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Cover picture A reconstruction of the Hanyuandian in Tang Chang'an (from Chao Liyin, ed., *Shaanxi gujianzhu* (Xi'an: Shaanxi Renmin Chubanshe, 1992), p.98

POPULISTIC THEMES IN MAY FOURTH RADICAL THINKING: A REAPPRAISAL OF THE INTELLECTUAL ORIGINS OF CHINESE MARXISM (1917–1922)

史 Edward X. Gu 顧昕

Introduction

A great effort has been made by many historians of modern China to explain why so many Chinese intellectuals accepted Marxism after the May Fourth Movement, but few, except for Maurice Meisner, have seriously examined the relationship of the populist current prevalent at that time to the rise of Chinese Marxism. In his book *Li Ta-chao and the Origins of Chinese Marxism*, Meisner highlights the fact that Russian Populism was a significant factor in the formation of Li Dazhao's 李大釗 Marxist thinking. Li was the first Chinese intellectual who converted to Marxism, and later he and Chen Duxiu 陳獨秀 were the two principal founding fathers of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).¹ In another book, Meisner tries to extend his penetrating observation based on the Li Dazhao case to all Chinese Marxists, arguing that, in China, a genuine Populist impulse appeared and grew more or less simultaneously with the introduction and spread of Marxist ideas, including Leninism. Meisner also views Maoism from this particular perspective, arguing that the Populist strain in Maoism manifested itself in a profound distrust in the "knowledge" brought by urban intellectuals, a deep admiration for the innate "wisdom" of the peasantry and, in the most general sense, a strong tendency to view "the people" as an organic whole and to celebrate their spontaneous revolutionary actions and collective potentialities.²

However, Meisner has not provided a comprehensive survey of the populist themes in Chinese radical discourse of the late 1910s and the early 1920s. This shortcoming renders his entire research project incomplete, since his work lacks a study of the broad historical background to support

I am grateful to Woei Lien Chong and to Geremie Barmé for their help with English. My thanks also to Mabel Lee and Baogang He for their comments and suggestions.

¹ See Maurice Meisner, *Li Ta-chao and the origins of Chinese Marxism* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1967).

² See Maurice Meisner, *Marxism, Maoism and Utopianism* (Madison, Wisc.: University of Wisconsin Press, 1982), pp.94–9.

Citations for the following abbreviations may be found in the notes indicated:

<i>DXWC</i>	n.29 (p.106)
<i>LDZWJ</i>	n.27 (p.105)
<i>WSSQKJS</i>	n.19 (p.104)
<i>WSSQST</i>	n.84 (p.117)
<i>XQN</i>	n.29 (p.107)
<i>ZLX</i>	n.13 (p.102)

³ See Arif Dirlik, *Anarchism in the Chinese revolution* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California University, 1991), pp.148–96.

⁴ See *ibid.*, pp.104, 294, 296.

⁵ See Edward Shils, *The intellectuals and the power and other essays* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1972), pp.395–407.

his arguments. By reading his works alone, readers would not be easily convinced that the populist impulse of that time was not merely a personal idiosyncrasy of Li or Mao. At the same time, Meisner's conception of Populism has its limits. While correctly emphasizing the impact of the Russian Populists upon Chinese intellectuals, Meisner has not paid attention to the complicated intellectual elements which played an important part in shaping the Chinese populist current, especially the anarchist, Utopian socialist and democratic ideas that were in vogue for a time amongst the young intellectuals of the May Fourth period.

Arif Dirlik's detailed study of the popularity of anarchism offers an alternative image of the radical thinking of the May Fourth period.³ Based on his new understanding of the ideas and activities of radical intellectuals of that time, Dirlik presents a comprehensive treatment of the origins of the communist movement, particularly stressing the crucial part played by the competing socialist doctrines and organizations. Dirlik's attitude towards Meisner is nothing if not ambiguous. While acknowledging that Meisner's argument on the populist strain in Chinese Marxism is plausible, he seems to doubt the importance of the populist influence among Chinese radical intellectuals and its role in their subsequent acceptance of Marxism.⁴ Dirlik fails to be aware of a fundamental fact that many populist themes are evident in, and intrinsic to, Chinese anarchist revolutionary discourse. Moreover, Dirlik's overriding emphasis on the role of anarchism in the radical discourse makes the conversion of those non-anarchist but radical intellectuals (such as Chen Duxiu, Tan Pingshan 譚平山, Deng Zhongxia 鄧中夏, etc.) to Marxism difficult to understand.

This article is a preliminary but comprehensive study of the place of populism in Chinese radicalism during the May Fourth period. It is impossible to calculate exactly the degree of the popularity of populism. Nevertheless, through a survey of a wider range of historical materials, not only including the writings of famous figures like Li Dazhao, but also those of little-known, even anonymous young intellectuals, the popularity and dominance of certain populist themes can be demonstrated. I shall use the term 'populism' in a wide sense, without particular emphasis on its Russian roots and its anti-urban bias. In so doing, I certainly do not deny the importance to Chinese intellectuals of Russian Populism with its characteristic feature of eulogizing the moral life of the peasantry. When I deal with this special form of populism, I shall capitalize the first letter.

In this article, the scope for approaching populism in China will be widened to cover concern about the role of intellectuals in the process of modernization. The emergence of populism among the intellectuals in underdeveloped countries, according to Edward Shils, is an inevitable phenomenon.⁵ The intellectuals in these countries are inclined to espouse populism because, as he explained:

Alienated from the indigenous authorities of their own traditional society—chief, sultans, princes, landlords, and priests—and from the rules of their

modern society—the foreign rulers and the “Westernized” constitutional politicians (and, since independence, politicians of the governing party)—the intellectuals have had only the “people,” the “African personality,” the “Indian peasant,” etc., as supports in the search for the salvation of their own souls and their own society.⁶

But the question at stake here is: what is populism? This is a term that is frequently used by historians, social scientists, and political commentators to describe a bewildering variety of phenomena from Swiss direct democracy, the People’s Party of the 1890s in the United States and the *narodnichestvo* of Russian intellectuals in the late nineteenth century to Gandhism in South Asia, Peronism in Latin America, or even the campaigns promoted by environmentalists in the twentieth century.

Problems of this sort are not unique to populism. In trying to define terms such as ‘socialism’, ‘liberalism’, or ‘conservatism’, we would probably have equal difficulty in reaching a consensus. In this study, ‘populism’ is defined as the name not of a single political party, nor of a coherent body of doctrine, but of a widespread political orientation or attitude that may appear in many forms. Only under particular sets of circumstances, for example, in Russia, India and Argentina, has populism developed in its stronger form of a social, even political, movement. Edward Shils has defined populism as “a belief in the creativity and in the superior moral worth of the ordinary people, of the uneducated and unintellectual; it perceives their virtue in their actual qualities or in their potentialities.”⁷ Peter Wiles considers populism as a syndrome, but not a doctrine. In his opinion, “populism is any creed or movement based on the following major premise: virtue resides in the simple people, who are the overwhelming majority, and in their collective traditions.”⁸ Adopting Wiles’ term, ‘populism’ in this study is seen as a syndrome of radical discourses, including a few contradictory orientations or propositions, such as moralistic rather than programmatic modes of thinking, opposition to the existing establishment and anti-capitalism. At the core of populism is an extreme worship of ‘the people’. “The people,” as Shils states, “are a model and a standard; contact with them is good. Esteem and disesteem are meted out on the basis of ‘closeness to the people’ or distance from them.”⁹

The most important point is the populist conception of ‘the people’. It was assumed by many populists that ‘the people’ constitute a more or less single entity, i.e. a homogeneous mass. What was of prime significance to many populists is not the difference between the farmers and the workers, but that society is divided between ‘the people’, who worked for a living, and the vested interests of those who did not work. As Richard Hofstadter has pointed out,

In some populist literature the farmer, conceived as the honest yeoman, was considered to have a certain moral priority because of the “natural” character of his labors, his closeness to the soil, and the fundamental character of agricultural production. But by and large, what is most impressive is the ecumenical character of populist thought, its willingness to grant the moral legitimacy and

⁶ Ibid., p.405.

⁷ Ibid., p.20.

⁸ Peter Wiles, “A syndrome, not a doctrine: some elementary theses on populism,” in Ghitu Ionescu and Ernest Gellner, eds, *Populism: its meaning and national characteristics* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1969), p.166.

⁹ Shils, *Intellectuals and power*, p.405.

¹⁰ Richard Hofstadter, "North America," chapter 1 in Ionescu and Gellner, *Populism*, p.17.

¹¹ See Franco Venturi, *Roots of revolution* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1966); and Antonio Walicki, *The controversy over capitalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969).

Figure 1

Liu Shifu at the age of twenty-nine
(Source: Shifu wencun [Guangzhou: Gexin Shuju, 1927])



¹² See Isaiah Berlin, "Russian Populism," in his *Russian Thinkers* (Harmondsworth, Middx.: Penguin Books, 1979), p.235.

¹³ Shifu, "Bianji xuyan" [Editor's note], *Huiminglu* 1 (20 Aug. 1913), in Ge Maochun et al., ed., *Wuzhengfu zhuyi sixiang ziliao-xuan* [Selection of materials on anarchist thought], 2 vols (Beijing: Beijing Daxue Chubanshe, 1984) [hereafter cited as *ZLX*], p.269.

¹⁴ See Shifu, "Wuzhengfu gongchandang zhi mudi yu shouduan" [The goals and the means of anarchism], *Minsheng* 19 (18 July 1914), *ZLX*, p.316.

political acceptability of anyone who did any kind of honest work. This common bond was thought to be more important than any difference. Moreover, the masses were susceptible to being united, the populists assumed, because of the basic harmony of their interests, their common stake in a fair, honest, and prosperous economy.¹⁰

Actually, no self-avowed populist movement has ever existed in modern China. By 'Chinese populism' I mean the widespread existence of certain crucial populist themes in intellectual discourse of the time. Chinese populism only manifested itself as a kind of political attitude or orientation which shared certain common characteristics with that of other countries. More importantly, populist tendencies were interwoven with other radical thoughts prevailing in modern China, such as anarchism, Utopian socialism, democratic thought, and so on. It was within this intellectual atmosphere that many radical Chinese intellectuals accepted Marxism.

The Anarchist Movement and the Rise of Laborism

In many countries, especially in Russia of the mid-nineteenth century, Populism and anarchism emerged from the same intellectual sources, mainly the works of the French Utopian socialists, and were both accepted as part of the socialist trend. Their common orientation was anti-capitalist. Many Russian anarchists, of whom the most famous are Bakunin and Kropotkin, were active participants in the Populist movements.¹¹ According to Isaiah Berlin, anarchism, emphasis on equality, a full life for all of the people, were universally accepted by the Russian Populists.¹²

Even before the New Culture movement began in China in 1915, the propagation of socialism and the advocacy of social revolution in which Chinese anarchists played a significant part were very much alive. Chinese anarchism was colored by a sort of populist-style sympathy with the misery of the common people. In their pursuit of an ideal society based on absolute egalitarianism, Chinese anarchists, like populists elsewhere, often saw themselves as the spokesmen of 'the common people' (*pingmin* 平民 in Chinese), which was a term they very frequently used. In 1913, a widely popular magazine *Huiminglu* 晦鳴錄 (a year later renamed *Minsheng* 民聲, "Voice of the People") was published in Guangzhou by Liu Shifu 劉師復 (better known under his adopted name of Shifu 師復), a charismatic leader of the Chinese anarchist movement, who called this journal the "voice of the common people" and claimed that it aimed at improving the "livelihood of the common people all over the world."¹³ The so-called "social revolution" they advocated was said to be identical with the so-called "great revolution of the common people" (*pingmin dageming* 平民大革命).¹⁴ Here we find the particular concern for "the common people," a cornerstone of populism.

Opposition to the existing moral and political establishments expressed by Chinese anarchists can be traced back to Confucian moralism, populism and egalitarianism. According to Hao Chang, three Confucian ideas, that is, the ethical ideal of *gong* 公 (literally meaning 'the public') that may be defined as a moral commitment to the social world and the common good, the political idea that the will of the people (*min* 民) serves as a sort of terrestrial surrogate for Heaven's will and thereby constitutes the penultimate source of legitimate authority, and the moral belief that people are all blessed with the same potential for moral fulfilment, reinforced each other in the anti-despotist and anti-traditionalist thinking of Liu Shiwei 劉師培, an eminent anarchist activist before the 1911 revolution.¹⁵

Of more relevance here was the Chinese anarchist propaganda for laborism, which built up a great momentum before the May Fourth movement in 1919. The rise of laborism stimulated a moralistic image of labor and laborers. Labor, according to Shifu, was instinctive to humanity. He refuted the viewpoint that "loving ease and hating work (*baoyi wulao* 好逸惡勞) are natural to human beings," believing in the opposite idea that "being fond of activity (*baodong* 好動) is a fundamental human endowment." What made labor unpleasant lay in its present coercive nature, which resulted from private ownership that led to the inequality between the poor and the rich. With the implementation of public ownership and the advance in science and technology, however, everyone would be in an equal position, so that labor could, as Shifu imagined, become more pleasurable. As a result, everyone would like to "engage in appropriate work beneficial to human life."¹⁶ Thus, in the ideal society of "anarcho-communism," everybody would become a laborer.

For Chinese anarchists, labor was not only an end but also a means. That is the means to avoiding moral degeneration and to promoting moral growth that would help the moral transformation, or rather moral restitution, of both the individual and society as whole. It was in this intellectual context that laborism became increasingly popular, comparable to the idea of "mutual aid," another moral cornerstone of anarchism.¹⁷

In March 1918, a number of famous Chinese anarchists, Wu Zhihui 吳稚暉, Liang Bingxuan 梁冰鉉, and Liu Shixin 劉石心 (Shifu's younger brother) brought out a monthly periodical *Laodong* 勞動 (Labor), the first Chinese journal to use 'labor' in its title, and later praised as "a vanguard for advocating laborism in China."¹⁸ An essay by Wu, entitled "Laborer's Speech," which can be regarded as the foreword to *Labor*, listed its guidelines as follows: (1) revering labor; (2) advocating laborism; (3) approving of appropriate labor and fighting against inappropriate labor; (4) cultivating the morality of the laborer; (5) imbuing the laborers with knowledge of the world and

¹⁵ See Hao Chang, *Chinese intellectuals in crisis: search for order and meaning (1890-1911)* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1987), pp.165-7.

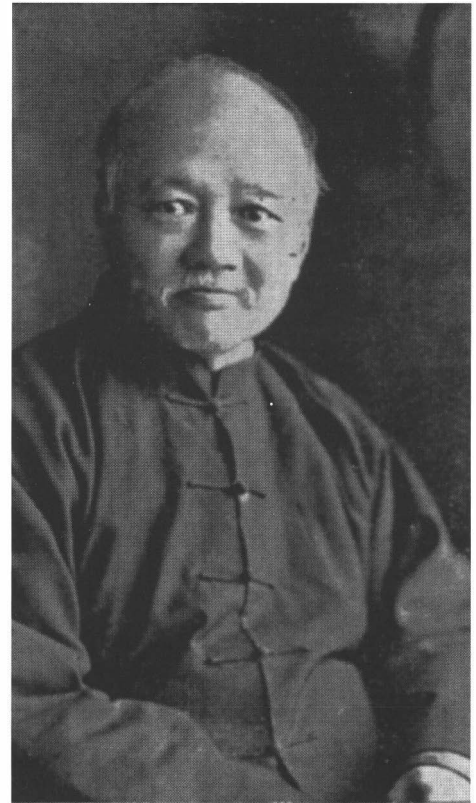
¹⁶ See Shifu, "Wuzhengfu qianshuo" [Anarchy briefly explained], *Huiminglu* 1 (20 Aug. 1913), ZIX, pp.273-5.

¹⁷ See Arif Dirlik, *The origins of Chinese communism* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), pp.81-2.

¹⁸ See Ke Lao, "Wuren ershinian lai zhi chuanbopin" [Our publications over two decades], *Huzhu yuekan* 2 (15 April 1923).

Figure 2

Wu Zhibui (Source: Dalu Zazhi 28.6 (1934))



¹⁹ Wu Zhihui, "Laodongzhe yan" [The laborer speaks], *Laodong* 1.1 (20 Mar. 1918), in *Wusi shiqi qikan jieshao* [Introduction to periodicals of the May Fourth period], 6 vols. (Beijing: Sanlian Shudian, 1979) [hereafter cited as *WSSQKJS*], vol. 2-b, pp. 546–7. Wu Zhihui was a materialist. He divided labor into two sorts: appropriate labor, which is beneficial to the life of people, and inappropriate labor, which is not. His views were widely shared by Chinese radical intellectuals at the time.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 547.

²¹ Dirlik, *Anarchism*, pp. 186–7.

²² Cai Yuanpei, "Laogong shensheng" [Labor is sacred], in Gao Pingshu, ed., *Cai Yuanpei quanji* [The complete works of Cai Yuanpei] (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1918), vol. 3, p. 219.

²³ See Peter Zarrow, *Anarchism and Chinese political culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), pp. 83–9, 92–5.

Figure 3

Cai Yuanpei as President of Peking University (Source: Zhou Tiandu, *Cai Yuanpei zhuan* [Biography of Cai Yuanpei] [Beijing: Renmin Chubanshe, 1984])



general learning; (6) reporting laborers' activities all over the world in order to clarify the real situation of social problems; and (7) promoting the cooperation of China's laborers with those in other countries in order to resolve social problems.¹⁹

According to Chinese anarchists, the greatest social problem was that of labor, and its substance, in their view, was the question of class struggle.²⁰ Contrary to other early Chinese advocates of socialism—the guild socialists and some of the Guomindang's leading intellectuals, for example—most Chinese anarchists admitted that there was class oppression and conflict in China, and that this was the most urgent problem to be addressed. However, without an analysis of the economic relations between different classes, Chinese anarchists often adopted a moralistic approach, speaking of "class struggle" as a question of conflict between the poor and the rich, between those who labored and those who did not, and between manual and mental laborers. Morally, they roundly condemned the inequality in a society where labor was despised, and in which the idle occupied a high position and enjoyed ease and comfort. The problems of labor, they believed, arose entirely from the exploitation of laborers by a parasitic class.²¹

The propaganda of laborism reached its height on 16 August 1918 when Cai Yuanpei 蔡元培, an influential intellectual who was then president of Peking University, gave a strong populist-colored speech at a meeting celebrating the end of World War I:

The world of the future is the world of labor! By labourers we do not mean only metal workers, carpenters, etc. All those who strive for the benefit of others are engaged in labor, be it mental or physical work. Farmers cultivate crops, merchants transport commodities, writers and inventors educate. We are all laborers. We must all recognize the value of labor. Labor is sacred (*laogong shensheng* 勞工神聖).²²

"Labor is sacred" became one of the most fashionable catchcries among Chinese radicals in the years that followed.

The problem of labor had been anticipated earlier, and can be traced back at least to the writings of Liu Shipei, an outstanding representative of the first generation of Chinese anarchists.²³ The rise of laborism, however, only took place in the mid-1910s. Intellectually, it was heavily influenced by the Chinese acceptance of Tolstoy's humanistic ideas.²⁴ In practice, laborism as an ideology was to some extent an immediate product of the work-study movement (*qingong jianxue yundong* 勤工檢學運動) launched in 1916 by famous Chinese anarchists such as Wu Zhihui, Li Shizeng 李石曾 and Cai Yuanpei. Its participants consisted of mostly poor students, who went to France on this program and worked part-time to finance their studies. For Chinese anarchists, the aim of the work-study movement was not only to provide opportunities for education, but also to provide a moral way for the transformation of society. This idealistic zeal was clearly stated in an essay published anonymously in *Labor*:

With the combination of work and study, workers will become scholars, and scholars workers. A new society, the goal of which will be “from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs” (*gejin suoneng, gequ suoxu* 各盡所能, 各取所需), shall be possible.²⁵

Many publications in this period propagated the idea of the combination of labor and study.²⁶

The laborism advocated by Chinese anarchists, especially through their journal *Labor*, did much to bring the problem of labor to the attention of the intellectuals. Many Chinese publications reported widely on this issue. It is noteworthy that Li Dazhao published a series of reports on the conditions of laborers in China from late 1918 onwards, of which a relatively famous piece was the article on Tangshan miners published in the *Meizhou pinglun* 每週評論 (Weekly Critic), edited by Chen Duxiu, who later became general secretary of the Chinese Communist Party.²⁷ In March 1919, Li Dazhao stated that the practice of laborism constituted one of the directions of the youth movement. A life based on labour was for him a life lived in accordance with human nature.²⁸

Even the liberal-inclined journal *Xinchao* 新潮 (New Tide, or Renaissance) also showed concern for laborism, a traditionally non-liberal topic. In April 1919, a translated article entitled “The Resolution of the Problem of Labor” was published. The translator was Tan Minqian 譚鳴謙 (later known as Tan Pingshan), a member of the New Tide Society and later an important leader of the CCP and the left-wing Guomindang.

Within the Chinese context, ‘laborers’ was taken to mean ‘the common people’, that is, those who were not well-educated and were of low social status. Hence, the popularity of laborism can be considered as a prelude to the rise of Chinese populism.

Figure 4

“Labor is sacred”—inscription by Cai Yuanpei for the special May Day issue of *New Youth* 7.6 (1 May 1920)



/ing to his ability, to each according to his needs” (*gejin suoneng, anxu fenpei* 各盡所能按勞分配).

²⁶ See Dirlik, *Chinese communism*, p.87.

²⁷ See Ming Ming (Li Dazhao), “Tangshan meikuang de gongren shenghuo” [A worker’s life in the Tangshan mine], *Meizhou Pinglun* 12 (9 Mar. 1919), in *Li Dazhao wenji* [Collected works of Li Dazhao], 2 vols (Beijing: Beijing Renmin Chubanshe, 1984) [hereafter cited as *LDZWJ*], 1: 658–9.

²⁸ See Shou Chang (Li Dazhao), “Xiandai qingnian huodong de fangxiang” [The direction of modern youth’s activities], *Chenbao*, 14–16 Mar. 1919, *LDZWJ*, vol. 1, pp.663–5.

²⁴ In the English-language world, there has not yet been a comprehensive study of the influence of Tolstoy in China. Derk Bodde’s small book *Tolstoy and China* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1950) is entirely devoted to the influence of Chinese culture on Tolstoy.

²⁵ See *WSSQKJS*, vol.2-a, p.178. The Chinese phrase *gejin suoneng, gequ suoxu*, which was pre-

valent during the May Fourth period, expresses the anarchist principle of distribution. It differs from the socialist principle of distribution, “from each according to his ability, to each according to his work” (*gejin suoneng, anla fenpei* 各盡所能按勞分配), and the communist principle of distribution, “from each accord-

Who was "Mr Democracy" during the May Fourth Period?

The young generation of Chinese anarchists, mainly consisting of the disciples of Shifu, were widely seen as being ultra-radicals. The apolitical, even anti-political, position they held was not accepted by many Chinese socialists. However, as a result of anarchist propaganda, the term 'pingmin' became fashionable and was frequently used by all those who did not want to be identified as 'conservative'. This point is clearly manifested in their understanding of democracy.

The notion of democracy was crucial to May Fourth ideology, and has now become a symbol of the May Fourth era. In an article published in

Figure 5

Contents page, Peking University Monthly 1.1 (Jan. 1919), in which Chen Qixiu published "Shumin zhuyi zhi yanjiu" [A study of democracy]

北 京 大 學 月 刊	
第 一 卷 第 一 號	
民 國 八 年 一 月	
目 錄	
發刊詞	蔡元培
哲學與科學	蔡元培
國家改制與世界改制	陳啟修
庶民主義之研究	陳啟修
軍國主義	陶履恭
文學論	朱希祖
銀行之真往	馬寅初
近世幾何學概論	王仁輔
有機化學史	丁緒賢
中國文字形體變遷新論	錢玄同
駁中國先有苗種後有漢種說	朱希祖
以圖象研究三次方程式之根之性質	馮祖荀
X線與原子內部構造之關係	何育杰
工業化學中之接觸作用	陳世璋
Caudy-Goursat之定理及應用	許光福
答學生問十一事	陳漢章

January 1919 to celebrate the third anniversary of the publication of *Xin qingnian* 新青年 (New Youth), Chen Duxiu gave democracy and science the nicknames 'Mr. Democracy' (De Xiansheng 德先生) and 'Mr. Science' (Sai Xiansheng 賽先生), and concluded that "only these two gentlemen can save China from the political, moral, academical and intellectual darkness in which it finds itself."²⁹

The immediate question here is: which version of democratic thought was accepted by Chinese radicals as mainstream in the May Fourth commitment to democracy? "The concept of democracy," as Sartori says, "is entitled to be diffuse and multifaceted."³⁰ Chow Tse-tsung suggests that May Fourth democratic thought can be grasped within the tradition of liberal democracy.³¹ This image has not yet been seriously doubted, still less challenged. The present article attempts to provide an alternative image.

Democratic thought came to prevail in Chinese radical thinking during the May Fourth period at a time when propaganda regarding laborism had suffused the intellectual world. From early 1919 onwards, there were many publications that propagated the idea of democracy as being an essential part of the so-called 'new tides' (*xinchao* 新潮). This viewpoint was shared not only by radicals, but also by many liberal-minded teachers and students. For example, Chen Qixiu 陳啓修, a professor of law at Peking University, stated in an article published in the moderate academic periodical *Beijing Daxue yuekan* 北京大學月刊 (Peking University Monthly), one which has hitherto attracted little attention in studies of Chinese intellectuals, that democracy and federalism are two tendencies in the so-called "restructuring of the state" (*guojia gaizhi* 國家改制).³² In *New Tide*, edited by a few Peking University students who were close to Hu Shi 胡適, the most famous liberal in China, Luo Jialun 羅家倫 listed democracy and socialism (not liberalism) as the signs of "new tides in the world today."³³

The understanding of democracy by the May Fourth intellectuals was different from what was, and is, normally understood by European and American intellectuals. As Qu Qiubai 瞿秋白 (later famous as a Marxist literary theorist and a leader of the CCP) recalled in 1922, "a unique explanation of this term was presented to Chinese intellectuals."³⁴ But how unique was it?

We could look at this point first of all from the way in which 'democracy' was rendered in Chinese. Besides the transliteration '*de-mo-ke-la-xi*' 德謨克拉西, the most popular translations during the May Fourth period were '*pingmin zhuyi*' 平民主義 and '*shumin zhuyi*' 庶民主義 (which can both literally be retro-translated as the 'principle of the common people'). Sometimes, several terms were used simultaneously. Mao Zedong, for example, in his "Manifesto on the Founding of the *Xiang River Review*," first used the term '*pingmin zhuyi*' to refer to 'democracy', and then immediately listed many other terms such as '*de-mo-ke-la-xi*', '*minben zhuyi*' 民本主義 (the people as the basis), '*minzhu zhuyi*' 民主主義 (people's rule—the usual term today), and '*shumin zhuyi*' (the principle of the common people).³⁵ Li Dazhao, from 1918 to 1919, when speaking about democracy, often used the English term

²⁹ Chen Duxiu, "*Xin qingnian* zuian zhi dabianshu" [New Youth's reply to charges against the magazine], *Xin qingnian* [hereafter cited as *XQM*] 6.1 (15 Jan. 1919), in *Duxiu wencun* [Selected works of Chen Duxiu] (Shanghai: Yantong Shuju, 1922; reprint ed., Hefei: Anhui Renmin Chubanshe, 1987) [hereafter cited as *DXWC*], p.243.

³⁰ Giovanni Sartori, *The theory of democracy revisited* (Chatham, N.J.: Chatham House Publishers, 1987), p.3.

³¹ See Chow Tse-tsung, *The May Fourth movement: intellectual revolution in modern China* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1960).

³² See Chen Qixiu, "Guojia gaizhi yu shijie gaizhi" [Reorganizing the state and the world], *Beijing Daxue yuekan* 1.1 (Jan. 1919): 20–21.

³³ See Luo Jialun, "Jinri zhi shijie xinchao" [New tides in today's world], *Xinchao* 1.1 (Jan. 1919): 19–24.

³⁴ Qu Qiubai, *Erxiang jicheng* [Travelling in the Soviet Union] (Shanghai: Shangwu Yinshuguan, 1922), reprinted in *Qu Qiubai wenji: wenxue pian* [The collected works of Qu Qiubai: literature section] (Beijing: Renmin Wenxue Chubanshe, 1985), p.29. Qu Qiubai's *Erxiang jicheng* [Travelling in the Soviet Union] was originally published by the Commercial Press (Shanghai) in 1922. At the time, he was a journalist with the Peking-based *Chenbao*.

³⁵ See Stuart Schram, ed., *Mao's road to power: revolutionary writings (1912–1949)*, vol.1: *The pre-Marxist period, 1912–1920* (Armonk, N.Y.: M. E. Sharpe, 1992), pp.318–19.

³⁶ See Li Dazhao, "Fa-E geming zhi bijiao-guan" [A comparison of the French and Russian Revolutions], *Yanzhi* 3 (1 July 1918), *LDZWJ*, vol. 1, pp. 572–5; and Shou Chang (Li Dazhao), "Zhanhou zhi shijie chaoliu" [World trends following World War I], *Chenbao*, 7–9 February 1919), *LDZWJ*, vol. 1, pp. 627–31.

³⁷ See Li Dazhao, "Shehui zhuyi yu shehui yundong" [Socialism and social movements], *LDZWJ*, vol. 2, pp. 371–436. This is an unpublished manuscript which was used as a textbook in 1920 when Li was a teacher at Beida. Also see Li Shouchang (Li Dazhao), "Cong pingmin zhengzhi dao gongren zhengzhi" [From democracy (the politics of the common people) to ergatocracy], *Chenbao fukan* [Chenbao supplement] (15–17 Dec. 1921), *LDZWJ*, vol. 2, pp. 501–7; and Li Shouchang, "Pingmin zhengzhi yu gongren zhengzhi" [Democracy (the politics of the common people) and ergatocracy], *XQN* 9.6 (1 July 1922), *LDZWJ*, vol. 2, pp. 569–74.

³⁸ See Li Shouchang, *Pingmin zhuyi* [The principle of the common people (or Populism)] (Shanghai: Shangwu Yinshuguan, 1923), reprinted in *LDZWJ*, vol. 2, pp. 588–609. In the English translation of Mao's article, Stuart Schram reminds readers to note the different renderings for 'democracy' in Chinese. As Schram states, the term *pingmin zhuyi* had been used by Mao's mentor, Li Dazhao. However, Li did not use the term *pingmin zhuyi* in his writings when Mao published his *Xiangjiang pinglun*.

³⁹ Sartori, *Theory of democracy*, p. 22.

⁴⁰ This article, which represents the extent of theoretical understanding of the concept of democracy at that time, has never been mentioned by China scholars in the English-language world. It is worth noting that, according to the contents given by Chen, this article was to consist of two parts, but that only the first part was published in *Beijing Daxue yuekan*. Where or whether the second part was published is still unclear.

⁴¹ See Chen Qixiu, "Shumin zhuyi zhi yanjiu" [A study of the notion of democracy], *Beijing Daxue yuekan* 1.1 (Jan. 1919): 28–32.

⁴² This is from the Confucian classic *Li Ji* (chapter 1, any version). The translation is my own.

⁴³ See Zhu Zhimin, "'Wusi' shiqi de suowei 'pingmin' shi zhi na xie ren?" [Who were the so-called 'common people' during the May Fourth period?], *Lishijiaoxue* 9 (Sept. 1988): 55–6.

without Chinese translation. Sometimes, he adopted the phrase '*minzhu zhuyi*'.³⁶ From 1920 onwards, however, Li came to accept '*pingmin zhuyi*' as the most accurate Chinese translation.³⁷ He even used it as the title for a long article on the notion of democracy which was published in 1923.³⁸

The diversity of the Chinese renderings for democracy embodies the ambiguity of etymological democracy that simply defines 'democracy' as the rule or power of the people. The point at stake here is the meanings of the 'people'. Sartori gives six possible interpretations of 'people':

1. People meaning literally everybody
2. People meaning an undetermined large part, a great many
3. People meaning the lower class
4. People as an indivisible entity, as an organic whole
5. People as a greater part expressed by an absolute-majority principle
6. People as a greater part expressed by a limited-majority principle.³⁹

The meaning of 'people' as understood by May Fourth intellectuals drifted between the first four interpretations on Sartori's list. At that time, however, few were interested in making clear the distinction between (a) all the people of the nation (*guomin* 國民), (b) the common people, and (c) the majority. Peking University professor Chen Qixiu was a rare exception. In January 1919, he published a somewhat academic article in *Peking University Monthly*, entitled "A Study of the Notion of Democracy,"⁴⁰ in which he argued that '*shumin zhuyi*' rather than '*pingmin zhuyi*' was the best Chinese rendering of 'democracy'. In his view the rendering '*pingmin zhuyi*' implied opposition by the common people to the nobility, but democracy was not something to be exclusively practised by the common people. According to him, '*shu*' 庶 in Chinese means 'all', and '*shumin*' 庶民 means 'all the people', i.e. all the persons of a nation. Therefore he held that '*shumin zhuyi*' was the best term as it expresses the organic and holistic implications within the concept of democracy. The term 'democracy' in Chen's mind evoked three things: the well-being of the people, popular sovereignty, and government by the people.⁴¹

Although Chen Qixiu insisted that '*shumin*' means 'all the people', the fact is that, in its ordinary usage, this term was frequently employed to distinguish common people from officials. "Rites," as the Confucian aphorism goes, "cannot be applied to the common people, and punishments cannot be enforced among senior officials" (*li buxia shumin, xing bushang dafu* 禮不下庶民, 刑不上大夫).⁴² Actually, the popular usage of the terms '*pingmin*' and '*shumin*' encouraged Chinese intellectuals to understand 'people' as 'the lower class', that is, the poor, the laboring class, workers, peasants and so on.⁴³ The definition of the lower class here was not derived from any class theory, but was merely based on sympathy for the suffering majority. As a result, etymological democracy as widely understood and Rousseauian democracy that Chen Qixiu insisted on were both incorporated into a discourse of populist democracy.

The notion of populist democracy is a radical version of democratic thought. As J. Roland Pennock states:

Populism is at the opposite pole from élitism. It assumes a maximum of popular participation, so that power tends to be distributed equally. In its normative version, equality is its primary value. It also tends to assume that all decision making will be by a simple majority. Nothing should, or, on the descriptive side, does obstruct the will of the majority.⁴⁴

Such a version of democratic thought is congenial to an age-old traditional Chinese ideal, that is, egalitarianism. The emphasis on equality, without an awareness of the distinctions between its diverse meanings, as we shall see below, runs through the whole May Fourth discourse of democracy, one marked by a powerful concern for the well-being of the common people and a longing to remove social inequality.

'Political democracy', therefore, was widely understood by Chinese May Fourth intellectuals as 'the politics of the common people' (*pingmin zhengzhi* 平民政治, which, in their view, meant "to implement general elections and organize a government of the common people."⁴⁵ In such a political system, Luo Jialun argued, "the common people should administer the legislative, executive, and judicial bodies."⁴⁶ Chen Duxiu believed that "real democracy must mean that political power is held by all the people."⁴⁷ He suggested that everyone should possess the rights of proposing and making policy.⁴⁸ However, he said, democratization in China was obstructed by the government and congress which had been seized by the minority. In 1916 Chen had already proposed that party politics should be replaced by the "movement or politics of the people of the nation" (*guomin yundong* 國民運動 or *guomin zhengzhi* 國民政治).⁴⁹ By 1919, he further suggested that the only way to implement democracy in China was by "the common people conquering the government." That is to say, "the common people as the majority—consisting of students, merchants, peasants and workers—should forcefully bring into play the spirit of democracy (in which, except for various associations organized by the common people, no political parties should be allowed to exist), in order to make governmental officials and members of parliament, as the minority, hang their heads and listen to the demands of the common people."⁵⁰

The representative system and party politics, which in the mainstream Western view are both fundamental characteristics of a democracy, were abhorred by Chinese radicals even before the May Fourth period; Rousseauian antipathy to representative democracy had already been voiced early in the century by intellectuals ranging from Liang Qichao to Chen Duxiu and the anarchists. The destruction of the representative system under Yuan Shikai's rule and the failure of the Beiyang governments to establish such a system aggravated the widespread distrust in representative democracy. Many intellectuals were eager to find alternative ways to achieve the political participation of the masses. The theory and practice of direct democracy, as partially exemplified by Swiss democracy, also attracted their attention. The rights of proposing, impeaching and reviewing, called 'direct civic rights' (*zhijie minquan* 直接民權) in Chinese, were introduced into China by the Guomindang-founded magazines *Xingqi pinglun* 星期評論 (Weekend Review) and *Jianshe* 建設 (Construction).⁵¹

⁴⁴ J. Roland Pennock, *Democratic political theory* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1979), p.163. Here Pennock is actually speaking of populistic democracy, although he uses the term 'populism'.

⁴⁵ Luo Jialun, "New tides," p.21.

⁴⁶ Luo Jialun, "Dazhan hou zhi minzhu zhuyi" [Democratic thinking after the Great War], *Chenbao*, 15–16 Apr. 1919.

⁴⁷ Chen Duxiu, "New Youth's reply," p.245.

⁴⁸ See Chen Duxiu, "Xin Qingnian xuanyan" [New Youth manifesto], *XQN* 7.1 (Dec. 1919), *DXWC*, p.257.

⁴⁹ Chen Duxiu, "Yijiu yiliu nian" [1916], *XQN* 1.6 (15 Jan. 1916), *DXWC*, pp.32–6.

⁵⁰ Zhi Yan (Chen Duxiu), "Shandong wenti yu guomin juewu" [The problem of Shandong and the awakening of the people], *Meizhou pinglun* 23 (26 May 1919): 428–9.

⁵¹ See Zhong Kai (Liao Zhongkai), "San da minquan" [Three great civil rights], *Xingqi pinglun* 6 (18 July 1919); Liao Zhongkai, transl., "Quanmin zhengzhi lun" [On all-people politics], *Jianshe* 1–6 (Aug. 1919–Jan. 1920); and Min Yi, transl., "Chuanzhiquan fujuequan baguanquan zhi zuoyong" [The functions of proposing, reviewing and impeaching rights], *Jianshe* 1 (Aug. 1919).

Figure 6

Chen Duxiu (Source: DXWC)



⁵² See Arif Dirlik, "Ideology and organization in the May Fourth movement: some problems in the intellectual historiography of the May Fourth period," *Republican China* 12.1 (Nov. 1986): 6.

⁵³ Shou Chang, "Laodong jiaoyu wenti" [The problem of labor education], *Chenbao*, 14–15 Feb. 1919, *LDZWJ*, vol.1, p.632.

⁵⁴ See Luo Jialun, "New tides," pp.19–22.

⁵⁵ For a detailed introduction to the New Tide society see Vera Schwarcz, *The Chinese enlightenment: intellectuals and the legacy of the May Fourth movement* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1986), esp. chapters 2 and 3, and appendices A, B and C.

⁵⁶ Chow Tse-tsung, *May Fourth movement*, p.61.

Another unique feature of the May Fourth concept of democracy was its all-embracing character. In emphasizing its dialectically historic moments, Dirlik has outlined three stages of change in the notion of democracy during the May Fourth period. According to him, to its proponents in New Youth in the early stage of the Movement, 'democracy' signified intellectual democracy. In May 1919, when the May Fourth Movement was 'politicized', it meant political democracy. By the summer of 1919, when the working class became part of the Movement, a new idea of democracy, namely, 'economic democracy', emerged.⁵² In fact, however, democracy or *pingmin zhuyi* was always seen as an all-encompassing rather than only an intellectual or political ideology during the entire May Fourth period. In February 1919, Li Dazhao published an essay in which he stated:

All aspects of modern life are influenced by Democracy and run according to Democracy. You can find it in the political, economic, social, ethical, educational and religious, even in the literary and artistic realm. Everything in modern life is dominated by it. To sum up in one sentence, Democracy is the sole authority in the modern era.⁵³

This all-embracing character of the May Fourth discourse of democracy can also be illustrated by reviewing the discussions of democracy by some members of the New Tide society, which was organized by a number of Peking University students. In the first issue of *New Tide*, then a very influential journal, Luo Jialun, who was a student at Peking University and one of initiators of the New Tide Society, expressed the view that democracy as a global new tide must be coordinated with the current of socialism. In his view, the contemporary new tide had three characteristics: first, collectivistic policies and public ownership would be emphasized in the future economy; second, the politics of the common people would be carried out; third, in society as a whole, various socialist policies would be implemented.⁵⁴

Although most of the members of the New Tide Society were involved in the radical May Fourth Movement, they are generally depicted by historians as 'liberal intellectuals'. This description is by no means groundless. In fact, most of them later became liberal-minded writers and scholars. What they had in common was their reformist mentality, for they either consciously rejected or instinctively feared violence. Only two members of the Society, Zhang Shenfu 張申府 and Tan Ping-shan, became communists. But both of them left the CCP in the late 1920s.⁵⁵ It should be stressed, however, that in the minds of these 'liberal intellectuals' there were few liberal elements. While Chow Tse-tsung in his work *The May Fourth Movement* has correctly pointed out that "[T]heir ideas were a vague mixture of socialism and democracy,"⁵⁶ he does not discriminate between liberal and populist democracy, and thereby fails to present an adequate analysis of the mixture.

Figure 7

Li Dazhao (Source: LDZWJ)



In fact, the understanding of democracy by the members of the New Tide Society, just like the popular view, was populist, although most of them rarely demonstrated that they were affected by the populist enthusiasm widespread among Chinese radicals at that time. Moreover, democracy, in their minds, was an all-embracing ideology. These points are confirmed by Tan Mingqian's lengthy article entitled "Aspects of Democracy," published in *New Tide* in May 1919, which has been neglected by most Western historians of China's intellectuals, such as Chow Tse-tsung, Vera Schwarcz and Arif Dirlik. Tan's argument, to a great extent, typified the understanding of democracy by students at Peking University. "The essential form of democracy," he said, "is irrelevant to either political or social problems; rather, it presents a way of life."⁵⁷ The author distinguished the following four forms of democracy: political, economic, philosophical, and social.⁵⁸ Tan subsumed political equality, social justice, humanitarianism, national sovereignty, free expression of people's will, world peace and laborism all under an umbrella concept of 'democracy'. The core of political democracy, he said, was the principle of the victory of reasonable truth over naked force (*gongli zhansheng qiangquan* 公理戰勝強權). By philosophical democracy, he meant the principle of humanitarianism that was embodied in US President Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points.⁵⁹

This view must be understood within the historical context of the time, the period following the conclusion of World War I on 1 November 1918. Many Chinese, including numerous intellectuals, somewhat naïvely believed that the Allied victory was the manifestation of the principle of so-called "reasonable truth over naked force," and this became a pet phrase among the population.⁶⁰ From the Allied victory and Wilson's Fourteen Points, it seemed to the Chinese that the spirit of international egalitarianism was back. To be against all forms of "naked force" became an extremely popular slogan, well illustrated by Mao Zedong 毛澤東 in the summer of 1919:

'*Pingmin zhuyi*' (*dui-mo-ke-la-xi*, also '*minben zhuyi*', '*minzhu zhuyi*', '*shumin zhuyi*') is a fundamental doctrine that is opposed to all forms of brute force. Such force, whether religious, literary, political, social, educational, economical, ideological, or international, no longer has a place in this world. All should be overthrown in the name of '*pingmin zhuyi*'.⁶¹

The main focus of Tan's article was on economic and social democracy. At the heart of economic democracy, he stated, lay the problem of labor. According to Tan, Karl Marx, among others, had provided the most valuable solutions to this problem. By 'social democracy' Tan meant the implementation of socialism in all realms of social life, in order to resolve the problems of labor, paupers, women, and so on. Tan devoted the bulk of his article to

Figure 8

Part of the first page of Tan Mingqian's article, "Aspects of democracy," published in *Xinchao* 1.5 (1 May 1919)

「德謨克拉西」之四面觀
今日世界之最大主潮維何？稍有識者，莫不知舉「德謨克拉西」以對矣。「德謨克拉西」者，英文為「Democracy」，法文為「Démocratie」，茲從英文音譯也。今人從義譯者，日本譯作民主政治，或作民本政治，或作民主主義，或作民本主義。我國除間用日譯外，或譯作平民政治，或譯作平民主義，或譯作庶民主義。至於今日尚未有一定之譯名。但欲以我國適當文字，能簡單的完滿其意義者，殊非易事。且與其徒從事於譯名上之爭論，毋寧將其所含善之意義，及其所實現之事實，從實際上表出之為愈。此茲編所以從音譯之意也。惟「德謨克拉西」之研究對象物異常廣大，因之諸家立論，難歸一致。若在我國，國體雖屬民主，然於「德謨克拉西」之研究，尚無要領。蓋我國普通國民，對於「德謨克拉西」之各種問題，仍未明瞭者，尚不知有幾許人也。

譚鳴謙

⁵⁷ Tan Mingqian, "De-mo-ke-la-xi zhi simian-guan" [Aspects of democracy], *Xinchao* 1.5 (1 May 1919): 808.

⁵⁸ Ibid., p.809.

⁵⁹ Ibid., pp.807–21.

⁶⁰ See, for example, Zhi Yan (Chen Duxiu), "Meizhou pinglun fakanci" [Founding preface to the *Weekly Critic*], *Meizhou pinglun* 1 (12 Dec. 1918), *DXWC*, p.388.

⁶¹ [Mao] Zedong, "Xiangjiang pinglun chuanke xuan" [Manifesto on the founding of the *Xiang River Review*], *Xiangjiang pinglun* 1 (14 July 1919), in *Mao Zedong zaoqi wengao* [Mao Zedong's writings from his early years] (Changsha: Hunan Chubanshe, 1990), p.293. The translation here is my own. For Schram's translation see his *Mao's road to power*, pp.318–19.

⁶² See Tan Mingqian, "Aspects of democracy," pp.807–20. 'Socialism of the chair' refers to the project of the German Verein für Sozialpolitik, which played a critical role in the initiation of modern social policies in Germany at the turn of the century. For more details see Dietrich Rueschemeyer and Ronan van Rossen, "The Verein für Sozialpolitik and the Fabian Society," in *States, social knowledge, and the origins of modern social policies*, ed. Dietrich Ruesche-meyer and Theda Skocpol (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1996), pp.117–62.

⁶³ Ibid., p.821.

⁶⁴ See Chen Duxiu, "Shixin minzhi de jichu" [The basis for implementing democracy], *XQN* 7.1 (Dec. 1919), *DXWC*, pp.250–61.

⁶⁵ See Li Dazhao, "Socialism and social movements," p.376.

⁶⁶ Berlin, "Russian Populism," pp.211–12.

a discussion of social policies outlined by various schools of socialism, including state socialism, 'socialism of the chair', democratic socialism, and so forth.⁶² Eventually he concluded:

We have no alternative but to follow the world tide of change, and not to resist it. Today, the people of China realise the need to conform to that tide, to turn over a new leaf, and sincerely to mend their ways. By following the example of advanced, civilized countries, we should give full play to the true spirit of social democracy under the republican government. Whether in the field of politics, the economy or education, a determined advance should be made along the track towards achieving a perfect state. It is particularly urgent to carry out policies aimed at resolving a range of problems so as to achieve social stability.⁶³

The emphasis on economic and social democracy and the identification of democracy with socialism seemed virtually to become the consensus among Chinese socialists. Chen Duxiu, for example, proposed in 1919 that economic and social democracy constitute the basis of implementing this ideology in politics. Economic and social democracy for him meant the achievement of equality and the abolition of class.⁶⁴ Li Dazhao also emphasized that the spirit of democracy (*pingmin zhuyi*) and of socialism were consistent.⁶⁵

In short, the democracy propagated by May Fourth intellectuals was actually an extension of populist democracy. They pushed the notions of political equality and popular sovereignty to such an extreme that democracy became a populist Utopia.

"Go to the Villages," "Go to the Factories," "Go to the People"

In early 1919, more and more Chinese intellectuals came to be deeply influenced by Russian Populism. Classical 'Russian Populism' generally refers to an intellectual movement largely inspired by the writings of Alexander Herzen and Nikolai Chernyshevskii between 1850 and 1880. In response to the development of capitalism in the West, Russian Populists hoped to find an alternative means of modernizing Russia, bypassing capitalism. Their central goals were social justice and social equality. Most of them were convinced that the essence of a just and equal society existed already in the Russian peasant commune—the *obshchina*, organized in the form of a collective unit called the Mir.

The Mir was a free association of peasants which periodically redistributed the agricultural land to be tilled and whose decisions were binding on all its members. Isaiah Berlin describes the Russian Populists' worship of the Mir as follows:

The Populist leaders believed that this form of cooperation offered the possibility of a free and democratic social system in Russia, originating as it did in the deepest moral instincts and traditional values of Russian, and indeed all human, society, and they believed that the workers (by which they meant all

productive human beings), whether in town or country, could bring this system into being with a far smaller degree of violence or coercion than had occurred in the industrial West. This system, since it alone sprang naturally from fundamental human needs and a sense of the right and the good that existed in all men, would ensure justice, equality and the widest opportunity for the full development of human faculties.⁶⁶

Although it is clear that there had not been any organization in China homologous to the Mir,⁶⁷ and that most Chinese intellectuals, especially the radicals, did not firmly believe that there was a spontaneous socialist consciousness among the Chinese peasantry, this did not prevent them from drawing spiritual strength from Russian Populism. Its ideology and strategy was publicized with increasing frequency in radical writings.

In February 1919, Li Dazhao published an article in the Peking *Chenbao* 晨報 (Morning News) entitled "Youth and the villages," which, as Maurice Meisner has shown, was the most faithful expression of the spirit of early Russian Populism to be found in modern Chinese intellectual history.⁶⁸ In this article, Li appealed to young intellectuals "to go to the villages, adopting the spirit of the Russian youth in the Russian village propaganda movement of those years, and beginning without delay the work of developing those villages."⁶⁹ He explained his reasons as follows:

China is a rural nation and most of the laboring class consists of peasants. Unless they are liberated, our whole nation will not be liberated; their sufferings are the sufferings of the nation; their ignorance is the ignorance of the nation; the advantages and defects of their lives are the advantages and defects of all of our politics. Go out and develop them and teach them to demand liberation, to speak out about their sufferings, to throw off their ignorance and be people who will themselves plan their own lives. Who would like to do so except our youth!⁷⁰

In the same article, Li Dazhao also emphasized the populist contrast between city and rural life. As in the Mir worship of the Russian Populists, Li described rural life as "natural" and "good":

Idle young friends in the cities! You should know that while cities have a great many evils, villages contain much happiness. Many are the dark aspects of city life, and many the bright aspects of village life. City life is virtually that of ghosts, whereas village life is truly that of living people. City air is filthy, while village air is clean.⁷¹

At the core of his article, Li proposed the idea that "if a new, contemporary civilization is to be introduced to the fundamental level of Chinese society, it is important that the intelligentsia unite with the laboring class."⁷² Only through this populist style of social reconstruction, Li believed, could the ideal of "Young China" (*Shaonian Zhongguo* 少年中國) hope to be achieved.⁷³

Russian Populism also had a great impact upon some writers who were influenced by socialist currents prevalent at that time and later became sympathizers of Chinese communist literary movements. In 1920, for

⁶⁷ See Meisner, *Li Ta-chao*, p.86.

⁶⁸ Whether the democratic commune in Russia was a historical reality or something of a historical illusion is an issue open to controversy. For more details, see R. Portal, ed., *Le statut des paysans libérés du servage 1861-1961* (Paris: Mouton [under the auspices of the École Pratique des Hautes Études], 1963). The author thanks Mark Elvin for bringing this point to his attention.

⁶⁹ Shou Chang, "Qingnian yu nongcun" [Youth and the village], *Chenbao*, 20-23 Feb. 1919), *LDZWJ*, vol.1, pp.648.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p.649. I use Meisner's translation with minor changes.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p.651.

⁷² *Ibid.*, p.648.

⁷³ See Li Dazhao, "Shaonian Zhongguo de shaonian yundong" [The youth movement for Young China], *Shaonian Zhongguo* 1.3 (15 Sept 1919), *LDZWJ*, vol.2, pp.42-5.

⁷⁴ Zheng Zhenduo, "Zailun women jinhou de shehui gaizao yundong" [Further discussion of our future social transformation movement], *Xin shehui* 9 (21 Jan. 1920), WSSQKJS, vol.1-a, p.326.

example, Zheng Zhenduo 鄭振鐸 argued in *Xin shehui* 新社會 (New Society) that the social transformation movement should not devote its main efforts to publishing a few propaganda magazines confined to intellectual circles, but should rather "learn from Russian youth's spirit of 'going to the peasantry,' to enlighten them, to change their minds, to awaken them from their dreaming state and at the same time to reform their lives."⁷⁴ Shortly

Figure 9

The first page of Zheng Zhenduo's article "The foundation of the student movement," published in *New Society* 12 on 21 Feb. 1920

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北京社會實進會消息

●學生的根本上的運動

鄭振鐸

現在因爲外交的問題，全國各處的學生運動，又起來了。天津的運動，已經失敗了，北京的學生，也鬧得沒有十分的结果。他們不惟運動不得效果，並且還給政府恣意的蹂躪；被捕的也有，被打的頭破腦折的也有，一切言論行動的自由，完全被剝奪盡了。咳！全國的國民很多，爲什麼都不起來，却坐視學生之「奮鬥」「反抗強權」而不一援手？

我前天遇着好些朋友，他們對於學生的運動，不惟不贊許幫助，並且還有許多微辭；許多商家，對於學生的被捕被打，也若「無與己事」袖手旁觀。求他們與學生一致行動，真是困難極了！咳！他們爲什麼如此？良心都死了嗎？

不對！他們是沒有覺悟，沒根本上的覺悟！

北京益世報曾說學生極爲可憐，舉國乃無一人爲之後盾。這句話實在不差。在前次——去年——請願風潮時，上海的時事新報，曾極力主張直接的羣衆運動。真是夢話！除了學生以外，誰還肯去幹這事？即使學生都流血死於朝市，我恐怕這個靜的死的無爲的中國社會裏，還是沒有人起來繼他們後步的！

咳！可憐！他們爲什麼如此？

他們是沒有知識，沒有奮鬥的精神！

使他們有知識，明事理，有覺悟，有奮鬥的精神，我

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afterwards, in another article published in the same journal, Zheng urged students to “Go! Go to the countryside and factories. ... Our future hope rests upon farmers and workers.”⁷⁵

More significantly, there are indications that the example of Russian Populism became increasingly attractive to many young intellectuals, in particular the students in universities and colleges. This is revealed in two historical documents, which have never been quoted by historians of modern Chinese intellectuals either in China or in the West. The first is from the opening editorial announcement in an influential magazine, *Beijing Daxue xuesheng zhou-kan* 北京大學學生週刊 (Peking University Students' Weekly or La Studentaro De La Stata Pekin-Universitato), established by the university's Student Union in January 1920. In this essay, the editor claimed:

We place our faith in a dictum popular among Russian students, and take it as our motto: “If you want to get rid of the yoke of autocracy, go, seek the people, live among them, educate them, and win their confidence.”⁷⁶

The second is from *Xuedeng* 學燈 (Light of Learning), the supplement of a reform-inclined, Shanghai-based newspaper *Shishi xinbao* 時事新報 (Current Events Daily), in which, from April to June 1920, eight young people debated the notions of “combining with the laborers” and “going to the people.” Particularly noteworthy is the article entitled “Going to the People,” written under the pen-name Bin Bin 彬彬, in which the author again suggested that young Chinese intellectuals should follow the example of the Russian Populists and go to the villages. He listed the following eight reasons for doing so:

1. Most of our population is made up of peasants who, once educated, would possess the power to transform society.
2. Peasants are only ignorant because they are poorly educated.
3. They lead simple lives.
4. They are well-intentioned because they have not been spoiled by outside events.
5. They cannot organize themselves, possessing [as they do] no knowledge of self-government on account of having been subjected to thousands of years of despotism.

Figure 10

Masthead of the Peking University Students' Weekly

⁷⁵ Zheng Zhenduo, “Xuesheng de genben-shang de yundong” [The foundation of the student movement], *Xin shehui* 12 (21 Feb. 1920), WSSQKJS, vol.1-a, p.326.

⁷⁶ See Peking Students' Union, *Beijing Daxue xuesheng zhoukan* 1 (Jan. 1920), p.1. This magazine was closed down five months later by the Peking government. The English translation is the original, apart from two corrected spelling errors. The Chinese for ‘the people’ here is *pingmin*.

⁷⁷ See Bin Bin, "Wang tianjian qu" [Go to the villages], *Xuedeng*, 8 June 1920, p.2.

⁷⁸ Renewed because Russian Populism had already heavily influenced Chinese revolutionaries for a time during the late-Qing period. See Meisner, *Li Ta-chao*, p.278, n.21.

⁷⁹ Ruo Yu (Wang Guangqi), "Xuesheng yu laodong" [Students and labor], *Chenbao*, 25 Feb. 1919.

⁸⁰ Deng Zhongxia, *Zhongguo zhi gong yundong jianshi* [A brief history of the Chinese labor movement] (Moscow, 1930; reprint ed., Beijing: Beijing: Renmin Chubanshe, 1953), p.9.

6. They lack initiative, knowing little beyond farming.

7. They possess a certain spirit of co-operation and mutual aid, but it is narrow rather than broad in nature because they are unschooled.

8. They live in pleasant surroundings—simple, honest and frugal.⁷⁷

It is obvious that Li Dazhao's "Youth and the villages" had played an important role in the renewed popularity of Russian Populism,⁷⁸ although he did not devote himself to the populist activities in which young students participated. Here perhaps we can locate the origin of the Maoist doctrine of "combining intellectuals with the broad masses of workers and peasants."

It must, however, also be noted that, although it was indeed largely Russian in origin, the Chinese campaign of "going to the people" during the May Fourth period dropped the Russian Populists' anti-urban bias. The two slogans, "going to the villages" and "going to the factories," were often used together—an impulse also expressed in the more general formulation enjoining people to "join with laborers." In February 1919, when Li Dazhao published his important article "Youth and the village," Wang Guangqi 王光祈, the leader of the Young China Association who had taken part in the work-study program in France, also published an article in *Chenbao*, in which he stated:

It is better to join with laborers and to carry out reform than just to talk clamorously [about the problem of labor] while remaining outside the world of laborers. If we stand apart from laborers, we cannot appreciate their real interests. We can understand their misery only if we enter their world.⁷⁹

Figure 11

Wang Guangqi (Source: Zuo Shunsheng et al., *Wang Guangqi xiansheng jiniance* [Taipei: Wenhui Chubanshe, 1966])



Besides the influence of Russian Populism, the manifestation of workers' power was also an important factor in promoting the rise of the 'going to the people' campaign. The workers' strike on 5 June 1919 in Shanghai against foreign enterprises in support of the May Fourth Movement had far-reaching implications for radical intellectual thinking. Deng Zhongxia, at the time a student at Peking University and later an important Communist labor organizer, recalled in his *A Brief History of the Chinese Labor Movement* published a few years later:

The gentlemen of the upper classes so far have not bothered to pay any attention to laborers. With this movement [the June Third movement], laborers demonstrated their power to bourgeois intellectuals who could not but be impressed with its magnitude. And now they are at pains to secure the support of laborers.⁸⁰

Having become aware of the laborers' power, many young students threw themselves into populist activities aimed at social transformation. At that time, the Chinese campaign 'going to the people' mainly took two forms: the work-study movement and the education of the common people. Many organizations were established, such as the Labor-Learning Mutual-Aid Corps, the Common People's

Education Lecture Society and the Common People's Education Society, for implementing 'populist democracy' or *pingmin zhuyi*.⁸¹

The populist practices of the May Fourth students in 1919 were heavily tinged with Utopianism. The students naïvely imagined that these programs would provide opportunities for the reorganization of Chinese society. Wang Guangqi, a zealous initiator of the Labor-Learning Mutual-Aid Corps, stated:

Labor-learning mutual-aid groups are the embryonic form of a new society, the first step towards the fulfilment of our ideals. ... If these groups eventually succeed and steadily gain popularity, and if the ideal of 'from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs' can gradually be realized, then this campaign will be called a 'peaceful economic revolution'.⁸²

His enthusiasm, as Dirlik notes, was shared by some of China's most prominent intellectuals.⁸³

In March 1920, however, the first labor-learning group founded in Peking conceded defeat after lasting for only four months. This event shocked the radical intellectuals, many of whom wrote essays to discuss the reasons for its failure. Li Dazhao thought it inappropriate to implement such programs in the cities. Based on his romantic views of rural life, he called upon youth to "go to the villages, buy some cheap land on which to live, and start farming."⁸⁴ Dai Jitao 戴季陶, at that time an advocate of socialism and later a prominent Guomindang intellectual, held more strongly anti-capitalist views, suggesting that "if youth, who are both zealous and determined to devote themselves to transforming society and to be ready to bear hardships and take risks, are neither willing to be dependent upon an evil society nor able to achieve the goals of labor-learning and mutual-aid programs, they must adhere firmly to their faith in universal salvation, abandoning all notions of merely improving themselves morally, and go to the factories under the capitalist system of production."⁸⁵ His arguments were embraced by a participant in the labor-learning mutual-aid movement, Shi Cuntong 施存統, then a student in Hangzhou who later became an influential figure in the early CCP youth movement. In an article summing up his experiences in and the lessons to be learned from the failure of the Peking Labor-Learning Mutual-Aid Corps, Shi concluded that "there can be no new life until society has been thoroughly reconstructed"; "if we want to reconstruct society, we must penetrate the capitalist-dominated organs of production."⁸⁶ In a letter to a friend he claimed: "I believe the social revolution must set up its battlefields in the factories." Unsure of how to go about doing this, he stated in the last sentence of the letter: "I am deeply ashamed that I am still not a worker."⁸⁷

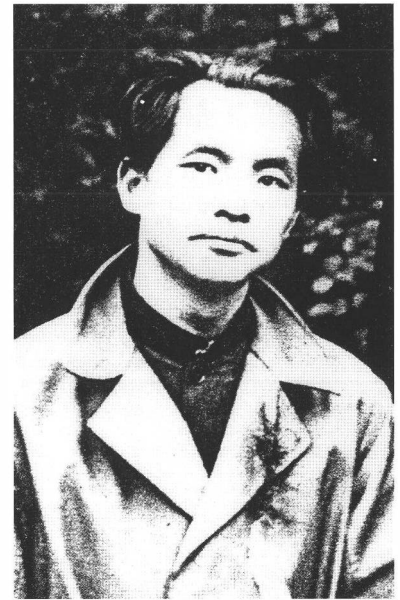
⁸¹ See Chang-tai Hung, *Going to the people: Chinese intellectuals and folk literature, 1918–1937* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1985), pp.10–11; also see Schwarcz, *Chinese enlightenment*, pp.131–3.

⁸² Wang Guangqi, "Gongdu huzhutuan" [Labor-learning mutual-aid groups], *Shaonian Zhongguo* 1 (15 Jan. 1920): 379.

⁸³ See Dirlik, *Chinese communism*, p.92.

Figure 12

Deng Zhongxia (Source: Wei Wei and Qian Xiaohui, *Deng Zhongxia zhuan* [Beijing: Renmin Chubanshe, 1981])



⁸⁴ Li Shouchang, "Dushi shang gongdu huzhutuan de quedian" [The shortcomings of labor-learning mutual-aid groups in cities], *XQN* 7.5 (1 Apr. 1920), *LDZWJ*, vol.2, p.413.

⁸⁵ Jitao (Dai Jitao), "Gongdu huzhutuan yu zhibenja de shenchanzhi" [Labor-learning mutual-aid groups and the capitalist system of production], *XQN* 7.5 (1 Apr. 1920), in *Wusi shiqi de shetuan* [Societies of the May Fourth period], 4 vols (Beijing: Sanlian Shudian, 1979) [hereafter cited as *WSSQST*], 2: 405–6.

⁸⁶ Cuntong (Shi Cuntong), "Gongdu huzhutuan de shiyan he jiaoxun" [The experiment and lesson of 'Labor-learning mutual-aid groups'], *Xingqi pinglun* 7 (1 May 1920), *WSSQST*, vol.2, p.439.

⁸⁷ Cuntong (Shi Cuntong), "Cuntong fu Yiqian" [Cuntong's reply to Yiqian], *Juewu* [Awakening], *Minguo ribao* supplement, 16 April 1920, *WSSQST*, vol.2, p.422.

⁸⁸ Li Dazhao, "Shumin de shengli" [The victory of the ordinary people], *XQN* 5.5 (Dec. 1918), *LZJWJ*, vol.1, pp.593–6.

⁸⁹ Li Dazhao, "Bolshevism de shengli" [The victory of Bolshevism], *ibid.*, pp.597–603.

⁹⁰ See, for example, Ding Shouhe and Yin Xuyi, *Cong wusi qimeng yundong dao Makesi zhuyi de chuanbo* [From the May Fourth enlightenment movement to the propagation of Marxism] (Beijing: Renmin Chubanshe, 1978), pp.63–7.

⁹¹ See Meisner, *Li Ta-chao*, p.61.

⁹² See Dirlik, *Chinese communism*, pp.26–8.

⁹³ Chi Ping, "Eluosi shehui geming zhi xianfeng Linin shilitie" [A brief account of Lenin, a pioneer of the Russian social revolution], *Laodong* 1.2 (20 April 1918), *WSSQQKJS*, vol.2-a, pp.170, 173.

⁹⁴ See Yi Cun, "Xin shidaizhigenben sixiang" [The fundamental thought of a new era], *Meizhou pinglun* 8 (9 Feb. 1918), p.171.

⁹⁵ See Dirlik, *Chinese communism*, p.28.

The Populist Understanding of the October Revolution

The Allies' victory in World War I was a significant event in the history of Chinese socialism. On 15 November 1918, Cai Yuanpei in his celebratory lecture proclaimed the populist slogan: "Labor is sacred." Some two weeks later, in a speech delivered at another celebration meeting, Li Dazhao interpreted the Allies' victory as the victory of democracy, laborism and the ordinary people (*shumin*). The far-reaching impact of this victory upon human history, according to Li, was specifically embodied in the October Revolution, the social revolution made by laborers. "The Russian Revolution of 1917," said he, "will herald the world revolutions of the twentieth century."⁸⁸

Shortly afterwards, Li Dazhao published an influential article entitled "The Victory of Bolshevism" in *New Youth*, in which he hailed the October Revolution as a new kind of revolution, a social revolution that marked the beginning of a new era and a new stage in the history of the world, representing "the victory of humanism, pacifism, reason and freedom; the victory of democracy, socialism, and Bolshevism; the victory of the red flag, the working class of the world, and the new tide of the twentieth century." He predicted: "The globe in the future will become the world of the red flag!"⁸⁹

The significance of Li's enthusiastic response to the October Revolution has been overestimated by communist accounts of modern history in China.⁹⁰ Maurice Meisner has also stated that there were few Chinese except for Li who found the Revolution relevant to their own situation until the May Fourth Movement in 1919.⁹¹

However, a recent study by Arif Dirlik throws a different light upon the matter. The honor of being the first to hail the October Revolution as the harbinger of a new era of history actually belongs to *Labor*, which devoted many pages to evaluating (even praising) the nature of the Russian Revolution and its historical significance.⁹² In April 1918, an article in the second issue of *Labor* stated admiringly: "Our neighbour Russia has explicitly carried out a social revolution to make equal the rich and the poor (*pinfu yibanqi* 貧富一般齊)." The author also described Lenin as "the most enthusiastic proponent of Great Unity (*datong zhuyi* 大同主義)."⁹³ Expressions used by the author such as '*pinfu yibanqi*' and '*datong zhuyi*' were, to the Chinese readership, reminiscent of the populist ideals advocated by peasant rebels in Imperial China, and also popularized, as a venerable and respectable notion, by Kang Youwei 康有為.

Another article published in the same issue described the Russian Revolution as "a revolution in the broad sense," and pointed out that it was feared by bureaucrats and the wealthy and welcomed by laborers and the poor in all countries.⁹⁴ The characterization of the October Revolution as a social revolution was not only anarchistic, as Dirlik emphasizes, but also populist.

It is difficult to prove that *Labor* was the source of Li's views on the October Revolution, but there is evidence, as Arif Dirlik notes, that he was

familiar with the publication.⁹⁵ Questions of who was the first to disseminate the anarchist-populist view of the October Revolution and who influenced whom are not of particular interest here. What is important is that Li played an important part in propagating this view. While the anarchist-populist view of the October Revolution by contributors to *Labor* was almost wholly accepted, Li strengthened its populist aspect. It was early in July 1918, in an important article entitled "A Comparison of the French and Russian Revolutions," that Li presented a unique analysis of the eruption of the October Revolution from the perspective of the national character of the Russians. In his view, "God," "autocratic monarchy," and "the people" had all been of equal importance to them, but "the storm of the Revolution today has broken the force of 'God' and 'autocratic monarchy'; on the basis of humani-tarianism and freedom, the power to govern everything has been regained by the people."⁹⁶

There are indications that Li's lecture "The Victory of the Ordinary People" and his article "The Victory of Bolshevism" celebrating the end of World War I on the Russian front were easily accessible to Chinese radicals. From early 1919 onwards, the anarchist-populist understanding of the October Revolution as a social revolution became a very popular, even dominant, viewpoint among Chinese radicals. In *Xiangjiang pinglun* 湘江評論 (Xiang River Review) Mao Zedong accepted Li Dazao's argument *in toto*, describing the French Revolution as a political and the Russian Revolution as a social one. The victory of social revolution was the result of what Mao warmly applauded as the "great union of the popular masses," in opposition to the "great union of the aristocracy and the great union of the capitalists."⁹⁷

The populist understanding of the October Revolution was also embraced by a number of liberal-minded intellectuals. In the first issue of *New Tide* published on 1 January 1919, Luo Jialun, imitating his teacher and supporter of the New Tide Society, Li Dazhao, asserted that "the present revolution is not like previous ones! Previous revolutions were of the French type; henceforth revolutions will be of the Russian type!" The Russian Revolution as a social revolution, according to Luo, was one "in which democracy defeated monarchism, the common people defeated warlords, and laborers defeated capitalists."⁹⁸ In the same issue, Fu Sinian 傅斯年, editor of *New Tide* and one of the main founders of the New Tide Society, expressed the same opinion, claiming that French-style revolution would soon be out of date, while Russian-style revolution—social revolution—would spread all over the world. "Over the past year I have by no means taken a pessimistic view of the Russian situation," he stated. "In my opinion, this is what should happen in the modern era. Inexhaustible hopes concerning the future all depend on the direction of the Russian Revolution."⁹⁹

With regard to the October Revolution, students seemed to be more radical than their teachers, such as Chen Duxiu. In January 1919, Chen's attitude to the Russian Revolution was critical: "the common people suppress the middle class and slaughter nobles and the opposition." But by April he

⁹⁶ Li Dazhao, "French and Russian Revolutions," pp.574–5.

⁹⁷ See Mao Zedong, "The great union of the popular masses," in Schram, *Mao's road to power*, p.379. In this article, Mao used the term "social reform" but not "social revolution." Actually, Mao was not prudent in his choice of words when he was young. In his early writings, the terms 'reform' and 'revolution' are mutually interchangeable. In the same issue in which the above-mentioned article was published, Mao also used the term 'social revolution' to describe the Russian Revolution in another essay, see Ze Dong (Mao Zedong), "Deyizhiren chentong de tiaoyue" [A bitter treaty for the Germans], *Xiangjiang pinglun* 2 (21 July 1919), in *Mao Zedong's writings from his early years*, pp.343–57. This essay is not included in the volume edited by Schram.

⁹⁸ Luo Jialun, "New tides," p.20.

⁹⁹ Meng Zhen (Fu Sinian), "Shehui geming: erguoshi de geming" [Social revolution: Russian-style revolution], *Xinchaobao* 1.1 (1 Jan. 1919): 128–9.

¹⁰⁰ See Chen Duxiu, "Guowai dashi shuping" [A review of international events], *Meizhou pinglun* 4 (12 Jan. 1919). For a description of this change in Chen Duxiu's attitude see Tang Baolin and Lin Maosheng, *Chen Duxiu nianpu* [Chronology of Chen Duxiu] (Shanghai: Shanghai Renmin Chubanshe, 1988), p.98.

had dramatically changed his mind, accepting the popular viewpoint that the "Russian social revolution" in the twentieth century, like the "French political revolution" in the eighteenth, would be regarded by historians as "the great turning-point of social change in the evolution of human society."¹⁰⁰

The Victory of the Proletarian Dictatorship in Radical Thinking

¹⁰¹ See *Selected works of Mao Tse-tung*, 4 vols (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1961), 4: 413.

¹⁰² Martin Bernal has shown that some Marxist ideas had been introduced in China before the New Cultural Movement started. See Bernal, "Chinese socialism before 1913," in *Modern China's search for a political form*, ed. Jack Gray (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), pp.66–95; and Martin Bernal, *Chinese socialism to 1907* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1967). It should be noted that some Marxist ideas were in China by 1905.

¹⁰³ Luo Jialun, "New tides," p.22.

¹⁰⁴ Liu Binlin, "Jingjixue shang zhi xinxue-shuo" [New economic theories], *Xinchaobao* 1.3 (Mar. 1919): 382.

¹⁰⁵ Liu Binlin, "Makesi zhuanlue" [A brief biography of Marx], *XQN* 6.5 (the publication date printed on the magazine is May 1919, but it was actually published in September, 1919): 519.

¹⁰⁶ Ze Dong, "Minzhong de da lianhe" [The great union of the popular masses], *Xiangjiang pinglun* 2 (21 July 1919), in *Mao Zedong's writings from his early years*, p.341; see also Schram, *Mao's road to power*, p.380.

What the salvos of the October Revolution brought to the Chinese, therefore, was not Marxism-Leninism, as Mao Zedong later claimed,¹⁰¹ but populist ideals. Within this intellectual context, the main elements of Marxism were once again re-introduced, albeit fragmentarily, into China.¹⁰² Marx was welcomed by many radical intellectuals as one of the great socialist thinkers. As Luo Jialun commented in his article in the first issue of *New Tide*, "we would worship George Washington rather than Peter the Great, Benjamin Franklin rather than Bismarck, Karl Marx's economics rather than Richelieu's public finance, and Thomas Edison's inventions rather than Alfred Krupp's manufactures."¹⁰³ Liu Binglin 劉秉麟, then a student at Peking University and a member of the New Tide Society, predicted in an essay about the new economic theories published in the third issue of *New Tide* that "economics based on the system of private ownership of property must be reformed; a revolution in economics is ultimately inevitable."¹⁰⁴ Half a year later, in a short biography of Marx published in *New Youth*, Liu showed his high esteem for Marx's *Das Kapital*, characterising it as "ushering in a new era in modern economics."¹⁰⁵

In 1919, however, Marxism was not widely accepted among Chinese radical intellectuals. Two obstacles to the Chinese acceptance of it were the doctrines of class struggle and proletarian dictatorship. Influenced by anarchism and Utopian socialism, most Chinese radical intellectuals preferred bloodless revolution to violent class struggle and were opposed to any form of dictatorship. This moderate orientation towards the problem of revolution was even shared by Mao Zedong. In his influential article "The Great Union of the Popular People," Mao maintained that the moderate political line of the anarchists led by Kropotkin was broader and more far-reaching than the violent Marxian approach, which he described as using "the method of 'Doing unto others as they do unto you' to conduct a desperate struggle to the end against the aristocracy and the capitalists."¹⁰⁶

With the subsequent failure of several Utopian socialist experiments, the populist orientation of the early Chinese Marxists underwent some subtle but significant changes. First, abstract terms such as 'the common people' and 'laborers' gradually assumed a clearer and more precise meaning: the common people were increasingly identified with 'workers' (*laogong*) and 'farmers' (*laonong* 勞農), and the so-called intellectual workers (*laoxinzhong* 勞心者在 Chinese, that is, intellectuals) were gradually excluded from the category of 'laborers'.

On 1 May 1920, in a speech to boatmen and warehouse workers later published in the special May Day issue of *New Youth* under the title “The Laborers’ Awakening,” Chen Duxiu exclaimed:

Who are the most useful, the most important people in the world? The befuddled would say emperors, officials or intellectuals. I say they are wrong: only those who labor are useful and important. Why? Because the food we eat comes from those who till the fields, ... the clothes we wear come from those who weave, ... the houses we live in come from carpenters, tile makers, common laborers ... None of these things come from the labor of emperors, presidents, officials, or intellectuals.¹⁰⁷

For Chen Duxiu, those who labor included “farmers, dressmakers, carpenters, bricklayers, unskilled laborers, blacksmiths, lacquerers, machinists, helmsmen, car drivers, stewards, porters, and so on.”¹⁰⁸ In this speech, Chen called for the rejection of the traditional Chinese notion that “those who work with their brains rule while those who work with their hands are ruled,”¹⁰⁹ advocating instead that “those who labor with their hands should rule and administer political, military, and industrial affairs, while intellectuals who do not labor should be ruled.”¹¹⁰ The first signs of the notion of the dictatorship of the proletariat can be seen to emerge here.

Yet, it was true that Chen’s concept of ‘the proletariat’ diverged sharply from the definitions of Marx or Lenin; Chen’s retained more populist elements. In fact, from 1919 through 1921 he had been using the Chinese rendering ‘*laodong jieji*’ 勞動階級 or ‘*laodongzhe jieji*’ 勞動者階級—both literally meaning the ‘laborer class’—to translate the Marxist concept of ‘the proletariat’ in opposition to the term ‘*zichan jieji*’ 資產階級, ‘bourgeoisie’. Correspondingly, the concept of ‘the dictatorship of the proletariat’ was often expressed as ‘*laodong zhuanzheng*’ 勞動專政 (the dictatorship of labor); only in a published letter was it expressed as ‘*wuchan de laodong jieji zhuanzheng*’ 無產的勞動階級專政 (the dictatorship of proletarian labor).¹¹¹ Chen did not use the usual Chinese rendering ‘*wuchan jieji*’ 無產階級 (the proletariat) until January 1921.¹¹² Chen was not the only one who held a populist conception of the proletariat. Li Dazhao, the first Marxist in China, also used the term ‘*laodong jieji*’ until 1921. After 1921, although Li started to use the term ‘*wuchan jieji*’, the phrase ‘*laodong jieji*’ still frequently appeared in his writings.¹¹³

From 1921 onwards, the way early Chinese Marxists viewed the October Revolution also underwent an important change. The Russian Soviet government now was called a ‘Workers’ and Farmers’ Government’ (*laonong zhengfu* 勞農政府), and the Revolution also gradually came to be regarded as a ‘class revolution’ (*jieji geming* 階級革命) aimed at achieving a ‘Workers’ and Farmers’ Dictatorship’ rather than a social revolution in a vague sense. In March 1920, the news that the Soviet Russian government had declared the abolition of all Sino-Russian unequal treaties aroused universal joy and acclaim among Chinese intellectuals. The Soviet Union, now the embodiment of humanitarianism, attracted the attention of radical intellectuals. In July that

¹⁰⁷ Chen Duxiu, “Laodongzhe de juewu” [The awakening of laborers], *XQN* 7.6 (1 May 1920), *DXWC*, pp.300–2.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, p.300.

¹⁰⁹ A quotation from Mencius.

¹¹⁰ Chen Duxiu, “Awakening of labourers,” p.301.

¹¹¹ See Duxiu (Chen Duxiu), “Da Ke Qinshi” (Reply to Ke Qinshi), *XQN* 8.3 (1 Nov. 1920), *DXWC*, p.818.

¹¹² See Chen Duxiu, “Shehui zhuyi piping” [A critique of socialism], *Guangdong qunbao*, 19 Jan. 1921, reprinted in *XQN* 9.3 (July 1921): 1–13.

¹¹³ See Gu Song (Li Dazhao), “Makesi de jingji xueshuo” [Marx’s economic doctrine], *Chenbao*, 21–23 Feb. 1922, *LDZWJ*, vol.2, pp.540–7.

¹¹⁴ Chen Duxiu, "Tan zhengzhi" [On politics], *XQN* 8.1 (1 Sept. 1920), *DXWC*, pp.361–71.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p.371.

¹¹⁶ See Li Dazhao, "Wo de Makesi zhuyi guan" [My views on Marxism], *XQN* 6.5–6 (Sept.–Nov. 1919), *LDZWJ*, vol.2, pp.46–85, esp. pp.67–9.

¹¹⁷ Li Dazhao, "Socialism and social movements," p.375.

same year, *New Youth* began running a special column, "The Study of Russia," in which many translations introducing and praising the "achievements of the Soviet Union" were published.

By this time, many radical intellectuals were coming to accept the central doctrine of Marxism, that is, the theory of class struggle and the idea of the dictatorship of the proletariat, and they became the first generation of Chinese Marxists and Communists. Since the Russian Revolution had succeeded where Utopian socialism had failed, they were attracted to Marxism as an effective strategy for class revolution rather than an abstract theory of social revolution, in their yearning to find the way toward China's modernization. They believed that the Russian Revolution provided them with the only course leading to the realization of their ideals.

Chen Duxiu's article "On Politics," published in September 1920, was an important landmark in this intellectual development. Chen saw class struggle as a legitimate means for the oppressed to stand up and realize a new, egalitarian society. He wrote:

We should recognize that the most unfair and painful thing in the world is that under the power of capital the minority—the lazy and consuming bourgeoisie—utilizes the political and legal institutions of the state to oppress the majority—the bitterly laboring and productive working class. They force them to produce but treat them worse than beasts of burden or machines. To remove this painful inequality, the oppressed laboring class must itself gain power and become the master of the state. They must utilize the political and legal institutions to conquer completely the oppressive bourgeoisie. Only then will there be any hope of abolishing private property and the wage system, and eliminating the economic inequities of the past.¹¹⁴

Finally, Chen concluded that "the top priority in a modern society is to establish a government of the laboring class by revolutionary means and to formulate policies and laws forbidding all exploitative activities both at home and abroad."¹¹⁵

In 1919, while his knowledge of Marxism was still limited, Li Dazhao was still inclined to see class struggle and the dictatorship of the proletariat as an inevitable evil in the process towards an ideal society.¹¹⁶ In the summer of 1920, however, he gradually came to see this inevitable evil as a necessary good. In a course entitled "Socialism and Social Movements" given at the Department of Economics at Peking University, Li defended Marxist socialism as follows:

Some people suspect that after socialism is implemented the powers of the state and society will increase, while individual freedom will be easily infringed upon, and as a result, socialism will become a yoke. This is a misunderstanding. It is true that in the transitional phase of socialism, freedom in its individualistic sense will be restrained because the freedom of capitalists as the minority will certainly be curtailed, while the freedom of the majority will increase. The purpose of socialism is to safeguard and expand freedom, and to provide greater freedom to the farmers and workers.¹¹⁷

In the name of the laboring class, the vast majority, the common people, or, in the term of orthodox Marxism, the proletariat, all the means that Chinese radicals originally regarded as evil and refused to justify by righteous ends eventually obtained legitimacy. This shows that Chinese radicals did not abandon their populist concerns when they embraced Marxism.

Theoretically, nothing could be easier than to translate the ideology of populism into the Marxist concept of revolution. There are many intellectual similarities between populism and Marxism. They both share an intense anti-capitalist orientation and an idealistic socialist goal. In fact, many Marxists in Russia were profoundly influenced by the writings of the Russian Populists. Georgii Plekhanov was the first Russian Populist who converted to Marxism. Trotsky, like the Populists, found in Russia's economic backwardness a favorable condition for revolution. Lenin drew much of his voluntaristic and élitist approach to revolution from Russian Populist ideas.¹¹⁸

To be sure, there are also substantive differences between the populist and Marxist programs. As Maurice Meisner has pointed out, in Russia, "the Populists believed that the state structure brought classes and their struggles into existence; the Marxists held that class struggles and the economic relations that produced them gave rise to the state."¹¹⁹ At the same time, violent disputes took place between Russian Populists and Marxists about the means, methods and the timing of the revolution.

Yet the shift from populism (in the broad sense of the term) to Marxism in China was simpler and more direct than in Russia. Sophisticated theoreticians being lacking, there were neither pure orthodox populists nor Marxists in China during the May Fourth period.¹²⁰ Nor did a debate analogous to that between Plekhanov and the Populists in Russia occur in China. The main reason why China lacked a populist-Marxist debate is, obviously, that there were no self-identified populists. (The term 'populism', as mentioned above, is used in this study to refer to the widespread populist assumptions and propositions in Chinese radical thinking.) Nonetheless, an important anarchist-Marxist debate ensued in the early 1920s after a few Chinese socialists had converted to Marxism. One of the main issues was whether the existence of the state or dictatorship of laborers was necessary. Many early Chinese Marxists held that a dictatorship of laborers was necessary, not only to keep down the bourgeoisie after the revolution, but also to transform the economically backward society into an advanced one. Class struggle was the only means of establishing a state of laborers. All these stages were needed to prepare the conditions for the ideal state of anarcho-communism. As Dirlik has shown, 'communism' and anarchism were portrayed as merely different stages of history, with the one serving as the means to the other.¹²¹

Thus, the perception of democracy prevalent among radical Chinese intellectuals did not constitute an obstacle to their acceptance of Marxism. On the contrary, it was a vehicle that facilitated it. What they opposed was 'capitalist democracy', while what they favored was 'populist democracy'. In

¹¹⁸ See Meisner, *Li Ta-chao*, pp.77-8.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p.77.

¹²⁰ For example, the omission in populism of a sequence of developmental stages linked to means and modes of production is one of a number of serious differences between populism and Marxism. But no Chinese radicals during the May Fourth period, no matter whether or not they turned towards Marxism, took into consideration the issue of the developmental stages of society. They paid no attention to this issue until after 1927 when, with the so-called "social history controversy," Marxist historiography began to take shape in China. For more details about the "social history controversy" see Arif Dirlik, *Revolution and history: the origins of Marxist historiography in China, 1919-1937* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, Calif.: University of California Press, 1978).

¹²¹ Dirlik, *Chinese communism*, pp.236-8.

¹²² Chen Duxiu, “*Gongchandang* yuekan qianyan” [Preface to the monthly *Communist*], *Gongchandang* 1 (Nov. 1920): 1–2.

¹²³ See Duxiu, “Reply to Ke Qinshi,” p.818.

¹²⁴ See Li Shouchang, “From democracy to ergatocracy,” pp.504–5.

¹²⁵ See Li Shouchang, “Democracy and ergatocracy,” pp.569–72.

their minds, the dictatorship of the proletariat was the one and only way to achieve ‘genuine democracy’. In the preface to *Gongchandang* (Communist), a propagandist magazine established by the newly-founded Chinese Communist Party, Chen Duxiu claimed that “both democracy and representative politics are established by capitalists in their own interests. They are irrelevant to the laboring class. ... Our belief is that all means of production should be possessed by the laborers and all political powers should be mastered by the laborers.”¹²² Consistently basing his views on populist assumptions, Chen maintained that “real democracy” would be achieved after the “revolution of the economic system” (by which he meant Marxist class revolution), because those who possessed property but did not labor would cease to exist in future society, while all those who labored would thereby enjoy freedom and democracy.¹²³

In early 1921, Li Dazhao introduced the notion of ergatocracy as an alternative to democracy. Ergatocracy to him meant the ‘politics of workers’, which was derived from the spirit of democracy. According to his explanation, this new term was introduced by a number of communist scholars in order by way of contrast with the old term ‘democracy’, which had been already abused by the bourgeoisie.¹²⁴ In July 1922, Li repeated his views on ergatocracy and in particular pointed out that only the proletarian politics of the common people constituted the real and pure democracy.¹²⁵ The dictatorship of the proletariat was merely a transitional form of government aimed at preventing the resurgence of the bourgeoisie.

Conclusion

Chinese populism does not refer to a single political party, a coherent body of doctrine, or a radical social movement, but to a set of political attitudes and orientations in May Fourth radical thinking. It served as an essential vehicle for Marxist ideas and was conducive to the birth of Chinese Marxism. Like populism in other countries, Chinese populism had numerous and mixed intellectual sources, such as the anarchist version of laborism, the populist notion of democracy, and the ideology of the Russian Populist movement, as well as other doctrines of Utopian socialism.

Intense dissatisfaction with, and criticism of, capitalism greatly attracted Chinese radicals toward various versions of populism. Their all-consuming desire was to see China avoid the evil social consequences of the capitalist stage of development by building a communist society. This would be a society in which the sacred morality of the laborers and the common people prevailed; where freedom, equality, universal fraternity and mutual aid would be achieved; and capitalists, politicians, intellectual élites and social hierarchy would no longer exist. They made great efforts to seek out an ultimate path for accomplishing this ideal goal in one step.

Like other Utopians, Chinese radicals who held populist assumptions and propositions shared a deep-rooted monistic belief that, as Isaiah Berlin puts it, “somewhere ... there is a final solution”; and that “all the positive values in which men have believed must, in the end, be compatible, and perhaps even entail one another.”¹²⁶ A kind of Utopian consciousness was fully present in their minds. They felt confident that their pursuits were sacred, because they were in the interests of the common people.

When they obtained more knowledge of Marxism and more information about the true situation of the Bolshevik Revolution (after having mistaken the October Revolution for an anarchist-populist social revolution), they eventually came to the view that Marxists and Bolsheviks outside China had formulated brilliant critiques of capitalism, and that they had indeed had a certain amount of success in finding the correct means for building an ideal society. After the abstract concept of ‘the common people’ was replaced by a relatively more concrete one, ‘laborers’ or ‘workers’, early Chinese Marxists shifted easily from populism to Marxism, the distance between them being no more than a single step. None of the values popular during the May Fourth period was spurned by them. They rejected the slogan of ‘democracy’ in so far as it was seen to represent the interests of capitalists; their own aim was to achieve ‘genuine democracy’, which they defined as a situation in which the common people would become masters—politically, socially and economically. ‘The dictatorship of the proletariat’, according to them, was an absolutely necessary stage in the course of realizing the politics of the common people or workers.

One fundamental value widely shared by Chinese radicals during the May Fourth period, however, was retained by the early Chinese Marxists. This was the goal of a populist Utopia, which was pictured as an ideal society of the common people (or so-called ‘laborers’), in which morality, equality, justice, and freedom from exploitation by the bourgeoisie and oppression by the state could be realized. Furthermore, both populists and Marxists shared the view that history would inexorably lead toward this Utopia. It is particularly relevant here to cite Isaiah Berlin’s general portrayal of populists as well as other sorts of socialists:

All these thinkers share one vast apocalyptic assumption: that once the reign of evil—autocracy, exploitation, inequality—is consumed in the fire of the revolution, there will arise naturally and spontaneously out of its ashes a natural, harmonious, just order, needing only the gentle guidance of the enlightened revolutionaries to attain to its proper perfection. This great Utopian dream, based on simple faith in regenerated human nature, was a vision which the Populists shared with Godwin and Bakunin, Marx and Lenin.¹²⁷

Berlin’s penetrating argument, in my view, is fully applicable to China’s case. While Chinese Marxists abandoned populist democracy as corrupt, they still conceived of the proletariat dictatorship as being able to lead to laborers’ or workers’ democracy and ultimately a populist-style Utopia.

¹²⁶ Isaiah Berlin, *Four essays on liberty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), p.167.

¹²⁷ Berlin, “Russian Populism,” p.217.

¹²⁸ Vehement debates concerning the means and ends of revolution frequently erupted among radical intellectuals all over the world. "The dilemma of means and ends," according to Isaiah Berlin, "is the deepest and most agonizing problem that torments the revolutionary movements of our own day in all the continents of the world, not least in Asia and Africa." *Ibid.*, pp.222–3.

¹²⁹ See John Keane, *Civil society and democracy* (London: Verso, 1989), p.52. According to Keane, this myth is evident in many types of nineteenth-century political and social thought, which aimed at reversing an important achievement of European modernity: the differentiation between social life and state institutions (pp.51–6).

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, pp.52–6.

There were, of course, deep divisions among Chinese radicals, in particular between Chinese populist-oriented, non-Marxist radicals and Chinese Marxists. While the latter firmly believed that they had found a correct revolutionary path for achieving their ideal, those who were deeply influenced by populism of one sort or another but did not later become involved in the Bolshevization process, on the contrary, firmly insisted that the means used by Bolsheviks were often incompatible with the ultimate goals of the revolution. They were still deeply troubled by the long-standing issue of ends and means.¹²⁸ At the same time, the principle of 'democratic centralism' that governed the Leninist-type vanguard Party was another major area of disagreement between Chinese communists and other radicals.

On the other hand, while they shared a common myth of collective harmony which held the "assumption that complex social systems can be brought to order, pacified and emancipated from conflict by annulling the division between social and political power,"¹²⁹ the Chinese populist radicals with their anarchistic inclinations argued that the elements of social life, once emancipated from the forces of the state and other obsolete or parasitic forms of power, would spontaneously result in homeostasis. In contrast with this naïve outlook, the Chinese Marxists assumed that the state, as the living embodiment or caretaker of universal interest or reason, should, and could, integrate society, with the same outcome of homeostasis. As a result, according to John Keane, these two views of how to attain homeostasis are two variants of the same myth that has strongly influenced the socialist tradition.¹³⁰

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