Chen Duxiu’s Conversion from a Liberal Democrat to a Marxist-Leninist: Motivations And Impact

Tai Wan-chin*

This article reviews the process in which Chen Duxiu dramatically converted himself from a liberal democrat to a Marxist-Leninist. It explores the factors that contributed to his controversial conversion. His interaction with Li Dazhao in founding the Chinese Communist Party is discussed as well. The shortcomings of the May Fourth Movement were important in causing the change in Chen’s convictions. Patriotism, nationalism, and aspirations for a modernized China were major issues motivating his conversion. The role of the Soviet Union is also scrutinized. Both Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai were influenced by his conversion. Chen’s conversion to Marxism and Leninism was a great loss to the development of liberalism in China. His influence lingers and still may have an impact on China’s destiny.

Key words: Chen Duxiu, Grigorii N. Voitinsky, Hu Shi, John Dewey, Li Dazhao, Mao Zedong, Sun Yat-sen, Zhang Guotao,

* Dr. Tai Wan-chin (戴萬欽) is a professor at the Institute of American Studies and Dean of the College of International Studies at Tamkang University. He also teaches at the Institute of Russia Studies. Dr. Tai’s areas of specialization are in American Foreign Policy, Russian History and China’s Foreign Relations. His published dissertation is The Sino-Soviet Rift: The Perception and Response by the Kennedy Administration. One of his recent book is A Divided China: The Response by the Truman Administration. In the past three years, he presented three conference papers on the Quemoy Crises of 1958. Currently, he is researching on Russia’s calculations in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). Dr. Tai’s e-mail address is tai131@hotmail.com.
Chinese Communist Party (CCP), Guomindang (a.k.a. KMT), May Fourth Movement, The New Youth Magazine, Peking University (Beijing University or Beida), Third Communist International (a.k.a. Comintern), anarchism, liberalism, Marxism-Leninism as a vehicle of modernization, radical Chinese intellectuals, republicanism

Introduction

Chen Duxiu is a very important and complicated figure in China’s modern history. Contending models and proposals for China’s modernization abounded even before the downfall of the Qing Dynasty (1644-1912). The founding of the Republic of China in 1911 was not a triumph of liberalism and democracy; the backlash was the domination of warlords in the political landscape of China.

As of this moment, liberalism has not yet prevailed in China. The divergence and inconsistency of Chen’s chosen models for democracy and modernization in China had something to do with it. From the 1920’s throughout the 1940’s, Chen himself organized or took part in more than ten political groups. He wrote extensively for several influential journals and newspapers. In addition to academic writings and essays, he wrote novels and poems. Indeed, the transformation of his thought was not only dramatic but had a great impact on China’s modern history.

As a youth, he was educated to be a follower of Confucianism.
Later however, he advocated reforming Confucianism by arguing for the merits of liberal democracy and science.\(^1\) Frustrated by the oppression that took place during the May Fourth Movement (which erupted in 1919), he shifted to Marxism and Leninism, advocating the merits of “direct actions.” Subsequently, he became a Trotskyite, believing in the theory of “permanent revolution” developed by Leon Trotsky. In his final years, however, he again dramatically veered away from Marxism-Leninism favoring the British-American type of democracy. By then Chen had frankly indicated remorse for his devotion to Marxism and Leninism.

Regarding political beliefs, Chen had a pattern of moving fast to renounce his support of an earlier school of thought and to accept a newer one. However, in retrospect, his rejection was never that thorough nor was he ever ready to completely embrace a new school of thought.

This study will explore the question of Chen’s motivation in transforming himself from a liberal democrat to an advocate of Marxism and Leninism for China. The role of the Soviet Bolsheviks represented by Grigorii N. Voitinsky, who was sent by the Third Communist International (Comintern), will be scrutinized. The issues of nationalism and modernization that influenced Chen’s conversion to Marxism and

\(^1\) In 1918, Chen strongly expressed his disinclination toward Taoism, Buddhism and Confucianism. In his eyes, Taoism is full of superstitious notions; Buddhism is full of supernatural fantasies; and Confucianism is full of authoritarian servility. He openly stressed his inclination for republicanism, science, and atheism while denouncing despotism, superstition, and theocracy. See Chen Duxiu, “The Von Ketteler Monument,” *The New Youth Magazine* (Vol. V, No. 5 October 15, 1918): 449-458.
Leninism will also be addressed, as well as the early relationship between
Chen and Sun Yat-sen and the failure of the Guomindang to recruit Chen.
Certainly, the impact of Chen’s conversion on the Chinese Communist
movement, including Mao Zedong himself, will be another focus of this
paper.

The Relationship of Chen Duxiu and Li Dazhao

In a way, Chen Duxiu was a latecomer to Marxism and Leninism. At
Peking University, compared to his colleague, Li Dazhao, Chen could not
be considered an advocate of Marxism and Leninism prior to the May
Fourth Movement. It is widely recognized that Li was the first person that
systematically introduced Marxism into China. Li believed that “it is first
necessary to have a fundamental solution, and then there will be hope of
solving concrete problems one by one.” As early as mid-1918, Li
professed his inclination towards Marxism and Leninism. He praised the
Bolshevik Revolution as a great universal and elemental force that was
comparable in importance to the French Revolution. Shortly after
inaugurating the New Tide Society in the Autumn of 1918, Li founded the
Society for the Study of Marxism. Soon afterwards, in the November
1918 issue of The New Youth Magazine, Li wrote an article titled “The
Victory of Bolshevism.”

When Li founded the Society for the Study of Marxism, Chen was
the dean of the College of Liberal Arts at Peking University. However,
Chen did not join the society, giving only tacit support. During the

2 The Society for the Study of Marxism was actually the forerunner of the Chinese
well-known debates between Li and another colleague, Hu Shi, regarding the appropriateness of Marxism-Leninism for China, Chen never made his position clear.

It was not until the eve of the May Fourth Movement that Chen began to accept and recognize the influence of the Bolshevik Revolution. In early 1919, Chen for the first time published an article sympathizing with the Bolshevik Revolution. On April 20, 1919, Chen published his well-known article, “Russian Revolution in the Twentieth Century.” In the article, Chen noted that both the French Revolution (1789-99) and the Russian Revolution (1917) had been severely criticized by people who actually experienced those upheavals. But he predicted that historians of later generations would praise the two revolutions as important milestones of social change and progress for humankind. Such comments by Chen indicated the beginning of his transformation from a democrat to an advocate of Communism for China. In his first exposure to Marxism, Chen had some reservations. The main reason was that Marxist theory conflicted with the liberal Western ideas he had assimilated and promoted in China. Chen felt uncertain of the practical application of Marxist theory to the problems that existed in China. An American scholar Helmut Gruber believed that it was the Leninist formulation and its practical application that ultimately converted Chen to Marxism. That is to say, the victory of the Bolsheviks ultimately convinced Chen that Marxism would

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be the answer for China.

However, it is useful to note that before 1920, Chen apparently had not yet made his commitment to Marxism. Around the middle of 1919, he was still saying that, “it is better to promote the practical movement of education and emancipation of workers than vaguely talk of anarchism and socialism.”\textsuperscript{6} Such remarks revealed that Chen was then not yet ready to accept Marxism-Leninism.

Anarchism had a strong appeal to Chinese intellectuals and youths during the May Fourth Movement. At that time quite a number of Chinese radical intellectuals drew inspiration from it. Anarchism laid an important foundation for a number of Chinese radical intellectuals to eventually accept Marxism and Leninism.\textsuperscript{7} Very few scholars deny the role played by anarchism in the early stages of the Chinese Communist movement.

The following is a sampling of Chen’s comments on anarchism. He believed that the essence of anarchism is to respect the absolute freedom of individuals and groups. But such a spirit of respect for absolute freedom is preferably applied to the areas of ethics and art. According to Chen, anarchism should be not applicable to political and economic

\textsuperscript{6} Chen was quite familiar with the five major branches of socialism: anarchism, communism, state socialism, syndicalism, and guild socialism.

\textsuperscript{7} Some anarchists, such as Huang Lingshuang, did participate in the Chinese Communist Party. However, in late November 1920, they decided to quit the Chinese Communist Party for opposing the doctrines of “proletarian dictatorship” and “collective leadership.” See Tang Baolin and Lin Maosheng, \textit{Chen Duxiu Nianpu 1879-1942} (Shanghai: Shanghai People’s Publishing House, 1988), 133. Even Mao Zedong admitted that he was for a time under the influence of anarchism. See Benjamin Schwartz, \textit{Chinese Communism and the Rise of Mao} (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979), 26.
questions.8 On January 27, 1921, Chen went on to write an article, criticizing anarchism for its rejection of the state, the law, and the proletarian dictatorship.9

Zhang Guotao, a student and a key follower of Chen, believed that Chen’s conversion to Marxism was largely influenced by his friendship with Li Dazhao and Dai Jitao.10 In late 1919, Chen left Beijing for Shanghai. Zhang and others confirmed that by the end of 1920, Chen had already become a firm convert to Bolshevism and to the efficacy of applying it to political action.11 An American scholar Benjamin Schwartz also noted that by September 1920, Chen had accepted Marxism-Leninism “in toto.”12 Interestingly, however, Schwartz emphasized that Li was a convert to Marxism-Leninism after Chen. He pointed out that Li did not announce his complete conversion to Marxism-Leninism until December 1920 when The New Youth Magazine published his article titled “The Value of Historical Materialism in Modern Historical Science.”13

Schwartz’s assertion was correct. It is true that by September 1920, Chen had converted himself to Bolshevism. On October 10, 1920, Chen

9 Tang and Lin, Chen Duxiu Nianpu 1879-1942, 141.
10 Zhang, My Reminiscences, Vol. 1, 94. At that time, Li Dazhao was inclined not to extend the study of Marxism-Leninism into practical politics.
11 Ibid., p.100. Hsu, The Rise of Modern China, 508. The organizational capability of the Bolsheviks also attracted the attention of Dai Jitao.
12 Schwartz, Chinese Communism and the Rise of Mao, 23.
13 Ibid., 24. Previously, Li Dazhao was quite unwilling to accept the Darwinist propensity to explain social phenomena in biological terms.
went further and published an article proclaiming his prediction that socialism would definitely replace republicanism. Along with saying that this would definitely be progress in social development, Chen emphasized that the rise of socialism over republicanism would be inevitable in China.  

In July 1920 when Zhang Guotao went to Shanghai and stayed at Chen’s residence, Chen exhibited more aggressiveness than Li Dazhao in seeking the establishment of the Chinese Communist Party. Chen told Zhang that studying Marxism was no longer the most important task at hand; at this time, he said, it was the setting-up of a Chinese communist party that was most urgent and critical. And according to Zhang, that was a must for Chen. It is fair to say that Chen and Li helped each other to mutually reinforce their convictions in Marxism and Leninism and together they strengthened their determination in founding the Chinese Communist Party.

After all, Chen and Li were not only the spiritual fathers of Marxism-Leninism in China but also the most distinguished first founders of the Chinese Communist Party.  

14 Tang and Lin, Chen Duxiu Nianpu 1879-1942, 127-128.  
16 In the reminiscences of Zhang, Chen was considered a great thinker. Zhang noted that in putting forward his arguments, Chen never easily backed away. However, Chen was seen by Zhang as straightforward in admitting the errors of his ideas if they were clearly pointed out. According to Zhang, Chen was a very eloquent person. Comparing Chen with Li Dazhao, the latter’s character was relatively mild. From Zhang’s standpoint, Chen continued to be very much attached to Chinese culture even though he was under the strong influence of Western culture and thought. See Ibid., 94.
The New Youth Magazine and Chen Duxiu

The New Youth Magazine began in 1916 and Chen Duxiu was its first editor. Before the emergence of the May Fourth Movement in 1919, there already existed a climate for social change in China, which, consequently, paved the way for a growing intellectual movement. Catchy terms (in Chinese) were used to describe this movement such as the “New Tide,” “Renaissance,” “New Thought,” and “New Culture.” Actually, this new intellectual movement had many dimensions. It included the advocacy of using colloquial Mandarin in writing, the experimentation with novels in literature, the critique of China’s past, in-depth discussions on philosophy, and the search for a new and reformed China that possessed a more vital civilization. It is true that the new intellectual movement had no headquarters. It is also true that the main figures of this new intellectual movement flirted with a variety of social-political doctrines. Hence The New Youth Magazine played a very influential role in this period of intellectual ferment.

Under the editorship of Chen, The New Youth Magazine especially dedicated itself to the promotion of the value of science and the scientific approach. It strongly emphasized the importance of using the scientific method to reform the approach of psychology and education in China. In addition, numerous articles called for the strengthening of nationalism. The magazine under Chen’s direction had the distinction of being the

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17 Li Dazhao did not join the editorial board of the New Youth Magazine only until the fall of 1918.

leader for introducing new ideas and concepts and advocating a heightened awareness of the importance of nationalism.

**The May Fourth Movement and Chen’s Conversion**

The May Fourth Movement was sparked by the supine attitude of a weak Chinese government in confronting mounting Japanese pressure and by the betrayal of American promises and Wilsonian ideals at the Peace Conference at Versailles in 1919 that marked the end of the First World War. What happened at the Versailles conference situated in the outskirts of Paris was that the Allied countries worked in concert in support of Japanese imperialism in China. As a result, a nation-wide protest erupted leading to what has become know as the May Fourth Movement. In short, anti-imperialism and anti-feudalism were major issues in the protest; they were fundamental to the growing national sentiment against foreign encroachment and widespread corruption in China.

The stunning impact of the May Fourth Movement on Chinese intellectuals was no less potent than the growing influence of Marxism. The failure of radicalism in the May Fourth Movement made Marxism and Leninism even more attractive to Chinese radical intellectuals. For them, Marxism and Leninism offered a more comprehensive world outlook and viable approach to revolution on the basis of class struggle. In their eyes, Marxism and Leninism had the appropriate organizational principles and tools to implement the ideals and aspirations of the people. Throughout the May Fourth Movement, these radical intellectuals were articulate in arguing that public interest must rise above personal interest, and they favored public ownership on the basis of egalitarianism.
Chen Duxiu was deeply struck by the students’ role in the May Fourth protest. He thus committed himself to participate in the forthcoming demonstrations. In the evening of June 11, 1919, Chen was caught distributing propaganda literature. The authorities in Beijing arrested him for using his “new thought” to instigate student demonstrations that originated from Peking University. On September 16, he was released on bail. On November 10, Chen decided to give up his position at Peking University to become “wholeheartedly dedicated to social movements.” He also had a strong urge to carry forward the radical movement.

Having removed himself to Shanghai, Chen became increasingly immersed in Marxism. In a little more than half a year, his faith as a liberal democrat was torn apart. To Chen, liberal democracy seemed to be no more than a tool employed by the bourgeoisie to swindle the people in order to maintain their political power.19 Hence Chen reoriented himself toward Communism.

In early 1920, after Chen left Beijing to stay at a place in the French Concession in Shanghai, Mao Zedong called on him. In their talk, Chen asked Mao to read the forthcoming translation of the “Communist Manifesto.” Citing the words of Marx, Chen emphasized to Mao that the laboring class must employ revolutionary means to seize power in their struggle against the bourgeoisie. Chen also shared with Mao his bitter experience in the May Fourth Movement, saying that it was just not

19 Hsu, The Rise of Modern China, 516.
enough to simply talk about democracy and science. He also expressed his resentment for his arrest by Beijing authorities. The experience of being painfully frustrated by the weakness of the May Fourth Movement gave Chen the strong urge to carry forward the radical movement. Later in May 1920, Chen founded the Marxist Study Society and in August, the Socialist Youth Corps. These organizations were important in laying the groundwork for the founding of the Chinese Communist Party of which Chen’s involvement was instrumental to its creation in July 1921.

Mao praised Chen as the commander-in-chief of the May Fourth Movement. In Mao’s view, several important cadres of the latter-day Chinese Communist Party emerged out of the May Fourth Movement. His arrest during the May Fourth Movement was a crisis to Chen. But it turned out as a good opportunity for the birth of the Chinese Communist Party.

It is not an overstatement to say that the May Fourth Movement was an important impetus to the dissemination of Marxism in China. But was this movement the sole opportunity for the birth of the Chinese Communist Party? Actually, it is inevitable that Marxism-Leninism became an attractive option for many Chinese intellectuals. The spread and development of Marxism-Leninism in China was not necessarily a historical accident.

Nationalism as a Motivating Factor

In his memoirs, Zhang Guotao touched on Chen Duxiu’s

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motivations for converting to Marxism-Leninism and for his founding of the Chinese Communist Party. Zhang believed that Chen was motivated mainly by his concerns over the political reality in China. Zhang noted that China’s degeneration into a status of “semi-colony” and the widespread corruption within China together with the political crisis Chen was personally facing drove him to convert himself from a liberal democrat to a Marxist.\footnote{Zhang, \textit{My Reminiscences}, Vol. 1, 94.} Certainly, there are other factors that led to Chen’s conversion.

In Zhang’s view, Chen’s sense of nationalism was an important factor that made him turn to Marxism. Being strongly Chinese, nationalism, after all, was more significant than liberalism in Chen’s analysis of China’s road to modernization.

How much was Chen a nationalist? That is an interesting question for further study. Those who so praised him believe that what he was most concerned with was the question of the destiny of the Chinese nation, not the question of individual freedom.

It is commonly accepted that the two declarations made by Lev M. Karakhan on the giving up of the unequal privileges in China by Communist Russia were helpful in leading Chen to adopt a favorable attitude toward the Bolsheviks.

While accepting Soviet guidance, Chen still intended to maintain the independence of the Chinese Communist Party. At a party meeting in
Guangdong in April 1921, Chen said that the Chinese Communist Party should not rely on the financial support of the Comintern. He expressed his worries that if they took money from the Comintern, the Chinese Communist Party would then be forced to follow its directives. Chen emphasized the principle that the Chinese Communist Party should be on its own.\textsuperscript{22} Undoubtedly, however, Chen had earlier accepted some form of financial support from the Bolsheviks.

**Modernizing China as Another Motivating Factor**

While nationalism was one of Chen Duxiu’s motivations for converting to Marxism-Leninism, the pursuit of China’s modernization was another. In Russia, anti-Western nationalism arose only after Western Powers intervened in the wake of the victory of the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917. Anti-Western nationalism, therefore, could not be considered as one of the motivating factors for the Russian Revolution. In contrast, Chinese Communism arose partly because of the strong national sentiment against Western colonialism and imperialism. In China, the widespread protests that took place on May 4, 1919 broke out amid

\textsuperscript{22} Tang and Lin, *Chen Duxiu Nianpu 1879-1942*, 148-149. On June 3 1921, G. Maring (Jahn Henricus Sneevliet) arrived in Shanghai. He pushed Chen to organize and convene the First Party Congress of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) soon. But according to an American scholar James Pinckney Harrison, there were stories that claim as early as 1920 the Comintern had already sent Korean Communists and funds to Shanghai to organize a Chinese communist party. But Harrison added that it was unclear what effects such efforts had on the initial development of the CCP. Korean Communists were active in Shanghai after August 1919, and convened one of their own Party Congresses in Shanghai in May 1921. See James Pinckney Harrison, *The Long March to Power: A History of the Chinese Communist Party, 1921-72* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1972), 27. Helmut Gruber in his book believed that it was Grigorii N. Voitinsky who financed the organization of the Socialist Youth Corps. See Gruber, *Soviet Russia Masters the Comintern*, 337.
outcries against the attempt by signatories of the Versailles Peace Treaty to transfer Chinese territorial concessions in the Shandong Peninsula and elsewhere from the defeated Germany to Japan. The Chinese Communist movement surfaced in an atmosphere of intense nationalistic fervor brought about by the May Fourth incident, which passionately searched for a means to overcome China’s weakness and humiliation.

In China, nationalism was inevitably tied to modernization. The latter is a vehicle of the former. Pride and self-respect transpires through modernization.

The emergence of Chinese Communism was viewed by some scholars like Richard Lowenthal as the final outcome of the quest for identity pursued by radical intellectuals who hoped to break with their cultural tradition so as to achieve modernization. For them, to recover national dignity was the first step that was needed to achieve modernization.

Chen was not anti-Western in a cultural sense. Many foreign scholars such as Stuart R. Schram saw Chen as above all, a “Westernizer.” Early on in the May Fourth Movement, Chen was even seen by many people in China as a “radical Westernizer.” Ultimately, Chen believed that it was China’s own faults and weaknesses that led to its terrible misfortunes and suffering. Thus, he later turned to Marxism as he believed it was an “advanced Western message” that was more relevant to dealing with the

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existing problems of China. Schram strongly held that Chen Duxiu’s conversion to Communism was mainly because he took it to be the most efficient method for “modernizing” Chinese society.\textsuperscript{24} Schram emphasized Chen’s high hopes for China’s modernization.

While saying that Chen did not share the nationalist mystique of Li Dazhao and Mao Zedong, Schram believed that Chen was a “Westernizer” at heart.\textsuperscript{25} In other words, Schram went along with the assumption that to modernize China was one of the key motivating forces for Chen Duxiu to convert himself to a Marxist-Leninist. Such a view, of course, suggests that Chen perceived Marxism-Leninism more as a vehicle in China’s modernization process as opposed to a doctrinaire principle.

**Chen Duxiu and the Labor Movement in China**

Was the rise of labor movements a factor in Chen’s conversion to Marxism-Leninism? That is an interesting and important question. Benjamin Schwartz emphasized that by 1920, Chen Duxiu still did not feel that separate organizations for workers and management were justified. It led Schwartz to forcefully argue that, “it is thus patent that the rise of the proletariat was not the factor which led Chen into the Communist movement.”\textsuperscript{26} After the May Fourth incident, the appeal of labor movements in China did not rise significantly. Not until the spring of 1920 did the Chinese radical intellectuals begin to sense the importance

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\item[25] Ibid., 42. Schram took Li as a nationalist who had seen in the Leninist theory of imperialism a justification for his “chauvinistic” views. See Ibid., 29.
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of labor. To them during the May Fourth Movement, Chinese workers were largely a source of ethical renewal. But in the spring of 1920, they began to view labor as a strength of social renewal. Gradually, Chinese radical intellectuals, including Chen himself, regarded labor as the only hope for social revolution in China.

At a closer look, we see that Chen was instrumental in organizing the early Communist-controlled labor unions, such as the Mechanical Workers Union and the Printers Union in Shanghai. On April 21, 1920, Chen delivered an address to a joint conference of several major labor unions in Shanghai. On that occasion, Chen openly argued for the shortening of working hours and a wage-hike for union members.

Even before the Temporary Central Organ of the Chinese Communist Party was established, Chen delivered another speech in May 1920 to encourage the shipping and warehouse workers in Shanghai to heighten their awareness of labor interests.27

According to Benjamin Schwartz, the rise of the Chinese proletariat should not be taken as a factor in the conversion of Chen Duxiu and Li Dazhao to Marxism-Leninism. For Schwartz it would be more correct to say that Chen and other Chinese intellectuals turned their attention to the proletariat rather than to say that the proletariat in China turned their attention to Marxism-Leninism. Schwartz added that this did not mean that, after 1920, Chen’s and Li’s concern for the poor living conditions of

the Chinese proletariat was not genuine. He stressed that their conversion had more extraneous ideological roots such as the organizational and class struggle aspects of Marxism-Leninism.28

Notably, Chen and Li differed on the revolutionary potential of the workers and the peasants of China. Chen subscribed to the general European Marxist emphasis on the proletariat. He almost had an implicit disdain toward the role that could be played by what he considered the “inert” Chinese peasantry. Li, instead, stressed the importance of the role of the large masses of impoverished peasants. Drawing on the inspirations of the Russian Populist (narodnik) movement, Li urged young intellectuals to go to the backward villages of China’s rural areas to help “awaken” the peasants and to stimulate their revolutionary zeal.29 Chen, however, did not make such an appeal to young Chinese intellectuals.

At one point, some historians on China mainland went so far as to distort Chen’s role in the Chinese labor movement, considering him unimportant and compared him to Liu Shaoqi.30 But from the collection of reminiscences of Zhang Guotao, such a distortion could easily be refuted. Zhang recalled Chen’s closely held view that a strong Communist party must be a party of the workers. Zhang also cited Chen’s belief that trade unions should belong to the workers and noted Chen’s clear-cut

29 Hsu, The Rise of Modern China, 517-518.
30 Warren Kuo, Analytical History of the Chinese Communist Party, Vol. I (Taipei: Institute of International Relations, Republic of China, 1968), 15. Liu at one time was the president of the People’s Republic of China but was tragically disgraced and perished in the Cultural Revolution.
position that a Communist party could not exist without trade unions.31

**Did John Dewey Influence Chen?**

A study of Chen Duxiu’s conversion to Marxism-Leninism would be incomplete if the influence of John Dewey were ignored. The lectures delivered at Peking University by Bertrand Russell and Dewey respectively in 1919 and 1920 were by no means a small part of the intellectual ferment of China during those years. Dewey influenced Chen more than Russell did. Chen was very impressed with Dewey’s thought in both social philosophy and the philosophy of science. In his lecture on “Social Philosophy and Political Philosophy,” Dewey enlightened Chen with the conception that democracy must have a grassroots social basis. Dewey also turned Chen’s attention to the question of economic democracy.

Clearly in his lectures at Peking University, Dewey indicated his rejection of all-embracing solutions to mankind’s political and economic difficulties. Dewey specifically stated that the only scientific approach to human problems should be “to search for concrete methods to meet concrete problems according to the exigencies of time and place.”32 But it was precisely Chen’s hope of finding such all-embracing solutions that turned his interest to the West. Dewey gave Chen the opportunity to think about the importance of grassroots democracy and the question of economic democracy, however, his acceptance of Dewey’s ideas, albeit partial, did not prevent him from becoming a Marxist-Leninist.

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To assert that Dewey’s thoughts facilitated Chen’s conversion to Marxism-Leninism is untenable. But it would be interesting to further explore whether or not Dewey’s thoughts ever delayed Chen’s conversion.

**Comrade Voitinsky, the Catalyst**

Among the Russians or Bolsheviks who had been associated with Chen Duxiu, Grigorii N. Voitinsky deserves special attention. Voitinsky served, in a sense, as a catalyst to Chen’s determination to expedite the founding of the Chinese Communist Party. In December 1919, the Marxist Research Society, founded by Li Dazhao, was replaced by the Society for the Study of Socialism. During this time, two other Bolsheviks, A. A. Muller and N. Bortman, offered to help Li. By March 1920, the various Marxist groups in Beijing united to form the Beijing Society for the Study of Marxist Theory. In early 1920, Voitinsky arrived China and was given the authority by the Comintern to take concrete steps toward helping Li and Chen establish the Chinese Communist Party. Voitinsky first conferred with Li about organizing such a party. Shortly afterwards, Voitinsky went to Shanghai to confer with Chen through Li’s introduction. The upshot of these meetings with Voitinsky was the decision to establish a Communist party branch in Shanghai under Chen

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33 After his arrival in China, Voitinsky also met with Sun Yat-sen in Shanghai. From 1913-1918, he was a Russian immigrant worker in the United States and learned his English there. While in the United States, Voitinsky joined the American Socialist Party. After the victory of the Russian Revolution, he returned home and became an active Bolshevik. See Israel Epstein, *Woman in World History: Life and Times of Soong Ching Ling [Mme. Sun Yat-sen]* (2nd ed.; Beijing: New World Press, 1995), 88.

34 Voitinsky was sent by the Comintern to also explore the possibility of setting up an East Asian Secretariat of the Comintern in Shanghai. С. Л. Тихвинский, *Путь Китая К Объединению И Независимости 1898-1949*, Москва: Восточная Литература, 1996, с. 70.
and another in Beijing under Li. In August, a provisional central bureau was set up with Chen elected as its secretary.35

In his memoirs, Zhang Guotao recalled that around August 20, 1920, he overheard a conversation one evening upstairs in Chen’s home in Shanghai between a foreigner and Chen. The following morning Chen told him that the foreigner was a representative from the Comintern. Zhang later added that he knew that the foreigner was Voitinsky, a member of the Soviet Communist Party (CPSU), who with his interpreter, Yang Mingzhai, met with Chen that evening. But Zhang also emphasized in his memoirs that Chen at that time neither revealed the details of their conversation nor told him how many times he and this foreigner met. In his reminiscences, Zhang assumed that Voitinsky’s persuasion and promise on behalf of the Comintern might have given the final push to Chen’s determination to set up the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).36 Later in 1921, Voitinsky also helped the CCP hold its First Party Congress in Shanghai.

Chen maintained good ties with Voitinsky and trusted him. But in 1927, Chen’s leadership in the CCP was ruined by Michael Borodin, the later representative to China from the Comintern, who also acted as Sun

35 Chen consulted with Li Dazhao and Zhang Shenfu about the designation of the newly created party. They eventually decided to name it “Communist Party” instead of “Socialist Party.” They also decided to make The New Youth Magazine a party organ. See Tang and Lin, Chen Duxiu Nianpu 1879-1942, 120. On August 22, 1921, the Chinese Socialist Youth Corps was inaugurated in the editorial office of The New Youth Magazine in Shanghai. It was noted that Voitinsky made the final decision there on the designation of the name Chinese Communist Party. Cheng Xuejia, The Biography of Chen Duxiu, Vol. 1 (in Chinese) (Taipei: the China Times Publishing House, 1978), 356.
Yat-sen’s political advisor.\(^{37}\)

In short, the help and support rendered by the Comintern was one of the factors for the emergence of the Chinese Communist Party. But the rapid popularity of Marxism and Leninism in China could not be exclusively attributed to the role played by the Comintern. More specifically, it was the increasingly unbearable and decadent social, political, and economic conditions in China that made Chen and his followers along with his associates to become more easily receptive to Marxism and Leninism.

**Guomindang’s Failure to Recruit Chen**

The repeated failure of the Guomindang (also know as the KMT) to convince Chen to become a member of their party was certainly another factor that contributed to his conversion to Marxism-Leninism. At the time when Sun Yat-sen founded the Tongmeng Hui (Chinese United League) in Japan, the predecessor of the Guomindang, Chen was studying there, but he did not join the organization. The reason he gave was that he

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\(^{37}\) On August 7, 1927, seven days after the failure of the Nanchang Uprising, the CCP Central Committee called an emergency conference. The conference was presided over by Besso Lominadze, another representative of the Comintern. The conference was aimed at putting all the blame of opportunism on Chen Duxiu. Chen, the founder of the Chinese Communist Party, was thus removed from its chairmanship. The conference issued a circular letter to all members of the CCP. In the letter, the responsibility for the mistakes of the Chinese Communist Party was shifted onto Chen. The letter said, “The Chinese Communist Party has not only carried out an erroneous policy resulting in the defeat of the revolution…and capitulation to the enemy, but has also failed to admit its errors and obey the instructions of the Communist International….We positively admit that the leadership of the Central Committee did carry out an opportunist and non-revolutionary policy and that such policy will be duly changed on the basis of the lessons learned in the past.” Actually, Borodin was the key person involved in deposing Chen. See Kuo, *Analytical History of the Chinese Communist Party, Vol. I*, 375-377.
did not like their emphasis on Han nationalism, which was aimed at overthrowing the Manchu rule. Later, when the Revolution of 1911 (Xinhai Geming) broke out, Chen was the chief secretary of General Bo Wenwei and was on good terms with the revolutionaries. In 1913, when the rebellion against the coronation of Yuan Shikai was crushed, Chen exiled himself to Japan.\(^{38}\) Even though Chen was not a member of the Guomindang, he identified himself with their cause to oust Yuan who had dreams of becoming another emperor.

Yet Chen still refused to join the Guomindang and continued to be critical of their institutional arrangements. He underscored the merits of the democratic ideas of the French and the structure they established. In 1921, before the founding of the Chinese Communist Party, Chen particularly emphasized to Zhang Guotao, his protégé and friend, that the Chinese Communist Party should definitely not make the presidential system a part of their structure. In his view, a “committee system” would be more effective and democratic as opposed to that which was adopted (i.e., a presidential/parliamentary/imperial Chinese-mixed system) by Sun Yat-sen and the Guomintang.\(^{39}\)

In spring 1921, Chen discussed with Tan Pingshan, Tan Zhitang, and Chen Gongbo about the feasibility of setting up a Communist party branch in the province of Guangdong. Chen perceived the consolidation of the Guangzhou Government (in the provincial capital) by Sun Yat-sen and Chen Jyoungming as a good opportunity for the Chinese Communist


\(^{39}\) Ibid., 96.
Party to facilitate mass movements province-wide. Chen himself later became the secretary of the CCP branch in Guangdong. Ultimately for Chen Duxiu, the reform program of the Guomindang was simply not sweeping enough.

After the founding of the Chinese Communist Party, Chen did not change his basic criticism of the Guomindang. On January 26, 1923, the Sun-Joffe Manifesto was declared. It provided the framework for cooperation between the Guomindang, the Soviet government, and the Chinese Communist Party. But on July 1, 1923, Chen sent a letter from Guangzhou to G. I. Safarov, the chief of the Eastern Directorate of the Executive Committee of the Comintern. In his letter, Chen criticized the Guomintang, saying that too many of their ideas were obsolete. Among other things, Chen continued to put emphasis on the fact that the Guomindang was not yet a mass party.

Despite his criticism and however unhappy he was in saying it, Chen still urged the Chinese Communist Party to help mobilize masses to join the Guomindang. The reason he gave for taking such a position was that if the Chinese Communist Party did not join the Guomindang, the latter would commit more mistakes. Hence, the better it is for the CCP?

40 Tang and Lin, *Chen Duxiu Nianpu 1879-1942*, 147.
41 Russian academician S. L. Tikhvinsky emphasized that the Guomindang had neither a clear-cut political program nor a charter when it was founded on October 10, 1919 in Shanghai. *Тихвинский, Путь Китая К Объединению И Независимости 1898-1949*, с. 77.
interesting logic, needless to say!

The evidence of Chen’s basic disinclination toward the Guomindang has been summarized in the above. What then were the personal contacts between Chen and Sun Yat-sen, the leader of that party, like?

Actually, before the founding of the Chinese Communist Party, Chen interacted with Sun from time to time. It was on his recommendation that Voitinsky, the Comintern representative, called on Sun in Shanghai in mid-November 1920. At that meeting, Sun expressed his interest in cooperating with the Russian Bolsheviks.

On November 21, 1920, the Mechanical Labor Union of Shanghai was inaugurated and Chen Duxiu delivered the inaugural address. On that occasion, Sun also spoke and took the opportunity to expound on his Three Principles of the People. In early January 1921, when Voitinsky visited Guangzhou, it was Chen who accompanied him to meet with Sun again.

On August 23, 1922, Li Dazhao met with Sun in Shanghai through a man named Zhang Ji. On that occasion, Sun invited Li to join the Guomindang, giving him his assurances that he could still keep his membership in the Chinese Communist Party. Subsequently, Zhang Ji

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43 Tang and Lin, *Chen Duxiu Nianpu 1879-1942*, 131. Voitinsky then was curious to know more about Chen Jyongming. On August 28, 1921, Sun Yatsen sent a reply to G. V. Chicherin, asking Chicherin to convey his respect to Vladimir Lenin and expressing his hope to have connections with the Soviet government. See Ibid., 139.
arranged for both Li and Chen to meet with Sun jointly.\textsuperscript{44} However, Chen was still unconvinced and declined to join the Guomindang.

Indeed, the failure of the Guomindang and Sun to recruit Chen early on was also a factor that contributed to Chen’s conversion to a Marxist-Leninist.

**Hu Shi’s Regret**

Hu Shi and Chen Duxiu have been considered the best-known figures in the May Fourth Movement. Hu was Chen’s most important colleague at The New Youth Magazine and a follower and student of John Dewey. Thus, the interaction between Hu and Chen during the period of the latter’s conversion to Marxism-Leninism deserves a closer look. Hu Shi was the person responsible for introducing Dewey’s “pragmatic” approach to China. He forcefully preached an evolutionary “drop-by-drop” improvement of society through the study of specific and practical problems and arriving at the right solutions. Specifically, Hu argued that “people nowadays indulge in talk about liberation and reform, but they should know that there is no liberation in toto, or reform in toto.”\textsuperscript{45} Chen did not agree with Hu on that point. Instead, he argued that liberation and reform must be immediate and thoroughgoing if social, political, and economic transformation were to succeed, using the Bolshevik model as a case in point. It was on this point that Chen saw eye-to-eye with Li Dazhao despite their differences elsewhere.

\textsuperscript{45} Tang and Lin, *Chen Duxiu Nianpu 1879-1943*, 104.
Immediately after Chen’s arrest in June 1919 by Beijing authorities, Hu published an article, advocating less talk about “isms.” That article was seen as a step deliberately taken by Hu to emphasize the difference between his standpoint on the question of reform and that of Chen’s and Li’s.46

From the very beginning, Hu did not approve of the dissemination of Bolshevism in The New Youth Magazine. However, he did not voice any criticism against it, as both Chen and Li were not only colleagues but also personal friends.47

However, Maurice Meisner, an American scholar, noted that Hu failed to see that “pragmatism” was the product of a stable American society that permitted free examination of problems and the implementation of reforms. In his view, Hu was not able to quickly address the serious problems that China was facing and come up with the right solutions.48

On his part, Hu made an attempt to trace the causes of Chen’s conversion to Marxism-Leninism. According to Hu, the removal of Chen from his position of dean of the College of Liberal Arts at Peking University was one of the major factors that led to Chen’s break with liberal-democratic ideals. Hu even took steps to defend Chen by way of speaking out against the university’s action, which he considered was unjust. In a letter to Tang Erhe, Hu complained that “visiting prostitutes”

46 Hsu, The Rise of Modern China, 507.
47 Chu, Chen Duxiu and Chinese Celebrities, 192.
48 Cited from Hsu, The Rise of Modern China, 509.
(the pretext for Chen’s firing) should not have been used to justify his removal. In that letter, Hu also attributed to this incident Chen’s dramatic shift to Marxism-Leninism. Ultimately, Hu noted and with much chagrin, the purging of Chen Duxiu led to the weakening of liberalism in China, and subsequently, to the founding of the Chinese Communist Party. The above also reveals Hu’s personal regret over Chen’s ideological change of heart. He not only offered his profound sympathy to the hardship Chen had to endure, but also noted the strong impact on China as a result of his conversion.

Chen Duxiu’s Impact on Mao Zedong

In 1949, Mao was proclaimed the founder of the People’s Republic of China. It was under his leadership that the Chinese Communist Party defeated the Guomindang and forced it to relinquish control of mainland China. Hence, it is important to explore Chen’s influence on Mao toward becoming a Marxist-Leninist. As early as 1917, Mao expressed his profound admiration for Chen’s vision in a talk with his close friend Cai Hesheng. Later, Chen published Mao’s article (under a pseudonym) on the importance of physical education in The New Youth Magazine. Chen appreciated Mao’s article because he felt it was in harmony with his own advocacy of learning from Western culture. In 1918, through Li Dazhao’s introduction, Mao met with Chen in the library of Peking University.

Immediately after Chen’s imprisonment for his involvement in the May Fourth incident, Mao, on July 14, 1919, published an article in Hunan, praising Chen as a “shining star” in the circles of new thought in

49 Tang and Lin, Chen Duxiu Nianpu 1879-1942, 96.
China. Mao protested against Chen’s incarceration by stressing the fact that his arrest was made simply on the basis of his advocating science and democracy.\(^{50}\)

Parenthetically, it should be noted that Mao did not have much first-hand knowledge—if any at all—of Marxism-Leninism until he read the *Communist Party Monthly* sent by the CCP Provisional Central Organ. The monthly was founded on November 7, 1920 under the leadership of Chen Duxiu.\(^{51}\)

Later in 1937 during an interview with Edgar Snow, Mao recalled his first encounter with Chen. He also told Snow that at a critical period of his life Chen deeply influenced him.\(^{52}\)

But in the final analysis, Mao showed that he was better able than either Chen or Li Dazhao to understand the implications of Marxism-Leninism as a program of action. Mao’s ability as a military and political strategist and tactician also surpassed that of Chen’s and Li’s.

It may be too strong to assert that Chen was a mentor to Mao. But Mao had openly admitted that he was under Chen’s great influence when he converted to Marxism-Leninism. It is widely assumed that the Chinese Communist Party could not have succeeded in defeating the Guomindang

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50 Ibid., 105.
had it not been for Mao’s leadership. This illustrates how strong an impact Chen’s conversion to Marxism-Leninism had on the fate of China. At this writing, we know that the CCP is still far from obliterating the pivotal role Chen Duxiu played in modern Chinese history. In China today, although Mao’s status has declined after more than two decades of economic liberalization, the Chinese Communist Party still has a clear monopoly on power, politics and policy. Hence, any investigation of Chen’s impact would continue to be marginalized. Nevertheless, his “transformed devotion” to Communism is still very much a relevant issue to the development of China and the direction it takes.

Zhou Enlai once admitted the powerful impact that Chen Duxiu had on him. In his recollection, Zhou said that The New Youth Magazine, edited by Chen, strongly influenced his outlook and ideological development.53

At this moment, the political conditions on China mainland are changing to some extent. Study groups and associations devoted to learning more about Chen’s life have surfaced. The eventful and dramatic life of Chen Duxiu has become increasingly attractive to China’s historians and political theorists.

Conclusion

The introduction of Marxism into China was facilitated by the

Bolshevik October Revolution of 1917. Mainly through the rise of Bolshevism, Marxism became widely known to Chinese intellectuals. Without the Bolshevist victory in Russia, Chinese intellectuals would not have paid that much attention to Marxism.

And without the actions taken by Chen Duxiu, the Chinese Communist Party would not have emerged in China so soon. Had Chen’s ideological conversion not taken place, it is conceivable that quite a number of intellectuals in China would have been more reluctant to embrace Marxism-Leninism. However, would it not also be true that without Chen, the Chinese Communist Party would still have been founded, but, perhaps, at a later time? That should be a foregone conclusion. The reason being that the radical intellectuals in China would not have remained ignorant of the Bolshevist victory for too long. China could not have resisted or avoided the historical currents of not having a Communist party challenge an ineffective Guomindang.

Even though he converted himself from a liberal democrat to a Marxist-Leninist, Chen did not profoundly grasp the principles of Marxism-Leninism. At the time when he led the founding of the Chinese Communist Party, Chen’s knowledge of Marxism and Leninism was limited.54 We could fairly say that at the outset of the Chinese Communist movement, China had no such great theorists in the likes of a Vladimir Lenin or a Georgy Valentinovich Plekhanov for which Russia was

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54 Zhang recalled in his memoirs that at one time, Chen lamented to him about the very fragile theoretical basis of the Chinese Communist Party because of the absence of a Chinese translation of Marx’s “Capital,” among others. See Zhang, My Reminiscences, 101.
blessed.

While preparing for the Seventh Party Congress of the Chinese Communist Party, Mao Zedong drew a comparison between Chen and Plekhanov. In praising the outstanding achievements of the Chinese Communist movement, Mao compared Chen Duxiu to Plekhanov. However Mao was quick to add that Chen’s understanding and propagation of Marxism was not as far-reaching as Plekhanov’s.55 Such remarks made by Mao regarding Chen were basically fair.

In retrospect, one must also admit that it was quite remarkable that Chen eventually turned against Marxism-Leninism, a doctrine that he pioneered and preached in China. As a result, Chen was treated as a traitor by the Chinese Communist Party, the very party for which he was instrumental in founding. Was the second dramatic reversal of Chen’s political belief the ultimate tragedy for him? This question leaves much room for thought. Had Li Dazhao lived longer, would he have also given up on Marxism-Leninism? That would be extremely hypothetical. But, it is a very interesting and challenging question, one of which should be more openly discussed by Chinese scholars as the twenty-first century matures.

It should be noted that the Soviet Union in 1965 published the selected works of Li Dazhao;56 however, no similar publication on Chen’s selected works was ever done in its seventy-four-year history. In the

55 Tang and Lin, Chen Duxiu Nianpu 1879-1942, 2.
Russian Federation today, there seems to be no interest even in publishing a biography on Chen.

All in all, Chen’s acceptance and rejection of Marxism and Leninism are not as clear-cut and straightforward as they seem. His conversion to a Marxist-Leninist could very well have been a process of painful struggle and self-discovery. But patriotism, nationalism and aspirations for China’s modernization were important factors in his decision to give up on liberal Western ideas. His latter-day remorse for his conversion to Marxism-Leninism must have been painful as well. Judging from the significant modification of the tenets of the Chinese Communist Party today, Chen’s final rejection of Marxism-Leninism is sure to place him eventually in a loftier position in modern Chinese history.

Indeed, Chen Duxiu’s life and intellectual odyssey would an important page in the annals of China’s quest for modernization in the twentieth century. His eventual renunciation of Communism proved to be correct. It is good to know that in the foreseeable future there will be more serious and thoroughgoing studies written about Chen’s beliefs and convictions and his impact on China.