

Chinese Marxism in the Early 20th Century and Japan

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Last year, the Chinese Communist Party celebrated the eightieth anniversary of its founding in 1921. Also last year I published my first book, and it concerned the founding of the Chinese Communist Party.¹ Needless to say, my book has nothing to do with the Party's official memorial events. In this short essay, I would like to introduce some of the principal points of my research, including some new findings which even the Chinese Communist Party would not acknowledge.

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has more than sixty million members today. To make a simple comparison, they exceed, in number, the population of most European countries, such as Great Britain and France. The CCP is, thus, not only ruling the most populous country of the world, but is also in itself the largest party in world history. When it held its first national congress in Shanghai at the end of July 1921, however, the Party had only fifty-three members, a faint shadow of what it would grow into. The history of the Chinese Communist Party goes back to 1920, when Chen Duxiu 陈独秀 (1879-1942) and other radical intellectuals brought together a small group in Shanghai with the help of Gregory Voitinsky (1893-1953), a representative of the Russian Communist Party.

For many years, opinions have differed over the role played by Soviet Russia. Generally speaking, historians in Mainland China tend to emphasize the independent effort of the Chinese revolutionaries, while overseas historians incline to overestimate the Russian influence vis-à-vis domestic factors. For example, according to the official view of the CCP, the birth of the Party was recognized as “an outcome of the combination of the Chinese labor movement and the wide spread of Marxism-Leninism in China.”² Although they do not neglect the role of Soviet Russia, it is considered, at most, a secondary factor. This general tendency has much to do with the current policy of the CCP never to open its collective mouth without saying “Socialism with Chinese characteristics.” From its point of view, the CCP had to have had Chinese characteristics from its very start.

On the other hand, some scholars in the West lay great emphasis on the foreign background of the Communist movement in China. Some of them go so far as to say that the major factor in the birth of the CCP was the impact of the October Revolution and the political and financial aid offered by the Bolsheviks in subsequent years. No doubt, the founding of the CCP was an integral part of the whole international Communist

¹ Ishikawa Yoshihiro 石川禎浩, *Chūgoku kyōsantō seiritsu shi* 中国共産党成立史 (The history of the founding of the Chinese Communist Party) (Tokyo: Iwanami shoten, 2001).

² Zhonggong zhongyang dangshi yanjiushi yishi 中共中央党史研究室一室, *Zhongguo gongchandang lishi (shang juan) ruogan wenti shuoming* 《中国共产党历史(上卷)》若干问题说明 (Some explanatory notes on the first volume of *History of the Chinese Communist Party*) (Beijing: Zhonggong dangshi chubanshe, 1991), p.22.

movement initiated by the Bolsheviks. But, I think the international background that they are referring to is mostly limited to the direct influence of Soviet Russia and the Comintern. For example, they often quote Mao Zedong 毛澤東 to show the important role of Soviet Russia. In a 1949 speech, Mao said:

It was through the Russians that the Chinese found Marxism. Before the October Revolution, the Chinese were not only ignorant of Lenin and Stalin; they did not even know of Marx and Engels. The salvos of the October Revolution brought us Marxism-Leninism.³

At first glance, these sentences sound perfectly acceptable. But, when you think about it, were there many Chinese intellectuals who could understand the intricacies of Marxist theory through Russian articles at that time? Most assuredly not. As a matter of fact, it was not until a few years after the founding of the Party that some Party leaders began to translate Communist writings directly from Russian. Then, where did Chinese Marxism come from? The answer is, as is suggested in the title of this essay, Japan and, later, Great Britain and the United States. It may sound a little bit strange that modern China absorbed Communist theory through these typically capitalist countries, but the point should become clearer below.

As is well known, China and Japan have much cultural history in common. For instance, we use countless expressions written in Chinese characters to translate modern concepts of Western origin, such as politics (*seiji*政治), society (*shakai*社会), religion (*shūkyō*宗教), freedom (*jiyū*自由), culture (*bunka*文化) and the like, although the pronunciation of these characters of course differs greatly between Chinese and Japanese. Needless to say, there were ideas of politics, society, religion, and whatnot in pre-modern East Asia, but there was no precise equivalent for those Western concepts before then. In Meiji-era Japan those new terms were coined to introduce modern Western civilization.⁴ Before the modern era, the circulation of culture had been a largely one-way flow from China to Japan for more than a thousand years. But, at the beginning of the twentieth century, for the first time a backward or return flow from Japan to China developed. Japan hungrily ingested the Western social sciences and then passed them along to its East Asian neighbors. This was indeed the pattern through the first two decades of the twentieth century. In this sense, Japan served as middleman to China's intellectual Westernization. According to one estimate, fully half of all modern loanwords in Chinese are of Japanese origin,⁵ and these loanwords from Japanese are accepted so firmly and widely in China that few Chinese people would even be aware of their origins.

³ "On the People's Democratic Dictatorship (June 30, 1949)," in *Selected Works of Mao Tse-tung*, (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1967), vol. 4, p.413.

⁴ On the coinage of new Japanese terms in the early Meiji era, see: Saitō Tsuyoshi 齋藤毅, *Meiji no kotoba* 明治のことば (The new vocabulary of the Meiji era) (Tokyo: Kōdansha, 1977); Suzuki Shūji 鈴木修次, *Bunmei no kotoba* 文明のことば (Words concerning civilization) (Hiroshima: Bunka hyōron shuppan, 1981); and Suzuki Shūji, *Nihon kango to Chūgoku* 日本漢語と中国 (Chinese terms made in Japan and China) (Tokyo: Chūō kōronsha, 1981).

⁵ Wong Siulun, *Sociology and Socialism in Contemporary China* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1979), p.5.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, with the great increase in the number of Chinese students in Japan, numerous Western works were translated into Chinese from Japanese editions. Suffice it to say here that most of the first Chinese translations of important Western works, such as Montesquieu's *The Spirit of Laws*, Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Social Contract*, and Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*, to name but a few, were made from Japanese translations almost simultaneously around the year 1900. The results constituted an intellectual revolution affecting every segment of the Chinese elite.

Japan also served as the initial route for the introduction of diverse theories of early socialism, such as evolutionary thinking and the progressive view of history. In fact, the two principal waves of socialism in China in the early twentieth century coincide with those in Japan. That is to say, the first wave appeared at the very beginning of the twentieth century, when the Japanese socialist movement reached its first high tide; the second which brought about the founding of the CCP occurred in 1919, when the Japanese socialist movement had just begun to recover from the destruction caused by the Great Treason Incident of 1910, a frame-up by the Meiji state to suppress the anarchist socialists who were accused of plotting to assassinate the Meiji Emperor. A famous socialist Kōtoku Shūsui 幸徳秋水 (1871-1911), whose books had a great impact on the earlier high tide of socialism in China, was executed among others.⁶ After this case, the socialist movement in Japan was stifled for several years and has come to be called "the winter period of socialism" (*shakaishugi fuyu no jidai* 社会主義冬の時代). It was not until 1919 that Japanese socialists such as Kawakami Hajime 河上肇 (1879-1946), Sakai Toshihiko 堺利彦 (1870-1933), and Yamakawa Hitoshi 山川均 (1880-1958), among others, resumed their writing activities and soon exercised a major influence on many Chinese intellectuals who had been highly encouraged by the recent October Revolution of 1917.

Many Chinese revolutionaries at the time pointed out the importance of Japanese socialist writings. For example, in 1920 when a large number of socialist works were translated from Japanese, Feng Ziyou 冯自由 (1881-1958), a member of Sun Yat-sen's group and the author of a book entitled *Shehuizhuyi yu Zhongguo* (Socialism and China) wrote:

In Japan, ever since Kōtoku Shūsui was executed in 1911, no one has gone ahead and advocated this kind of dangerous idea. As you all know, most of the Chinese books about the new knowledge were translated from Japanese. But the Japanese then stopped publishing this sort of work. How were we to find translations of them? Now, though, those who advocate socialism in China are doing their best to publish socialist magazines and newspapers with the help of new reinforcements from new Japanese translations.⁷

⁶ On Kōtoku's influence over Chinese socialism in the first decade of twentieth century, see Hazama Naoki 狭間直樹, *Chūgoku shakaishugi no reimei* 中国社会主义の黎明 (The dawn of socialism in China) (Tokyo: Iwanami shoten, 1976).

⁷ Feng Ziyou, *Shehui zhuyi yu Zhongguo* 社会主義與中國 (Socialism and China) (Hong Kong: Shehuizhuyi yanjiusuo, 1920), p.11.

It should be clear from this example that the rise and fall of the socialist movement in China was closely linked to Japan. The influence from Japan can also be seen in the careers of the early Party leaders. In the early days of the CCP, the party was mainly composed of intellectuals who had earlier been students in Japan. Li Dazhao李大釗 (1889-1927) may be the most famous and important CCP leader among them.

The name of Li Dazhao is still extremely well known in China, especially as a founder of the CCP, and he is often called “the father of Chinese Marxism.” There is indeed ample reason for him to have earned this title—not only because he made the first, full-fledged introduction of Marxism in China in 1919, but also because his understanding of Marxism was, in a sense, colored by earlier Chinese streams of thought. Many historians believe that the early thought of Li Dazhao and his understanding of Marxism have certain parallels to those of Mao Zedong—for example, the inclinations toward populism, voluntarism, and traditional Chinese idealism.⁸ In this sense, Li Dazhao probably deserves the title “the father of Chinese Marxism.”

We miss the point, however, if we regard these inclinations simply as reflections of Chinese traditions of thought. In fact, the complexity of Li Dazhao’s thought and his understanding of Marxism can quite clearly be explained by the Japanese texts he read. To take one simple example, Li’s most famous writing on Marxism “Wo de Makeshuyi guan”我的马克思主义观 (My views on Marxism),⁹ which was also a landmark in the introduction of Marxism to China, was little more than a translation, or rather adaptation, from two Japanese writings. One was “Marukusu no shakaishugi no rironteki taikai” マルクスの社会主義の理論的体系 (A theoretical system of Marxist socialism) written by Kawakami Hajime, Japan’s most eminent Marxist scholar and a professor of economics at Kyoto University; the second was *Zoku keizaigaku kōgi*続経済学講義 (A new outline of economics), written by Fukuda Tokuzō福田徳三 (1874-1930), a professor of economics at Tokyo Imperial University.¹⁰ By comparing Li Dazhao’s “My Views on Marxism” with these two Japanese writings, we can easily see that Li Dazhao not only understood the outlines of Marxism precisely as those Japanese texts explained it, but also that he quoted certain critical views toward Marxism from them as well. So, we cannot simply conclude that this famous essay by Li Dazhao was a reflection of his own distinctive thought. Both Kawakami and Fukuda were very famous scholars in prewar Japan, and they did not completely agree with Marxism at that time. Of course, then, neither did Li Dazhao. In other words, the ambivalent attitude toward Marxism in Li Dazhao’s writing reflected the attitude of those Japanese scholars rather than simply that of Li himself.

In view of this Japanese influence, let us take a brief look at Li Dazhao’s early thought, that is before he came out in support of Marxism. As just mentioned, it is generally agreed that the early thought of Li Dazhao had certain idealistic inclinations,

⁸ See, for example: Maurice Meisner, *Li Ta-chao and the Origins of Chinese Marxism* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1967), pp.55-56, 80-89; and Stuart Schram, *The Thought of Mao Tse-tung* (Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p.36-37.

⁹ Li Dazhao, “Wo de Makeshuyi guan,” *Xin qingnian*新青年 (The New Youth) 6.5-6 (1919).

¹⁰ Kawakami Hajime, “Marukusu no shakaishugi no rironteki taikai,” *Shakai mondai kenkyū*社会問題研究2 (1919); and Fukuda Tokuzō, *Zoku keizaigaku kōgi* (Tokyo: Dōbunkan, 1913).

but there is little agreement about what his idealism was and where it came from. Some say it was a form of philanthropism from Leo Tolstoy;¹¹ some say he was influenced by Henri Bergson and Ralph Waldo Emerson;¹² and others say his idealism came from the Chinese tradition, for example Daoism.¹³ To put the matter simply, there is no agreement whatsoever on this issue.

There are, of course, reasons for this disagreement. The most important reason is that the early writings of Li Dazhao are not only hard to understand because of their style, but also often full of inaccurate quotations from Chinese and foreign texts from all ages. They are quite simply pedantic; or, to put it the other way round, one might say that they are extremely deep in meaning. And that is, I believe, why a large number of studies have been produced on Li Dazhao's philosophical background and why historians have interpreted his thought so differently. The influence from Japan is, I believe, the key to resolve the complexity of Li's early thought. His early writings were, as well as his understanding of Marxism, based on the writings of a Japanese publicist, by the name of Kayahara Kazan 茅原華山(1870-1952). For example, Li Dazhao's early masterpiece "Qingchun" 青春 (Youth) of 1916 is completely based on Kayahara's marvelous cosmology: "Hisō naru seishin" 悲壮なる精神 (A tragic but brave spirit) written earlier the same year.¹⁴ This is just one example of the relationship between Li Dazhao and Kayahara Kazan, and one could find many similar examples elsewhere between them.¹⁵

Kayahara Kazan is not at all famous in Japan today, and his name would be unfamiliar even to most Japanese historians.¹⁶ However, at the beginning of the twentieth century, he was a very famous publicist. We have here a familiar story of the most popular star of one era becoming completely forgotten by later generations. In his day, one could find articles by Kayahara in virtually every Japanese magazine, sometimes with a portrait of this kind seen below beside it. Probably, while Li Dazhao was living in Tokyo as a student at Waseda University in the 1910s, he became a devoted reader of Kayahara and continued reading his work after returning to China to work as the librarian

¹¹ Nittono Yoshiyuki 入野良行, "Ri Taishō to Torusutoizumu 李大釗とトルストイズム (Li Dazhao and Tolstoyism)," *Sundai shigaku* 駿台史学 46 (1979).

¹² Benjamin I. Schwartz, *Chinese Communism and the Rise of Mao* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1951), p.10-11.

¹³ Kondō Kuniyasu 近藤邦康, *Chūgoku kindai shisō-shi kenkyū* 中国近代思想史研究 (The history of modern Chinese thought) (Tokyo: Keisō shobō, 1981), p.192.

¹⁴ Li Dazhao, "Qingchun," *Xin qingnian* 2.1 (1916); and Kayahara Kazan, "Hisō naru seishin," *Kōzui igo* 洪水以後1 (1916).

¹⁵ For further details, see Ishikawa Yoshihiro, "Tōzai bunmeiron to Nit-Chū no rondan" 東西文明論と日中の論壇 (On eastern vs. western culture and the views of critics in China and Japan), in Furuya Tetsuo 古屋哲夫, ed., *Kindai Nihon no Ajia ninshiki* 近代日本のアジア認識 (Modern Japanese perceptions of Asia) (Kyoto: Kyōto daigaku jinbun kagaku kenkyūjo, 1994).

¹⁶ As for Kayahara's personal history, see Matsuo Takayoshi 松尾尊允, "Daisan teikoku" kaisetsu 『第三帝国』解説 (Explanatory notes about *Daisan teikoku*)," in: "Daisan teikoku" kaisetsu, *sōmokuji, sakuin* 『第三帝国』解説・総目録・索引 (*Daisan teikoku* Explanatory notes, catalog, index) (Tokyo: Fuji shuppan, 1984); and Kayahara Ken 茅原健, *Kayahara Kazan to dōjidaijin* 茅原華山と同時代人 (Kayahara Kazan and his contemporaries) (Tokyo: Fuji shuppan, 1985).

at Peking University. The library of Peking University still has some old Japanese magazines that were edited by Kayahara, and these magazines were apparently donated by none other than Li Dazhao.¹⁷

Kayahara Kazan (1870-1952)

In the field of journalism, Kayahara contributed to the development of democracy in modern Japan. He is considered to be the first person to use the expression *minpon shugi* 民本主義 as a Japanese equivalent for the term “democracy.” In his day he played an active role as a critic of Japanese continental expansionism. Why then has such an important man been completely ignored for such a long time? The answer may be that he had a tendency to change his opinions so frequently that he was dubbed a “chameleon.”

¹⁷ The list of Japanese magazines which Li Dazhao donated to the library in 1920 is printed in *Beijing daxue rikan* 北京大学日刊, June 18, 1920.

In fact, he actually did become an opponent of democracy after he was defeated in the National Diet elections in 1915. But, it is also true that, in spite of this, he was exceedingly popular especially among the middlebrow readers of his time. If we take a look at a number of his books which covered everything under the sun from daily life to cosmology, we can easily see that they were beautifully written and composed of numerous quotations from philosophers of the world, such as Emerson, Thomas Carlyle, Bergson, Rudolf Eucken, Edward Carpenter, Confucius, and others. It was with this rather pedantic style that he made a name for himself.

Now, we can more easily understand why Li Dazhao's writings were so difficult and full of quotations from philosophers. It is undoubtedly because Kayahara's writings were that way rather than because Li's thought itself was terribly profound. It is interesting to note that the general reputations today of Li's writings and Kayahara's writings are as different as day and night. One is highly reputed as a philosophical thinker, the "father of Chinese Marxism," and the other a worthless "chameleon" critic. What they actually had to say was almost identical.

Of course, this is not to say that Li Dazhao was just a middlebrow writer who dazzled his readers with Kayahara's penchant for quoting from others, or that Li Dazhao's thought had no philosophical meaning. Surely, Li Dazhao's paying attention to Kayahara and other Japanese socialists tells us something about his thought. What I want to emphasize here is simply that we need to take the intellectual environment into consideration when we analyze the thought of a historical figure, and we need to distinguish what he created from he copied. No thinker, especially in the modern age, lives in complete seclusion, not reading books, magazines, and newspapers. This is natural enough, but it seems many historians especially of modern China still tend to identify a person's writings solely with his or her thought.

Let us return to the relationship between the Chinese understanding of Marxism and Japan. As far as the prevalence of socialism in China was concerned, the influence of Japan was overwhelming. From 1919 to 1921 when the early Communist organization was under way, thirty-six books concerning socialism were published in China, thirty-one of them were translations, and twenty-two were translated from Japanese. By "books concerning socialism," I include critiques of socialism. If we use the term in the limited sense, that is to say books written by Marx, Engels, or other Marxist figures, thirteen books out of eighteen that appeared in Chinese in these years were translations from Japanese, among them *The Communist Manifesto* and *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*.¹⁸ One should note in passing that it was not until 1938, seventeen years after the founding of the CCP, that the first complete Chinese translation of *Das Kapital* appeared. As for articles on socialism published in magazines and newspapers in those early years, more than half were translations or adaptations of Japanese articles written by Kawakami Hajime, Sakai Toshihiko, Yamakawa Hitoshi, and others.

The subsequent development of the Japanese Communist movement was much different from that of China. In Japan, the Communist movement was completely suppressed by the secret police before the Second World War and never developed even after the War. Nonetheless, we cannot overlook the fact that Chinese Marxism was, as well as other modern Western systems of thought, brought to China via Japan, and

¹⁸ For a more detailed list of socialist books at that time, see Ishikawa, *Chūgoku kyōsantō seiritsu shi*, pp.459-84.

Japanese interpretations of Marxism colored the characteristics of early Chinese Marxism to a significant degree. For instance, Kawakami Hajime's understanding of Marxism which emphasized the decisive human factor in the development of history helps explain why Chinese Communists could accept Marxist theory which otherwise seemed so unsuited to China at that time.

In this way, Japanese Marxists provided some nourishment for the start of the Communist movement in China. But, they could not offer the Chinese much further information about Bolshevism, especially the idea of the Leninist Party, because in Japan while studies of Marxism were relatively allowed to develop as a field of scholarship, socialist activity and detailed information about Soviet Bolshevism were placed under tight controls. Chinese socialists and Communists certainly must also have needed this kind of data to develop their movement from study to action. Where did they get this new information about Bolshevism? As it turns out, it was not from Russia, but from Great Britain and the United States.

Let me show visually the origins of Chinese Bolshevism. On the previous page, you will see a cover of *Xin qingnian* 新青年 (New youth), the first organ of the Chinese Communist Party. The *New Youth* was first published in 1915 as a magazine introducing Western ideas and became an organ of the Shanghai Communist Group in the autumn of 1920. From this issue on, it started to introduce a large number of Bolshevik documents. With the change in the magazine's character, the cover design was changed to this format, too. This design is so familiar among scholars of modern Chinese history that one can hardly be called a card-carrying Chinese historian if one are unfamiliar with it. But a closer look will reveal that something is wrong. The hands are being shaken across the Atlantic Ocean—strange indeed for a Chinese magazine. Stranger still is that no one has explained why, including mainland Chinese historians.

A look at the next picture (above) and one can easily see that the cover design of the *New Youth* was a copy of this. This is the emblem of the Socialist Party of America. In other words, the early CCP members by some chance found this emblem and clearly liked it a great deal, but where did they find it? I believe it was among the books or pamphlets published by Charles H. Kerr & Co. in Chicago, a company belonging to the Socialist Party of America. This company was at the time publishing numerous Communist documents, and many Chinese socialists often ordered books and magazines from it.¹⁹ Space does not permit a detailed discussion of the history of the American Communist movement, but what is obvious is that Chinese Communists obtained information about Bolshevism from American documents.

The same is true of the second Party organ of the CCP, *Gongchandang* 共產黨 (The Communist) published just after the *New Youth*. Its cover page, reproduced below, is also a copy. The English *Communist* was an organ of the Communist Party of Britain. It appears that *Gongchandang* was the Chinese edition of *The Communist*. And, indeed, the Chinese *Gongchandang* did publish translations of documents from the English *Communist*.²⁰

In any event, these imitations are, in a sense, not strange at all, because the Chinese Communists were, so to speak, beginners in the founding of political parties and had no idea about the image of a so-called Communist Party and Communist activity before then. The imitations show that the early Chinese Communists tried to obtain the images of a Communist Party through the icons of other Communist Parties—those of the United States and Great Britain. To add just one more example, which has also been ignored before, the first platform adopted at the first party congress of the CCP was, for all intents and purposes, a carbon copy of that of the United Communist Party of America founded in May 1920.²¹ Many historians have found it rather puzzling that the first platform of the CCP was so radical in its call for socialism and the like in light of China's economic condition at that time.²² But this can also be explained by the facts as outlined above.

Thus, the influence of American socialism enables us to identify what might be called a “missing link” in the formation of Chinese socialism, tying the preceding influence of Japanese writings on Chinese Marxist theory with the ensuing one of doctrines from Russia via the United States and Great Britain. In other words, a wider perspective is needed in analyzing early Chinese Marxism. Only by using such a broad

¹⁹ Ke Bonian 柯柏年, “Wo yi Makesi he Engesi zhuzuo de jianjian jingli 我译马克思和恩格斯著作的简单经历 (Short introduction concerning my translation of some writings of Marx and Engels),” in *Makesi Engesi zhuzuo zai Zhongguo de chuanbo* 马克思和恩格斯著作在中国的传播 (The introduction of the writings of Marx and Engels into China) (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 1983).

²⁰ For example, Zhenhuan 震寰, transl., “Gongchandang weilai de zeren” 共产党未来的责任 (The future responsibility of the Communist Party), *Gongchandang* 1 (November 1920) is a translation of Arthur McManus, “The Task awaiting the Communist Party,” *The Communist* 1 (August 1920).

²¹ “The Platform of the United Communist Party of America,” *The Communist*, June 12, 1920. This platform was translated and published in *Gongchandang* 2 (December 1920) before the first party congress of the CCP.

²² Steve A. Smith, *A Road is Made: Communism in Shanghai, 1920-1927* (Richmond: Curzon Press, 2000), p.28.

international approach can we rise above such tired discussions of whether Chinese Marxism was homegrown or imported from Soviet Russia.