

THE MAY FOURTH MOVEMENT AND THE ORIGINS OF CHINESE MARXISM

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THE UPHEAVAL that occupied the People's Republic of China from 1966 onwards — an upheaval without parallel anywhere else in the contemporary world because it was an upheaval encouraged and later directed by its own recognized leader, Mao Tse-tung, and by a party in power — was in its early stages depicted in the West as something so utterly out of the ordinary in the context of Chinese events as to be the prelude to the disintegration of the regime which, having come to power on October 1, 1949, had proceeded to embark on the twentieth century's most remarkable experiment in social engineering. The Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, as it has come to be officially known, was generally presented in the West as if Chinese history, particularly during the twentieth century, had not been marked with even greater disturbances than the controlled phenomenon that the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution was.

This assumption is of course utterly without basis. It need not be stated here that the history of China in the twentieth century has been one of perpetual change, that the great event of October 1, 1949 was merely the culmination of more than fifty years of great events. I would like to suggest in this paper, therefore, as it has been suggested by other writers, particularly by Mao Tse-tung¹ himself and by Han Suyin,² that the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution is but a continuation of the Chinese cultural revolution against imperialism* and feudalism. The beginnings of this cultural revolution may be found in the events and developments known as the May Fourth Movement, the

¹ Mao Tse-tung, "The May Fourth Movement," "The Orientation of the Youth Movement," and "On New Democracy." *Selected Works*, Vol. III (London: Lawrence and Wishart Ltd., 1954), pp. 9-11; 12-21; 106-156.

² Han Suyin, *The Morning Deluge: Mao Tse-tung and the Chinese Revolution, 1893-1953* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1972), pp. 84-101.

* "Imperialism" is here used in the sense that it has been defined in V. I. Lenin's *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism*.

effects of which extended to the conversion of many Chinese intellectuals to Marxism, and, consequently, the establishment of the Chinese Communist Party.

I

The Confucian view of the immutability of the social and political order was, by the end of the nineteenth century in China, being severely challenged by events. "The ways of heaven," according to Confucian doctrine, "do not change." But, unable to cope with an outside world where tremendous advances in technology and the rise of imperialism had brought about the growth of forces the Middle Kingdom could no longer dismiss as cavalierly as she did in the past, the Empire had suffered its greatest humiliation in 1895, when its armies were defeated at the hands of a modernized Japanese army, which Japan was to use as its main weapon in its search for raw materials and new markets in the Asian continent. This disaster was followed by the near-partition of China among the foreign powers, by the abortive response to imperialism known as the "hundred days' reform" of 1898, and by the Boxer Rebellion of 1899-1900, which had brought armed intervention by the foreign powers in the suppression of what was, after all, an internal Chinese problem.

The twentieth century did not bring relief from domestic difficulties exacerbated by external pressures. Despite the fall of the Manchu (Ch'ing) Dynasty in the Revolution of 1911,³ hopes for the establishment of a republican regime floundered on the ambitions of politicians and the jockeying among the imperialist powers for positions of advantage in a China without the Manchus.

Yuan Shih-k'ai, who, as Imperial Commissioner in charge of all of China's armed forces under the Manchus had been given the task of saving the dynasty but who had instead collaborated with the rebels in destroying it, was provisional President of China. From all evidence available, Yuan was a self-seeking careerist whose essentially conservative outlook could not be the source of social change in China. The republic-in-name that he now headed had a treasury that was practically empty, and he turned to the foreign powers, which were eager to preserve their treaty rights and special privileges, for help.⁴

³ O. Edmund Clubb, *Twentieth Century China* (New York and London: Columbia University Press, 1964), pp. 23-50. Much of the details are from this source.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 44-50.

Though by no means a mass upheaval, the Revolution of 1911 had nevertheless given expression to the spirit of Chinese nationalism, which demanded resistance to foreign impositions and the elimination of domestic autocracy. Yuan's actions revealed very little intention to pursue the former goal, and, though the Manchus had been overthrown, domestic autocracy was soon revealed to be far from ended.

Moving swiftly to consolidate his position, Yuan proscribed the opposition and quickly gained the approval of the foreign powers scrambling for ascendancy in "Republican" China. By 1914, with the opposition silenced, Yuan Shih-k'ai ruling by fiat, and fundamental social reforms nowhere in sight, the impact of the First World War, which had begun in August, was being felt in China.

As the treaty ally of Great Britain, Japan had entered the war against Germany in August and had swiftly occupied the German concession in Shantung and other parts of China as well. Yuan Shih-k'ai protested, but not too strongly.

Taking advantage of the confused international situation, Japan, upon entering the war in August, served an ultimatum on Germany demanding the transfer to Japan of the entire territory of Kiaochow, which had been leased to her by China for ninety-nine years in 1898 after she had seized the area by force, using as pretext the killing of two German Jesuits by disbanded Chinese soldiers. Japan promised the eventual restoration of the area to China, and in the next year, 1915, seized Kiaochow and the greater part of Shantung province, where Confucius and Mencius had been born, taught and died. Japan clearly did not intend to restore the area to China, but had instead used her commitment on the side of the Allies as a lever in a bid to displace Germany in the foreign looting of China.

On January 18, 1915, Japan therefore served on the Yuan Shih-k'ai government the notorious twenty-one demands, which, divided into five groups, sought to subordinate China to Japanese interests. Among others, the demands provided for the confirmation of Japan's newly-won gains in Shantung; Japanese control of Mongolia, China's southeast coast, and the Yangtze Valley; the employment of Japanese advisers in political, financial and military affairs; the right of ownership of land for the building of Japanese hospitals, churches and schools; the participation of Japan in the organization and administration of the Chinese police forces in certain places; Chinese purchase from Japan

of fifty per cent or more of the total quantity of her munitions or the establishment in China of jointly-worked Sino-Japanese arsenals.

Negotiations between the Japanese and Chinese governments dragged on for almost four months, until Japan, on May 7, 1915, presented China with an ultimatum. The Yuan Shih-k'ai government accepted on May 9 the terms set forth in the ultimatum and concluded with Japan a treaty based upon them on May 25. Chinese public indignation, which had been at a fever pitch since the demands were first made known reached its peak upon the Chinese government's acceptance of the ultimatum. Though Chinese officialdom would soon abandon the attempt to regain the territories thus lost and the sovereignty that had been compromised, this event hardened further the spirit of the new nationalism which had been gradually developing among China's progressive intellectuals and other segments of Chinese society, specially the merchants. The cornerstone of this nationalism was the idea that it was necessary to resist such instances of foreign aggression if China was to survive.

Nationalist sentiment was so high that as early as January, 1915, when the demands were first made known, public meetings were already being held to oppose them. A boycott of Japanese goods was soon organized in Shanghai, spreading rapidly to other cities, gaining the support even of merchants specializing in Japanese goods. Though Yuan Shih-k'ai ordered the abandonment of the boycott, it started to spread to the Yangtze ports and to some of the northern cities by April. Though the boycott did not lack further support, spreading so rapidly to the southern cities that a second order for its prohibition had to be issued by Yuan, the treaty had nevertheless been concluded. Many Chinese hoped that the Great Powers would restore the Shantung area to China at the end of the First World War.

II

When the war ended on November 11, 1918, therefore, there was a widespread hope that the national disgrace would also be ended.⁵ Chinese intellectual leaders as well as the emerging bourgeoisie hoped that the defeat of Germany had brought about the end of an era of secret diplomacy, intervention in Chinese affairs by the foreign powers, militarism, and dictatorship. They assumed that the territory and in-

⁵ Chow Tse-tung, *The May Fourth Movement* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960), pp. 84-90.

terests seized from China by Germany since 1898 and now controlled by Japan would be restored to her and that the treaty with Japan would be readjusted at the Versailles Peace Conference, which China was attending as one of the victors. China had, after all, supplied the allied powers with the men they needed in their home countries during the critical moments of the war; many Chinese believed that, at least, would be counted in her favor.

Hopes for equitable readjustments were soon dashed to pieces. News from Paris soon reached China that the conference was going to award to Japan the German interests that she had seized in China. During the plenary session of the five Great Powers (the United States, Great Britain, France, Italy and Japan) on January 27, 1919, the Japanese delegate announced that Great Britain, France and Italy have signed secret treaties with Japan in February 1917, assuring Japan that after the war they would support Japanese claims regarding the disposal of Germany's "rights" in China. It turned out also that a year later, on September 24, 1918, the Chinese warlord government in Peking (Yuan Shih-k'ai's death in June 6, 1916 has ushered in the division of China into warring warlord fieldoms), had negotiated a secret loan from Japan for the construction of the Tsinan-Shunteh and Kaomi-Hsuchow railroads in Shantung province. On the same day, the Japanese foreign minister had proposed a seven-point agreement concerning Shantung to the Chinese ambassador to Tokyo, who had conveyed his government's acceptance of these proposals, and all arrangements were kept secret until the morning of the meeting on January 28, 1919 of the Council of Ten at the Versailles Peace Conference. The loan for the railroads and the exchange of notes regarding the Shantung question Japan now used as added "legal" bases for her claims on Shantung. Consequently, China lost her case before the Conference, and on April 30, 1919, the Council of Four resolved in secret to transfer all of Germany's "rights" in China to Japan, without any mention at all of Japan's 1914 promise to restore these to China.

Developments in the Conference had been closely followed by China's intellectual leaders and merchants, who were genuinely concerned that the threat and actuality of colonial control should be brought to an end. The first Chinese public reaction to the news of the defeat at the Peace Conference was to demand who was responsible for the disaster. Because the exchange of notes between Japan and the Peking warlord government had been cited as a cause for the failure of China to regain her alienated territories, suspicion grew that it was the Chinese

representatives themselves, with the knowledge and collusion of key government officials, who had sold out the nation's cause. The opinion at home gradually crystallized into the belief that once again China had been victimized, not only by its foreign "friends" but also by the traitors within the warlord government itself.

China's intellectual leaders and her students — particularly those who had been exposed to progressive ideas — were therefore severely disappointed. Many observers⁶ noted the unrest among students in Peking, an unrest which clearly indicated that it was only a prelude to other events. By the beginning of May, this unrest had developed into a threat of demonstration against the traitors in the Chinese government and against the shabby treatment the Chinese had received at the hands of the Great Powers at the Versailles Peace Conference.

III

Before the onslaught of the combined forces of foreign imperialism and domestic reaction, Chinese intellectuals, specially those trained abroad, had begun to ask where China was heading, and to look around for the means with which to stave off her march to disaster.⁷

By the turn of the century, most Chinese students abroad were studying in Japan, Europe, or the United States. The ideas these students had encountered were inevitably reflected in their proposed solutions to the Chinese dilemma once they had returned home. It is significant that among the students who had studied abroad, many, including Hu Shih (United States), Lu Hsun and Ch'en Tu-hsiu (Japan) were later to assume leading roles in the May Fourth Movement and in subsequent events in China. Though they were to eventually go along separate paths, there was a general consensus that the country was in a dangerous situation vis-a-vis the foreigners, and that China needed saving.

By the second decade of the twentieth century, therefore, a huge clamor for "new culture," "new learning," "a literary revolution," etc., had arisen among the "new intellectuals" — i.e., those intellectuals who recognized the inadequacies of China's traditional culture insofar as unifying, strengthening and modernizing her were concerned, and who turned instead to Western ideas in order to achieve these purposes. This was aided to no little extent by the return from abroad of numerous

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 92-98.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 19-83.

intellectuals. Ch'en Tu-hsiu, who was later to play such a prominent role in the early years of the Chinese Communist Party, returned from Japan in 1915. His subsequent establishment of the *New Youth* magazine, which was to become the vehicle for the new ideas that the new intellectuals wanted to disseminate, marked the peak of the cultural reform movement. Hu Shih, who was later to express the American-trained Chinese intellectuals' reluctance to participate in the revolutionary tide sweeping China, also returned from the United States in 1917, and joined the new intellectual leaders. Li Ta-chao, Marxist pioneer in China and one of the Communist Party's first martyrs, returned to China from Japan in 1916.

The situation at home was highly repressive. Specially severe were the laws governing the press, which were in force throughout the reign of Yuan Shih-k'ai and nearly throughout the entire period of the May Fourth Movement (1915-1921). The betrayal of the Republic of 1911 by Yuan Shih-k'ai had assumed an even more glaring form in his effort to have himself proclaimed Emperor; after his death the warlords revealed themselves to be, except in rare circumstances, no less tyrants than Yuan had been. These were manifested in the laws that restricted speech, association and the press, and *New Youth*, therefore, avoided direct political criticism, and declared itself to be committed to the reformation of the thought and behavior of the Chinese youth. Both Ch'en Tu-shiu and Hu Shih, however, no matter how poles apart they were later to be in the latter stages of the May Fourth Movement, believed that the problems of China were rooted in the stagnant traditions and ideology that were the 2,000-year legacy of Confucianism. Both held that it was necessary to destroy these traditions and to awaken their countrymen, specially the youth upon whom they placed their hopes for the building of a New China. Ch'en particularly held that it was necessary to destroy the ideological bases of the monarchical movements, which were using Confucianism in support of their beliefs. *New Youth*, therefore, tried to carry out this program until 1917.

To be sure, the intellectual ferment was not limited to the publication of *New Youth*. In the great cities of China, the pros and cons of using the vernacular, of adapting Western science to Chinese conditions, of the virtues and vices of Confucianism, and other issues, were being debated. Lu Hsun was already writing the essays and stories which were later to earn for him the praise of Mao Tse-tung and the gratitude of the New China. Li Ta-chao by 1918 had expressed his support of the October Revolution in Russia, and on September of the

same year had acquired the services of Mao Tse-tung as his assistant at the Peking University Library, and organized the Marxist Research Society.⁸

It was against this background that the May Fourth Incident of 1919 took place.

IV

The demonstration of May 4, 1919 has traditionally been marked off as the beginning of the May Fourth Movement, which term refers to the series of strikes and other events which followed the demonstration. In a sense, however, the Incident was only the culmination of a series of dissatisfactions and disappointments which had beset China's progressive intellectuals and students. The roots of the Movement may be said to have been nurtured during the period of the twenty-one demands, as a reaction to which an anti-Japanese campaign developed together with a stress on Western ideas of science and democracy, criticisms of traditional Chinese ethics, customs, literature, history, philosophy, religion as well as social and political institutions. Western political and social ideas, including liberalism, pragmatism, utilitarianism, anarchism, and various types of socialism were put forward as yardsticks against which to measure China's traditional culture and as answers to the crisis of Chinese society.

The decision of student organizations in Peking to hold a mass demonstration on May 7, 1919, the fourth anniversary of Japan's ultimatum on the twenty-one demands, indicates that the immediate cause of the demonstration was not only the disaster at the Versailles Peace Conference but also the continuing humiliation that many Chinese felt over the twenty-one demands of 1915.

Events forced the students to advance the date of the demonstration by three days, and on the morning of May 4, student representatives met at the Peking College of Law and Political Science to prepare the demonstration. Representatives from thirteen colleges and universities, including students from the National University of Peking, attended. Of the five resolutions adopted during the meeting, two are of special importance: the decision to undertake efforts to awaken the people of China to the facts of foreign oppression and domestic treachery, and the decision to create a permanent organization of Peking students.

⁸ Maurice Meisner, *Li Ta-Chao and the Origins of Chinese Marxism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967), pp. xvi-xvii.

By 1:30 in the afternoon of the same day, over three-thousand students had gathered at the Square of Heavenly Peace (T'ien-an men), representing thirteen colleges and universities in Peking. Though the Peking government had tried to prevent the mass meeting, sending a representative of the Ministry of Education to Peking University at about 11 A.M., the students were not convinced. By two o'clock, therefore, the demonstration had begun moving, with the students distributing leaflets along the way and carrying placards with slogans in Chinese, English and French, the main emphasis of which was the excoriation of the three pro-Japanese officials Ts'ao Ju-lin, Lu Tsung-yu and Chang Tsung-hsiang, and the expression of resistance to the Great Powers. Upon reaching Peking's foreign Legation Quarter, the students were refused entry and the entire procession waited for two hours before being finally told that they would not be permitted to go through the Quarter. The students were attacked by the Quarter police and by Chinese police and troops. The marchers therefore abandoned the attempt to go through the Quarter and instead veered northward, towards the residence of Ts'ao Ju-lin, Acting Minister of Finance of the Peking Government, whom the students considered to be one of the foremost traitors in the Peking Government. The students rushed the house and the police intervened, in the course of which some students were wounded, and some thirty-two arrested. After the arrests, martial law was at once proclaimed for the area surrounding the Legation Quarter. Immediately after the incident, the Peking students began to organize the new intellectuals of the nation in support of their cause. They tried to win the public over through publicity, mass meetings and further demonstrations. In the process they began to establish contacts among the masses of illiterate people and to secure strong support from merchants eager to stave off Japanese competition, and industrialists and workers from the weak capitalist sector of the Chinese economy. The ideas of the student movement therefore spread rapidly throughout the country. "The Movement's aims," as Harvard's Chow Tse-tung has put it, "soon won sympathy from the new merchants, industrialists, and urban workers, and the Peking Government was forced to compromise in its foreign and domestic policies. This victory of the new coalition facilitated the expansion of the cultural and intellectual reforms it advocated."⁹

⁹ Chow Tse-tung, *op. cit.*, p. 1. Much of the details in this section of the paper are from this source.

V

Within two months after the Incident, there followed a series of student demonstrations and strikes, during which the alliance among students, merchants, industrialists and workers was further strengthened. Though it seemed to be, on the surface, purely a student movement, the May Fourth Movement was the logical result of the teachings of the new intellectual leaders, namely the professors, teachers and writers who had provided the inspiration for the movement by stimulating student interest in the affairs of China and the world. The students were enthusiastically supported by the elder intellectual leaders, at the same time that a *de facto* alliance developed between the reformist and revolutionary intellectuals. The new culture movement expanded as a result of this alliance, drawing those hitherto indifferent to it. There was also a rapid increase in the number of new publications and old ones revamped practically overnight along the lines of anti-imperialism that the Movement espoused. A new wave of iconoclasm engulfed the intellectual life of the nation, during which any and practically all ideas which had hitherto been sacred to traditional Chinese culture were questioned.

Political organizations, including the Communist Party of China, developed out of the chaotic period of self-examination that the May Fourth Movement stimulated among the intellectuals. Among those caught up in the tide of the movement was Mao Tse-tung, who became more active in a group called the New People's Study Society. He was editor of the Student Union Publication of Hunan province, which promoted the students' cause and criticized the Government. This publication, a weekly, was consequently suppressed by the military governor of Hunan, which suppression only intensified Mao Tse-tung's activities against the Government and hastened his subsequent acceptance of Marxism by the summer of 1920. In Wuchang, in the fall of 1919, Lin Piao was one of the organizers of the Social Welfare Society and the Social Benefit Book Store. The Awakening Society was founded in Tientsin on September, 1919, and among the most active members was a student newly-returned from France named Chou En-lai.

These developments began to shatter the unity manifested by the diverse forces within the movement. It must be pointed out, however, that the dominant schools of thought that composed the movement derived inspiration from Western ideas, since it was obvious that the traditional ideas that had been held sacred in China for two thousand years had not prevented her humiliation at the hands of the foreigners.

The ideas of liberalism, anarchism, utopian socialism and Marxism therefore gradually divided the new intellectuals into contending factions. "The Movement," again to quote Chow Tse-tung, "gradually became involved in politics, and the united front of new intellectuals collapsed. The liberals (reformists) lost their zeal or turned away from political activity, whereas the left wing (the revolutionary intellectuals) of the Movement took the expedient political step of allying itself with the nationalists to overthrow the warlord Peking regime . . ." ¹⁰

VI

The revolutionary ideology of Marxism was, before the May Fourth Incident, of little interest to the overwhelming majority of the new intellectuals. Li Ta-chao, who was executed by the warlord Peking regime in 1927, just a few months before the Incident, was practically the only partisan of Bolshevism in China. Except for a few of his students, no significant Chinese intellectual had responded to Li's view of the Bolshevik revolution in Russia as the herald of the reconstruction of world civilization,¹¹ nor to his Marxist view of events. In January, 1919, Li had called on the peoples of Asia to rise against "the European imperialist robbers,"¹² and had written that "only by overthrowing the capitalist classes of the whole world" could the oppressed peoples do away with an international order that permitted the shabby treatment China had received at the hands of the Great Powers. In February of the same year, he had anticipated the outcome of the Versailles Peace Conference, which he called "The European-Division-of-the-Spoils Conference." Throughout all this, many Chinese intellectuals still pinned their hopes on Versailles. The results of the Peace Conference, however, caused many of them to modify, if not totally abandon, their adherence to the theories of Mill, Huxley, Spencer or Darwin. A variety of socialist doctrines, after the May Fourth Incident, began to overshadow those ideas. "The utopian socialism of Saint-Simon, the Christian socialist and agrarian socialist doctrines inspired by Tolstoy, the anarchist theories of Kropotkin and Bakunin, the guild socialism of Bertrand Russell and G. D. H. Cole, and the revolutionary socialism of Marx and Lenin were the ideologies that the new student generation responded to with enthusiasm."¹³

¹⁰ Chow Tse-tung, *op. cit.*, pp. 1-2.

¹¹ Meisner, *op. cit.*, pp. 97-98.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 99-100.

Why, of all ideas from the West, the theories of socialism should have gained more adherents, was only logical. For many Chinese intellectuals, the idea of socialism represented the highest ideals of Western democracy. It rejected, however, the existing political and social order in the West and the exploitative relationship between the Western powers and imperialist Japan on the one hand and China on the other. The adherence of many intellectuals to some variety or another of socialism was therefore a reflection of their affirmation of Western intellectual influence at the same time that it was in harmony with the powerful currents of nationalism and anti-imperialism which the Chinese experience at the hands of the Western powers and of Japan had forced on much of the nation. In a word, socialist doctrines, rather than those of Darwinism, liberalism or pragmatism, were the most adequate in describing the Chinese reality and seemed to offer the most adequate means for the realization of a strong and unified China. This was particularly true of revolutionary socialism: it had just brought the Bolsheviks to power in Russia and had created the first socialist state in the world out of the chaos and ruin of the last days of tsarism in that country.

VII

On the heels of the May Fourth Movement followed the establishment in 1921 of the Communist Party of China and the revitalization of the Kuomintang — the political organizations which were later to battle for supremacy in China for nearly three decades. In 1919, however, the long and bloody civil war that was to come later was still far-off; both parties' leaders — or those individuals who were to become its leaders — sprang from the common soil of nationalism and anti-imperialism.

The emergence of the Communist Party of China on the political platform of anti-imperialism and anti-feudalism was foreshadowed by Li Ta-chao. Throughout the months of national uncertainty that had preceded the Shantung Resolution, Li had emphasized again and again the need for Chinese intellectuals to be both anti-imperialist and politically active, at the same time that he exhorted his students to go to the villages to liberate the Chinese peasantry.¹⁴

When the May Fourth Incident broke, therefore, Li Ta-chao became one of the logical rallying points of the student movement. After the first demonstration, Li's library office at the Peking University,

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 101.

where Mao Tse-tung had worked for a time as his assistant, became the regular meeting place of student leaders who had come under his intellectual influence. The Marxist Research Society, which Li had organized earlier, now sent its members to other Chinese cities to spread the ideas of the Movement.

Li's pioneering work as a Marxist — imperfect though his understanding of Marxism was — reaped impressive results because events had shown that it was only a revolutionary ideology which could save China. In the anti-imperialist atmosphere engendered by the May Fourth Movement, more and more Chinese intellectuals were responding to Marxism-Leninism. Ch'en Tu-hsiu, for example, and many others who were later to become prominent in the Chinese Communist Movement, were drawn to Marxism because the Shantung Resolution had so obviously revealed to them the rapacity and treachery of the imperialist nations.

Ch'en had earlier maintained a posture of political non-involvement, but the May Fourth Movement caused him to abandon that position. So involved in Political action did he become that he was arrested on June 11, 1919 while distributing leaflets in the streets of Peking. He spent eighty-three days in prison, after which he resigned his professorship at Peking University and left for Shanghai, where less than a year later he announced his adherence to Marxism.

Li Ta-chao, on the other hand, had proclaimed his commitment to Marxism before May 4, 1919. But the Incident did strengthen his conviction that only Marxism could save China, and, in a debate initiated by Hu Shih, Li Ta-chao defended his Marxist views so intensely as to suggest the profound effect the Movement had had on him.¹⁵

The radicalization of many Chinese intellectuals soon began to break down the unity of the Movement. Hu Shih, the American-trained disciple of John Dewey, representing the reformist intellectuals, fired the opening salvo of the intellectual debate. In a series of articles, Hu argued against the adoption of "isms" and doctrines, and instead suggested that what was necessary was the study of practical social problems. Doctrines advocating fundamental solutions to social problems, according to Hu, were not only irrelevant but were also hindrances to their solution.

In a letter to Hu, Li Ta-chao argued that specific social problems could not be solved without the participation of the masses, and that it was therefore necessary to instill among them a consciousness of the

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 105-106.

problems of society as a whole, to which they could relate their own individual problems. In such a situation, a theory of society was important: it could provide the people with an idealism and a common direction. Li asserted the need for intellectuals to go out and work "in the practical movement," which to him meant the propagation of socialist theory and its advocacy "as a tool to eliminate the non-laboring bureaucratic robbers."¹⁶ More important, Li, even at that early period, foreshadowed the later admonition by Mao Tse-tung for the revolutionary to study the real conditions of the world, and to adapt the theory to those conditions.

The issues were joined: between the conservative view that China's problems could be solved through evolutionary social reform as advocated by Hu Shih, or through revolution. It was obvious, however, that the ideas of John Dewey which Hu Shih advocated were largely irrelevant to China's problems. As Maurice Meisner states in his intellectual biography of Li Ta-chao:¹⁷

"Hu Shih had formulated his ideas in terms of the American philosophical and sociological tradition . . . The philosophy and sociology of John Dewey did not need to be concerned with the structure of society as a whole because in the American social context it could be optimistically assumed that the whole world would take care of itself. Dewey's program was essentially conservative, assuming that reform would take place within the framework of existing institutions; but it was a product of a society that could afford conservatism, a society that could solve particular social problems because there already existed a viable social structure and a general consensus on the direction of social progress . . ."

"As applied to China, Dewey's program was neither conservative nor radical but largely irrelevant. After the Revolution of 1911 China was confronted with a crisis of social, cultural and political disintegration of massive proportions. The extreme poverty and widespread illiteracy of the masses of the Chinese people and the lack of even the rudiments of responsible political authority negated the possibility of the general social consensus that Dewey's program presupposed. Because of the overwhelming social crisis within and the threat of foreign aggression from without, the very existence of the Chinese nation was in doubt at the time . . . To advocate the study of particular social problems and to call for social reform (piecemeal) was to assume that there existed or would soon arise a viable social and political structure within which problems could be studied and reforms imple-

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 106.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 107-108.

mented. This assumption was unwarranted either by the existing situation or by any realistic hopes for the immediate future. In view of the total crisis of Chinese society, Dewey's program was doomed to failure."

The debate, however, did reveal the imperative of transforming words to action. Marxism is, after all, not simply an intellectual position, but also a guide to action. By mid-1920, therefore, Li Ta-chao and Ch'en Tu-hsiu were ready to assume the leadership of a revolutionary political party. The Communist Party of China was therefore established in July, 1921. Among those present in the founding meeting was Mao Tse-tung, formerly Li Ta-chao's assistant.¹⁸

VIII

Himself profoundly influenced by the events of the May Fourth Movement, Mao Tse-tung, writing in 1939 in commemoration of its twentieth anniversary, saw it as an indication that "China's bourgeois democratic revolution against imperialism and feudalism had reached a new stage."¹⁹ The Movement was an expression of the cultural level of the Chinese bourgeois-democratic revolution, but it had one important difference from previous cultural revolutions,²⁰ "As a result of the growth and development of the new social forces in that period, there arose a camp which later became a powerful force in China's bourgeois democratic revolution against imperialism and feudalism, i.e., the camp composed of China's working class, student masses and young national bourgeoisie . . . This showed that the May 4 Movement had advanced a step further than the Revolution of 1911 . . ."

The May Fourth Movement was the dividing line between an earlier stage of the bourgeois-democratic revolution in China and a later, higher stage, which saw the emergence of the revolutionary intelligentsia, and an awakened working class in alliance with the progressive bourgeoisie. In the essay "On New Democracy,"²² Mao asserts that "on China's cultural or ideological front, the period preceding the May 4 Movement and the period following it form two distinct historical periods." Before the Movement, "the struggle on China's cultural front was a struggle between the new culture of the bourgeoisie and the old culture of the feudal class . . . the ideology of the new learning played

¹⁸ Han Suyin, *op. cit.*, pp. 111-116.

¹⁹ Mao Tse-tung, "On New Democracy." *Selected Works* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1954), pp. 143-146.

²⁰ *Ibid. passim.*

²¹ *Ibid.*

the revolutionary role of fighting the Chinese feudal ideology and was in the service of the bourgeois democratic revolution of the old period . . . But since the May 4 Movement, things have gone differently. Since then a brand new cultural force of fresh strength has appeared in China, namely, the ideas of Communist culture guided by the Chinese Communists: the Communist world outlook and the Communist theory of social revolution. The May 4 Movement occurred in 1919, and in 1921 the Chinese Communist Party was founded and China's labour movement actually began . . .

“Before the May 4 Movement, the new culture of China was a culture of the old-democratic character and a part of the capitalist cultural revolution of the world bourgeoisie. Since the May 4 Movement, it has become a culture of new-democratic character and a part of the socialist cultural revolution of the world proletariat . . .

“What is called new democratic culture is the anti-imperialist and anti-feudal culture of the broad masses of the people . . . New democratic culture is, in a word, the anti-imperialist, and anti-feudal culture of the broad masses of the people under the leadership of the world proletariat . . .”

Though some Chinese scholars have taken exception to this view of the Movement,²² it is true nevertheless that the Movement profoundly affected historical developments in China. It convinced many Chinese intellectuals, rightly or wrongly, that the only adequate response to imperialism was the revolutionary socialism of Marx and Lenin. In a profound sense, the Movement was the training ground, the staging point for the future leaders of the Chinese Communist Movement, and the crucible which convinced them that the main platforms of the Chinese Revolution after 1919 should be the determination to put an end to the twin evils of imperialism and feudalism, which had so devastated and humiliated China that, paraphrasing Maurice Meisner, her very existence as a nation had been placed in doubt.

²² Chow Tse-tung, *op. cit.* pp. 338-368.