhua" [A talk between Comrade Eugene Chen and our journalist], *Guangzhou Minguo Ribao*, October 11, 1926; An English report of this can be found on *The North China Herald*. See "Eugene Chen on the Boycott", *The North China Herald*, Oct. 16, 1926.

⁴⁷ "Benbao jizhe yu Chen Youren tongzhi tanhua", *Guangzhou Minguo Ribao*, Oct. 11, 1926.

⁴⁸ Hua Gang, *Zhongguo dagemingshi*, pp.158-159; Weng Qianhong, "Guogong liangdang yu shenggang bagong" [The KMT and CCP and the Canton-Hong Kong Strike], *Jindaishi yanjiu*, 1991 (3): 257-270; Huang Xiurong, *Guomin gemingshi*, p.214; Li Ta-chia, "Direns huo mengyou: Shenggang bagong de shangren yinsu yu zhengdang celue", *Zhongyang yanjiuyuan jinshisuo jikan* [Academia Sinica Modern History Institute Bulletin], no.78, Dec. 2012, pp.125-177.

communists firmly sided with the workers and fought against the right-wing bourgeois counterrevolutionaries.⁴⁹ Nevertheless, the attitudes of Chen Gongbo and Eugene Chen as prestigious “left-wing leaders” proved the left-right dichotomy problematic. Their ambivalent stance towards the striking workers was not so much due to their class background or political fraction in the KMT, but stemmed more from the fundamental contradiction between revolution and governance.

Tan Pingshan’s relation with the Nationalist Government could further demonstrate our argument. Tan’s stance kept vacillating between the CCP central committee in Shanghai on the one hand and Borodin and the KMT leaders in Guangzhou on the other. When Zheng Chaolin (1901-1998), a senior member in the CCP, recalled the history of CCP in 1925 and 1926, he remembered clearly the different views among the communists between Shanghai and Guangzhou. In his view, the Shanghai communists risked their life engaging in revolutionary propaganda and organising the workers and students. Their work could be really called a rebellion against the established power. These Shanghai revolutionaries were obsessed with the proletarian revolution (they called it “our own revolution”) and apathetic about the cooperation with the nationalists with “their” revolution - the Nationalist Revolution. The communists in Guangzhou, such as Tan Pingshan, Zhou Enlai (1898-1976), and Yun Daiying (1895-1931), on the contrary, safely sat in splendid government buildings, busy with political negotiations, administrative routines, and all kinds of ceremonies:

“Comrades from other provinces who went to Guangdong to attend meetings or for some other purpose were astounded at these Guangdong ‘comrades’, these ‘revolutionaries’. They were halfway to being in power. They could work for the revolution without risk to their lives, at least as far as the authorities were concerned (except for a possible coup by Chiang Kai-shek)... comrades used to working in Guangdong who went to Shanghai or other places may well have thought, ‘Why are you so stupid?’”⁵⁰

⁴⁹ “Zhongyangju baogao” [The report of the central committee], *PCCC*, vol.2 (1926), p.356.

⁵⁰ Gregor Benton ed., *An Oppositionist for Life: Memoirs of the Chinese Revolutionary Zheng Chaolin*, New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1997, pp.114-115.

Obviously, the Cantonese communist leaders had become bureaucratic politicians in Zheng's eye, and perhaps most of the CCP senior members in Shanghai shared this observation. Zheng's description of the differences between Shanghai and Guangzhou can be further verified by Zhang Guotao's memoir.⁵¹ Like Zheng, Zhang observed that Borodin had more interest in high politics and looked down upon the Shanghai communists' mass mobilisation. Borodin, in Zhang's opinion, seemed to have roped in the communists in Guangzhou as his subordinates, which often irritated the CCP leaders in Shanghai and worsened the Shanghai-Guangzhou schism.⁵² Peng Shuzhi (1895-1983), a senior CCP leader who after 1928 became a Trotskyist, also points out the different styles between the communist leaders in Guangzhou and Shanghai in his memoir. Interestingly, Peng attacks Zhang Guotao as one of those degenerate members in Guangzhou.⁵³

Examining one of Tan's articles about the Canton-Hong Kong Strike, we do find some subtle differences between the Shanghai CCP central committee and himself. Two months before the strike was called off, Tan already demanded in the article that the strike should be solved as quickly as possible, in spite of the intransigence of the Hong Kong government. The termination of the movement, according to Tan, would not only benefit the workers who had already made a huge sacrifice over a year, but stabilise the situation in Guangzhou and consolidate the rule of the Nationalist Government.⁵⁴ A week later, however, the CCP Central Committee sent an open letter to the Cantonese striking workers, praising their sacrifice but motivating them to hold on until the Hong Kong government made a compromise.⁵⁵ In other words, the strike should continue if the negotiation with Hong Kong broke down. Tan's eagerness to solve and conclude the strike thus contradicted the communist leaders in Shanghai who wished to rely on the labour movement to fight against British imperialism. Deng Zhongxia was furious about Tan's stance, calling him a "scab" (*gongzei*) who betrayed the communist revolutionary principle.⁵⁶

The issue of the Northern Expedition further exposed the clash between Shanghai and

⁵¹ Zhang Guotao, *Wo de huiyi*, vol.2, pp.64-65.

⁵² Zhang Guotao, *Wo de huiyi*, vol.2, pp.56-57.

⁵³ Cheng Yingxiang and Clande Cadart ed., *Peng Shuzhi huiyilu* [The memoir of Peng Shuzhi], Hong Kong: Cosmos Books, 2016, vol.2, p.99.

⁵⁴ Tan Pingshan, "Fanying yundong yu shenggang bagong", *Tan Pingshan wenji*, pp.368-370.

⁵⁵ "Zhongguo gongchandang zhi yuegang bagong gongren shu", *PCCC*, vol.2 (1926), pp.286-288.

⁵⁶ Deng Zhongxia, *Zhongguo zhigong yundong jianshi (1919-1926)*, p.251.

Guangzhou. In July 1926 Chen Duxiu in Shanghai openly railed against Chiang Kai-shek and the expedition in *Xiangdao (The Guide Weekly)*, as the military operation meant nothing to Chen but a shameful reconciliation with right-wing nationalists. In Chen's opinion, without the boost of mass movement and the overthrow of the establishment in society, Chiang's expedition would only aggravate the financial burden on the common people and possibly led to a military dictatorship. Therefore, the Nationalist Government should promote the revolutionary movement in Guangdong instead of pursuing more influence northward by force.⁵⁷ By contrast, Tan Pingshan in Guangzhou emphasised in a speech to the delegates of workers and peasants that the most imperative task was to launch the Northern Expedition, expanding the political landscape of the government and liberating the masses in the north. He thus hoped that the mass organisations could stand up for the expedition.⁵⁸ Although Tan Pingshan and Chen Duxiu both worked as communist leaders, they diverged seriously on many significant issues. Their distinctions actually originated from the different stances they took on the balance between revolution and governance.

Revolutionary vs. politician: a dilemma again in Wuhan

A similar but more drastic scene took place again when the government moved to Wuhan in 1927. This time it was both the grassroots trade unions and peasant associations that annoyed and ultimately undermined the authority of the government. When the Northern Expedition proceeded to the Yangtze River Valley and defeated Wu Peifu and Sun Chuanfang (1885-1935) one after another in late 1926 and early 1927, moving the capital from Guangzhou became an imperative issue on the political agenda. Chiang Kai-shek, who was determined to expand and consolidate his sphere of influence in the middle and lower Yangtze River, advocated Nanchang as the temporary capital. Meanwhile, Borodin and most of the KMT leaders who attempted to resist the authority of Chiang

⁵⁷ Chen Duxiu, "Lun guomin zhengfu zhi beifa", *Chen Duxiu zhuzuo xuan*, vol.2, pp.1088-1090.

⁵⁸ Tan Pingshan, "Quanguo zhengzhi zhuangkuang yu shehui zhuangkuang baogao", *Tan Pingshan wenji*, pp.364-365.

insisted on Wuhan. These KMT leaders, together with Borodin, finally moved to Wuhan in December 1926 and on the first day of 1927 declared the establishment of the Wuhan Nationalist Government. In April, Wang Jingwei arrived in Wuhan from Europe and became the chairman of the government. The confrontation between Chiang and Wang thus gradually took form.

After taking over Shanghai and Nanjing, Chiang soon reached secret agreements with the merchants and the Green Gang in Shanghai. On April 12th 1927 he finally launched the notorious bloody purge of the communists. At the same time, General Li Jishen (1885-1959) in Guangdong joined Chiang's faction and committed a similar massacre against the CCP three days later. The martial music and joyful ceremony celebrating the birth of Chiang's Nanjing Nationalist Government on April 18th soon covered up the shooting, cries, and screams of the masses in Shanghai, but could not wipe out the dark clouds hanging over the revolution. Meanwhile, General Zhang Zuolin's soldiers in April also attacked the embassy of Soviet Union in Beijing, breaking down the KMT branch in North China and arresting and executing a group of KMT and CCP leaders, including Li Dazhao and Fan Hongjie (1897-1927).

Like Noah's Ark in the flood, Wuhan suddenly became the only sanctuary which could accommodate the communists. As Chen Duxiu had worried, the Northern Expedition gave Chiang Kai-shek a valuable opportunity to consolidate his military dictatorship. However, also as Tan Pingshan had expected, the expedition did swiftly expand the revolutionary force northward, penetrating into Hunan, Hubei, and Jiangxi. The tide of mass movements in both cities and countryside soon swept the three provinces. As the clash between Wuhan and Nanjing escalated, the political stances in the two blocs became more salient. Those in favour of mass movement and known as the "left-wing" gradually gathered in Wuhan, while those hostile to the communists and mass movement submitted to the authority of Chiang.

As prestigious "left-wing" leaders, both Tan Pingshan and Chen Gongbo joined the Wuhan regime. Tan was appointed as the Minister of Peasants (*Nongzhengbu*) in the government and Chen the head of the Department of Workers (*Gongrenbu*) in the KMT. Before arriving in Wuhan in February 1927, Tan Pingshan, as the only delegate of the CCP,

had travelled to Moscow and attended the seventh enlarged meeting of the Comintern executive committee. The fierce political struggle between Stalin and Bukharin on the one side, and Trotsky and Zinoviev on the other, set the tone for the meeting. Trotsky and his followers demanded that the CCP should quit the KMT and the Nationalist Government and establish their own soviet organisations. The KMT, in their view, was turning into a depraved, reactionary bourgeois party, which could be exemplified by Chiang Kai-shek's increasing autocracy. Stalin, by contrast, regarded the KMT as an amalgamation of workers, peasants, and petty bourgeois. The current task, therefore, should be a closer collaboration of the CCP with the left-wing KMT in Wuhan, and only in this way could the revolution survive the counterattack of imperialists, warlords, and the counterrevolutionary bourgeoisie. Meanwhile, Stalin dealt with the land issue. He stressed on the one hand that the requirement of Chinese peasants for land should be satisfied, while on the other the peasant movement should be directed top-down by the government.⁵⁹

Tan Pingshan firmly supported Stalin's thesis.⁶⁰ He insisted that the proletariat in China could not fight alone and ignore the petty bourgeoisie and especially the peasants.⁶¹ As early as 1920 when Chen Gongbo and Tan Pingshan ran *Zhengheng*, Tan already paid attention to the issue of rural construction. For him, it would be unimaginable in the Nationalist Revolution to reorganise the political and economic relations in a backward agricultural country without allying the workers with the poor peasants in villages. In an article illuminating the political struggle in Chinese villages in February 1926, he pointed out that the old feudal landlords had stood side by side with the new landlords who used to be compradors and had bought lands in villages. Therefore, this new alliance signified the collaboration of the feudal and imperialist forces in the rural areas, and it was an urgent task to mobilise the peasants to overturn the rule of the old and new landlords.⁶²

According to Tan's proposal, the class struggle against the rural establishment should have both political and economic projects. Politically, universal suffrage should be

⁵⁹ Yang Kuisong, *Zhonggong yu mosike de guanxi, 1920-1960* [The relation between the CCP and Moscow, 1920-1960], pp.116-117.

⁶⁰ Tan Pingshan, "Zai taolun Sidalin guan yu eguo wenti baogao shi fayan" [A speech on Stalin's report on Russia], *Tan Pingshan wenji*, pp.418-423.

⁶¹ Tan Pingshan, "Zai taolun Sidalin guan yu eguo wenti baogao shi fayan", p.420.

⁶² Tan Pingshan, "Nongcun de zhengzhi douzheng" [The political struggle in villages], *Tan Pingshan wenji*, pp.348-349.

achieved in villages and the peasants should be allowed to organise associations (*nonghui*) to confront the powerful gentry and landlords. Economically, the land rent should be limited below 50% of the agricultural production and the loan interest below 30%. The government should also try to meet the demands for land among the poor peasants.⁶³ No doubt Tan's opposition to Trotsky was partly out of pragmatic considerations. In fact, Stalin was then considering replacing Chen Duxiu with another senior communist to be the general secretary of the CCP, and Tan's strong support to him on the issue of Chinese revolution would definitely impress Stalin. There was even a rumour that Tan was indeed among the most likely candidates.⁶⁴ This political consideration notwithstanding, Tan's endorsement to Stalin also resulted from a long-held belief in the rural revolution and his confidence in the worker-peasant alliance in China.

Given Tan's strong argument on the rural issue, it was not surprising that after returning to China he was appointed by the Wuhan government to take charge of the rural revolution.⁶⁵ The situation in villages, however, was far more drastic and complicated than he had conceived. The Northern Expedition had brought down the local magistrates in Hunan, Hubei, and Jiangxi, which saw a temporary period of anarchy. Partly assisted by the CCP and partly organised spontaneously by local peasants or secret societies (like the Red Spears), the peasant associations rapidly spread across the three provinces. As depicted by Gustave Le Bon's in his famous book *The Crowd*, the anarchy and disorder soon provoked mass movements which saw both "the most bloodthirsty ferocity" and "the most extreme heroism".⁶⁶ The extensive radicalism among communist cadres also accelerated this wave of rage. Peasants rose to expropriate the land and property of the gentry directly and refused to pay for any rent or interest to the landowners. Many "class

⁶³ Tan Pingshan, "Guanyu zhongguo wenti de shumian baogao" [A written report on the issue of China], *Tan Pingshan wenji*, pp.403-404.

⁶⁴ Zhang Guotao, *Wo de huiyi*, vol.2, p.125; Gregor Benton ed., *An Oppositionist for Life: Memoirs of the Chinese Revolutionary Zheng Chaolin*, pp.120-121.

⁶⁵ It is widely believed that it was Stalin who ordered Tan Pingshan and Su Zhaozheng, two communists, to join the Wuhan government as ministers. See Yang Kuisong, *Zhonggong yu mosike de guanxi*, p.117. However, on the seventh enlarged meeting of the Comintern, it was Tan who first advocated that the communists should play a more significant role in the Nationalist Government to enhance the leftist force. In other words, Tan was at first very keen to become a minister in the Nationalist Government, though later he was heavily annoyed. See Tan Pingshan, "Zai gongchan guoji zhixing weiyuanhui diqi kuoda quanwei shang de baogao" [The report to the seventh enlarged meeting of the Comintern executive committee], *Tan Pingshan wenji*, p.400.

⁶⁶ Gustave Le Bon, *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind*, New York: Dover Publications, 2002, p.11.

enemies” were arrested, judged, and on some occasions executed at once. Zhang Guotao compared the scenes with the Reign of Terror during the French Revolution.⁶⁷ On this occasion, it was impossible for a dispassionate and theoretical discussion of the criteria about who should be punished and who should not be. The peasant militia even banned the transportation of grains to other provinces in order to maintain low prices for the poor peasants, even including those supplying the expeditionary armies. Some associations also destroyed ancestral and Buddhist temples, prohibited traditional rituals, and forced widows to remarry.

Zhang Guotao recalled that most of the CCP leaders were proud of motivating the peasants to rebel against the gentry and landlords. The mass movement, though sometimes going to extremes, was regarded as the best way of organising the peasants and establishing a solid grassroots rule. Mao Zedong’s famous investigation of the peasant movement in Hunan was born from such fanatical atmosphere:

“What the peasants are doing is absolutely right... Every revolutionary comrade must support it, or he will be taking the stand of counter-revolution... Doing whatever they like and turning everything upside down, they have created a kind of terror in the countryside. This is what some people call ‘going too far’, or ‘exceeding the proper limits in correcting a wrong’, or ‘really too much’. Such talk may seem plausible, but in fact it is wrong... A revolution is an insurrection, an act of violence by which one class overthrows another... Without using the greatest force, the peasants cannot possibly overthrow the deep-rooted authority of the landlords which has lasted for thousands of years.”⁶⁸

Qu Qiubai (1899-1935), a prominent communist leader, recommended Mao’s report to a publishing house and specially wrote a preface for it. When Mao only attached the label “counterrevolutionary” to all who discredited the peasant rebellion, Qu shouted straightforwardly that these people were not human beings at all.⁶⁹ Though Qu’s exaggerated rhetoric stemmed partly from his political ambition to replace Chen Duxiu

⁶⁷ Zhang Guotao, *Wo de huiyi*, vol.2, p.216.

⁶⁸ Mao Zedong, “Hunan nongmin yundong kaocha baogao” [Report on an investigation of the peasant movement in Hunan], *Selected Works of Mao Tse-tung*, vol.1, pp.27-28.

⁶⁹ Qu Qiubai, “Hunan nongmin geming xu” [Preface of the book *Hunan peasant revolution*], *Qu Qiubai xuanji* [The collected works of Qu Qiubai], Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 1985, p.347.

who then tried to maintain the alliance with the Wuhan government, the fierce statement reflected the widespread extremism among the CCP cadres. It was under such a turbulent and fierce circumstance that Tan Pingshan started his work under the Wuhan government. For Tan, this dilemma between being a revolutionary and a senior official in 1925-26 Guangdong not only re-emerged but loomed large. As a revolutionary, especially a CCP leader, he was supposed to side with the oppressed peasants and justify their rebellion. And indeed he argued in Moscow that the government should satisfy the demands of the peasants. Despite the heavy cost of the revolution (economic paralysis, violence, and killing), if the peasants could be mobilised to destroy the rule of landlord, wasn't it just what a revolutionary wanted? This was just the rationale of Mao's statement. Even when Mao served as the acting head of the Department of Propaganda (*Xuanchuanbu*) in the KMT, he never genuinely identified himself as a senior KMT official and was thus casual about his job. Criticised by one of his colleagues about his dereliction, he confidently retorted: "This is not our own party anyway".⁷⁰

But Tan could not act as recklessly as Mao. As a minister, he was responsible for bringing peasant movements into an organised, systematic policy and consolidating the social basis of the government. In this regard, Wang Jingwei, the chairman the Wuhan government, gave a speech on Tan's inauguration ceremony in May:

"Comrade Pingshan previously had many suggestions and proposals about the issue of peasants. This time he came back from Moscow, via Guangdong, Hunan, and Jiangxi, and he must have had a good knowledge of the current situation and future trend of the peasant movement... Chinese peasants have never taken power before, and the governmental influence thus could not penetrate into villages. Therefore, once the peasants are liberated, inevitably there will be some problems. We should consolidate and guide the rural organisations. The Ministry of Peasants will certainly make adequate policies on rural self-government and make great achievement. Currently there are two trends damaging the peasant movement. One is a rightward policy (*youqing*), which will drag the movement back to the feudal system; the other is an ostensible leftward one (*maosi de zuoqing*), which goes

⁷⁰ Liu Ning, "Yige gongren de gongzhuang" [A confession of a worker], *Beifa shiqi de zhengzhi shiliao: 1927 nian de zhongguo* [The political documents during the Northern Expedition: China in 1927], Taipei: Zhengzhong shuju, 1981, p.251.

against the policy and democratic discipline set by the government... We now have the loyal and determined comrade Tan Pingshan to implement the policy of the central committee and lead peasants, and the peasant movement will certainly develop more rapidly.”⁷¹

Wang’s speech politely criticised the violence and chaos produced by the peasant movement, and Tan replied at the ceremony that the problems would be eventually solved by promoting rural self-government and improving economy under the KMT and the government.⁷² To Tan’s surprise, his response was at once criticised by the Soviet Union as “completely wrong” and “liberalist empty talk” (*ziyouzhuyi konghua*).⁷³ Stalin even stated in the telegram that “any attempt to prevent peasants’ confiscation of the land was equivalent to a crime” and that Tan should “firmly lead this agrarian revolution rather than stop it”.⁷⁴ Faced with the attack from Trotsky and Zinoviev, Stalin at this time had to take a more radical stance and rhetoric towards the land issue, and Tan thus became the victim of the political struggle in Moscow. Sadly, this would not be the only time Tan became a scapegoat.

For Tan, the issue of land was central to the Nationalist Revolution, but the question lay in how to solve it. His plan was to alleviate the heavy economic burden (rent, interest, tax, and so on) shouldered by peasants, but did not favour a spontaneous violent confiscation of landowners’ lands. His political agenda advocated a democratic, incremental reform to empower the peasants, rather than ferocious, brutal collective violence against gentry and landowners. Despite his sharp criticism of established power in villages, he insisted that it was the role of the Nationalist Government to plan and control every step of the rural revolution.

From various materials we can see clearly Tan’s attempt to strike a balance between the role of a revolutionary leader and a senior official in the government. He tried to assure Moscow that he was not a moderate reformist and very willing to solve the land issue. It was only because the situation had become so severe that radical measures had to be

⁷¹ “Zuori nongzheng buzhang jiuzhi shengkuang” [The grand occasion of the inauguration of the Minister of Peasants yesterday], *Hankow Minguo Ribao* [Hankow Republican Daily], May 21, 1927.

⁷² “Zuori nongzheng buzhang jiuzhi shengkuang”.

⁷³ DCCCR, vol.4, p.306.

⁷⁴ DCCCR, vol.4, p.306.

stopped temporarily.⁷⁵ Chen Duxiu also supported strongly Tan's strategy on this issue, because a fierce agrarian revolution would irritate most of the KMT leaders in Wuhan.⁷⁶ In the meantime, the Ministry of Peasants under Tan soon released some announcements that the "childish" activities should be corrected immediately and people should follow legal approaches to punish the reactionaries.⁷⁷

However, there was such a huge gap between the two roles (revolutionary and politician) at this time that Tan's efforts turned out to be futile. What most of the CCP cadres expected from him was a series of revolutionary policies which supported and even encouraged the great terror and chaos created by the communists and the masses. Wang Jingwei and many leftist nationalists hoped, on the contrary, that Tan could stabilise the situation and establish a new system of governance in villages, a system different from both the previous "feudal" rule and a Soviet-style organisation. The government required particularly that the interest of the generals and officers in the countryside be protected, as it relied almost completely on the army to consolidate the regime. The massive confiscation and trial had deprived the officers and soldiers of their land and even killed their relatives, and an atmosphere of counter-revolution was rising within the army.

Tan found himself plunged into a dilemma, a structural paradox inherent to the revolution. Both his colleagues in the government and his comrades in the communist party condemned his weakness, either too weak to stop the radical peasant riots, or too weak to protect the legitimate and sacred peasant movement. Tan's tenure finally ended up with a letter requesting leave of absence. This was only a month from his exultant inauguration:

"This spring the government appointed me as the Minister of Peasants in spite of my inability. The peasant movement has been denounced in this critical period and since my inauguration I have tried day and night to make it return to the right path (*bide quyue guifan*). However, I am too exhausted that I have had a relapse and cannot support myself."⁷⁸

⁷⁵ DCCCR, vol.4, p.309.

⁷⁶ DCCCR, vol.4, pp.308-309.

⁷⁷ PCCC, vol.3 (1927), p.271.

⁷⁸ "Tan Buzhang qingjia jiuyi"[Minister Tan asking for leave], *Hankow Minguo Ribao*, June 29, 1927.

To his surprise, the short letter caused a serious matter within the CCP. Many cadres were furious about Tan's humble tone: the peasant movement had nothing wrong, but why did Tan aim to "make it return to the right path"?⁷⁹ Tan thus collided with the grassroots communist cadres who were organising peasant associations in Hubei, Hunan, and Jiangxi. When the famous August 7th Conference (*baqi huiyi*) a month later reviewed the CCP's rural policy under the Wuhan government, it immediately targeted Tan Pingshan:

"The peasant movement in Hunan developed into a strong land revolution, echoed by enthusiastic peasants in other provinces who also rose to oppose despotic gentries and landlords. This, however, had nothing to do with the guidance of the CCP high-level leaders; on the contrary, it (the peasant movement) violated their guidance. In general, there were only bottom-up peasant movements led by local party cadres, while the central committee tried its best to impede or even reverse the movements... The activities of Tan Pingshan, the communist delegate in the Nationalist Government, were so shameful that his Ministry of Peasants stubbornly rejected endorsing the agrarian revolution and attempted to push the movement onto the bourgeois reformist road."⁸⁰

When the CCP finally dismissed Tan in November, the announcement also mentioned that he "completely opposed agrarian revolution and often neglected the discipline of the party (*likai dang er ziyou xingdong*)" during his tenure in the Wuhan government.⁸¹ We can therefore imagine how Tan Pingshan had irritated some of the CCP cadres. Back to July, under the aggressive challenge from his comrades, the CCP Central Committee published an open resignation letter in the name of Tan, denouncing the policy of the Wuhan government to restrain peasant rebellions.⁸² However, another resignation letter written by Tan himself, which was submitted to the government, frankly acknowledged

⁷⁹ Zhang Guotao, *Wo de huiyi*, vol.2, p.261.

⁸⁰ "Zhongguo gongchandang zhongyang zhixing weiyuanhui gao quandang dangyuan shu" [A letter to all the members from the CCP executive committee], PCCC, vol.3 (1927), pp.266-271.

⁸¹ "Zhongguo gongchandang kaichu Tan Pingshan" [The CCP dismissed Tan Pingshan], *Bu er sai wei ke* [Bolshevik], issue 6, p.166.

⁸² "The Resignation Letter of Tan Pingshan and Su Zhaozheng", *Tan Pingshan wenji*, pp.440-441.

that he felt extremely sorry for not contributing to rural construction.⁸³

Chen Gongbo, responsible for the labour movements in the KMT, confronted a similar situation to Tan Pingshan. According to Chen's memoir, the labour movement in the city of Wuhan was also not under governmental control:

“There were rumours that the Wuhan government was a communist regime, which I would never admit; however, the Hubei General Union (*zonggonghui*) in Wuhan controlled by the communists was really very strong, not only equipped with corps and arms but also able to arrest and judge people. Their biggest weapon to recruit members was to incite strikes. Right after the occupation of Wuhan, there were as many as over thirty strikes in a single month. Panic spread over the whole city, and even the Foreign Minister Eugene Chen complained that I had not dealt with these people (the strike leaders)... I found Liu Shaoqi who took charge of the general union, warning that I knew their plots that once a strike was launched the workers would resort to the union and join it. Yet these strikes would shake the foundation of the Nationalist Government and damage the nationalist revolution.”⁸⁴

The documents from the Wuhan government verify the authenticity of Chen's recollection. In April 1927 the KCEC asked Chen Gongbo, Tan Pingshan, and Su Zhaozheng to organise a council to solve the serious unemployment and strikes in Wuhan.⁸⁵ The council invited Liu Shaoqi as the representative of trade unions to attend and questioned him.⁸⁶

Similar to their counterparts during the Canton-Hong Kong Strike, the empowered Worker Corps (*gongren jiuchadui*) under the Hubei General Union equally brought confusion to the municipal administration in Wuhan. The corps had the power to arrest, interrogate, and detain anyone they deemed as counterrevolutionaries. They could even execute suspects, which Deng Zhongxia had dreamed of in 1926 Guangzhou. The overwhelming worker corps sometimes even collided with the armed peasant associations due to some personal conflicts between their leaders, which ended up with meaningless

⁸³ HKA, No.3165.

⁸⁴ Chen Gongbo, *Han Fengji*, pp.248-249.

⁸⁵ HKA, No.3967.

⁸⁶ HKA, No.7261.2.

casualties and tainted reputation.⁸⁷ The government had to establish a Council of Public Security (*Wuhan bao'an weiyuanhui*) to coordinate the administrative power between the garrison, police, and worker corps and limit the extreme actions of the corps.⁸⁸ Yet the General Union was still able to keep its power to arrest and judge.⁸⁹

A “strictly confidential report” (in English) submitted by Chen Gongbo to the government on May 5th revealed clearly the frequent extortions and the consequent widespread panic among citizens caused by corps’ hegemony:

“It is said among merchant circles in Hankow that there has been considerable amount of blackmailing perpetuated by certain people who represent themselves as members of the Labour Union... Usually the wealthy merchant is accused of some such crime as anti-revolution or oppression of labour, and taken to a place said to be a detention house of the Labour Union. He is told to contribute a certain sum of money for an alleged good purpose or he would be held indefinitely or even handed over to the Labour Tribune for trial and condemnation to death. Usually the merchant pays something and gets his freedom but as a rule he leaves Hankow with all his money soon afterwards... Parading of merchants with high hats on which is written various accusations has ceased to be a novelty as it is alleged that more drastic measures are being taken by the labourers to force money out or [sic] peaceful merchants... Asked why have they failed to report such cases to the government, the merchants say that it is useless, that it would bring more trouble to them, and that it might mean death or total ruin of their business. They even refused to come forward as witness for the same fear.”⁹⁰

Admittedly, the Hubei General Union did take some measures to discipline the corps. Xiang Ying, the president of the union, convened his subordinates to make a detailed syllabus to educate and train the grassroots corps members.⁹¹ Meanwhile, the union

⁸⁷ “Shenggonghui jinbi fangemingpai” [The provincial general union detained counterrevolutionaries], *Hankow Mingguo Ribao*, May 4, 1927; “Sheng dangbu zhuyi gongnong lianhe” [The provincial party branch paid attention to the issue of uniting workers and peasants], *Hankow Mingguo Ribao*, May 5, 1927.

⁸⁸ HKA, No.1020.2.

⁸⁹ “Tongyi shenpan fangeming jiguan” [Uniting the organisations to judge counterrevolutionaries], *Hankow Mingguo Ribao*, May 7, 1927.

⁹⁰ FMA, No.4716.

⁹¹ “Sheng gonghui jiucha weiyuan huiyi” [The conference of the corps commissioners], *Hankow Mingguo Ribao*, May 4, 1927.

claimed to punish anyone daring to violate internal discipline and later did discharge and jail some.⁹² However, internal surveillance failed to prevent their malfeasance. In late May 1927 the CCP finally made a resolution about trade unions that large scale deployments of the corps should get the permission from the garrison headquarters in advance, that the corps could only arrest and judge workers, and that the unions should be very careful in provoking political strikes.⁹³ Yet whether these demands were actually carried out remained a question. Nor did the establishment of the Council of Public Security solve the question about who could in practice wield the supreme revolutionary power between the government and mass organisations. Even right before the split between the KMT and CCP in Wuhan in mid July, one of Chen Gongbo's reports still recorded the corps' interfering with the police.⁹⁴

The aggressive trade unions also exacerbated the already fragile economy in Wuhan which was already suffering from the economic sanctions from other provinces along the Yangtze River. The factory managers found it almost impossible to regulate their workers who were backed by unions. Chen submitted a report to the KCEC about the underproduction of the textile industry in Wuhan further elucidated the situation:

“1. Mass movements: One of the causes of the deficit in textile factories lies in a plethora of labour movements and strikes. As long as it is a day of commemoration or incident, the trade unions will organise strikes and demonstrations. On average there are more than two such movements each month... 3. Sick Leave: It is reasonable to give workers sick leave when they get ill, but there have been many workers pretending sickness in order to get holidays. The factories let them rest, offer them medical fees, and have to find replacements for them... There have been more and more workers asking for sick leave recently, reaching over a hundred in each factory. 5. Recruitment and slowdown: The power to recruit and dismiss workers is totally controlled by trade unions, so the factories found it hard to manage workers. In some cases there are even dishonest ones deliberately making

⁹² “Sheng gonghui jiuchadui jilu zhi senyan” [The strict disciplines of the corps], *Hankow Mingguo Ribao*, April 29, 1927; “Sheng gonghui chengban bufa jiucha” [The General Union punished the guilty corps member], *Hankow Mingguo Ribao*, April 30, 1927.

⁹³ “Gongren zhengzhi xingdong jueyi an” [The resolution on workers' political actions], in PCCC, vol.3 (1927), pp.134-135.

⁹⁴ HKA, No.14638.1.

difficulties for managers. The unions also side with the labourers, so that the situation deteriorates even more... This is the key factor of the underproduction.”⁹⁵

Therefore, Chen in the report strongly recommended that the government should promptly require the unions to regulate workers strictly, otherwise they will be punished.⁹⁶ However, Chen’s indignation with the trade unions did not mean that his initial sympathy with workers had gone or he stood on the side of the capitalists. Although this report listed excessive mass movements and sick leave as two important factors behind the economic recession, he still insisted that the workers’ rights to strike and enjoy medical care were legitimate and should be protected.⁹⁷ In the conclusion he also rejected explicitly the demands from the managers that the power of recruiting, rewarding, and punishing workers be completely returned to the factory, and he argued that the employees’ legal rights must be guaranteed.⁹⁸ Moreover, Chen worked restlessly for relief for unemployed workers. He also actively participated in the establishment and operation of the Unemployment Relief Bureau (*shiye gongren jiuji ju*) to feed more than 140,000 jobless workers in Wuhan.⁹⁹

Evidently, Chen encountered a similar situation to Tan Pingshan, though he did not have to face the blame from a large group of radical comrades. As a socialist revolutionary Chen Gongbo wholeheartedly sympathised with and supported the labour movement. He strongly bolstered the legitimacy for workers to establish unions, improve working environments, and enjoy decent welfare. On the other hand, Chen complained that “what the KMT required was order and what the CCP wanted was strike”.¹⁰⁰ He was very concerned with the endless political strikes incited by the CCP and the depressed economy in Wuhan.

⁹⁵ “Wuhan fangzhi shengchan ji yingye gaikuang diaocha” [The investigation of the production and operation of the textile industry in Wuhan], in Jiang Yongjing ed., *Beifa shiqi de zhengzhi shiliao: 1927 nian de zhongguo*, pp.328-329. Jiang Yongjing has not included the author of the report, but the original report in the Hankow Archives indicates that it was written by Chen Gongbo. See HKA, No.13160.

⁹⁶ HKA, No.13160.

⁹⁷ HKA, No.13160.

⁹⁸ HKA, No.13160.

⁹⁹ FMA, No.1908; “Shiye gongren jiuji ju chengli” [The Unemployment Relief Bureau has been established], *Hankow Mingguo Ribao*, May 15, 1927.

¹⁰⁰ Chen Gongbo, *Hanfeng Ji*, p.103.

The CCP's radical policy was the main target of Chen's criticism, yet this did not mean that he was satisfied with the KMT. Many KMT cadres, some of whom were anti-communists, provoked mass movements even more fiercely than the communists, because they believed that only radicalism could strengthen the KMT's revolutionary power and win over the masses. To Chen Gongbo, their naïve idea would only destroy the revolution.¹⁰¹

Gu Mengyu (1888-1972), later another significant theoretician of the left-wing KMT alongside Chen Gongbo, agreed with Chen that it was imperative to save the revolution from the “pincer attack” (*jiagong*) between conservative reaction and radical riot:

“‘Pincer attack’, (or facing the pincer attack), is really a vivid term to describe the position of the Chinese revolutionaries nowadays... The corrupted counterrevolutionaries (*fuhua de fangeming pai*) keep contrasting their just discourse with their dirty deed (*yanbi renyi er xingtong daozei*). Their high-sounding ideologies turn out to be only a tool to fool the masses and promote their power and position which will be in turn used to exploit the masses. The wicked counterrevolutionaries (*ehua de fangeming pai*) only blindly follow the instructions of the Soviet Union. They are both stupid and pretentious, both superficial and stubborn, and their only aim is to damage the Chinese revolutionary force. The genuine revolutionaries in China have to face the pincer attack from the two groups (corrupted and wicked ones) on all the issues... To the corrupted group, there is no problem of peasants in China at all... To the wicked group, a successful revolution in China entails an agrarian revolution of the Soviet model and a spontaneous peasant riot to confiscate the land from the landlords.”¹⁰²

Finding a way out: establishing a revolutionary party

By early July 1927, the split between the KMT and CCP had eventually reached an irreversible stage. The KMT in Wuhan could not tolerate the aggressive mass movements,

¹⁰¹ Chen Gongbo, *Hanfeng ji*, p.110.

¹⁰² Gongsun yuzhi (Gu Mengyu), “Zhongguo nongmin wenti” [The issue of Chinese peasants], *Qianjin* [Advance], vol.1, no.4.

while the Comintern and many Chinese communists urged the CCP leaders to push the revolution to a new climax. Meanwhile, the KMT leaders were astonished by the secret instruction from the Comintern to the CCP to compete for revolutionary leadership and establish an army under the control of the CCP.¹⁰³ From mid June Wang Jingwei summoned several urgent meetings discussing how to expel the communists from both the KMT and Nationalist Government.¹⁰⁴ On 13th July, the CCP published its declaration quitting the government, and two days later the KMT made a resolution ousting the communists.

On the night of 13th, the eve of the split, Tan Pingshan and Chen Gongbo had a final talk. Chen commented that “the talk could be regarded as the final discussion of the split and also a personal farewell between Pingshan and me”.¹⁰⁵ Both of them agreed that the revolution was experiencing a severe crisis and that they should immediately do something to save it. However, they diverged on how to revive the revolution. Tan was clearly disillusioned with Wang Jingwei as well as Chiang Kai-shek, and the KMT to him had gone to the opposite side of the mass revolution. Meanwhile, Tan insisted that it was still necessary to continue the Nationalist Revolution rather than to launch the new communist revolution argued by Trotsky. Tan therefore implied that a “third party” (*disandang*), which was to truly represent the interest of workers, peasants, and petty bourgeois, should be formed to replace the KMT and continue to cooperate with the CCP.¹⁰⁶

By contrast, Chen Gongbo was deeply concerned with a unified revolutionary power in China. For Chen, if the KMT could experience a thorough reorganisation according to his own plan, it would undoubtedly still be the only legitimate and qualified leader of the Chinese revolution. The fierce struggle between the KMT and CCP already led to countless contradictions and Tan’s proposal to build up a third party would only plunge the revolution further into an irreversible abyss.

¹⁰³ M. N. Roy, a Comintern delegate, showed the secret instruction to Wang Jingwei in order to win Wang’s trust but this backfired. Wang thereafter accelerated his anti-communist plan. See Wang Jingwei, “Wuhan fengong zhi jingguo”, [The process of splitting with the communists in Wuhan], in Lang Xingshi ed., *Geming yu fangeming* [Revolution and counterrevolution], Shanghai: Minzhishuju, 1928, pp.605-607; Zhang Guotao, *Wo de huiyi*, vol.2, pp.250-251.

¹⁰⁴ Wang Jingwei, “Wuhan fengong zhi jingguo” p.607.

¹⁰⁵ Chen Gongbo, “Guomin geming de weiji he women de cuowu” [The crisis of the Nationalist Revolution and our mistakes], *Chen Gongbo xiansheng wenji* [Collected works of Mr. Chen Gongbo], Hong Kong: Hong Kong Far East Book Company, 1967, p.268.

¹⁰⁶ Chen Gongbo, “Guomin geming de weiji he women de cuowu”, pp.268-269.

Despite their divergence on whether to rejuvenate the KMT or abandon it, both Tan Pingshan and Chen Gongbo expressed special fervour on building up a strong and disciplined party to lead the revolution. In 1925 Tan and Chen had already showed their strong concerns about party discipline. As the head of the Department of Organisation of the KMT, Tan in November stressed that a revolutionary party should be like a well-operated machine, and there was absolutely no space for individual action (*juedui meiyou geren xingdong de keneng*).¹⁰⁷ In a submitted report to the KCEC that year, Chen also stressed the imperative of making the KMT a genuinely disciplined party:

“Our party developed rapidly since the reorganisation, but the training of our members has been poorly implemented. The members often act against the regulations of the party and government, such as the strikes on the Guangzhou-Sanshui Railway (*Guangsan tielu*) and waterworks. The government had not detected anything abnormal before the strikes. Nor did the party receive any relevant report in advance. The government is currently facing serious military and diplomatic problems, but some members still launched the strikes without authorisation... If the party cannot guide its members, its base will not be strong enough, let alone governing the whole country under the party. For the sake of consolidating the government and strengthening the party organisation, I would here urgently propose that our party make a rigorous plan to discipline the members, so that the central committee can command the grassroots branches directly.”¹⁰⁸

Chen’s criticism of the strikes did not necessarily point to the communists. In fact, the workers in the waterworks were completely beyond the control of the CCP. The Cantonese communists in October 1925 mentioned in a report that these workers were controlled by the “yellow” union under the KMT and their strike was not provoked by the communists.¹⁰⁹ Clearly, the emphasis on party organisation of Tan Pingshan and Chen Gongbo was not so much due to the political struggle between the two parties, but mainly because they recognised that a centralised, systematic, and organised headquarter could

¹⁰⁷ Tan Pingshan, “Zhongguo guomindang quanguo dangwu gaikuang” [An outline of the organisational development of the KMT in the whole country], *Tan Pingshan wenji*, p.325.

¹⁰⁸ HKA, No. 12617.1.

¹⁰⁹ “Zhonggong Guangdong quwei guanyu gongren yundong de baogao” [The report of the CCP Guangdong branch on labour movement], *GRHD*, vol.1, p.50.

prevent an autonomous, blind, and impulsive mass riot in the revolution.

Here we can discover both the continuity and rupture between their proposition during the revolution and that in 1920 when they raised for the first time the issue of establishing a new-style political party.¹¹⁰ On the one hand, they did not change the initial proposition that a political party organised with a single belief among its members was crucial to the political reconstruction in China. On the other, in 1920 they explicitly rejected any subordination within the party and maintained that decisions should be made based on rational judgment and democratic discussions. During the revolution, however, they gave up their scholarly imagination and stressed the necessity of limiting the freedom of party members. When reviewing the different critiques of the KMT in April 1928, Chen Gongbo referred to an opinion that the organisation of the KMT was so rigorous that it compromised its members' freedom.¹¹¹ Chen commented that this view was widely shared by professors and scholars who lacked a deep understanding of a revolutionary party. These people were “full of liberalist and individualist ideas” (*fuyu ziyousixiang, pianyu gerenzhuyi*).¹¹² When he wrote down these comments he might have recalled his own footloose lifestyle as a CCP leader during the May Fourth period. Clearly, after transforming his identity from intellectual to revolutionary, he saw revolution very differently.

On the balance between revolution and governance, when the revolutionary government gives too much autonomy to the masses, the revolution may risk going too far towards leftist extremism. It can possibly become a mass riot or produce another unrestricted mass organisation which threatens the authority and legitimacy of the government. The experiences of Tan Pingshan and Chen Gongbo in Guangzhou and Wuhan demonstrated this. Tan and Chen's attitude towards this leftist extremism could also be observed from the CCP riots in the second half of 1927. After the communists were dismissed from the KMT in Wuhan in July 1927, the Comintern and the new CCP Central Committee under Qu Qiubai decided to correct the initial “right opportunism”, establishing soviet organisations widely among workers and peasants and launching a series of violent riots against the

¹¹⁰ Tan Pingshan, “Zhongguo zhengdang wenti ji jinhou zuzhi zhengdang de fangzhen”, *Zhengheng*, no.2.

¹¹¹ Chen Gongbo, “Guomin geming de weiji he women de cuowu”, *Chen Gongbo xiansheng wenji*, p.290.

¹¹² Chen Gongbo, “Guomin geming de weiji he women de cuowu”, p.291.

KMT. Both Chen and Tan, though from different perspectives, criticised these unlimited and blind rebellions for damaging rather than benefiting the Chinese revolution.¹¹³

However, if the government leans too much to governance and goes far too right, the revolution will face another challenge as well, since order, suppression, and even corruption and autocracy may ultimately put an end to the revolution. Indeed, Chen and Tan's attempt to build up a disciplined party was definitely intended to prevent the revolution from being a chaotic mass riot, but it was also an effort to stop the revolution from degenerating into conservative reaction. Their suspicion of the second possibility rose dramatically when Chiang Kai-shek and the conservative force within the KMT began to be dominant after 1926.

Chen Gongbo was well aware of the potential hazard of corruption after the revolutionaries took power:

“Upon taking power, the revolutionaries strived to consolidate the regime and would therefore do anything to prevent their failure. This psychology led them to compromise their revolutionary goal, and this was doomed to destroy the revolution... Before the revolution succeeded, there was no problem for the revolutionaries to further the interest of the masses, because the revolutionaries were also among the people. However, after taking power, their interests became different.”¹¹⁴

In Chen's opinion, after the revolutionaries became officials, the initial “interest” given to the people would suddenly be seen as the “loss” of the government, and the revolutionaries would begin to be fed up with the people and even actively suppress them.¹¹⁵ Was there any method to prevent it? The decay of the revolutionaries, for Chen, resulted largely from the weakness of the party discipline. He raised an issue about the contradiction between a political strongman and a revolutionary party. Before taking power, a strongman had to restrain his individual will for the sake of revolution. However, once his enemies were overturned and power seized, the strongman would seek to establish his

¹¹³ Chen Gongbo, “Guomin geming de weiji he women de cuowu”, pp.271-273; Tan Pingshan, “Zhi Zhongguo gongchandang zhongyang weiyuanhui xin” [A letter to the CCP central committee], *Tan Pingshan wenji*, pp.443-445.

¹¹⁴ Chen Gongbo, “Chenggong hou de gemingdangren” [The revolutionaries after success], *Chen Gongbo xiansheng wenji*, pp.130-131.

¹¹⁵ Chen Gongbo, “Chenggong hou de gemingdangren”, pp.131-132.

autocracy. In this regard, only a strong party could restrain individual dictatorship.¹¹⁶

Chen's comments were definitely aimed at Chiang Kai-shek. Since the beginning of the Northern Expedition, the "revolutionary government" became Chiang's dictatorship based on his military advantage. After Chiang purged the communists within the party in April 1927, many of the local KMT branches fell into paralysis and lost their connection with the central committee. They were soon affiliated to different political factions and became tools for struggling interests. Vibrant mass movements, under Chiang's suppression, were gone, and the social revolution against warlords, landlords, compradors, and imperialism turned into merely hot air. Frustration and confusion dominated and annoyed a large number of revolutionary youth. It was under this pressing crisis of the revolution that Chen Gongbo wrote two striking pamphlets, "*Zhongguo guomindang suo daibiao de shi shenme*" (What does the KMT represent?) and "*Guomin geming de weiji he women de cuowu*" (The crisis of the Nationalist Revolution and our mistakes), asking for a second reorganisation of the KMT which would be truly based upon Chinese workers, peasants, and petty bourgeoisie.¹¹⁷

The dismissal of the communists on July 15th 1927 in Wuhan produced an opportunity for Wang Jingwei to negotiate for an amalgamation with the Nanjing government. Some powerful KMT generals and politicians endorsed Wang's proposal. Chiang Kai-shek, who was long hostile to Wang's regime, thus became the prime obstacle for this unification, and the political leaders both in Wuhan and Nanjing managed to force Chiang to step down in August. For Chen Gongbo, Chiang's resignation and the reunification of the Nationalist Government were great news, which seemed to usher in a bright prospect for the KMT to reorganise. However, it turned out before long that the leaders in this forthcoming new government were no better than Chiang. They decided to establish a "Special Committee" (*tebie weiyuanhui*) to replace the KCEC, but Chen Gongbo acutely sensed the damage this committee would produce to the party and to the revolution. He immediately opposed it during the negotiation and claimed that the KCEC could be only legally dissolved by the KMT congress. At once he was seen as a troublemaker who stubbornly made a fuss about

¹¹⁶ Chen Gongbo, "Chenggong hou de gemingdangren", p.131.

¹¹⁷ Chen Gongbo, "Jinhou de Guomindang" [The KMT in the future], *Chen Gongbo xiansheng wenji*, p.13.

party regulations and procedures.¹¹⁸

Although Wang Jingwei was basically satisfied with his agreement with the special committee, Chen Gongbo insisted that this committee was no different from a private club manipulated by powerful tycoons and that the new government would be purely an oligarchy run by these politicians and generals. One of the generals, Bai Chongxi (1893-1966), talked disdainfully with Chen about the mass movement that “no matter how strong the masses were, they were simply nothing in front of machine guns”.¹¹⁹ Working with those with similar views as Bai, Chen found his ideal of uplifting the KMT to the supreme position above any individual and reorganise it to be a genuine mass party shattered.

Faced with Chen’s strong opposition, Wang Jingwei became hesitant about collaborating with the special committee and later left Nanjing. Chen then persuaded another of Wang’s followers, General Zhang Fakui (1896-1980), to bring his army back to Guangdong where they planned to establish a new revolutionary government and revitalise the Nationalist Revolution.¹²⁰ Their attempt almost succeeded, as Zhang in November dispelled General Li Jishen and Chen Gongbo was inaugurated as the new governor of Guangdong. However, during the chaos the communist force lurking within Zhang’s troops initiated a mutiny in December and established a short-lived (three days) Soviet regime. This is known as the “Guangzhou Uprising” (*Guangzhou qiyi*) in CCP history. Although Chen Gongbo and Zhang Fakui managed to suppress it, Guangzhou had been severely destroyed as a result of the battle and fire. Faced with the military counterattack and political pressure from the Nanjing government, Wang Jingwei denied any connection with the incident in Guangzhou and fled again to Europe, leaving Chen and Zhang condemned for encouraging a communist riot not only by the Special Committee but also by Chiang Kai-shek.¹²¹

Soon Chiang restored his supreme power in the Nanjing government. In the hope of reviving the revolutionary spirit and opposing Chiang’s dictatorship, Chen arrived in Shanghai and ran a new journal called *Geming Pinglun* (*Revolutionary Review*) in May

¹¹⁸ Chen Gongbo, *Kuxiao lu*, pp.104-106.

¹¹⁹ Chen Gongbo, *Kuxiao lu*, p.108.

¹²⁰ Zhang Fakui, *Jiang Jieshi yu wo: Zhang Fakui shangjiang huiyilu* [Chiang Kai-shek and me: General Zhang Fakui’s memoir], Hong Kong: Wenhua yishu chubanshe, p.150.

¹²¹ Zhang Fakui, *Jiang Jieshi yu wo*, p.161.

1928. Several leftist critics also joined the journal, including Shi Cuntong, Xu Deheng (1890-1990), Liu Kanyuan (1894-1989), and Xiao Shuyu (1900-1942). Shi and Xu had deep connections with the CCP previously, but by 1928 they had been disillusioned with the radical riots initiated by the CCP. *The Times* reported that Chen's journal swiftly reached a readership of 300,000 within three months, while *The Manchester Guardian* estimated a circulation of 50,000.¹²² Chen in his memoir recalled that the circulation at its peak only went up to 35,000, but, as these figures and reports showed, the journal had a significant impact at that time.¹²³

Astonished by the momentum of *Geming Pinglun*, Chiang Kai-shek soon instructed his subordinates to crush it.¹²⁴ With a short life of only 18 issues, *Geming Pinglun* stirred up a powerful revolutionary wave among the youth, spreading widely Chen Gongbo's proposition to reorganise the KMT. Also in 1928, Chen initiated the establishment of *Gaizu tongzhi hui* (Reorganisation Comrade Association, RCA), which soon became the most influential fraction within the KMT against Chiang Kai-shek in the late 1920s.¹²⁵

As for Tan Pingshan, after the split of the KMT and CCP in July 1927, Tan led the "Nanchang Uprising" together with some CCP leaders such as Zhou Enlai, Zhu De (1886-1976), Ye Ting (1896-1946), and He Long (1896-1969) in August. However, the failure of this military action in Nanchang was attributed by Moscow to Tan's leadership, and, together with his "mistakes" made in the Wuhan government, he was finally dismissed by the CCP in November 1927.¹²⁶ The bitterness of being dismissed by both the KMT and CCP within several months did not last long, as Tan in 1928 managed to organise his "third party", *Zhonghua gemingdang* (Chinese Revolutionary Party, CRP).

Despite the frequent quarrels between RCA and CRP, both Chen Gongbo and Tan Pingshan strived to save the Nationalist Revolution from Chiang Kai-shek's dictatorship.

¹²² "Opposition to Moderates", *The Times*, August 6, 1928; "China's 'General Election': Nervousness of the Executive", *The Manchester Guardian*, Mar. 18, 1929.

¹²³ Chen Gongbo, "Gaizupai de shishi" [The facts about the Reorganisation Comrade Association], *Hanfeng ji*, p.276. The memoir was written in 1944, and Chen's figure about the circulation was not necessarily accurate here, as in another memoir completed in 1939, he recalled there were at most 15,000 copies printed, instead of 35,000. See Chen Gongbo, *Kuxiao lu*, p.124.

¹²⁴ Chen Gongbo, *Kuxiao lu*, pp.127-129.

¹²⁵ The exact time of the establishment of RCA is still unclear, but the available materials show that it must have been formed in 1928. See Zha Jianyu ed., *Guomindang gaizupai ziliao xuanbian* [The selected materials about the RCA], Changsha: Hunan renmin chubanshe, 1986, pp.132-133.

¹²⁶ "Zhongguo gongchandang kaichu Tan Pingshan", *Bu er sai wei ke*, issue 6, pp.165-166.

Both of them interpreted Sun Yat-sen's Three Principles of People as an ideology siding with the common people (workers, peasants, and petty bourgeoisie) and the KMT as a mass party, which led them to justify labour movements, condemn the established power in urban and rural areas, and advocate a gradual abolition of private property.¹²⁷ Of course, the precondition for these policies was a strong, disciplined mass party which could prevent dictatorship or oligarchy as well as integrating the mass movement into a systematic political and economic programme. For Chen and Tan, RCA and CRP were not only established to save the Nationalist Revolution, but to solve their own identity crisis between a revolutionary and a politician. In this revolutionary party which they imagined, there would be no more tension between the two identities, because the party would transcend the contradiction between revolution and governance and the party leaders would unite the revolutionary and politician as one.

Revolution vs. governance: can it be transcended?

Can a revolutionary party really transcend the tension between revolution and governance? Here we should go back to French and Russian revolutions to re-examine this issue.

As early as the 1789 French Revolution the contradiction between mass democracy and a centralised government had already become manifest. On the one hand, there were some voluntary militant organisations thriving, which built their legitimacy firmly upon the common people. These groups of “sans-culottes” represented a spontaneous, bottom-up attempt to initiate a mass rebellion. On the other, Jacobins advocated a committee or a “collegial” government formed by a group of politicians to operate the wheel. As an extreme version of Jacobinism, Jean-Paul Marat, though known as the “Friend of the People”, was in favour of a single supreme dictator to wield the revolutionary power. The newly established Committee of Public Safety (Comité de salut public) in 1793 began to

¹²⁷ Chen Gongbo, “Jinhou de guomindang”, pp.13-18; “Muqian zenyang jianshe guojia ziben” [How to promote state capital now], *Chen Gongbo xiansheng wenji*, pp.38-65; Tan Pingshan, “Zhonghua gemingdang xuanyan caoan” [The draft of the declaration of the CRP], *Tan Pingshan wenji*, pp.470-480.

discredit and suppress grassroots organisations.¹²⁸ The committee actually became a *de facto* government during the Reign of Terror from 1793 to 1794, and Maximilien Robespierre (1758-1794) became a quasi dictator. However, with the execution of Robespierre in July 1794, the rule of Jacobins was finally overthrown.

For Albert Soboul, “the Jacobin dictatorship of public safety had failed because it had cut itself off from its social base, the popular movement”.¹²⁹ Indeed, the dilemma between revolution and governance already existed during the French Revolution. A bottom-up, mass politics granted the revolution its legitimacy and drive, but could possibly produce chaos and mob rule. Also there would be a question whether a polity like this would lead the revolution to a definite direction and efficiently protect it from counterrevolutionaries. On the other hand, a centralised committee or a dictator could form a mighty revolutionary force, but might risk abusing the huge power and turning into a tyranny. The original aim of the revolution would possibly be betrayed. In fact, the Committee of Public Safety had already vaguely sensed this paradox, maintaining that a revolutionary government “had to exhibit a level of judicial severity that was ‘just right’, halfway between the demands of the *modérés* and the *ultra-révolutionnaires*”.¹³⁰

François-Noël Babeuf (1760-1797) tried to offer a third way, establishing a small clandestine group to lead a revolution on behalf of the people. According to Babeuf, between the downfall of the old regime and the consolidation of the new popular power, there should be a transitional period. His “Société des égaux” (Society of Equals), in this regard, would rule as a provisional and revolutionary authority. Babeuf’s rough idea about the transition was inherited by Louis Auguste Blanqui (1805-1881) who illuminated that the small core group should form a dictatorship itself at this stage, using violence to suppress the counterattacks from any enemy. However, neither Babeuf nor Blanqui provided a clear answer about how this small secret organisation would keep its close ties with the masses and maintain itself as a revolutionary dictator instead of degenerating into autocracy. Their understandings of revolution, in fact, were very similar to what Shi

¹²⁸ Albert Soboul, *Understanding the French Revolution*, New York: International Publishers, 1988, pp.78-79.

¹²⁹ Albert Soboul, *Understanding the French Revolution*, p.81.

¹³⁰ Dan Edelstein, *The Terror of Natural right: Republicanism, the Cult of Nature, and the French Revolution*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2009, p.218.

Cuntong and Zhou Fohai in 1921 argued, as we have discussed in the second chapter (cf. pp.82-83).

When describing the process of change from a bourgeois society to a communist one, Marx was apparently enlightened by Blanquism. But Marx at once criticised Blanqui for his alienation from the masses and thus put forward the term “the dictatorship of the proletariat” for the transitional period. Nevertheless, as we have indicated in Chapter Two, Marx never explicitly explained its meaning, which left much space to different interpretations. In the eye of Lenin, the meaning was “simple” and “plain”:

“Dictatorship is rule based directly upon force and unrestricted by any laws. The revolutionary dictatorship of the proletariat is rule won and maintained by the use of violence by the proletariat against the bourgeoisie, rule that is unrestricted by any laws.”¹³¹

For Lenin, Marx suggested that the proletariat should not hesitate to use violence against the counterrevolutionary forces and deprived them of all the political and even economic rights. A “dictatorship” here denoted a monopoly and unrestricted use of the power. Lenin’s argument, though exaggerating Marx’s opinion on force and violence, did have some evidence in the original texts. A proletarian state is indeed seen by Marx an instrument for class struggle and “a means of holding down” other classes.¹³² In this way, Marx expected the proletarian state to lead the revolution, and at the same time to become an apparatus taking charge of day-to-day administration during the transitional period which could implement the ten measures (we have mentioned them in the first chapter) or something similar. Here Marx actually united revolution and governance into one under the proletarian state.

But how did the state keep its connection with the proletariat and remain as a revolutionary apparatus? Here Lenin inherited from Babeuf and Blanqui their preference for a small clandestine group and developed it into a systematic theory of a disciplined party as the revolutionary vanguard, which in fact had no grounding in Marx’s writings.

¹³¹ V. I. Lenin, “The Proletarian Revolution and the Renegade Kautsky”, *Collected Works*, Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1965, vol.28, p.236.

¹³² Robert C. Tucker, *The Marxian Revolutionary Idea*, London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1969, p.76.

Lenin hoped that the party could act as a bridge between the state and the proletariat, and between the governance and revolution. However, Lenin's conception was criticised by Rosa Luxemburg (1871-1919), who pointed out that Lenin's emphasis on the building up a centralist party was only "a mechanical transposition of the organisational principles of Blanquism into the mass movement of the socialist working class". With this "air-tight partition between the class-conscious nucleus of the proletariat in the party" and "the non-party sections of the proletariat", neither the state nor the party was able to eliminate the contradiction between revolution and governance.¹³³

In contrast to Lenin, Kautsky argued that the term "dictatorship" ought not to be understood so literally; it just meant a certain form of rule by the proletariat. The form of such rule, as Marx and Engels had indicated, was the same as the Paris Commune. In Kautsky's view, Marx hereby implied a democratic and bottom-up rule of the labourers, instead of a party branch or bureaucratic apparatus.¹³⁴ Hal Draper bolstered this democratic interpretation by arguing that Marx did not realise any difference between "rule" and "dictatorship" when using the term "the dictatorship of the proletariat".¹³⁵ Draper also agreed that Marx and Engels' understanding of the Paris Commune was indeed to emphasise its democratic character of a workers' state, though Draper does not completely approve Kautsky's interpretation.¹³⁶

As Kautsky pointed out, Lenin never expected socialism would be achieved in a country dominated by agrarian economy like Russia, even with a revolutionary party:

"The Bolshevik Revolution was based on the supposition that it would be the starting point of a general European Revolution, and that the bold initiative of Russia would summon the proletariat of all Europe to rise."¹³⁷

¹³³ Rosa Luxemburg, "Organizational Questions of the Russian Social Democracy", <https://www.marxists.org/archive/luxemburg/1904/questions-rsd/ch01.htm>

¹³⁴ Karl Kautsky, *The Dictatorship of the Proletariat*, London: National Labour Press, 1919, pp.43-44.

¹³⁵ Hal Draper, *The "Dictatorship of the Proletariat" From Marx to Lenin*, New York: Monthly Review Press, 1987, pp.28-29.

¹³⁶ Hal Draper, *The "Dictatorship of the Proletariat" From Marx to Lenin*, pp.29-30, 124-133.

¹³⁷ Karl Kautsky, *The Dictatorship of the Proletariat*, p.62.

However, Kautsky raised a key question: “But what if this did not happen?”¹³⁸ He then predicted:

“they [the Bolsheviks] were forced into a course which brought them up against insoluble problems... The less the material and intellectual conditions existed for all that they aspired to, the more they felt obliged to replace what was lacking by the exercise of naked power, by dictatorship. They had to do this all the more the greater the opposition to them amongst the masses became. So it became inevitable that they should put dictatorship in the place of democracy.”¹³⁹

In this way, Kautsky anticipated that Lenin’s party would not direct Russia towards a real proletarian dictatorship but breed an autocratic government and a corruptive bureaucratic social group, under which the self-government and political freedom of the masses were completely gone. The balance between revolution and governance finally tipped to the end of governance. Kautsky’s insight predated Milovan Đilas’s famous critiques of the communist system by almost four decades.¹⁴⁰

Kautsky’s prediction was further verified by the one-party dictatorship and great terror under Stalin:

“A network of revolutionary tribunals and extraordinary commissions has been formed ‘to oppose the counter-revolution, speculation, and abuse.’ They have the arbitrary power to condemn anyone who shall be denounced to them, and at their discrimination to shoot those of whom they do not approve... They do not stop merely at that, but involve every honourable man who dares to criticise their fearful misrule. Under the collective name of ‘counter-revolution’ every form of opposition is included.”¹⁴¹

In short, the political practice during the French Revolution has produced a longstanding question of how a mass revolution is able to survive and eventually triumph between legitimate but anarchic mass rebellion and centralised but dangerous oligarchy or autocracy.

¹³⁸ Karl Kautsky, *The Dictatorship of the Proletariat*, p.63.

¹³⁹ Karl Kautsky, *The Dictatorship of the Proletariat*, pp.64-65.

¹⁴⁰ Milovan Đilas, *The New Class: An Analysis of the Communist System*, London: Thames and Hudson, 1957.

¹⁴¹ Karl Kautsky, *Terrorism and Communism*, London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1920, p.197.

Behind this, it was the underlying contradiction between mass movement and bureaucratic governance. The former often dragged the revolution towards a spontaneous, irrational, and even aimless riot, while the latter inherently preferred an ordered, stable, and even conservative polity. Kautsky's argument was really incisive: "a class can only rule, not govern".¹⁴² Admittedly, a revolution could be driven by the masses and a revolutionary regime could be erected in the name of the proletariat. However, to govern society, maintain order, promote economic production, and achieve social revolution, which the survival and consolidation of a revolutionary regime entailed, a certain form of government was inevitably needed and it was very difficult for an entire class to provide this governance.

This contradiction became more prominent in 1920s China, where the uneducated, unorganised, and self-interested masses had not already rid themselves of the shadow of hunger and poverty and did not know clearly the significance of their participation in politics. Ironically, it was precisely these people who were regarded as the only origin of political legitimacy during the revolution.

Chen and Tan by the mid-1920s had given up their initial social democratic approach towards enlightening the masses and encouraging bottom-up socialism (The reasons for this change will be discussed in the next chapter). They instead tried to establish a "genuine" revolutionary party to transcend the paradox between revolution and governance, and their imagination of one-party rule and state capitalism actually had something in common with the Stalinist system. Even if their programmes had been put into practice, in a country even more impoverished than Soviet Russia, perhaps the clock of revolution, like the Soviet Union under Stalin, would have still ticked back to a bureaucratic and even autocratic rule in the end.

After the anti-Chiang Kai-shek forces were defeated in the Central Plains War (*Zhongyuan dazhan*) in 1930, Chen Gongbo realised that his project to reorganise the KMT was more and more impossible. His disappointment was not merely due to Chiang's triumph, but mainly from his observation during the war that the masses did not care at all about Chiang's dictatorship and the destiny of the KMT as a revolutionary party. Those

¹⁴² Karl Kautsky, *The Dictatorship of the Proletariat*, p.45.

anti-Chiang generals who only dreamed of power and interest would not have been any better if they had replaced Chiang. Chen Gongbo found it hard to fall asleep at night, since he worked and struggled for years for the Nationalist Revolution, but to him the prospect of the revolution was just like an endless dark night.¹⁴³ After Wang Jingwei cooperated with Chiang Kai-shek in 1932, Chen Gongbo followed Wang to enter the government and became a politician again. Thereafter he seldom mentioned his former revolutionary ideals.

¹⁴³ Chen Gongbo, *Kuxiao lu*, pp.147-149.

Chapter Five Chen Gongbo and the Left-wing KMT (1923-1928)

1923 was not only a turning point of Chen Gongbo and Tan Pingshan's political career, but a watershed of their political ideas. Both of them abandoned their social democratic proposition which aimed to enlighten the political consciousness of the masses step by step and provide political training for them in the political elections. Tan Pingshan remained within the CCP and accepted the opinion that it was imperative to launch a revolution immediately against the established power under a strong party. Interestingly, with the deepening cooperation between the KMT and CCP after August 1922, the Shanghai central committee also adjusted their initial stance. Chen Duxiu, Cai Hesen, and Zhang Guotao accepted the two-stage theory from Moscow and agreed that the CCP should join and support the KMT with the Nationalist Revolution first and, after its triumph, commit to the communist revolution. For Tan Pingshan, the changing attitude of his Shanghai comrades made it easier for him to embrace the new political programme of the CCP, since the Nationalist Revolution demanded an alliance of all the oppressed social groups, such as workers, peasants, petty intellectuals, and peddlers, rather than a monopoly of power by the proletariat. As we analysed in the first and second chapters, since the May Fourth period Tan had advocated egalitarianism and equality as the core of his democratic project, and even when he exalted "the rule of the proletariat" in *Qunbao*, he rejected using the term "dictatorship" which meant depriving all the other classes of their political rights. Just as Zheng Chaolin observed in 1926, when the communist leaders in Shanghai sought eagerly to start "the CCP's own revolution" – a communist revolution, Tan Pingshan seemed to still be obsessed with the Nationalist Revolution.¹

If Tan's change mainly originated from his decision to stay within the CCP, the days studying at Columbia University deeply influenced Chen Gongbo. In New York Chen gave up his belief in a communist future, but remained enthusiastic about a non-capitalist prospect in China. Behind this change was the formation of Chen's historical and economic

¹ Gregor Benton ed., *An Oppositionist for Life: Memoirs of the Chinese Revolutionary Zheng Chaolin*, p.110.

thought, together with his increasing interest in anti-imperialism. At Columbia University, Chen's historical view was hugely influenced by the prevalent "new history" school, which enabled him to examine the history of human society from economic perspective and at the same time diverge from Marxian historical materialism. British anti-imperialist theory further presented him a vision of West-East confrontation and provided an alternative to the Leninist theory of imperialism. Benefiting from these intellectual resources in the Western world, Chen Gongbo was able to become the most important theoretician of the left-wing KMT, who added socialist activism to the KMT's nationalist political programme.

Compared to Chen Gongbo, the political proposition of Tan Pingshan at this stage was not so original. Though quarrelling with the Shanghai leaders about revolutionary strategy, as a communist leader Tan basically shared with them the opinions that the salvation of China depended largely on the support of Soviet Union to bring down Western imperialism and that class struggle rather than coordination would push forward the evolution of Chinese society. In this chapter, therefore, we will mainly discuss Chen Gongbo's political ideas, which are more compelling and original than Tan's. I argue that Chen's political thought in the mid-1920s had a very close connection to intellectual trends in the West. The case of Chen Gongbo can give us an opportunity to revisit the political programme of the left-wing KMT from a global and transnational perspective.

I will first investigate the influence of the American "new school" of historical studies on Chen Gongbo, who thereby made a distinction between the Marxian historical materialism and an economic interpretation of history. Then I will deal with the issue of anti-imperialism in his masters dissertation. Finally I will examine the location of Chen Gongbo's ideas in the political spectrum based on the existing scholarship on the left-wing KMT.

Chen Gongbo and the "new history"

Chen Gongbo's interest in re-examining Chinese historical materials from a materialistic

perspective could be traced back to the May Fourth era. As mentioned in the first chapter, from childhood Chen was curious about *gewu*, a Confucian effort to understand the physical world. Meanwhile, at Peking University, Hu Shi's call for "sorting out the national cultural heritage" with modern methods also encouraged Chen to adopt a new, scientific tool to both explain the hyper stable political system since the Qin Dynasty and find a possible direction for China towards modernity in the future.

Chen was influenced during the May Fourth period by cultural leaders who were searching for a materialistic explanation of Chinese history and society. In fact, one reason why Chinese intellectuals embraced Marxism at that time lay in the glamour of Marxian historical materialism. As Arif Dirlik argues, Li Dazhao, Dai Jitao, and Hu Hanmin in this period all produced tentative articles which absorbed some elements of historical materialism and applied an economic analysis to the political, social, and historical problems in China.² In fact, Hu showed an even deeper understanding of historical materialism than early communist leaders such as Li Dazhao and Chen Duxiu. For example, Hu's review of Marxist historical materialism showed that he was not only familiar with the *Communist Manifesto* (1848) and *Das Kapital* (vol.1, 1867), on which early communist leaders concentrated, but also *The Holy Family* (1845), *The Poverty of Philosophy* (1847), *Wage, Labour, and Capital* (1849), *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon* (1852), and *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1859). Hu also criticised the revisionist views of both Bernstein and Mikhail Tugan Baranovsky (1865-1919), a famous "Legal Marxist".³ In fact, no early theoretician in the CCP, be it Li Dazhao, Li Hanjun (1890-1927), or Li Da, showed us a similar depth as Hu on this issue.

From the beginning, the spread of Marxism in China presented two different approaches, though their distinction was not so evident at early stage: a revolutionary and an academic approach. For Li Dazhao and Chen Duxiu, the glory of Marxism was mainly endowed by the triumph of Russian Revolution. This can be proved by the fact that Li's compliment towards Soviet Russia predated those discussing Marxist theories. When Chen Duxiu

² Arif Dirlik, *Revolution and History: The Origins of Marxist Historiography in China, 1919-1937*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978, pp.24-29.

³ Hu Hanmin, "Weiwu shiguan piping de piping" [A critique of the critique of the historical materialism], *Jianshe* [Construction], vol.1, no.5, pp.945-989.

transformed into a Marxist in early 1920, the first discussion he raised was not Marxist theory but Lenin's Bolshevism.⁴ Indeed, the Bolshevik revolution here seemed to be an inseparable element and the best feature of Marxism, and Li and Chen believed that it would offer a political blueprint for China's future. Li's understanding of the Soviet revolution in 1918 and 1919 was still somewhat superficial, since the difference between Leninism and Marxism did not draw his attention. For example, as Meisner argues, Li did not realise Lenin's great contribution on how to build a revolutionary party and mobilise the masses.⁵ Li seemed to hold an over-optimistic attitude towards the inevitability of a socialist revolution, thus neglecting the imperative of making a disciplined party in an agrarian society. Similarly, Leninism and Marxism were just synonyms to Chen Duxiu. Chen saw in Marxism a fierce class war and a strong dictatorship of the oppressed. The capital-labour opposition in Marxist texts, in Chen's eye, was no different from the division between the powerful and the oppressed masses in the Chinese context, and Lenin's revolution already pointed to this prospect for Chinese people.⁶

Hu Hanmin and Dai Jitao, by contrast, did not think Marxism offered a feasible political programme for China. In fact, they were strongly against class struggle and quite anxious that China would one day become a second Russia.⁷ Marxism, especially historical materialism, was no more than a theoretical tool for them. By that time the economic interpretation of history had been still a novel concept to Chinese intellectuals, and Hu and Dai suddenly discovered its huge potential for analysing Chinese political and cultural issues. In this way, their view represented an academic approach to Chinese Marxism. For this reason, when discussing Marx they also paid attention to the American economist and historian Edwin R. A. Seligman (1861-1939) and Italian economist Achille Loria (1857-1943), rather than Lenin or Trotsky.⁸

An influential economist and historian based at Columbia University, Seligman was

⁴ Chen Duxiu, "Guojipai yu shijie heping" [The radical party and world peace], *Chen Duxiu zhuzuo xuan*, vol.2, pp.44-45.

⁵ Maurice Meisner, *Li Ta-chao and the Origins of Chinese Marxism*, pp.203-205.

⁶ Chen Duxiu, "Tan zhengzhi", *Chen Duxiu zhuzuo xuan*, vol.2, pp.154-164.

⁷ Dai discussed how to prevent a Bolshevik revolution in China in June 1919. See Dai Jitao, "Duifu buerseweike de fangfa" [The method to cope with Bolshevik], in *Dai Jitao ji (1909-1920)* [Collected works of Dai Jitao, 1909-1920], Wuhan: Huazhong shifan daxue chubanshe, 1990, pp.894-897; Hu Hanmin, "Hu Hanmin xiansheng xujiang shehuxue jiyao" [An outline of Hu Hanmin's lecture on sociology], *Guangdong Qunbao*, Sept. 2 and 3, 1921.

⁸ Hu Hanmin, "Weiwushiguan piping zhi piping" [A critique of the critique of historical materialism], in *Jianshe*, vol.1, no.5: 974-976.

acquainted with Marxist political economy. He accepted the basic thesis of Marx about the role of economic drive in shaping cultural and political institutions. On the other hand, however, he distinguished himself from Marx to a considerable extent, not only in terms of his broader definition of “economic factors”, but a more flexible relation between the economic basis and superstructure:

“The economic interpretation of history, correctly understood, does not claim that every phenomenon of human life in general, or of social life in particular, is to be explained on economic grounds.”⁹

More dramatically, Seligman rejected Marx’s linear historical analysis and confident prediction about a communist prospect for human society, though he did acknowledge the existence of class conflicts.¹⁰

Loria was an Italian political economist. Like Seligman, Loria produced a large number of works on economic interpretation of human history in the late 19th century, arguing that land, population, and productive efficiency determined the development of political and social institutions of a society. In fact, according to Lee Benson’s article, it was Seligman who made a major contribution to the introduction of Loria’s studies to Anglophone audiences. Seligman praised Loria’s research as “most remarkable”, though he also expressed some reservations towards the theoretical framework of the latter.¹¹

Clearly, what Dai and Hu were obsessed with was more an economic analysis of history than typical historical materialism, though the distinctions between the two approaches were not so evident in early 1920s China. When the CCP was established, the two approaches coexisted within the party. Although Dai Jitao and Hu Hanmin did not really join the party (Hu did not even attend the inaugural meetings of the communist cell in Shanghai), there were still some members in the CCP believing that Marxism needed to be

⁹ Edwin R. A. Seligman, *The Economic Interpretation of History*, New York: The Columbia University Press, 1907, p.146.

¹⁰ Clyde W. Barrow, “From Marx to Madison: The Seligman Connection in Charles Beard’s Constitutional Theory”, *Polity*, vol.24, no.3, 1992, pp.385-388; Ajay K. Mehrotra, “Charles A. Beard & the Columbia School of Political Economy: Revisiting the Intellectual Roots of the Beardian Thesis”, *Constitutional Commentary*, 2014, vol.29, no.3, p.503.

¹¹ Lee Benson, “Achille Loria’s Influence on American Economic Thought: Including His Contributions to the Frontier Hypothesis”, *Agricultural History*, vol.24, no.4, 1950, pp.186-188.

studied thoroughly before becoming the political creed of the party. Li Hanjun was one of them, who maintained on the first congress in 1921 that the CCP should be organised more like a study society than a Leninist revolutionary party. Li advocated that the party should give priority to theoretical discussion and educational work, instead of devoting immediately to the overthrow of the established power.¹² His proposition was bolstered by Chen Gongbo, who, together with Tan Pingshan, also took this approach.¹³ After all, they identified themselves still as intellectuals and were not ready for a revolutionary work, as we have shown in Chapter Three.

Dai Jitao and Hu Hanmin did not continue their exploration of the economic origins of Chinese history and society after they followed Sun Yat-sen back to Guangzhou in early 1921. However, Chen Gongbo continued their approach and developed an ambitious plan to re-examine the two-thousand-year Chinese history from the Eastern Zhou Dynasty (770-256 B.C.) to the 1911 Revolution.

Some clues suggest that even at Peking University Chen had been seriously considering this plan. He mentioned in *Zhengheng* that he came to an agreement with Tan Pingshan in Beijing that Tan would concentrate on rural reconstruction while Chen himself studied how to reform the urban politics and society. However, Chen admitted that he was still unprepared to produce any serious study when Tan had already completed a series of treatises. Had Chen been preoccupied with any other project?

An advertisement gave us an answer, which introduced to the readers a newly published translated monograph: Carlton J. H. Hayes's two-volume *A Political and Social History of Modern Europe* (1916). Translated in 1919 by Chen Gongbo, the book "elaborates the political history of modern Europe from the sixteenth century to 1915". According to the advertisement, it "offers a brilliant and detailed analysis of the origin of the Great War, the Commercial and Industrial Revolution, and the change of the social and economic theories" in Europe, and was therefore "a must-read book for the scholars studying politics, diplomacy, economics, and sociology".¹⁴ Certainly Chen's recommendation was a kind of

¹² Zhang Guotao, *Wo de huiyi*, vol.1, pp.138-139; Chen Gongbo, "Wo yu gongchandang", *Hanfeng ji*, p.206.

¹³ Zhang Guotao, *Wo de huiyi*, vol.1, p.139; Chen Tanqiu, "Diyici daibiao dahui de huiyi", *Yida qianhou*, vol.2, p.287; Bao Huiseng, *Bao Huiseng huiyilu*, pp.22-23.

¹⁴ "Ouzhou zuijin zhengzhi shehui shi" [A political and social history of modern Europe], *Zhengheng*, no.1.

sales strategy, but the fact that he spent so much time in the university translating a monograph of more than 1200 pages could indirectly demonstrate his wholehearted obsession with it.

No previous study has noticed the connection of Hayes's book with Chen Gongbo, but here I argue that it played a profound role shaping Chen's historical view for the rest of his life. By the late 1910s Carlton J. H. Hayes (1882-1964) had become a promising young historian of European history. A Columbia historian, Hayes was deeply influenced by the "new history" advocated by James Harvey Robinson (1863-1936) and Charles A. Beard (1874-1948), both of whom were teaching in Columbia in the 1910s. The "new history" rebelled against the traditional historiography which confined itself as a chronology of Kings, royal families, heroes, and wars; instead, this new school suggested a collaboration of history and social science and expanded the historical horizon to all the political, economic, social, and cultural changes over time which had profound significance to the modern world. Robinson claimed:

"The 'New History' is escaping from the limitations formerly imposed upon the study of the past. It will come in time consciously to meet our daily needs; it will avail itself of all those discoveries that are being made about mankind by anthropologists, economists, psychologists, and sociologists – discoveries which during the past fifty years have served to revolutionize our ideas of the origin, progress, and prospects of our race."¹⁵

In particular, the school of "new history" recognised the fundamental role of economic factors in political and social changes. Beard, for example, gained high reputation but also incurred harsh criticism by publishing in 1913 his classical monograph *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution of the United States*. In the book he argued that the Constitution of the United States was an "economic document" and that in Philadelphia "the overwhelmingly majority of members, at least five sixths, were immediately, directly, and personally interested" in the outcome of the Constitutional Convention and "were to a

¹⁵ James Harvey Robinson, *The New History: Essays Illustrating the Modern Historical Outlook*, New York: The MacMillan Company, 1912, p.24.

greater or lesser extent economic beneficiaries from the adoption of the Constitution”.¹⁶ Therefore, for Beard, the sacred and supreme Constitution long exalted in the revolutionary historiography of the United States was in essence an attempt of the Founding Fathers to protect their own economic interest in a legal form.

It was not difficult to imagine the astonishment and even fury against Beard from the public after the book came out. However, Beard’s strong challenge against the national myth was just what he believed to be “new” in historical studies. The book revealed the economic differences between different social groups and sometimes the contradictions between different classes. His statement about this new approach was reminiscent of Marx: “The whole theory of the economic interpretation of history rests upon the concept that social progress in general is the result of contending interests in society – some factorable, others opposed, to change.”¹⁷ Indeed, Beard was labelled by his critics as a Marxist who applied economic determinism and class struggle to draw a partisan historical conclusion.¹⁸ As a response, Beard denied the charge and defended himself that his view towards the Constitution was enlightened by James Madison (1751-1836) rather than Marx and that he benefited much from Seligman’s economic analysis of history. Lee Benson in his article also reveals the similarities and connections between Loria and Beard, which may not be surprising to us, given our discussion about Loria and Seligman above.¹⁹

The close intellectual connections between Seligman, Beard, Robinson, and Hayes were thus identifiable, and all of them were holding academic positions in the late 1910s at Columbia University. This was no coincidence. Columbia University at that time, as Ajay K. Mehrotra describes, was “fast becoming a leading centre for the interdisciplinary study of the still nascent social sciences”.²⁰ The university was a vanguard which encouraged new methodologies and recruited young scholars with novel academic ideas. A combination of economics and historical institutionalism gradually took form here.

¹⁶ Charles A. Beard, *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution of the United States*, New York: The MacMillan Company, 1941, p.188, 149.

¹⁷ Charles A. Beard, *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution of the United States*, p.19.

¹⁸ Clyde W. Barrow, “From Marx to Madison: The Seligman Connection in Charles Beard’s Constitutional Theory”, *Polity*, vol.24, no.3, 1992, pp.379-380.

¹⁹ Lee Benson, “Achille Loria’s Influence on American Economic Thought: Including His Contributions to the Frontier Hypothesis”, *Agricultural History*, vol.24, no.4, 1950, p.186.

²⁰ Ajay K. Mehrotra, “Charles A. Beard & the Columbia School of Political Economy: Revisiting the Intellectual Roots of the Beardian Thesis”, *Constitutional Commentary*, 2014, vol.29, no.3, pp.485-493.

It was no surprise that the reputation of “new history” soon travelled across the Pacific Ocean. Q. Edward Wang in his studies of the Chinese historiography during the May Fourth Period discovers that Luo Jialun at Peking University had already learned about this new approach through He Bingsong (1890-1946), a prestigious historian graduating from Princeton University.²¹ When teaching at Peking University, He Bingsong began to translate Robinson’s *The New History* into Chinese and included some parts of Robinson’s book in his lecture handouts.²² The names of Robinson and Hayes were not strange to Luo Jialun, and it was very likely that Chen Gongbo became equally interested in them and then read and translated Hayes’s monograph.²³

Now we should take a glance at the approach that Hayes adopted in his monograph. Scrutinising the text of his book, we will find that he, like Beard, regarded economic factors as the fundamental force for political and social changes, and he saw these changes particularly from the perspective of class. Before expanding his descriptions of European political changes, Reformation, and Renaissance in the sixteenth century, Hayes studied first the Commercial Revolution as a major precondition. Before writing on the rise of nationalism and socialism after 1848, he spent much space first on the Industrial Revolution which he deemed as the economic origin of these ideologies. As for the period after 1871, to which Chen Gongbo paid special attention, Hayes emphasised its bourgeois nature which could be traced back to the Industrial Revolution:

“Thus, the period after 1871 was the consummation of the bourgeois Revolution. Its political principles and practices were mainly those of the French bourgeoisie of 1789. Its statesmen belonged in sympathy if not by birth to the middle class. The bulk of its legislation was in the interest of the middle class – the merchants, the traders, the ‘captains of industry’. The bourgeois character of the new era is easily explained by reference to the fact that the period was as much the economic result of the Industrial Revolution as the political outcome of the French Revolution. The downfall of Metternich, the theatrical adventures of Napoleon III, the rise of Cavour and Bismark, must not

²¹ Q. Edward Wang, *Inventing China through History: The May Fourth Approach to Historiography*, New York: State University of New York Press, 2001, pp.67-68.

²² Q. Edward Wang, *Inventing China through History: The May Fourth Approach to Historiography*, pp.69-70.

²³ Q. Edward Wang, *Inventing China through History: The May Fourth Approach to Historiography*, p.67.

obscure the development and expansion of the factory system that had been steadily going on ever since the momentous year 1768, when Richard Arkwright had erected in Nottingham his first power factory.”²⁴

Hayes deemed it superficial and naïve to interpret literally the slogans like “liberty”, “equality”, and “fraternity”, which he thought were in essence an integral part of the ideology of the middle class. Liberty meant the legal protection of private property, equality the belief created for the lower class that they enjoyed an equal opportunity to be promoted to the rich group one day, and fraternity an indispensable patriotism when competing “industrially or commercially” with other countries.²⁵ Hayes therefore provided a materialistic and class analysis of the Western ideologies since the French Revolution and in the meantime implied that all the social, political, and ideological changes could eventually be attributed to economic factors.

Hayes’s approach exerted a huge influence on Chen Gongbo’s political thought and his conception of history. When recalling why he left Guangzhou for Columbia University to study economics in 1923, Chen mentioned that by the time he stayed in Guangzhou he had already recognised that “there was no politics beyond economy”, a belief “derived from the political history of different countries”.²⁶ It requires no great imaginative leap to speculate that Chen meant here Hayes’s *A Political and Social History of Modern Europe*.

Hayes’s book not only explained why Chen later embarked on economic studies, but why he chose particularly Columbia as the place to study. In fact, his enrolment in Columbia in 1923 was a deliberate decision, which has not been noticed by existing literature. It was Hayes’s economic determinism and class analysis in historical studies as well as the burgeoning “new history” at Columbia that appealed to him.

Through a brief review of the rise of “new history” in the 1910s, we can see clearly that before Chen Gongbo went to Columbia a systematic, full-fledged new historiography had gained ground in Western academia. This new approach was to some extent inspired by the

²⁴ Carlton J. H. Hayes, *An Political and Social History of Modern Europe*, vol.2 (1815-1915), New York: The MacMillan Company, 1916, p.214.

²⁵ Carlton J. H. Hayes, *An Political and Social History of Modern Europe*, vol.2, pp.217-218.

²⁶ Chen Gongbo, *Hanfeng ji*, p.231.

class analysis and historical materialism of Marx and its advocates were sometimes even seen as Marxists, as the case of Beard shows. However, Marxism was definitely not the only source of this new school, whose perspectives diverged from Marx on many crucial aspects. In this regard, the rise of Chen Gongbo and left-wing KMT in the late 1920s can be regarded as a transnational reflection and response of this school in China, and it was no surprise to us that Chen and his followers were equally labelled by their political opponents as “Marxists” or “communists”.²⁷

Motivated by Hayes’s monograph, in the spring of 1921, Chen began his early attempt on the economic explanation of Chinese history. Based on some records on the Twenty-Four Histories (*Ershisi shi*) which covered various Chinese dynasties until Ming, he wrote an article on the connections between the economic changes and political upheavals in Chinese history.²⁸ The article was the starting point and a “rough outline” of Chen’s study of Chinese economic and political history throughout the 1920s, which finally developed into a monograph named *Revolutions in Chinese History (Zhongguo lishi shang de geming)*, published in 1928.²⁹ The book laid the foundation of the main arguments of the left-wing KMT historians in the famous debates with Marxist historians about the nature of Chinese society in the 1930s, and we will come back to it shortly.

In the article written in 1921, Chen claimed that he wished to challenge the prevailing May Fourth proposition that a political revolution often antedated and incited a social revolution. Although Chen did not offer an explicit definition of “political revolution” and “social revolution”, it seemed that the former meant regime changes and the latter denoted those political upheavals which involved popular uprisings and class struggles.³⁰

The basic question Chen aimed to answer here was how social revolutions (the revolts of the masses) happened in Chinese history, and he argued that it was the widespread

²⁷ There were numerous pamphlets printed in the late 1920s accusing Chen Gongbo and the left-wing KMT of propagating Marxism and communism. See, for example, Jing Ming, *Yong zhenping shiju zhengming Chen Gongbo bei shi huise gongchandang* [Demonstrating with solid evidence that Chen Gongbo and his followers are quasi-communists], Shanghai: Geming zhoubao she, 1928; *Gaizupai zhi zhenmianmu* [The real face of the RCA], Fuzhou: The bureau of propaganda of the KMT Fujian branch, 1929.

²⁸ Chen Gongbo, “Zhongguo lishi shang de shehui geming” [The social revolutions in Chinese history], *Guangdong Qunbao*, June 23, 1921. The article was first published in May 1921 on *Guangdong fazheng xuebao* [The Journal of Guangdong School of Law and Political Science].

²⁹ Chen Gongbo, *Zhongguo lishi shang de geming* [The revolutions in Chinese history], Shanghai: Fudan shudian, 1928, p.1.

³⁰ Chen Gongbo, “Zhongguo lishi shang de shehui geming”, *Guangdong Qunbao*, June 24 and 25, 1921.

economic destruction and panic that provoked the rise of the plebeians to overthrow the political elites. In Chen's opinion, such revolutions were very rare in the two-thousand-year history in China, and only the end of the Qin, Sui, Yuan, and Ming Dynasty could be counted as social revolutions.³¹ He rejected the old mythical account of Qin's fall that the emperor lacked virtue and acted against the Mandate of Heaven (*Tianming*), but focused on the slump of agricultural production and population which resulted from frequent wars and huge construction projects.³² He also provided similar evidence for the downfalls of the other three dynasties.³³

However, bad years for agriculture, economic recessions, and huge construction projects existed in almost all the dynasties, but why did large-scale revolts only succeed in these four dynasties? Perhaps Chen realised that his argument might be vulnerable to criticism, and he admitted that economic dysfunctions did exist in each dynasty but they were particularly intense in the four dynasties.³⁴

The issue whether Chen's defence was convincing enough can be temporarily put aside, as Chen then raised a more significant question: why did these peasant riots fail to shake the existing political and social system in China and bring the country into a capitalist society like Western Europe? Chen's tentative answer in this article was far from satisfactory. He attributed this to the powerful "old ideas" (*jiu sixiang*) and the manipulation of some careerists who attempted to restore the monarchy.³⁵ Yet Chen did not explain why the old ideas and political careerists failed to play an equivalent role in consolidating the old feudal system in Europe as in China. Though Chen aimed to break new ground in Chinese historiography by introducing a political economic analysis, the dimension from people's minds and ideas in his explanations remained within the May Fourth tradition of reconstructing national culture, rather than a materialistic analysis. According to Chen's conclusion in 1921, a modern social revolution which would lead China to a democratic and socialist future still largely relied on the enlightenment and iconoclasm rather than a renewed economic foundation. Chen's article showed that he was

³¹ Chen Gongbo, "Zhongguo lishi shang de shehui geming", *Guangdong Qunbao*, June 23, 1921.

³² Chen Gongbo, "Zhongguo lishi shang de shehui geming", *Guangdong Qunbao*, June 25, 1921.

³³ Chen Gongbo, "Zhongguo lishi shang de shehui geming", *Guangdong Qunbao*, June 27, 28, and 29, 1921.

³⁴ Chen Gongbo, "Zhongguo lishi shang de shehui geming", *Guangdong Qunbao*, June 29, 1921.

³⁵ Chen Gongbo, "Zhongguo lishi shang de shehui geming", *Guangdong Qunbao*, June 29 and July 1, 1921.

still unprepared for a rigorous, innovative academic investigation.

Even after he studied economics at Columbia University for two years, in his Masters dissertation he insisted that ideas and belief were significance factors of the hyper stable system in pre-1840 China, though he began to have a deeper understanding of the economic factors:

“All may be summed up in the Chinese devotion to agriculture on a small scale, with direct personal ownership of the soil they cultivate; the continuance of handicrafts; the partial influence of the customs of village communities and the permanent sanctity of family life.”³⁶

In any event, Chen Gongbo at Columbia took a more serious attitude and had a better knowledge of the political economic analysis of history. His dissertation mainly discussed the economic origin of the 1911 Revolution and the early 1920s communist movement in China. Chen concluded in the dissertation that it was the imperialist economic invasion, control, and colonisation of China after 1840 that bankrupted and destroyed the initial imperial economic system. The economic collapse first led to the 1911 Revolution and several years later aroused widespread radical movements. Chen thus predicted that a modern social revolution was about to happen in China.³⁷

We can see a clear continuity from the *Qunbao* period to the days at Columbia: Chen regarded social revolution as the last resort of the masses plagued by economic catastrophe. In other words, a social revolution would be only possible when the economy was badly destroyed. This argument remained as the basic thesis in his book published in 1928.³⁸

Here we can recognise a distinction between Chen’s political economic history and historical materialism. Marx argued that a social revolution took place when the productive force developed to the stage where the existing relations of production became an obstacle. Revolution to Marx was an inevitable stage in the process of social evolution from one system to a more advanced one.

Chen Gongbo seemed to have stressed the opposite. Revolutions arose not because of

³⁶ Martin Wilbur ed., *The Communist Movement in China: An Essay Written in 1924 by Chen Kung-po*, p.65.

³⁷ Martin Wilbur ed., *The Communist Movement in China: An Essay Written in 1924 by Chen Kung-po*, p.70, 75.

³⁸ Chen Gongbo, “Zhongguo lishi shang de geming”, *Chen Gongbo xiansheng wenji*, pp.360-361.

economic development but economic destruction. When historical materialism basically depicted a linear, progressive human history from lower to higher levels, Chen's view of Chinese social revolutions was more like a circular history: economic crisis – social revolution – political stability and economic development – economic crisis. Despite having the same argument as the 1921 article, Chen's book provided a much better explanation of the hyper stable Chinese imperial system. The sections about the old ideas and careerists were replaced by a more materialistic answer. Chen argued here that the social revolutions in China were provoked by economic destruction rather than development, and the economic system since the Qin had been dominated all the time by agriculture and a local self-sustaining economy. Therefore, the country was unable to transform the agricultural system into an industrial one, and it was impossible for an imperialist China to transform to a capitalist and democratic system. Chinese history was thus shaped by a circular history from chaos to stability and back to chaos.³⁹

A major contribution of Chen's book was the argument that the feudal system had collapsed before the Qin Dynasty (221-206 B.C.). This was, according to Chen, the only genuine social revolution driven by economic development rather than destruction in Chinese history before 1840.⁴⁰ Different from the communist theoreticians who simply defined the history between Qin and 1840 as a feudal period, Chen claimed that it was a time when the feudal system (*fengjian de zhidu*) had collapsed but the feudal force (*fengjian de shili*) remained.⁴¹ Chen provided much evidence proving that even during the Eastern Zhou Dynasty (770-256 B.C.) the commodity economy in China had been very developed and the businessmen had been so powerful that they could influence high politics.⁴² However, this commercial revolution failed to transform China into a capitalist society because there was no scientific research to support an industrial revolution. Without manufacturing industries, the prosperous businessmen could only invest in land, usury, and speculations, but not in factories. Moreover, there was no merchant organisation at that time strong enough to seize political power and establish the rule of the bourgeoisie.

³⁹ Chen Gongbo, "Zhongguo lishi shang de geming", *Chen Gongbo xiansheng wenji*, pp.404-405.

⁴⁰ Chen Gongbo, "Zhongguo lishi shang de geming", *Chen Gongbo xiansheng wenji*, p.355.

⁴¹ Chen Gongbo, "Zhongguo lishi shang de geming", *Chen Gongbo xiansheng wenji*, p.358.

⁴² Chen Gongbo, "Zhongguo lishi shang de geming", *Chen Gongbo xiansheng wenji*, pp.355-358.

Therefore, the economic structure in China since the Qin remained dominated by agriculture and the feudal forces were able to keep their influence until the late Qing period.⁴³

The influence of the “new history” can be seen in Chen’s book. His class analysis and distinction between commercial revolution and industrial revolution were reminiscent of Hayes. His attempt to trace the economic origins of politics aligned with Seligman and Beard. Following this approach rather than Marxian historical materialism, Chen did not have to apply the “feudalism-capitalism-socialism” formula to China rigidly, but argued that the history between Qin and Qing was a period that the formula could not explain. Chen’s argument about the coexistence of a collapsed feudal system and a dominant feudal force was then developed and elaborated by Tao Xisheng, a follower of Chen and a prominent historian within the KMT.⁴⁴ During the historical debate between the left-wing KMT, communist, and Trotskyist historians, this argument became the main thesis of the KMT side. The role of Tao Xisheng in this debate was well-known, but Chen Gongbo’s preliminary contribution has been forgotten.

Chen Gongbo and British anti-imperialism

Compared to his 1921 article, another development in Chen Gongbo’s dissertation was its emphasis of the external economic factors: the imperialist penetration and control of China. Did he inherit this anti-imperialist stance from the tradition of xenophobia since the Boxer Rebellion? Or was he influenced by the May Fourth nationalist sentiment? Or did he accept this ideology at Columbia from Woodrow Wilson, Lenin or any other particular source? Before answering these questions, it is necessary for us to review briefly the rise of anti-imperialism in China.

A predominant opinion, like Martin Wilbur and Luo Zhitian, argues that the formation of

⁴³ Chen Gongbo, “Zhongguo lishi shang de geming”, *Chen Gongbo xiansheng wenji*, pp.358-359.

⁴⁴ Gu Mengyu, another left-wing KMT theoretician, also held a similar opinion, but Gu was mainly concerned with contemporary Chinese society and did not offer a historical analysis. Chen Gongbo claimed that his book was the first one to interpret Chinese history from an economic dimension, which until now has been proved credible. See Chen Gongbo, “Zhongguo lishi shang de geming”, *Chen Gongbo xiansheng wenji*, p.405.

Chinese anti-imperialist theory and discourse mainly derived from Lenin and Moscow.⁴⁵ There are also some scholars, such as John Fitzgerald, tracing the origin back to the anti-foreign sentiment and racial consciousness in the 1900s and 1910s.⁴⁶ Although the resistance to the Western cultural supremacy had its value, we have to admit that in early twentieth-century China there was not many tenable intellectual resources inside the traditional cultural system to buttress a new indigenous ideology to fight back. The initial hegemony of Confucianism had been experiencing a severe crisis of its legitimacy during the May Fourth Movement, and the effort by scholars like Liao Ping (1852-1932) and Kang Youwei (1858-1927) to demonstrate that Western culture originated from China (*xixue zhongyuan shuo*) also seemed bankrupt to the new generation of scholars in the late 1910s.⁴⁷ A distinction should thus be made between xenophobia and the disdain of Western civilisation which existed among Chinese intellectuals long before, and a full-fledged, systematic ideology of anti-imperialism which could only be found in the imperial metropolis.

Taking Britain as an example, which was both the leader of Western imperialism and the origin of modern anti-imperialism. In the past, historians tended to focus on the economic (trade, foreign loan, treaty ports, custom, and new consortium), political (unequal treaties, Peking legations, and consul system), and legal (extraterritoriality and the legal reforms of the Qing government) aspects of the British “informal empire” in China.⁴⁸ Nevertheless, recently there have been more studies paying attention to the discussion about its moral and cultural foundation.⁴⁹ The rise of the “new imperialism” in Britain since the 1860s and

⁴⁵ Martin Wilbur, *The Nationalist Revolution in China, 1923-1928*, p.68; Luo Zhitian, “Diguo zhuyi zai zhongguo wenhua shiye xia tiaoyue tixi de yanjin” [Imperialism in China: the development of the treaty system from cultural perspective], *Zhongguo Shehui Kexue* [Social Science in China], 2004 (5): 192-204.

⁴⁶ John Fitzgerald, *Awakening China: Politics, Culture, and Class in the Nationalist Revolution*, Redwood: Stanford University Press, 1996, pp.117-124.

⁴⁷ See, for example, Wang Fansen, “Cong chuantong dao fanchuantong” [From tradition to anti-tradition], *Zhongguo jindai sixiang yu xueshu de xipu* [The spectrum of modern Chinese thought and scholarship], Taipei: Linking Publishing, 2003, pp.112-119.

⁴⁸ The concept of “informal empire” became well-known since John Gallagher and Ronald Robinson used it in an influential article published in *The Economic History Review* in 1953, arguing that British overseas empire relied not only on formal annexation as territory, but also informal and indirect dominance or influence with a variety of means. See John Gallagher and Ronald Robinson, “The Imperialism of Free Trade”, *The Economic History Review*, vol.6, no.1: 1-15. Jürgen Osterhammel further applies the concept to the study of treaty system in China. See, for example, Jürgen Osterhammel, “Britain and China, 1842-1914”, in Andrew Porter (ed.), *The Oxford History of the British Empire*, Vol.3, 1999, Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp.148-149.

⁴⁹ See, for example, Tim Barringer and Tom Flynn ed., *Colonialism and the Object: Empire, Material Culture and the Museum*, London: Routledge, 1997; James L. Hevia, *English Lessons: The Pedagogy of Imperialism in Nineteenth-century*

1870s gradually formed and based itself on ethnic nationalism and patriotism, and it was the propagation of racial superiority and agitation of strong national sentiment among the British people that largely justified the imperialist expansion overseas. The expeditions were thus described as a sacred movement for the “uncivilised” to be conquered and enlightened as well as the prosperity and glory of Britain. The Conservatives, led by Benjamin Disraeli (1804-1881), were mostly active advocates of British imperialism, claiming that the party was the genuine guardian of the imperial interest, contrasting with many liberal “little Englanders” who objected to imperial expansion.⁵⁰ Meanwhile, some Liberals, though strongly challenged by their colleagues, also contributed to the imperialist tide. The most celebrated example was Joseph Chamberlain (1836-1914), who largely forged the spirit of this new imperialism as the dominant ideology in late Victorian and Edwardian era.

The expansion, together with military conquest and sometimes brutal treatment of indigenous peoples, naturally provoked local resistance in Asia and Africa, leading to the outbreak of the Indian Mutiny (1857), the Anglo-Zulu war (1879), the invasion of Egypt (1882), the Mahdist War in Sudan (1881-1899), the Boer Wars (1880-1881, 1899-1902), and the 1900 Boxer Uprising in China. However, most of these rebellions barely challenged the ideological basis of the British imperialism, and the Britons only occasionally questioned the legitimacy of these wars. The second Boer war might be an exception, during which plenty of coverage produced an anti-war sentiment in Britain proper, but this was partly because the Afrikaners were racially white people. As for China, a country with a far longer history and a well-developed cultural system - Confucianism, a moral victory for the British side had to do with a rising theory of modernity, according to Immanuel Wallerstein, and a quite recent imagination of Chinese as “sick men” and the “yellow peril”.⁵¹ China, in this way, was degraded to a position awaiting a salvation from the West. In October 1898, right after Britain took over Weihaiwei, a bay located in

China, Durham: Duke University Press, 2003; Fa-ti Fan, *British Naturalists in Qing China: Science, Empire, and Cultural Encounter*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004; Ulrike Hillemann, *Asian Empire and British Knowledge: China and the Networks of British Imperial Expansion*, London: Palgrave, 2009.

⁵⁰ E. H. H. Green, *The Crisis of Conservatism: The Politics, Economics and Ideology of the British Conservative Party, 1880-1914*, London: Routledge, 1996, p.15.

⁵¹ Immanuel Wallerstein, *European Universalism: The Rhetoric of Power*, New York: The New Press, 2006, p.33.

Shandong, some voices could not help discussing the British mission in China. For example, *The Contemporary Review* claimed:

“Country after country is now being brought under the subjection of European civilization. Russia has thrown her influence over all Northern Asia. The various countries of India are now controlled from England. Indo-China has gradually been absorbed by France. Is China to follow the rest, and be brought within the pale of the higher civilisation, or are we to support her in her obstructive medievalism, and preserve her as a huge stumbling-block in the path of progress?”⁵²

Imperialist discourses like this were so compelling that in the 1900s and 1910s some leading Chinese intellectuals began to accept them, internalising into their own propositions and propagating them actively and widely. This was what Arif Dirlik defines as “self-orientalisation”.⁵³ Astonished by the rapid expansion of the European colonists in the world, Liang Qichao (1873-1929), a prominent thinker in early twentieth-century China, not only accepted imperialism as an inevitable historical trend but advocated that China should follow it. Japanese imperialist thought during the Meiji era deeply influenced Liang, whose description of the global order was surprisingly similar to what we have quoted from *The Contemporary Review* above:

“Let us look at the map. The white people have occupied five of the total six continents in the world, and only Asia has been until now left. More than that, even half of the area and 40% of the population in Asia have also submitted to the white race. The central and northern parts (of Asia) have been merged into the Russian Empire. The southern part – India – has been enslaved by the British. The neighbours of India in the west – Afghanistan and Baluchistan – have also become the protectorates of the British Empire. Forty years ago France also penetrated into Southeast Asia... Their momentum is so strong and their achievements are so dramatic! Now they have turned their spearhead towards the east and focused on China.”⁵⁴

⁵² F. E. Younghusband, “England’s Destiny in China”, *The Contemporary Review*, Oct. 1898, vol.74, p.457.

⁵³ Arif Dirlik, “Chinese History and the Question of Orientalism”, *History and Theory*, vol. 35, no.4, p.113.

⁵⁴ Liang Qichao, “Lun jinshi guomin jingzheng zhi dashi ji zhongguo qiantu” [On the recent trends of national competition and the prospect of China], *Liang Qichao wenji* [The collected works of Liang Qichao], Beijing: Beijing

Until 1915, the second year of the Great War, Chen Duxiu still lamented that the “peaceful and gentle inferior Eastern race” would not be able to compete with the aggressive and militant Western race, and this disadvantage would finally lead to the extinction of the Eastern people, including the Chinese.⁵⁵

Nevertheless, after the Great War this robust imperialist ideology encountered strong challenges in China as in many other Asian and African colonies, but the origin of these challenges was not from within. Anti-imperialism was often connected to the European Marxists like Lenin, Karl Kautsky, and Rosa Luxemburg, but some British theoreticians, such as J. A. Hobson (1858-1940), Leonard Woolf (1880-1969) and Henry Noel Brailsford (1873-1958), also formed a strong anti-imperialist tradition. Also it is well-known that Lenin benefited considerably from Hobson by integrating his analysis of imperialism into a Marxist framework.⁵⁶ In fact, a strong, systematic criticism against imperialism was not produced from the thinkers from the edge of European empires like China, but more an ideological reaction within the metropolis. On the periphery, the indigenous nationalist sentiment and military resistance were of course very intense, but the ideological challenges, ironically, came from within the Western world.

International relations after the Great War also underwent a significant change in terms of moral basis. A “new diplomacy”, inspired by Woodrow Wilson’s idealism, already became the new keyword among diplomats.⁵⁷ The request of the democratisation of foreign policy in Britain among MPs and intellectuals meant politicians needed a sound new moral basis for decision making on significant diplomatic issues.⁵⁸ As a result, the 1921-1922 Washington Conference openly denounced previous military invasions and the creation of spheres of influence in China. Although we should not simply take the new vocabulary at face value, the articulation of this principle was surely not simply paying lip

Yanshan Publishing, 2009, pp. 67-68.

⁵⁵ Chen Duxiu, “Dongxi minzu genben sixiang zhi chayi” [The fundamental intellectual differences between the Eastern and Western races], *Qingnian zazhi* [The Journal of Youth], 1915, vol.1, no.4, p.1.

⁵⁶ V. I. Lenin, *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism*, Sydney: Resistance Books, 1999, p.25; Hobson, *Imperialism: A Study*, New York: James Pott Company, 1902.

⁵⁷ C. J. Bartlett, *British Foreign Policy in the Twentieth Century*, New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1989, pp.32-34.

⁵⁸ Lucian M. Ashworth, *International Relations and the Labour Party: Intellectuals and Policy Making from 1918-1945*, London: I. B. Taurice, 2007, pp.64-65.

service. Under such circumstances, we should not be surprised that even Austin Chamberlain (1863-1937), a Conservative foreign secretary, wrote in a secret memorandum in November 1926 that the policy of Great Powers in China was “wrong and morally indefensible”.⁵⁹

Admittedly, it would be an anachronism to say that the anti-imperialism in 1920s Britain could stand side by side with post-colonialism after the Second World War. Yet we cannot underestimate the ideological and cultural shifts in the Western world. It was these changes in the big picture that directed Chen Gongbo, a young man concerned with the fate of China in an increasingly globalised world, to the theory of anti-imperialism.

The existing scholarship of Chen Gongbo and the left-wing KMT has noticed the weight of anti-imperialism in Chen’s theoretical framework.⁶⁰ However, no one has realised the contrast that, prior to his study at Columbia, Chen had never used the term “imperialism” in any of his printed works. It is very likely that Chen absorbed some new intellectual elements in New York, which facilitated his shift.

Martin Wilbur speculates that Chen’s anti-imperialism was possibly drawn from Lenin, but fails to find any direct evidence.⁶¹ However, So Wai-chor mentions that Chen did not refer much to Lenin’s theory.⁶² The bibliography of his dissertation also proves that Lenin played little role in his viewpoint towards imperialism. Edmund S. K. Fung’s article holds the opposite view to Wilbur, maintaining that “Chen did not draw on the Leninist theory” and “nor did he show the influence of J. A. Hobson’s study of imperialism”.⁶³

My study will demonstrate that Leninism was indeed not the source for Chen, but that Hobson and British anti-imperialism did shape his thought. The bibliography of Chen’s dissertation can provide some clues, which have never been noticed by historians. Inside the references there are two books on imperialism: Leonard Woolf’s *Economic Imperialism* and Sidney & Beatrice Webb’s *The Decay of Capitalist Civilisation*. Lenin’s Imperialism,

⁵⁹ Memorandum “China”, Nov 23, 1926, Cab 24/182, C.P.399 (26).

⁶⁰ Martin Wilbur (ed.), *The Communist Movement in China: An Essay Written in 1924 by Chen Kung-po*, p.14, 43; Edmund S. K. Fung, “Anti-imperialism and the Left Guomindang”, *Modern China*, vol.11, no.1, 1985, pp.39-76; So Wai-chor, *The KMT Left in the National Revolution*, 1991, Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 83-88; Chen Jianyue, *Chen Gongbo (1892-1946) and Chinese National Salvation* (PhD dissertation), The University of Toledo, 1999, p.113, 116.

⁶¹ Martin Wilbur (ed.), *The Communist Movement in China: An Essay Written in 1924 by Chen Kung-po*, p.43.

⁶² So Wai-chor, “Chen Kung-po: A Marxist-oriented KMT Theoretician”, *Papers on Far Eastern History*, vol.36, Sept. 1987, p.58.

⁶³ Fung, “Anti-imperialism and the Left Guomindang”, p.47.

The Highest Stage of Capitalism, was not included, partly because the English version in the Western world only came out in the late 1920s, which was much later than the German and French version published in 1920. The absence of Lenin's articles and books may also originate from Chen's negative attitude towards Marxism. By then Chen had been quite doubtful to the Marxian theories of class struggle and surplus value, and he concluded that Marx's political theory had already become outdated.⁶⁴ Although Chen was still obsessed with economic determinism, he quoted Seligman in the dissertation that a good political economic analysis of Chinese history was not necessarily entangled with a Marxian framework.⁶⁵ Therefore, Chen was both unable and unwilling to rely on Lenin for an economic analysis of imperialism. The two British monographs turned out to offer an alternative.

Leonard Woolf, in Peter Wilson's words, "in many ways assumed Hobson's mantle as Britain's foremost anti-imperialist theorist".⁶⁶ A significant leftist intellectual, Woolf largely inherited Hobson's analysis and criticism of British overseas expansion, emphasising the huge interest of the bankers to promote their investments overseas as the overarching cause of the British imperialism. While Hobson also spent pages discussing the "subjective" factors like nationalist propaganda and missionary work, Woolf in early 1920s seemed to concentrate on the economic origins of imperialism.⁶⁷ Also, different from Hobson's economic analysis which mainly targeted the financial circle in the City of London, Woolf criticised the manufacturers in northern England as well.

It is not hard to imagine that Woolf's argument would cater to Chen Gongbo's taste, which was to explain the politics from an economic perspective.⁶⁸ Comparing Chen's dissertation with Woolf's book, we can actually discover many parallel points. Woolf claimed that the capitalist system drove the European people to China "to find new markets and supplies of the raw materials of industry with a persistence and on a scale unknown in

⁶⁴ Chen Gongbo, *Hanfeng ji*, pp.231-233.

⁶⁵ Martin Wilbur (ed.), *The Communist Movement in China: An Essay Written in 1924 by Chen Kung-po*, p.65.

⁶⁶ Peter Wilson, *The International Theory of Leonard Woolf: A Study in Twentieth-century Idealism*, London: Palgrave, 2003, p.83.

⁶⁷ Anna Snaith, "Leonard and Virginia Woolf: Writing against Empire", *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 2015, vol. 51: p.27. Apart from the famous *Imperialism: A Study*, Hobson also published another monograph focusing more on the emotion and psychology under imperialism. See J. A. Hobson, *The Psychology of Jingoism*, London: Grant Richards, 1901.

⁶⁸ Chen Gongbo, *Hanfeng ji*, p.231.

previous centuries”, and Chen held a similar opinion that “it is not only convenient for the foreigners to import their capital, absorb raw materials, but, worst of all, the soul of Chinese economic life is mercilessly clutched in the imperialist claw”.⁶⁹ Similarities between them could also be found on the issues such as mines, railways, concessions, and spheres of interest in the last quarter of the nineteenth century.

The resemblance of their analyses became more evident when discussing the republican period. Sometimes Chen’s “borrowing” from Woolf can even be judged as plagiarism by today’s academic standard. For example, Woolf wrote about the connection between European imperialism and the disorder in Republican China:

“But economic imperialism sets no store by republics. The economic ruin of China which began under the monarchy has been completed under the republic. Instead of helping the new republic to get upon its feet, Europe and Japan have continued the system of economic exploitation. Civil war has been fomented and fostered by foreign loans to corrupt generals and politicians who have squandered them on their armies or have taken the simpler and more direct course of putting them straight into their own pockets.”⁷⁰

And here is what Chen wrote in his dissertation, which was nearly the same as Woolf’s original text:

“Economic imperialism does not aid a republic. The economic ruin of China which began under the monarchy has been completed under the Republic. Instead of helping the new republic to get upon its feet, Europe and Japan have continued the system of economic exploitation. Civil war has been fomented and fostered by foreign loans, and this state of affairs has permitted the Chinese to squander money on their armies or to take the simpler and more direct course of putting money for the armies straight into their own pockets.”⁷¹

⁶⁹ Leonard Woolf, *Economic Imperialism*, London: The Swarthmore Press Ltd., 1921, p.80; Martin Wilbur (ed.), *The Communist Movement in China: An Essay Written in 1924 by Chen Kung-po*, p.65.

⁷⁰ Leonard Woolf, *Economic Imperialism*, pp.97-98.

⁷¹ Martin Wilbur (ed.), *The Communist Movement in China: An Essay Written in 1924 by Chen Kung-po*, p.74.

We can thus discover the profound influence of Woolf's analysis in shaping Chen's thoughts. Woolf's arguments were further bolstered by the Webbs, who attributed the British renunciation of the initial free trade policy and the rise of expansion and protection during late Victorian and Edwardian era to increasingly fierce economic competition between the Great Powers.⁷² Woolf and the Webb couple, both of whom were outstanding figures in the Fabian Society and Labour Party, thus delivered a timely theoretical framework for Chen who was then eager for a systematic political economic theory different from Marxism.

Interestingly, examining the Webbs' political view on imperialism, we will discover an obvious misunderstanding in Chen's interpretation of them. They did analyse in the book the policy shift of the British Empire from a perspective of international political economics, but were actually in favour of, rather than opposed to, the transformation from the traditional principle of free trade to a more protectionist and robust imperial policy. The British Empire, according to them, now needed a new foreign and imperial policy to replace the creed of free trade long held by the liberalist "little Englanders".⁷³

The Webbs were not alone in the Fabian Society in advocating the consolidation of the empire, and some Fabian leaders, like George Bernard Shaw (1856-1950), declared unashamedly themselves as imperialists, though their definition of "imperialism" denoted the maintenance of the empire rather than further military expansion.⁷⁴ On the issue of anti-imperialism the attitudes among the Fabians were more divisive than unanimous, and members like Hobson and Woolf disagreed with Shaw and Webb. However, these inner distinctions did not prevent British anti-imperialism from shaping Chen Gongbo's imagination of a West-East confrontation. The expectation of a communist tide expanding from Europe to the rest of the world faded in Chen's mind, and now the conquest and suppression of the East by the West which existed in the 1900s and early 1910s once more came back to Chinese intellectuals. Ironically, it was after the Western powers morally dismissed imperialism that Chen formed the picture of an imperialist global order.

⁷² Sidney and Beatrice Webb, *The Decay of Capitalist Civilisation*, London: Fabian Society, 1923, pp.148-149.

⁷³ Bernard Semmel, *Imperialism and Social Reform: English Social-Imperial Thought, 1895-1914*, London: George Allen & Unwin, 1960, pp.129-130.

⁷⁴ A. M. McBriar, *Fabian Socialism and English Politics, 1884-1918*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1962, pp.124-130.

As we have mentioned, Lenin admitted that he was much indebted to Hobson's study. Their ideas on anti-imperialism were so similar that British historians have even had a heated debate on whether a "Hobson-Lenin thesis" really existed.⁷⁵ However, it was necessary to make a distinction between British anti-imperialism and Leninism here, as the dichotomy would later divert Chen Gongbo's understanding of imperialism from his communist counterparts in China. Bernard Porter points out that Lenin "added a Marxist gloss" to Hobson's theory, predicting that imperialism was an inevitable and inexorable stage of capitalism, while Hobson saw it only a matter of a choice.⁷⁶ Tom Kemp also indicates that Hobson and Lenin came from very different theoretical positions.⁷⁷ Totally isolated from the British Marxists, in his early days Hobson was a fervent follower of Richard Cobden (1804-1865) who advocated free trade and laid the ideological foundation of the Liberal Party in mid-nineteenth century. Hobson was later convinced by social liberalism, attempting to solve the social problems under capitalism via social reform rather than dismantling it.⁷⁸

Similar to Hobson, Woolf did not believe that communism could and should replace the existing system, despite his strong condemnation of European capitalism and imperialism. Admittedly, Woolf indicated that as long as the Western people "accept these beliefs and desires of capitalism and imperialism, they will not, in fact, regard the land and peoples of Asia and Africa as 'a sacred trust of civilisation' but as a field for grabbing a profit".⁷⁹ However, he believed that "it is not true that human beings never change their beliefs and desires" under the current political and social system.⁸⁰ He anticipated that, influenced by socialism and internationalism, the imperialist system would be transformed by the League of Nations and ultimately benefited the development of China and other Asian and African countries.⁸¹

Thanks to the divergence of Hobson and the British anti-imperialism from Lenin, after

⁷⁵ A. M. Eckstein, "Is there a 'Hobson-Lenin Thesis' on Late Nineteenth-Century Colonial Expansion?", *Economic History Review*, 1991 (2): 197-218.

⁷⁶ Bernard Porter, *Critics of Empire: British Radicals and the Imperial Challenge*, London: I, B. Tauris, 2008, p.xxxvi.

⁷⁷ Tom Kemp, *Theories of Imperialism*, London: Dobson Books Ltd., 1967, p.64.

⁷⁸ Anthony Webster, *The Debate on the Rise of the British Empire*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006, pp.43-44.

⁷⁹ Leonard Woolf, *Economic Imperialism*, p.105.

⁸⁰ Leonard Woolf, *Economic Imperialism*, p.105.

⁸¹ Leonard Woolf, *Economic Imperialism*, pp.106-109.

the KMT-CCP split of 1927, Chen Gongbo was able to combine the anti-Soviet and anti-imperialist propositions together. Different from the CCP members who believed that anti-imperialism only came from the Comintern, Chen demonstrated that this ideology was not necessarily bound with communism. In fact, the Soviet Union after 1926 was itself a red imperialist power.⁸² On the other hand, Chen again differed from Chiang Kai-shek and the right-wing KMT leaders who believed that after purging the communists the KMT should give up their radical anti-imperialist propaganda.⁸³

Like Hobson and Woolf, Chen also rejected the inevitability of the fall of capitalism and imperialism, a proposition insisted on by Lenin and the CCP. In 1928 he attributed the failure of the Chinese revolution partly to the restoration and rejuvenation of the capitalist world system. His observation of the global situation, such as Stanley Baldwin's Tory government in Britain and the rise of the US, confirmed this trend to him.⁸⁴ The signing of the Locarno Treaties in 1925, which marked a temporary reconciliation and appeasement among the European capitalist countries, demonstrated a similar tendency. Although Chen's belief in the overthrow of capitalism and imperialism never changed, he did not share Marx and Lenin's firm confidence that capitalism was doomed to wither away. To sum up, British anti-imperialism helped Chen to develop a theory for Chinese revolution, different from both the communists who loyally followed the guidance from the Soviet Union and the right-wing KMT members who threw away the ideology of anti-imperialism and turned towards a more moderate "treaty revision" diplomacy (*xiuyue waijiao*).⁸⁵

However, we have to admit that Chen's dissertation proved that he lacked essential background knowledge and academic appreciation of serious theoretical discussion. According to his memoir, he bought and read the whole series of Marx's works in New York, but his criticism on Marxism came less from a close examination of Marx's theories than a personal observation of the American society. For instance, he rejected class struggle and communist revolution not from a critique of the revolutionary theories of

⁸² Chen Gongbo, "Jinhou de guomindang [The future of KMT]", *Chen Gongbo xiansheng wenji*, pp.5-6.

⁸³ Chen Gongbo, "Zhongguo guomindang suo daibiao de shi shenme", *Chen Gongbo xiansheng wenji*, pp.229-230.

⁸⁴ Chen Gongbo, *Geming Pinglun* [Revolutionary Review], vol.1, p.2.

⁸⁵ Tang Qihua, *Bei feichu bupingdeng tiaoyue zhebi de beiyang xiuyue shi* [Treaty revision campaign of the Beijing Government, 1912-1928: out of the shadow of "the abrogation of unequal treaties"], Beijing: Social Science Academic Press, 2010, pp.400-406.

Marx, Lenin or Trotsky, but the expansion of the middle class and the reconciliation of capital-labour relation in the US.⁸⁶ He cited Marx's *Communist Manifesto*, but not deeper works like *Das Kapital*, *The Poverty of Philosophy* or *Critique of the Gotha Programme* whose English versions had been all published by then. His understanding of Marxism was even far behind Hu Hanmin's article written during the May Fourth period, which we mentioned at the beginning of this chapter.⁸⁷ In terms of British anti-imperialism, he also neglected Hobson's important works. Given his educational experience, jumping from law and philosophy to economic history was really a big challenge to him, and he certainly did not have enough time to read comprehensively during his Masters programme.

In fact, comparing Chen's critique with a monograph by his supervisor at Columbia, Vladimir G. Simkhovitch (1874-1959), we will find that Chen's points on class struggle and surplus value were definitely enlightened by Professor Simkhovitch, but far less profound.⁸⁸ Simkhovitch pointed out that Marx's concept of "class" was not only an objective description but a psychological identification and consciousness. However, people were shaped not just by class solidarity but also other "cross-sectional solidarities and loyalties" like nationalism and humanism.⁸⁹ He then mentioned that even Karl Kautsky had to admit that "only under certain social conditions does class struggle become the motive of history".⁹⁰ As for surplus value, Simkhovitch compared the first and third volume of *Das Kapital* and pointed out some theoretical contradictions between them.⁹¹ These analyses have shown more depth than Chen's personal observation.

Not surprisingly, Martin Wilbur maintains that "Chen was rather unoriginal in his explanations of modern Chinese history and the communist movement".⁹² So Wai-chor also shared the judgment, saying that Chen "was not a theoretician of the first rank, for he was neither original nor profound in his thought".⁹³ Certainly Chen's lack of originality

⁸⁶ Chen Gongbo, *Hanfeng ji*, p.232.

⁸⁷ So Wai-chor expresses a similar opinion that "Hu Han-min displayed an unusual ability to expound Marxism in a clear-cut way which Chen Kung-po never surpassed". See So Wai-chor, "Chen Kung-po: A Marxist-oriented Kuomintang Theoretician", *Papers on Far Eastern History*, p.69.

⁸⁸ See Vladimir G. Simkhovitch, *Marxism versus Socialism*, New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1913.

⁸⁹ Vladimir G. Simkhovitch, *Marxism versus Socialism*, pp.199-200.

⁹⁰ Vladimir G. Simkhovitch, *Marxism versus Socialism*, p. 201.

⁹¹ Vladimir G. Simkhovitch, *Marxism versus Socialism*, pp.265-267.

⁹² Martin Wilbur (ed.), *The Communist Movement in China: An Essay Written in 1924 by Chen Kung-po*, p.43.

⁹³ So Wai-chor, "Chen Kung-po: A Marxist-oriented KMT Theoretician", *Papers on Far Eastern History*, p. 68.

stemmed largely from his limited talent and knowledge, but, taking him as a lens, it actually reflected the shortage of theoretical resources for Chinese young intellectuals to fight against the Western imperialist culture. They would find little room for the birth of a totally “indigenous” ideological framework and had to rely heavily on an anti-imperialist West to object to an imperialist “West”. Rejecting Marxism, the task for Chen Gongbo to establish an anti-imperialist theory could be even harder, but he did stick to the path in the following years and became a leading theoretician of the left-wing KMT. In fact, his main originality lay in his creative mixture and application of various Western intellectual resources to respond to the crisis of the Nationalist Revolution.

Chen and the left-wing KMT: Chinese fascists?

The economic interpretation of history and the theory of anti-imperialism had a profound influence on Chen Gongbo’s shift after 1925. He gave up the initial social democratic programme of *Qunbao*. An economic analysis proved that the rule of the proletariat in China had no economic basis, even after the workers received education and political training. An article written in January 1928 expressed his observation that Chinese revolution lacked the corresponding basis because the economy had been undermined by imperialism. The revolution would have no hope without an independent economic foundation, despite the enthusiasm of the masses.⁹⁴

At the same time, the theory of economic imperialism undermined his previous belief that a communist revolution would sweep across the world. On the contrary, the menace of the West to the East showed that the priority should be given to a nationalist liberation of China. The struggles between different classes had to give way to the conflicts between the imperialist West and the colonised East. As Dirlik argues, Chen Gongbo and other left-wing KMT leaders placed national survival above social transformation.⁹⁵ The situation was so urgent and vital that a gradual enlightenment of the masses was no longer

⁹⁴ Chen Gongbo, “Qianbo de geming liliang” [The weak revolutionary forces], *Chen Gongbo xiansheng wenji*, p.125.

⁹⁵ Arif Dirlik, “Mass Movement and the Left Kuomintang”, *Modern China*, vol.1, no.1, 1975: 59-60.

feasible. Only under a strong revolutionary party could the masses be immediately organised, disciplined, and trained to fight against Western imperialism and only under this party could the distinctions and conflicts between different classes be gradually diminished.

On the other hand, we can still identify some continuities in Chen's thinking before and after his study at Columbia. He kept his opinion that the masses had their own initiative, subjectivity, and judgement and that without mass mobilisation a revolution would be doomed to fail. Mass movements were crucial to the KMT and Nationalist Revolution in that they guaranteed the vitality and revolutionary character of the party. Meanwhile, Chen still believed that China should not take a capitalist route towards modernity. He no longer believed in a communist future, but his new programme still advocated a non-capitalist economy, a kind of socialised mass production in which the ruling party and state played a key role.⁹⁶ Influenced by the American "new history" and their economic interpretations of history, Chen insisted that the economic structure had a decisive impact on political system and people's ideas and values. A capitalist economy would only lead to class struggle and social upheaval, while a socialised economy was able to gradually eliminate the class distinctions and consolidate the revolutionary regime.⁹⁷

Thanks to the "new history" and British anti-imperialism, Chen Gongbo was able to develop a unique political project within the KMT, which mixed both nationalist and socialist elements. Running the *Revolutionary Review* and establishing the RCA in 1928, he strongly challenged both the CCP and the right-wing KMT. Here, different from the initial studies of the left-wing KMT which concentrated on the factors inside China, I argue that the rise of this faction was a product of a global intellectual trend which both benefited and diverged from Marxism.

So should we define the particular political programme of Chen and the left-wing KMT in the spectrum of modern political ideology? There have been some studies comparing KMT and Chen Gongbo's political thought with the political ideologies in contemporary Europe, and they emphasised their similarities with fascism.

⁹⁶ Chen Gongbo, "Muqian zenyang jianshe guojia ziben" [How to build state capital at present], *Chen Gongbo xiansheng wenji*, pp.38-66.

⁹⁷ Chen Gongbo, "Muqian zenyang jianshe guojia ziben", *Chen Gongbo xiansheng wenji*, p.65.

James Gregor's polemical book, for example, argues that Sun Yat-sen's theory had nothing to do with classical Marxism which neglected the less-developed regions; rather, it resembled Italian fascism in that both of them tried to agitate fanatical nationalism to offset national humiliation and fight against the well-developed European capitalism.⁹⁸ Both of them, according to Gregor, strived to avoid domestic class struggle and build up a centralised and unified country, together with a modernisation programme initiated by the state.⁹⁹ Fully aware of the challenges from other Chinese historians this argument may provoke, Gregor admits that Sun differed in many ways from Italian fascist theoreticians, and describes Sun's programme as a "reactive and developmental nationalism".¹⁰⁰

If Gregor juxtaposed Sun Yat-sen and fascism in a comparative approach, Margherita Zanasi underlines the direct influences of Mussolini and Italian fascism on the leaders of the KMT government. Though conceding that historians have not reached a consensus on how to define interwar fascism, Zanasi insisted that fascism, as a reaction against both capitalism and communism, arose not solely from Europe.¹⁰¹ She focused on late 1920s and 1930s China, arguing that Chiang Kai-shek, Wang Jingwei, and Chen Gongbo all embraced fascism, though from different angles.¹⁰² Chen Gongbo, in her opinion, "appeared to have been particularly attracted by the Italian Fascist model of nation building and economic modernity", especially the self-sufficient and controlled economy in the fascist programme.¹⁰³ Chen's role in establishing a rapprochement with Italy is also noticed in Zanasi's book, as he was alleged to be a close friend of Galeazzo Ciano, Mussolini's son-in-law and foreign minister.¹⁰⁴ Zanasi's observation of Chen's diplomatic activities in Italy was further bolstered by Chen Hongmin, who describes Chen Gongbo's official visit to Ciano and Mussolini in Italy at the end of 1937.¹⁰⁵

⁹⁸ James Gregor, *A Place in the Sun: Marxism and Fascism in China's Long Revolution*, Boulder: Westview Press, 2000, pp.53-55.

⁹⁹ James Gregor, *A Place in the Sun: Marxism and Fascism in China's Long Revolution*, pp.56-59.

¹⁰⁰ James Gregor, *A Place in the Sun: Marxism and Fascism in China's Long Revolution*, pp.66-69.

¹⁰¹ Margherita Zanasi, *Saving the Nation: Economic Modernity in Republican China*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006, pp.13-14.

¹⁰² Margherita Zanasi, *Saving the Nation: Economic Modernity in Republican China*, p.15.

¹⁰³ Margherita Zanasi, *Saving the Nation: Economic Modernity in Republican China*, p.12.

¹⁰⁴ Margherita Zanasi, *Saving the Nation: Economic Modernity in Republican China*, p.13.

¹⁰⁵ Chen Hongmin, "Minguo shiqi yidali yu zhongguo guanxi de dangan shiliao: yi Chen Gongbo fangyi baogaoshu (1938 nian) weili" [The documents on the diplomatic relation between Italy and Republican China: a case study of Chen Gongbo's report in 1938 of his visit to Italy], *Anhui Shixue* [Historical Research in Anhui], 2015 (1): 41-49.

Gregor and Zanasi's arguments are not without foundation. Indeed, both Chen Gongbo and Sun Yat-sen preferred class cooperation to class struggle, state capitalism to liberal capitalism, centralism to federalism. The similar inferior positions of China and Italy in the global political and economic system in the Interwar period can also strengthen the validity of their thesis. However, these resemblances cannot prevent us from wondering whether Chen Gongbo was really advocating a fascist or quasi-fascist programme in China, especially in the 1920s. Admittedly, Zanasi carefully deals with Chen Gongbo's relation with fascism, adding that "trying to determine whether Chen Gongbo was fascist" "is not a fruitful exercise".¹⁰⁶ Yet her juxtaposition of the two makes it necessary for us to discuss the connection between them.

First, there has been until now no accurate criteria to judge which regime can be defined as a fascist regime and which cannot, and Zanasi acknowledges this. After an elaborate discussion of the variability and diversity of fascism in different countries and different stages, Robert O. Paxton concludes that any study that suggests a single, fixed image of fascism is doomed to be problematic.¹⁰⁷ In this regard, the application of the term "fascism" upon a country outside Europe can incur some risks.

In Europe, the rise of fascism could not avoid an alliance with the conservative social groups. Paxton, Eric Hobsbawm, and Stanley G. Payne all stress the significance of the cooperation between fascist regimes and rightist traditional elites, though sometimes accompanied with friction and discord.¹⁰⁸ Although the fascist parties like the Arrow Cross in Hungary and Iron Guard in Romania were so radical as to frighten the conservatives, they were still, quoting Hobsbawm, "the revolutionaries of the counter-revolution" who engaged actively in mass mobilisation in order to achieve a rightist political end.¹⁰⁹ Chen Gongbo was indeed in strong favour of mass movements, but to him the pillar of the Nationalist Revolution should be workers, peasants, and petty bourgeois, while the traditional, conservative feudal class must be excluded. In his plan to

¹⁰⁶ Margherita Zanasi, "Chen Gongbo and the Construction of a Modern Nation in 1930s China", p.128.

¹⁰⁷ Robert O. Paxton, "The Five Stages of Fascism", *The Journal of Modern History*, vol.70, no.1, Mar. 1998, p.21.

¹⁰⁸ Robert O. Paxton, *The Anatomy of Fascism*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2004, p.212; Eric Hobsbawm, *Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century, 1914-1991*, London: Abacus, 1994, p.123; Stanley G. Payne, *Fascism: Comparison and Definition*, Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1980, p.8.

¹⁰⁹ Hobsbawm, *Age of Extremes*, p.117.

reorganise the KMT, he estimated the proportions of members from different classes in the party to be 50% peasants, 30% workers, and 20% petty bourgeois. In his opinion, the crisis of the Nationalist Revolution in 1927 was to a large extent due to the conservative forces' domination over the party.¹¹⁰ Zanasi mainly focuses on Chen's economic policies, but puts aside his political project which was largely different from that of Mussolini's Italy.

Apart from antagonism against the traditional forces, other aspects of Chen's political proposal also hardly showed any common ground with European fascism. We cannot see any attempt in it to nullify labour movements, to use extensive violence to keep order, or to advocate aggressive expansionism towards neighbouring countries, but all of these characterised Italian and German fascism. Chen indeed shared with European fascists a strong nationalist sense, and yet it was never expressed as an attempt to ethnically purify the Chinese race. On the contrary, Chen showed a certain degree of internationalism in his project. Pan-Asianism formed an ideological foundation of his anti-imperialist plan, which advocated a China-India alliance, together with Korea, Vietnam, Malaysia, Burma, and other Asian races, to fight against Western imperialism. An East International (*dongfang guoji*) was therefore to be established, which would replace the corrupted Comintern to lead a nationalist revolution in the whole East.¹¹¹

A charismatic supreme leader like Hitler or Mussolini never played a role in Chen's proposal either. Admittedly, Chen exalted the authority of the party, but the power of party, at least for Chen, was precisely to eradicate the danger of autocracy. His objection to Chiang Kai-shek not only stemmed from their personal rivalry, but more from his objection to all forms of individual dictatorship or oligarchy. His strong opposition to the special committee in 1927, as we mentioned in Chapter Four, was a good example.

Evidently, we can hardly see any connection in Chen's political plan with Hitler or Mussolini's. If there is any resemblance, it might be found in Chen's quasi-corporatist view towards mass organisations. Corporatism originated from Europe, especially the Catholic world. It can be understood as "a system of interest and/or attitude representation".¹¹²

¹¹⁰ Chen Gongbo, "Zhongguo guomindang suo daibiao de shi shenme", *Chen Gongbo xiansheng wenji*, p.240.

¹¹¹ Chen Gongbo, "Zhongguo guomindang suo daibiao de shi shenme", *Chen Gongbo xiansheng wenji*, pp.229-230; "Jinhou de guomindang", *Chen Gongbo xiansheng wenji*, p.12.

¹¹² Philippe C. Schmitter, "Still A Century of Corporatism?", *The Review of Politics*, vol.36, no.1, p.86.

Corporatism believes that various associations representing different industries can be formed to contribute to a harmonious rather than contradictory society. While Hitler had no interest in building a corporatist state, Mussolini's fascism was profoundly rooted in this Catholic tradition.¹¹³ From the Palazzo Chigi Agreement in 1923, to the Palazzo Vidoni Pact in 1925, to the Italian Syndical Law in 1926, then to the Charter of Labour in 1927, Mussolini's government persistently pursued an effective way to arbitrate capital-labour conflicts within a corporatist framework.¹¹⁴

Chen Gongbo's plan articulated that workers, peasants, and merchants should establish respectively unified associations (*tongyi chanye he zhiye de zuzhi*) so that the KMT and government could discipline and guide the whole movement.¹¹⁵ This suggestion was based on his previous observations that Chinese workers were deeply influenced by "feudal" ideas and "localism" and that the trade unions were so powerful that they went out of control.¹¹⁶ To Chen, the existing Merchant Associations (*shangmin xiehui*) also artificially distinguished the "big businessmen" from "middle and small merchants", which did not make sense at all in China.¹¹⁷ Once a unified corporatist system was set up, the factional conflicts within each class were supposed to be minimised, and the interclass struggle would also be diminished under the guidance of the party.¹¹⁸

However, there were still dramatic distinctions between Chen Gongbo and Mussolini's corporatism. Chen hoped that the unified organisations under the KMT could diminish the internal strife between classes (especially between the workers and peasants) and gradually cultivate the consciousness and ability of self-government at the grassroots level. Though by this time he had already given up the proposition that the masses should be enlightened through education and public debate, Chen Gongbo still hoped to nurture their political consciousness and protect them from class oppression under the party. By contrast, Mussolini, though often adopting anti-capitalist rhetoric, aimed to use the corporatist system to limit the labour movement, so that the capitalists could maintain their

¹¹³ Hobsbawm, *Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century, 1914-1991*, p.117.

¹¹⁴ Martin Kitchen, *Europe Between the Wars*, pp.229-231.

¹¹⁵ Chen Gongbo, "Jinhou de Guomindang", *Chen Gongbo xiansheng wenji*, pp.15-16.

¹¹⁶ Chen Gongbo, "Guomin geming de weiji he women de cuowu", *Chen Gongbo xiansheng wenji*, pp.318-325.

¹¹⁷ Chen Gongbo, "Guomin geming de weiji he women de cuowu", *Chen Gongbo xiansheng wenji*, p.328.

¹¹⁸ Chen Gongbo, "Jinhou de Guomindang", *Chen Gongbo xiansheng wenji*, p.17.

exploitation of the working class in a certain form.¹¹⁹ The specious similarity between Chen and Mussolini here in fact revealed two very different routes.

Even Chen's economic policy needs to be re-examined. It was almost natural that in those underdeveloped countries the economic development was largely driven by the state. Alexander Gerschenkron in his famous monograph, *Economic Backwardness in Historical Perspectives*, has arguably shown that the more backward the country is, the greater the role of the state has to be.¹²⁰ In this regard, it was no surprise to see various forms of state capitalism in developing countries when they tried to catch up with developed ones. Therefore, a similar economic policy to Italian fascism was still insufficient to prove Chen to be a fascist theoretician. It was true that in the 1930s he had some interest in the autarkic economic policies under Mussolini, but this interest should be understood as a tool to cope with the increasing menace from Japan, rather than his ultimate political ideal which differed greatly from Mussolini or Hitler.

Another evidence of Chen's distance from Italian fascism can be found in his articles written in late 1920s, which Zanasi has not noticed. Chen condemned Italian fascism as a capitalist dictatorship which publicly tore off the mask of democratic politics during the turbulence.¹²¹ However, he made light of this fascist regime because of its heavy economic dependence on import. He asked scornfully in 1928: "How much influence could Mussolini's Italy produce?" And he answered himself that Italy was merely an appendage of the Western European capitalism.¹²² To Chen, Mussolini's Italy was outwardly strong but inwardly weak. This seemingly "extremely reactionary" (*jiduan fandong*) fascist regime was not even qualified to be the leader of the counterrevolutionary forces in Europe.¹²³ Mussolini's Italy "simply cannot be called an independent country", because its supply of iron and coal meant complete reliance on outside powers.¹²⁴

¹¹⁹ Martin Kitchen, *Fascism*, London: MacMillan Publishers Ltd., 1976, p.56.

¹²⁰ Alexander Gerschenkron, *Economic Backwardness in Historical Perspective: A Book of Essays*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962, pp.16-30.

¹²¹ Chen Gongbo, "Muqian zenyang jianshe guojia ziben", *Chen Gongbo xiansheng wenji*, p.65.

¹²² Chen Gongbo, "Jinhou de Guomindang", *Chen Gongbo xiansheng wenji*, p.2.

¹²³ Chen Gongbo, "Guomin geming de weiji he women de cuowu", *Chen Gongbo xiansheng wenji*, p.279.

¹²⁴ Chen Gongbo, "Guomin geming de weiji he women de cuowu", *Chen Gongbo xiansheng wenji*, p.279.

Conclusion

If Chen Gongbo, at least in the 1920s, cannot be regarded as a fascist, how do we provide an accurate definition to his political thought? In fact there have been already some attempts from both Anglophone and Chinese academia. So Wai-chor deems Chen Gongbo as a Marxist-oriented theoretician who analysed political, economic, and social issues in a way largely shaped by Marx and Engels' theories.¹²⁵ Similarly, Chen Jianyue underlines the intertwined connection between Marxism and Chen Gongbo's programme and argues that the position of the latter can be located vaguely between typical Marxism and state capitalism.¹²⁶

On the other hand, Dirlik stresses the similarity between the left and right wings within the KMT and indicates that for both of them national independence and unification outweighed socio-economic reforms.¹²⁷ In this way, it appears that Dirlik understands Chen Gongbo more as a nationalist than a Marxist. Studying the anti-imperialism of the left-wing KMT, Edmund S. K. Fung shares Dirlik's observation, arguing that the leftist leaders, including Chen, had much in common with the right. These leaders used the ideologies like anti-imperialism mainly as a tool of political struggle to attack their opponents, and strong anti-imperialist rhetoric often contrasted with their "soft" actions.¹²⁸ Similar to Dirlik and Fung, Li Zhiyu also maintains that the division between the left and right KMT was not so significant due to their ideological differences but the political struggle between factions. Li's article admits that the left wing was a complicated historical phenomenon, and it is hard to provide a clear-cut definition of their propositions.¹²⁹

I agree that the ideology of the left wing was indeed an important instrument of political struggles, but, given our discussions above, Chen Gongbo's revolutionary theory should not be deemed merely as an instrument of opportunism. However, the difficulty and divergence of defining Chen Gongbo in the existing scholarship do lead us to reflect upon

¹²⁵ So Wai-chor, "Chen Kung-po: A Marxist-oriented KMT Theoretician", *Papers on Far Eastern History*, vol.36, Sept. 1987, p.58.

¹²⁶ Chen Jianyue, *Chen Gongbo (1892-1946) and Chinese National Salvation*, pp.139-140.

¹²⁷ Arif Dirlik, "Mass Movement and the Left Kuomintang", *Modern China*, vol.1, no.1, 1975, p.60, 71.

¹²⁸ Edmund S. K. Fung, "Anti-imperialism and the Left Guomindang", *Modern China*, vol.11, no.1, 1985, pp.69-70.

¹²⁹ Li Zhiyu, "Guanyu Guomindang zuopai wenti de zaisikao, 1924-1931" [Re-examining the issue of the left-wing KMT, 1924-1931], *Zhonggong Dangshi Yanjiu*, 2016 (10): 98-99.

the problem when we use a system of political concepts and discourses originating from European contexts to analyse the political thought of Chinese political figures. When we find it hard to define their ideas, it is not the problem of our protagonists, but the analytical frameworks we use to define them.

This chapter investigates the political programme of Chen Gongbo and the left-wing KMT in a transnational perspective, and we can see that Chen Gongbo kept absorbing various European ideologies and academic theories. However, his propositions were not a mechanical combination of the Western intellectual resources, but an active re-understanding of them. Travelling across the border, these Western ideas were immediately refined, re-understood, mixed, and adapted. Once they were localised in a historical context very different from their origins, it would be very difficult and even risky to gauge new ideas with existing political terms. We have to admit that the Western cultural hegemony is still deeply and overwhelmingly shaping our perspectives of the non-Western world, and only when we transcend the existing analytical frameworks and tools could we have a better understanding of the intercultural dissemination of political ideas.

Epilogue

Through the case of Chen Gongbo and Tan Pingshan, this study explores how Marxism was interpreted by local intellectuals and, after committing to revolution, how their political ideas and social identity changed. Departing from the existing historiography which emphasised the influence of October Revolution and Lenin on early Chinese communist revolution, I demonstrate that there existed in Guangzhou another important approach within the CCP: a social democratic approach. Chen and Tan expected that the proletariat could form their solidarity and finally seize political power through democratic elections. The embrace of Marxism in May Fourth China was also helped by a new imagination of the global order emerging after the Great War, believing that there could and should be an alternative to Western capitalism: a socialist future.

As we have shown in the first and second chapters, there were frequent re-understandings and even misunderstandings during the transnational dissemination of Marxism in late 1910s and early 1920s China. In Chapter Five we again find how Chen Gongbo's misinterpretation of Sidney and Beatrice Webb's proposition consolidated his belief in anti-imperialism. These observations reveal the necessity of examining Chinese intellectual and revolutionary history from a global perspective. It also has broader implications for the intercultural spread of ideas as a whole. Disembedded from the original historical context and cultural circumstances and re-integrated in a new social and cultural system, these ideas will inevitably be mixed with various new intellectual resources and endowed with new meanings. In this regard, the rising global intellectual history nowadays among historians requires not only a transnational dimension to trace the movement of ideas across the border, but a system of theoretical frameworks to analyse these cross-cultural misunderstandings which are so frequent and so crucial to travelling ideas. In fact, the issue of misunderstandings has recently drawn attention from those specialising in global intellectual history.¹

¹ Martin Mulsow, "A Reference Theory of Globalized Ideas", *Global Intellectual History*, vol.2, issue 1, 2017, pp.67-87.

Meanwhile, I am also interested in the social institutions and circumstances in which political ideas are spread, discussed, and re-understood. I argue that, before 1922, the spread and discussion of Marxism and socialism in China was basically a cultural phenomenon rather than a revolutionary activity. It was therefore the cultural power, capital, and hierarchy that shaped the dissemination of Marxism in May Fourth China, and it was those who occupied an advantageous position in the cultural field who had more power defining how Marxism should be interpreted and what a “genuine” Marxism was. The branches of the newly established Chinese Communist Party were more like study societies or cultural salons, and many of its members identified themselves more as intellectuals than as revolutionaries. After 1922, however, being a revolutionary as a social identity was more and more important to Chinese Marxists, and discussions of Marxism were gradually transferred from the cultural field to the political field. This transformation reminds us of the importance of inviting the perspective of social history when we discuss modern Chinese radicalism, and my research is a continuation of this fruitful approach which has arisen in the past 30 years.

Apart from global and social history, historians studying Chinese revolutionary history should also interact with local history. I summarise elsewhere a dynamic three-tiered system in the Chinese cultural field where Marxist ideas flowed top-down in the May Fourth period.² At the top of the system, national cultural elites set the tone of cultural trends throughout the country. At the bottom, numerous local petty intellectuals were earnestly absorbing the limited intellectual resources flowing down from above. Most of them lacked the ability to think critically and often accepted the knowledge of Marxism in a simplistic way. Between the national cultural elites and petty intellectuals were the regional cultural elites who found themselves in a peripheral position in cultural hubs like Beijing and Shanghai but occupied centre stage in their own provincial capitals. These regional cultural leaders were on the one hand influenced by the national elite, while on the other hand actively adapting the propositions from above to their own frameworks. As an intermediary between the top and bottom, these regional elites played a crucial role in

² Zhao Xuduo, “Revisiting the Dissemination of Marxism in May Fourth China: A Perspective of Cultural Field”, *Twentieth-century China*, vol.44, no.2, pp.198-200.

spreading Marxism from Beijing and Shanghai to provincial capitals and towns. It was largely because of the various understandings among them that Marxism was interpreted differently in different areas. The thought and life of the national cultural leaders have been heavily studied in the past 50 years, but there is still much space for historians to investigate from the perspective of intermediary regional elites.

Therefore, as indicated in the introduction, my thesis deliberately avoids the big names. Chen Gongbo and Tan Pingshan never became the most significant leaders both in the cultural field and among revolutionary theoreticians. However, a study of the political thought and social identities of these middle-level leaders will enable us to see how radicalism and revolutionary ideologies were accepted and re-understood at a local level. The relationship between them and Chen Jiongming in Guangdong, for example, offered a good opportunity for us to discover the interactions between early Marxists and the local political and cultural context. In this way, my thesis attempts to bring local history back to the study of the early Chinese communist movement.

After studying at Columbia University for two years and completing a dissertation on Chinese communism, however, Chen Gongbo no longer believed in Marxism. His transfer had to do with a fundamental contradiction between nationalism and socialism underlying Chinese revolution. Both of these two ideologies were integral parts of the May Fourth spirit which aroused the enthusiasm of so many intellectuals, including Chen Gongbo and Tan Pingshan. Nevertheless, nationalism emphasised ethnic identity and cleavage, while socialism highlighted the division and distinction between different classes. This inner tension between the nationalist sentiment and socialist ideal left a haunting shadow of the May Fourth Movement and the following Nationalist Revolution.

During the *Qunbao* period, Chen and Tan fervently advocated class revolution rather than nationalist revolution, but this did not mean that they were repressing their nationalist emotions. On the contrary, their nationalist aspiration was integrated into their socialist proposition. Their imagining of a global communist revolution from Europe to Asia made them believe that a worldwide class war was approaching. They expected that after this class war there would be no oppression of any kind, including the national oppressions from the West. Moreover, socialism, in their opinion, had become a new criteria

distinguishing between the advanced and backward countries. Only when the plebeians seized political power could China be positioned among the most advanced country in the world. In this way, the tension between nationalism and socialism was temporarily dissolved.

After Chen Gongbo became disillusioned with the communist future and realised that the capitalist system was regaining its momentum in the mid-1920s, the tension between the two ideologies began to surface and his nationalist emotions finally outweighed his socialist beliefs. To Chen, it was therefore imperative to unite the domestic political forces to launch an anti-imperialist revolution, so that China could get rid of the economic and financial shackles imposed by Western capitalism and imperialism. However, socialism still occupied an important position in Chen's political blueprint. He insisted that China should pursue a non-capitalist future and hoped that under the leadership of a revolutionary party (the KMT) the workers and peasants could be gradually transformed into the backbone of a collective economy. Chen kept striking a balance between nationalism and socialism, and so did Tan Pingshan. Although debating intensely with Chen on various issues after 1927, Tan held a similar opinion with Chen that the workers, peasants, and petty bourgeoisie in China should form a united front against Western imperialism. In this sense, it is understandable that the CCP in 1928 defined Tan's new party merely as a branch of Chen Gongbo's left-wing KMT.³

When talking about Wang Jingwei and Chen Gongbo's anti-imperialist theory of the left-wing KMT, Edmund S. K. Fung correctly argues that "considering his earlier revolutionary opposition to imperialism, Wang's collaboration with the Japanese is a great irony".⁴ The same judgment can be applied to Chen. When Chen followed Wang Jingwei in 1940, both nationalism and socialism had to give way to his personal loyalty to Wang. As a result, both nationalism and socialism abandoned Chen, making him both a traitor to the Chinese people and a traitor to Chinese communism in historical memory.

Tan Pingshan, on the contrary, managed to keep the balance and earn himself a good reputation in the revolutionary historiography. On September 28th, 1986, the CCP held a

³ Dianqi, "Guomindang de xin lilunjia: Chen Gongbo" [The new theoretician of the KMT: Chen Gongbo], *Bu er sai wei ke*, no.22, pp.756-757.

⁴ Edmund S. K. Fung, "Anti-imperialism and the Left Guomindang", *Modern China*, vol.11, no.1, p.71.

commemoration celebrating the centenary anniversary of Tan's birthday. Xi Zhongxun (1913-2002), the secretary of the Central Secretariat of the CCP (*Zhonggong zhongyang shujichu*), in his talk praised Tan as "an outstanding patriot believing in Marxism" (*jiechu de juyou Makesi zhuyi xinyang de aiguo zhe*).⁵ Today, when Xi's son has become the supreme leader in China, the contradiction between nationalism and socialism still persists in this communist regime. The propaganda department has made great efforts in recent years to provoke nationalist sentiment, but in a "socialist" country ruled by an alleged "Marxist" party, this nationalist instigation has produced increasing doubt about whether Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels would be happy with the slogan "Chinese Dream" (*Zhongguomeng*).

⁵ Xi Zhongxun, "Zai Tan Pingshan xiansheng danchen yibaizhounian jinian zuotanhui shang de jianghua" [The talk at the commemoration conference celebrating the centenary anniversary of Mr. Tan Pingshan's birthday], *Guangzhou Qingnianbao* [Guangzhou Youth Weekly], June 26, 2016.

Abbreviations

- CCP The Chinese Communist Party (*Zhongguo gongchandang*)
- CECR Canton: Events and Current Rumours, in the Canton Customs Archive (*Minguo Guangzhou yaowenlu*)
- DCCCR Documents of the Comintern, the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, and Chinese Revolution (*Gongchan guoji liangongbu yu zhongguo geming dangan ziliao*)
- FMA Five Ministries Archive (*Wubu dang*)
- GRHD Guangdong Revolutionary Historical Documents (*Guangdong geming lishi wenjian huiji*)
- HAGD The Historical Accounts of Past Events of Guangdong (*Guangdong wenshi ziliao*)
- HKA Hankow Archive (*Hankou dang*)
- KCEC Kuomintang Central Executive Committee (*Guomindang zhongyang zhixing weiyuanhui*)
- KCPC Kuomintang Central Political Committee (*Guomindang zhongyang zhengzhi weiyuanhui*)
- KMT Kuomintang or The Chinese Nationalist Party (*Zhongguo guomindang*)
- PCCC The Papers of the Central Committee of the CCP (*Zhonggong zhongyang wenjian xuanji*)
- RCA Reorganisation Comrades Association (*Gaizu tongzhihui*)
- STCC The Second and Third Congress of the CCP (*Erda he sanda*)

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Chen Bao [The Morning Post]

Dagong Bao [The Impartial]

Geming Pinglun [Revolutionary Review]

Gongchandang [The Communist]

Gongren zhilu [The workers' road]

Guangdong Qunbao [The Social]

Guangdongsheng jiaoyuhui zazhi [The Journal of Guangdong Educational Association]

Guangzhou Mingguo Ribao [The Republican Times, Guangzhou]

Guangzhou Qingnianbao [Guangzhou Youth Weekly]

Hankow Mingguo Ribao [The Republican Times, Hankow]

Huazi Ribao [The Chinese Mail].

Jianshe [Construction]

Meizhou Pinglun [The Weekly Review]

Nuli zhoubao [The Endeavour]

Qianjin [Advance]

Shanghai Mingguo Ribao [The Republican Times, Shanghai]

Shen Bao [Shun Pao]

Shishi Huabao [The Pictorial Journal of Current Affairs]

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