

# Freedom, Rights, and Authority in Chen Duxiu's Thinking

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*Researches on the May Fourth Movement tend to argue that modern Chinese intellectuals embraced the ideas of individual freedom and human rights as a means to solve China's crisis. Many later shifted to communism or other ideologies because of such instrumental attitudes. Based on a study of Chen Duxiu, this paper suggests that such instrumental attitudes were a result of a dilemma. On the one hand, the intellectuals wanted to pursue individual freedom and human rights in order to relieve the individual Chinese from the constraints of tradition, so that China could achieve wealth and power on the basis of a vigorous society. On the other hand, however, beset by the total disintegration of political order, they wanted to quickly complete the task of state-rebuilding through a strong central authority. The dilemma reflected an inherited tension between the power of central authority and the development of individual freedom and human rights. Examining how this tension affected Chen Duxiu's thinking and life experience helps us to better understand not only an important figure but also an important chapter of Chinese modern history.*

**KEYWORDS:** Chen Duxiu; May Fourth; Chinese Communist Party; Communist; Chinese intellectual history

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Chinese intellectuals became aware of a crisis of meaning and order in the Chinese tradition as early as the mid-nineteenth century.<sup>1</sup> Their at-

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<sup>1</sup>Chang Hao, *Chinese Intellectuals in Crisis* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 4-12.

tempt to reconstruct the meaning and order of the tradition from within, however, quickly gave way to mounting self-doubt and self-reappraisal because of continuing and strengthening Western intrusions. The skepticism was widely discernible among the educated elite in the late nineteenth century and eventually turned into the totalistic iconoclasm of the May Fourth period.

May Fourth as an intellectual movement had a dualistic nature: *qimeng* (啟蒙 enlightenment) and *jiuwang* (救亡 national salvation).<sup>2</sup> Achieving these dual goals simultaneously was a difficult, if not completely impossible, task because of the inherent tension between the two. Enlightenment requires a society to recognize the value of science and reason while national salvation can hardly be achieved without inspiring passion. Although unaware, most of the May Fourth intellectuals, Chen Duxiu (陳獨秀) included, were confronted by this tension. By advocating the value of individual freedom and human rights, not only did these thinkers want to relieve individual Chinese from the constraints of tradition, but they also visualized a China surviving Western challenges on the basis of a vigorous society. To them, individual freedom and human rights were means as well as ends. Out of the passion to achieve national salvation, the political development following the May Fourth Movement in 1919 gradually led Chen and many of his contemporaries to choose strong central authority as the solution to China's crisis over the development of individual freedom and human rights. As a consequence, the unlimited authority of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) emerged in the pre-1949 period and the party-state came to the fore in China after 1949. Moreover, the continuing tension between the power of central authority and the freedom and rights of individual Chinese gradually encased Chinese intellectuals in a historical tragedy: many became victims of their own solution to the crisis of modern China.

As one of the most influential figures in modern Chinese history, Chen Duxiu was among the earliest victims of both political and intellec-

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<sup>2</sup>Vera Schwarz, *The Chinese Enlightenment: Intellectuals and the Legacy of the May Fourth Movement of 1919* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 1-11.

tual development. Examining the development of Chen's thought and activity, this paper aims to illustrate how Chen went through a transformation from regarding individual freedom and human rights as a means to embracing them as an inherently important value. For Chen's counterparts in contemporary China, this transformation is still an ongoing process as China in the post-1978 era gradually learns to bid farewell to the passion of revolution.

### The Duality of Chen Duxiu's Iconoclasm

Chen Duxiu's role in May Fourth's iconoclasm has been well documented by many works.<sup>3</sup> Some scholars regarded Chen's iconoclasm as an "iconoclastic nationalism"<sup>4</sup> and his individualism as a "socially motivated individualism."<sup>5</sup> The contradictory connotations of these terms reveal the duality of Chen's iconoclasm. On the one hand, Western values were used to enlighten Chinese to create a modern society based on science and democracy. On the other hand, this advocacy was also a means for China's survival. Such duality was expressed by Chen's acceptance of Social Darwinism, his discussion of science and human rights, and his unawareness of the difference between positive and negative rights. The latter particularly paved the way for his conversion to Marxism.

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<sup>3</sup>Among the numerous works on Chen Duxiu, the most comprehensive study is the work of Cheng Hsueh-chia. See Cheng Hsueh-chia, *Chen Duxiu zhuan* (Biography of Chen Duxiu), 2 vols. (Taipei: Shibao wenhua chubanshe, 1989).

<sup>4</sup>This term is used by Lin Yu-sheng. See Lin Yu-sheng, *The Crisis of Chinese Consciousness* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1979), 63. There is controversy as to whether Chen can be regarded as a nationalist. For example, Maurice Meisner regards Chen as a cosmopolitan when he argues Li Dazhao (Li Ta-chao) was a nationalist. See Maurice Meisner, *Li Ta-chao and the Origins of Chinese Marxism* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1977), 24-25. Lee Feigon, however, regards Chen as an nationalist who, from his thought to his actions, was deeply influenced by tradition. See Lee Feigon, *Chen Duxiu: Founder of the Chinese Communist Party* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1983).

<sup>5</sup>Benjamin I. Schwartz, *Chinese Communism and the Rise of Mao* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1979), 9.

## Social Darwinism

All our traditional ethics, law, scholarship, and ceremony are vestiges of feudalism. When compared to the accomplishments of the white race, the differences in thought between our peoples of this same age can be measured in millennia. . . . The world progresses like a horse that gallops and gallops and never stops. Those who cannot skillfully adjust and advance with the world will witness their own maladaptation to the struggle for survival. They will merely return to the natural process of elimination.<sup>6</sup>

Anyone who reads the above text cannot avoid being impressed by the strong sense of crisis conveyed in the jargon of Darwinism. This segment is from one of Chen's most often cited articles entitled "Call to Youth," which was published in September 1915 in the first issue of *Xin qingnian* (新青年 New Youth).<sup>7</sup> The publication of this article as well as the magazine itself ushered in the era of iconoclasm in modern Chinese history.

To Chen, the strong sense of crisis was derived from a long-held perception of China's situation since the late nineteenth century. Before publishing *Xin qingnian*, he was already engaged in various activities aimed to solve China's crisis.<sup>8</sup> However, in the early 1910s, despite the overthrow of the Qing dynasty, all these endeavors seemed to be in vain in the face of the pressing situation confronting China.

Aside from long-lasting socioeconomic problems, China's crisis in the 1910s was also an institutional one. The 1911 Revolution achieved nothing more than the abolition of the millennium-old monarchical system. The ensuing transplantation of the republican system, clumsy and without any corresponding change in socioeconomic structure or ethics, not only

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<sup>6</sup>Chen Duxiu, "Call to Youth," in *Chen Duxiu wenzhang xuanbian* (Selected works of Chen Duxiu), 3 vols. (Beijing: Sanlian shudian, 1984), 1:75. For English translation see *Chinese Law and Government* 12, no. 3 (1980): 33.

<sup>7</sup>*Xin qingnian* (New Youth) was first named *Qingnian* (Youth) when it was published in September 1915. The name *Xin qingnian* was adopted in 1916. This paper neglects to make this distinction for the sake of convenience.

<sup>8</sup>Before *Xin qingnian*, Chen had published *Anhui suhua bao* (Anhui Vernacular Paper) in his home province Anhui, and published *Guomin riri bao* (National Gazette) with his friends in Shanghai. Before the 1911 Revolution, he belonged to several revolutionary groups in Japan and was a leader of a revolutionary assassination group in Anhui. After the 1911 Revolution he had been the chief secretary for the governor of Anhui for a short period of time. See Zhi Yuru, *Chen Duxiu nianpu* (Chronological biography of Chen Duxiu) (Hong Kong: Longman Bookstore, 1974), 7-23.

led to a malfunctioning government but also to a failure to rebuild the state. To Chen, the political chaos caused by the corrupt Yuan regime and the ill-functioning parliament proved that a mere change of political system could not really cope with China's sizable crisis. What China needed for survival in the modern world was a wholesale change of thought and culture.

Chen's sense of crisis was couched in Darwinian terms because the concept of Darwinism "served as a vehicle for comprehending and explaining the unprecedented experience of humiliation and consternation resulting from the Western intrusion."<sup>9</sup> The Darwinist idea that "only the fittest can survive" enhanced the sense of crisis because of the fear that China might become extinct as a result of being "unfit" for the modern world. Yet the works of Chen and many of his colleagues did not bother to ask what is the mechanism of the "natural selection" or if there is any distinction between "the fittest" and "the strongest." China's profound crisis was already the best illustration of her unfitness for the modern world. Thus, the second role Darwinism played in the thoughts of Chen and his contemporaries was to help to establish and provide a powerful justification for their iconoclasm.

### *Science and Human Rights*

Justified by the concept of Darwinism, Chen's iconoclasm was based on the belief that traditional Chinese culture lacked two crucial elements needed for the modern world: science and human rights. As he stated:

The reason that modern Europeans have surpassed our people is the rise of science. The contributions [of science] are by no means secondary to the theories of human rights; they are to each other as the two wheels are to each cart. . . . If our people desire to leave the dark ages, having become ashamed at being people of shallow culture, then we must lose no time, stand up, and plunge headlong [toward improvement], giving equal emphasis to science and human rights.<sup>10</sup>

Chen's idea of science has been regarded as no more than a weapon against superstition in the traditional society.<sup>11</sup> True, Chen did attack the

<sup>9</sup>Lin, *The Crisis of Chinese Conscience*, 57.

<sup>10</sup>Chen, "Call to Youth," 77-78.

<sup>11</sup>See note 5 above.

mysticism of Buddhism and Taoism in the name of science.<sup>12</sup> However, the concept of science had a much more important use, being a weapon against traditional authority in all forms. In his article entitled "On the Destruction of Idols," he viewed the state as a political idol and the honor and virtue emphasized by traditional morality as ethical idols.

When Chen attacked the state as an idol and wanted to eliminate it, he certainly was not speaking in the Marxist sense since he moved in that direction only much later. What Chen meant to oppose was the authority of the state. This attitude was understandable in terms of his general resentment of China's warlord government of the time. Given the fact that in Chinese tradition, there is no distinction between China as a state and China as a political community, Chen was voicing his opposition to conventional thinking.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, he opposed the so-called fraudulent unreasonable ethical belief because it came from traditional authority and imposed constraints on individuals. Thus, although close to being a crude form of naturalism, Chen's idea of science played a core role in forming his iconoclasm.

Chen's attacks on tradition in the pursuit of human rights had a more complex and rich texture. To him, the independence and autonomy of the individual was not only the essence of human rights but also a source of the wealth and strength of the West. Thus, to claim that China was surpassed by the West because Chinese culture did not espouse human rights was actually to argue that Chinese tradition hampered the development of individual independence. Chen put the blame on the concept of "*sangang wuchang*" (三綱五常) and "*zongfa zhidu*" (宗法制度) and argued that these traditions kept the Chinese people from living a modern life.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup>Chen Duxiu, "On the Problem of the Existence of Ghosts," in *Chen Duxiu wenzhang xuanbian* 1:264.

<sup>13</sup>Early in 1914, while he was obviously disappointed at the government of Yuan Shih-kai, Chen published the article "Patriotism and Self-Consciousness" in which he opposed unconditional support for the state. Chen's article aroused quite a controversy when published. See Lin, *The Crisis of Chinese Consciousness*, 60-61; and Meisner, *Li Ta-chao and the Origins of Chinese Marxism*, 21-24.

<sup>14</sup>See Chen Duxiu, "The Year 1916," in *Chen Duxiu wenzhang xuanbian* 1:103; and "The Constitution and Confucianism," *ibid.*, 145-47. The term "*sangang wuchang*" refers to the three cardinal guides (ruler guides subject, father guides son, and husband guides wife) and the five constant virtues (benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom, and fidelity).

Just as the principle of individual independence penetrated every aspect of Western people's lives, the constraint of Chinese culture on the individual had the same effect on its society. Chen's belief that the progress of the West and the backwardness of China were the result of the interaction between ethics and socioeconomic structure was more reinforced when Kang Youwei (康有為), whom Chen had admired in his early years,<sup>15</sup> made efforts to establish Confucianism as a state religion in October 1916. This event moved Chen to insist on the absolute incompatibility between Chinese and Western cultures.<sup>16</sup> As late as July 1918, when he spoke of "the basic political problems which involved the extinction or survival of the country," he contended that "whether it is politics, academics, ethics, or literature, the Chinese method and the Western method are absolutely different from each other. . . . If we decide to reform, we should adopt the new Western method for everything and not allow the so-called unique features in Chinese culture to cause disturbances."<sup>17</sup>

Even as Chen passionately advocated Western culture, the mode of his thinking was deeply influenced by Chinese tradition. In his repeated insistence on the incompatibility between Chinese and Western cultures, Chen showed that he saw the Confucian tradition as a holistic entity. To him, everything in the Confucian tradition was organically related and was unique to the culture. Although his basic attempt was to relieve individual Chinese from the constraints imposed by traditional social norms, he attacked the tradition in toto. This monistic and holistic attitude toward tradition was affected by the long-term historical Chinese disposition to interlace the cultural core with the sociopolitical core.<sup>18</sup>

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During the May Fourth period, the term "zongfa zhidu" (patriarchal clan system) was used to refer to institutions of the kinship system based on consanguinity, hierarchy, and male domination as well as other social organizations supported by such institutions.

<sup>15</sup>In his autobiography, Chen identified himself as a follower of Kang Youwei. See *Shian zizhuan* (Chen Duxiu's autobiography) (Taipei: Zhuanji wenxue chubanshe, 1967), 43.

<sup>16</sup>Chen, "The Constitution and Confucianism," 148. Similar views can be found in the following articles of Chen: "Our People's Most Recent Awakening," in *Chen Duxiu wenzhang xuanbian* 1:108; and "Reply to Peijian Qingnian," *ibid.*, 186.

<sup>17</sup>Chen Duxiu, "Present-Day Chinese Political Problems," in *Chen Duxiu wenzhang xuanbian* 1:270.

<sup>18</sup>Lin, *The Crisis of Chinese Consciousness*, 75.

Because of the impact of traditional thinking on Chen, when he launched his totalistic iconoclasm, he was already on his way toward accepting an all-embracing theory of a new holistic entity which could perform the same function as did Confucianism. The way he attacked the Chinese tradition reflected what he wanted from Western culture. By attacking all aspects of Chinese tradition, Chen wanted to install a totally new set of values. The vacuum of thought created by this iconoclasm became a problem for Chen and many of his colleagues. Between 1915 and 1919, Western liberalism was used to fill that vacuum. However, Western liberalism, with its orientation toward definite, concrete tasks, was not qualified to be an all-embracing solution. The demand for such a solution, as will be discussed shortly, contributed to Chen's conversion to Marxism.

### *Political Parties and the French Revolution*

Chen ardently embraced Western democracy while attacking tradition. Well known, however, is that his understanding of Western democracy, like that of many of his contemporaries, was very limited and insufficient. Where Chen's insufficient knowledge about Western democracy had the greatest impact on the later development of his thought (and on modern Chinese history in general) was in regard to his opinions on political parties and his understanding of the French Revolution.

The political parties after the 1911 Revolution, like the whole republican system, were a clumsy, failed transplantation of the Western model. Many of these parties were no more than cliques or factions gathered around a prominent figure who was patron to a group of followers.<sup>19</sup> The party members were organized by personal patron-client relations rather than around a party program, and the power struggle among these political parties was more of a factional struggle than a regulated political competition.

Chen's notion of party politics was inevitably influenced by the political chaos caused by the pseudo party system. He was not only opposed

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<sup>19</sup>Li Chien-nung, *Zhongguo jinbainian zhengzhi shi* (The Chinese political history of the last one hundred years) (Taipei: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1982), vol. 1:372-82.



to political parties as an institutional arrangement in general, but specifically to the existence of party politics in China. In his first article published in 1916, Chen claimed: "Party politics as a useless thing will be discarded with the passage of 1915; it is inapplicable to today's China."<sup>20</sup> He reasoned that political parties in China were formed by a special social class which was alienated from the masses. What China needed to cope with its deep crisis was a national movement which could promote the progress of the masses and not party struggles involving only the interests of the party members.<sup>21</sup> As he said in the "Manifesto of the *New Youth*": "We advocate national movement, social reform, and separation from all the political parties of the past and the present."<sup>22</sup>

In the China of his days, Chen's claim was true that the activities of political parties only involved a special social class. However, he failed to recognize the important role that political parties had played in the consolidation of Western democracy. In a modern liberal democratic state, party competition is regarded as an important check against the development of a despotic state. The party system is directly related to the protection of individual freedom and human rights. Chen's belief that party politics should be replaced by a national movement, especially after his witness of the malfunctioning of the whole republican system, however, made him devote attention to the masses rather than to political institutions. This inclination later made Marxism-Leninism very appealing to him.

Chen's insufficient understanding of the French Revolution had a relatively more subtle and more important impact on the development of his thought. The way he understood the French Revolution and the idea of human rights planted the seed of his later conversion to Marxism.

In a discussion of the French people's contribution to modern civilization, Chen credited the French Revolution with originating the doctrine of basic human rights. He said nothing, however, about the terror under Robespierre.<sup>23</sup> At the same time, he understood the idea of human rights to

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<sup>20</sup>Chen, "The Year 1916," 103.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., 103-4.

<sup>22</sup>Chen Duxiu, "Manifesto of the *New Youth*," in *Chen Duxiu wenzhang xuanbian* 1:428.

<sup>23</sup>Chen Duxiu, "The French and Modern Civilization," *ibid.*, 79-80.

be mainly a doctrine for liberating human beings from their inequality. To Chen, the attainment of human rights was equivalent to the attainment of human equality. There was no awareness of the different notions of individual freedom and human rights.<sup>24</sup>

Chen's failure to understand the difference between positive and negative rights, and more specifically, to comprehend the totalitarian element in the French Revolution made his later conversion to Marxism easier. As Steven Lukes points out, Marxism in its moral aspect is profound as a morality of emancipation but lacks the concrete contents for a morality of rights.<sup>25</sup> Chen's view of human rights during this time exhibited a similar feature. As revealed in his text, Chen's conviction of individual freedom and human rights was more a morality of emancipation to free Chinese people from the constraint of Chinese tradition than a morality of rights to provide a concrete mechanism that prevents individuals from being oppressed by arbitrary power.

In terms of the development of modern Chinese history, the iconoclasm triggered by Chen denoted the end of efforts by Chinese intellectuals to solve China's crisis via reformation of the Confucian tradition from within, and marked the beginning of a new era of ideology. The abolition of the Confucian authority from the Chinese consciousness inevitably cleared room for a new authority to be formed and established. However, in terms of the thoughts revealed by their works, Chen, many of his prominent contemporaries, and the prominent figures in the following generations could all be categorized as ideologues: they believed in and advocated—more than they understood—a set of universalistic values. In their belief, these values provided the best and the only solution for China's crisis in the twentieth century. Chen and his colleagues thus hoped to implement fully this set of values through political action and a social movement.

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<sup>24</sup>The discussion of the contrasting views on positive and negative freedom and rights has been presented by many works, including Friedrich A. Hayek, *The Constitution of Liberty* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960), part 1; Charles E. Lindblom, *Politics and Markets* (New York: Basic Books, 1977), chaps. 19-20; Steven Lukes, *Marxism and Morality* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), chaps. 4-6; and Jacob L. Talmon, *The Origins of Totalitarian Democracy* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1952), part 1.

<sup>25</sup>Lukes, *Marxism and Morality*, chap. 3.

## Converting to Communism

As the publication of *Xin qingnian* marked the beginning of iconoclasm in the May Fourth period, the publication of *Meizhou pinglun* (每周評論 Weekly Review) in December 1918 precluded Chen's intellectual transition from Western democracy to Marxism, and his transition from the leader of the New Culture Movement to the founder of the CCP. The publication of this magazine indicated a change in Chen's attitude toward what kind of role he should play in solving China's crisis. His works since the publication of *Meizhou pinglun* showed a new perspective toward politics, his disillusion with Western liberal democracy, and his search for a quick and all-embracing solution for China's crisis.

### *Changing Attitude toward Politics*

When Chen published *Xin qingnian* in September 1915, his purpose was to "provide a forum for discussing the ways of self-cultivation and the methods of governing the state."<sup>26</sup> Responding to a reader's letter, Chen made his position even more clear: "Reforming the thoughts of youth and guiding them to seek perfection in ethical pursuit is the responsibility of our magazine. To comment on the current political situation is not our goal. If our people do not have basic consciousness, we do not have the reason to blame people who have the political power."<sup>27</sup>

He wanted to make his efforts in the field of culture and refrain from involvement in politics. One reason may be that, as he himself stated, he believed that in resolving China's crisis, priority should be given to a reformation of thought. Any effort made without a corresponding change in people's thinking would be in vain. Secondly, the difficult political situation at the time *Xin qingnian* was published might have caused Chen to avoid direct political commitments in his magazine in order to survive.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>26</sup>This text and its translation is cited from Lin, *The Crisis of Chinese Consciousness*, 65. This text was not collected in *Chen Duxiu wenzhang xuanbian*. According to Lin Yu-sheng, this paragraph was published in an unnumbered opening page in the first issue of *Xin qingnian*.

<sup>27</sup>Chen Duxiu, "Reply to Wang Yonggong," in *Chen Duxiu wenzhang xuanbian* 1:82.

<sup>28</sup>Chow Tse-tsung, *The May Fourth Movement: Intellectual Revolution in Modern China* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1960), 45.

However, he gradually changed his attitude. In July 1918, one half year before the publication of the first issue of *Meizhou pinglun*, Chen wrote that "political problems are always related to the death or survival of the country. How can we pretend that we are mute and deaf [so we do not have to hear and talk about it]?"<sup>29</sup> Following this idea, Chen and Li Dazhao (李大釗), later the co-founder of the CCP, began publishing *Meizhou pinglun* in addition to *Xin qingnian*, because they wanted to have a magazine "closer to reality."<sup>30</sup> As indicated by the articles published in the new magazine, "reality" here referred to "current politics."

The revision in Chen's attitude was most apparent in his new view of political parties. As mentioned before, Chen wanted to replace political parties with a national movement. However, in an article he published in *Meizhou pinglun*, he claimed that "persevering people in society should stand up and organize a conscientious and mass-supported party so as to eliminate the party backed up by force and without conscience."<sup>31</sup> The idea of a mass-supported party not only was close to his previous idea of a national movement, but also showed that the notion of organizing a party with a mass base had begun to take root in Chen's mind.

### *Disillusion with Western Democracy*

Chen's earlier resolution to refrain from involvement in politics had been constantly challenged by the enduring political chaos, and finally ended with the publication of *Meizhou pinglun*. Soon after he published the new magazine, he faced a more serious challenge. Like many of his contemporaries who believed in Western democracy, Chen was extremely disappointed that the Western democracies rejected Wilsonian idealism at the Versailles Peace Conference and supported Japan's claims to Germany's former sphere of influence in Shandong. His disappointment was revealed in the following statement: "At the Versailles Peace Conference, every

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<sup>29</sup>Chen, "Present-Day Chinese Political Problems," 268.

<sup>30</sup>This is from the memory of Zhang Shenfu. See Tang Baolin and Lin Maosheng, *Chen Duxiu nianpu, 1879-1942* (Chronological biography of Chen Duxiu, 1879-1942) (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 1988), 89.

<sup>31</sup>Chen Duxiu, "Eliminating the Three Evils," in *Chen Duxiu wenzhang xuanbian* 1:326.

country just focuses on its own claims. The so-called justice, permanent peace, and the fourteen peace propositions of President Woodrow Wilson have all become worthless nonsense."<sup>32</sup>

If we contrast this paragraph with his previous claim in "A Statement on the Publication of the *Weekly Review*" that Woodrow Wilson was "the best person in the world," his disappointment was even more obvious. The May Fourth Incident led to his overall distrust of Western democracy as the solution to China's crisis. The corruption and incompetence of the warlord government in China further convinced him that constitutionalism was an incompetent political device and merely "a weapon in the power struggle among politicians."<sup>33</sup>

His gradual abandonment of belief in Western democracy forced Chen to seek a new model. From mid-1919 to mid-1920, Chen was "exploring and alternately supporting a whole series of ideas ranging from the new village movement of the Japanese socialist Mushakoji Saneatsu to the Christian socialism advocated by the followers of the Korean independence movement."<sup>34</sup> The new model he finally turned to was a different type of "democracy," but one that better fit China's situation.

In his open letter "To the Workers of Beijing" written at the end of 1919, Chen declared:

Democracy since the eighteenth century has been a flag raised by the oppressed bourgeois class to claim rights for their own common interests against the ruling monarch and noble class. . . . Today democracy in the twentieth century is a flag raised by the oppressed new proletarian class to claim rights for their own common interests against the ruling middle class.<sup>35</sup>

In his other articles, we can go as far as to find his discussion of the abolition of private property and Marx's value theory.<sup>36</sup> Chen's attention to economic problems might have been due to the many industrial and com-

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<sup>32</sup>Chen Duxiu, "Both Peace Conferences Are Nonsense," *ibid.*, 397.

<sup>33</sup>Chen Duxiu, "Constitutionalism and Political Parties," *ibid.*, 422.

<sup>34</sup>Lee, *Chen Duxiu*, 143.

<sup>35</sup>*Chen Duxiu wenzhang xuanbian* 1:449.

<sup>36</sup>Chen Duxiu, "Malthus' Theory of Population and the Chinese Population Problem," *ibid.*, 498-507.

mercial strikes that occurred after the May Fourth Incident, thus inevitably exposing Chen to China's newly developing industrial sector and its problems.<sup>37</sup> Many believed that these new concerns of Chen were strengthened after he left Beijing for Shanghai at the beginning of 1920. Shanghai at that time was the most industrialized city in China.<sup>38</sup> However, this attention to economic problems, in turn, led to his concerns about the path of China's development and the welfare of Chinese workers. These concerns, when combined with his perception of the overall situation of China, may have strengthened Marxism's appeal.

### *The Appeal of Marxism*

In August 1920, with the help of Grigorii N. Voitinsky (the Comintern's first delegate in China), Chen established the first official communist cell and the provisional CCP Central Committee. Chen formally declared that "the first priority of the modern society is to establish a working-class state through the means of revolution."<sup>39</sup> Various explanations have been given for Chen's conversion to Marxism. His disappointment in the Western democracies after the Versailles Peace Conference is generally accepted as an important factor. However, other factors that have been suggested—such as the success of the October Revolution in Russia and the appeal of the Soviet Union's friendly diplomatic policy toward China—are less likely to have been as important.

The Karakhan Manifesto promulgated in March 1920, which renounced czarist extraterritorial rights in China and repudiated all unequal treaties, no doubt heightened the moral standing of the newly established Bolshevik regime in the eyes of Chinese intellectuals.<sup>40</sup> The Manifesto aroused the Chinese intellectuals' attention to and even friendship with the Soviet Union. However, Chen's work reflected no significant reaction to

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<sup>37</sup>For the many industrial and commercial strikes after the May Fourth Incident, see Chow, *The May Fourth Movement*, 151-58.

<sup>38</sup>See Thomas Kuo, *Ch'en Tu-hsiu and the Chinese Communist Movement* (South Orange, N.J.: Seton Hall University Press, 1975), 78-79.

<sup>39</sup>Chen Duxiu, "On Politics," in *Chen Duxiu wenzhang xuanbian* 2:10.

<sup>40</sup>Cheng, *Chen Duxiu zhuan* 1:475-80.

the Karakhan Manifesto. This author's explanation for such a seemingly incredible phenomenon is that, at that time, Chen was already attracted to the idea of Marxism. Although having appealed to Chen, the Karakhan Manifesto was not the real reason for his interest in Marxism. At most, the document was an extra push toward his conversion.

Moreover, well known is that Chen's response to the success of the Russian Revolution came much later than those of his contemporaries. Even as late as April 1919, when his first article concerning this topic was published, Chen only regarded the Russian Revolution as a great event in the evolution of human society.<sup>41</sup> Chen made no link between the Russian Revolution and any solution to China's crisis. This response to the success of the Russian Revolution was very different from the response of Li Dazhao, who believed that the experience of Russia should be set up as a paradigm for Chinese revolution.<sup>42</sup> Even Dai Jitao (戴季陶), a member of the Kuomintang (KMT, the Nationalist Party) and later a fierce opponent of communism, at that time aimed to use Russia's experience for the needs of China.<sup>43</sup> Thus, the statement that the success of the Russian Revolution led to Chen's conversion to Marxism can only be regarded as partially correct. The real appeal of Marxism to Chen, as suggested by his own works, was his long-term perception that China's crisis was a total crisis and his eagerness to find a quick and all-embracing solution to China's problems.

Ever since the beginning of the publication of *Xin qingnian*, Chen had tended to address China's crisis as being "social" rather than "political," "economic," or "cultural." To him, the term "social" denoted all aspects of society. Thus, what he called for was always a social movement or social reformation. As Zhang Guotao (張國燾) recalled in his memoirs, one of the reasons for Chen's founding the CCP was that "the revolutionary movement led by Sun Yat-sen and his Three Principles of the People were not comprehensive enough."<sup>44</sup> As a theory of total crisis, Marxism fit Chen's

<sup>41</sup>Chen Duxiu, "The Twentieth Century Russian Revolution," in *Chen Duxiu wenzhang xuanbian* 1:381.

<sup>42</sup>Meisner, *Li Ta-chao and the Origins of Chinese Communism*, 64.

<sup>43</sup>Actually many KMT members were among the earliest Chinese intellectuals attracted by the success of the Russian Revolution. See Cheng, *Chen Duxiu zhuan* 1:456-74.

<sup>44</sup>Zhang Guotao, *Wode huiyi* (My memoirs), 3 vols. (Hong Kong: Mingbao yuekanshe,

contention for a comprehensive social movement.

Both the notion of class conflict and that of a mass-concerned revolution in Marxism were consistent with Chen's disgust with the elite and his emphasis on the masses. His disgust with the elite was reflected in his views toward politicians, bureaucrats, and the military. He claimed that for China's survival, these "three evils" should be eliminated.<sup>45</sup> The malfunctioning republican government and the disappointing performance of Western democracies convinced him of the defects of the republican system. As politics was corrupted by a social elite concerned only with its own interests and negligent of the masses, the only way for Chinese people to be liberated from their plight was through a war between the privileged and the deprived, between the dominant minority and the oppressed majority. This is what Chen meant by saying "let ordinary people conquer the government."<sup>46</sup>

The strongest of all the appeals of Marxism was probably the immediate results the ideology promised. The vision of a total social transformation in the near future not only satisfied the need for an all-encompassing change, but also fulfilled the expectation of a quick completion of state-rebuilding. As Chen defended his belief in Marxism: "For countries like China that are intellectually immature, lack organization, and that face a situation where external political and economic invasion is more and more imminent, would time allow us to gradually evolve if we do not adopt immediate revolution?"<sup>47</sup>

Noteworthy here is that the thought of a quick solution for China's crisis was not in Chen's mind earlier. When committed to cultural reformation, he had claimed that his pessimism was due to the unawakened consciousness of the Chinese people.<sup>48</sup> Thus, the quest for a quick solution

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1971), 1:95. Translation is cited from Chang Kuo-t'ao, *The Rise of the Chinese Communist Party: An Autobiography*, 2 vols. (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1971), 1:100.

<sup>45</sup>Chen, "Eliminating the Three Evils," 325-26.

<sup>46</sup>Chen Duxiu, "The Shandong Problem and the Awakening of Our People," in *Chen Duxiu wenzhang xuanbian* 1:410.

<sup>47</sup>Chen Duxiu, "A Letter to Russell and Zhang Tongsun," *ibid.*, 56.

<sup>48</sup>This view of Chen was expressed in his correspondence with a reader of *Xin qingnian*. See *Xin qingnian* 2, no. 3 (November 1, 1916).



here should be regarded as a result of China's experience of the enduring and worsening crisis of the late 1910s and early 1920s, and a consequence of his different perception of his own role.

The relationship between the appeal of Marxism and Chen's former belief is best understood by looking at the relationship between the idea of Marxism and Chen's well-known former belief in science and democracy. As mentioned earlier, Chen was strongly attracted to Darwinism when trying to conceptualize China's crisis, and in many of his works, Darwinism and a sense of crisis were closely related. In seeming to be a scientific social theory and claiming the inevitable evolution of human society, Marxism is quite compatible with Chen's former belief in scientific value, especially the idea of Darwinism.

### Freedom and Authority

Chen's political experience as a communist began with his justification of using coercive power and ended with his choosing individual freedom over central authority. This experience led him to reembrace Western democracy in his final years.

#### *The CCP's Central Authority*

Having settled for a quick and all-embracing solution for China's crisis, Chen began to claim the necessity of using coercive power. To him, the use of coercive power is a necessary and justified means for the weak, oppressed majority to overcome the strong, dominant minority. He claimed that "we should not allow coercive power to harm justice, but we must agree to use coercive power to defend justice."<sup>49</sup> The distinction between justified and unjustified uses of coercive power was expressed even more clearly in the following paragraph:

Why is coercive power bad? I think coercive power is bad because some people use it to support powerful and tyrannical people and oppress the powerless

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<sup>49</sup>Chen, "The Shandong Problem and the Awakening of Our People," 410-11.

and repress justice. If the reverse is true and we use coercive power to save the powerless and support justice and against powerful and tyrannical people, then coercive power is not necessarily bad.<sup>50</sup>

Just as the use of coercive power can be justified by its purpose, the institution which exercises coercive power can also be justified by its purpose. This led to Chen's proposing a strong central authority to liberate Chinese people from their plight:

I dare to claim that unless we implement strict interventionism in politics and education, we Chinese people will never be saved from corruption and decay. So our only hope is that the people who have conscience, knowledge, and capability in the country can join together to construct an enlightened despotism to save us by raising us up from below average human beings to above average human beings.<sup>51</sup>

The "enlightened despotism" in the above quote could be read as a different expression of proletarian dictatorship. More important, Chen made the argument about "enlightened despotism" when he was fighting against the anarchists over the necessity of a strong central authority.<sup>52</sup> Thus, to him, a strong central authority based on the rule of the proletariat was necessary for the reconstruction of China.

The justification of the use of coercive power and of the need for a strong central authority can be regarded as Marxist influence as well as Chen's response to his perception of the lasting crisis in China. However, when Chen used the ends to justify the means in his eager pursuit of the reconstruction of China, he did not foresee that he would eventually pay for such justification.

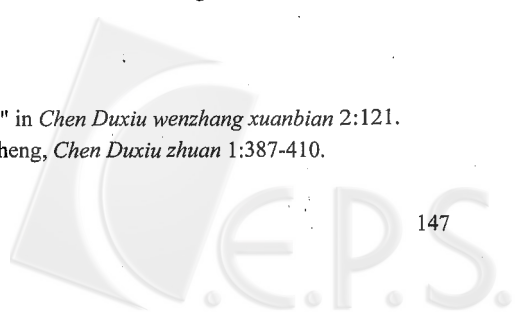
In July 1921, Chen was formally elected as the first general secretary of the newly established CCP. For a person who had been fighting authority all his life, this position of authority should have been a challenge to his former belief. However, since he did not really have authority over the operation of the CCP, the challenge was moot. From its inception, the CCP was guided by the Comintern. In Chen's early perception of the relations between the Comintern and the CCP, he did not imagine that the newly es-

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<sup>50</sup>Chen, "On Politics," 4.

<sup>51</sup>Chen Duxiu, "Chinese-Style Anarchism," in *Chen Duxiu wenzhang xuanbian* 2:121.

<sup>52</sup>For Chen's debate with anarchists, see Cheng, *Chen Duxiu zhuan* 1:387-410.



established party would be seriously dominated by the Comintern.<sup>53</sup> During his leadership from 1921 to 1927, however, the most important policy formulated by the Comintern and implemented by the CCP was collaboration with the KMT. The strategies used by the CCP in implementing this policy showed that while Chen was the general secretary, the CCP was actually operating under the authority of the delegate from the Comintern.

The Comintern's instruction to the CCP to collaborate with the KMT was based on the idea that the CCP was not able to achieve revolution independently.<sup>54</sup> However, after being proposed by Hendrikus Maring (Sneevliet), a delegate of the Comintern, the collaboration strategy aroused heated opposition within the CCP. Chen was among those who opposed. Because of the domination of the Comintern over the CCP, Chen later accepted and helped implement the policy of collaboration.<sup>55</sup>

Another proof that Chen lacked the authority over the CCP's operation was the Comintern's decision to support the KMT to proceed with the Northern Expedition. The plan for the Expedition was actually proposed by Mikhail M. Borodin who, at that time, was the delegate of the Comintern in Guangzhou. Immediately after the KMT's announcement of the Northern Expedition, Chen published an article in *Xiangdao zhoubao* (嚮導周報 Guide Weekly), then the mouthpiece of the CCP, opposing any such policy.

Chen's stated reason for voicing opposition was that the timing was wrong. He claimed that the "political situation inside the Nationalist government, the total power of the Nationalist government, and the fighting capability and revolutionary consciousness of the military of the Nationalist government" were all unfavorable.<sup>56</sup> However, given Chen's long-term re-

<sup>53</sup>Chen's early perception was that the CCP could gain only practical experience and theoretical training from the Comintern. See Zhang, *Wode huiyi* 1:101.

<sup>54</sup>See *Gongchan guoji yu Zhongguo geming ziliao xuanji* (Selected materials of the Comintern and the Chinese revolution) (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 1985), 42-52.

<sup>55</sup>This contention is supported by the following materials: Zhang, *Wode huiyi* 1:286-302; Chen Duxiu, "A Letter to All Comrades in the Party" (Xerox copy at the library of the Hoover Institution on War, Revolution, and Peace, Stanford University); and Peng Shuzhi, *Ping Zhang Guotao de Wode huiyi* (Review of Zhang Guotao's *My Memoirs*) (Hong Kong: Xianfeng chubanshe, 1975), 20.

<sup>56</sup>Chen Duxiu, "On the Northern Expedition of the Nationalist Government," in *Chen Duxiu wenzhang xuanbian* 3:250-52.

sentment of the warlords and his distrust of the KMT, his opposition should probably be explained by his distrust of the commander-in-chief of the Northern Expedition. Chiang Kai-shek, in Chen's mind, might not have been too much different from a warlord, despite the sympathy he was forced to show toward social revolution.

Just as Maring's collaboration policy had been accepted by the CCP, so was Borodin's support of the Northern Expedition. Chen did not fight against the authority of the Comintern in either case, but he did express his disagreement toward these policies within the CCP. Tension did surface between Shanghai, where the CCP's leadership was located, and Guangzhou, where members of the CCP received instruction from the Comintern.<sup>57</sup> Chen, as the general secretary, was not able to use this discord to help consolidate his ultimate authority over the operation of the CCP.

The second reason that Chen's election as general secretary did not seem to him a challenge to his earlier belief in individual freedom and human rights has to do with the personal profiles of the early CCP members. Many of the early CCP members were Chen's former followers. His authority over them, regarded as patriarchal by some scholars,<sup>58</sup> did not come from his institutional position, but rather from his role as a teacher, as a pioneer of the social movement.<sup>59</sup> This identification of the source of Chen's authority in the CCP is important because a lack of awareness of his own institutional authority might have delayed Chen's reflection on the relations between central authority and the individual in Marxism-Leninism.

### *Opposing the CCP's Central Authority*

In 1927, the collapse of the KMT-CCP collaboration led to Chen's ouster from the position of party secretary, even though he should not have been held entirely responsible for the fiasco.<sup>60</sup> After his removal, he fre-

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<sup>57</sup>Zheng Chaolin, *Zheng Chaolin huiyilu* (The memoirs of Zheng Chaolin) (Manuscript, 1982), 130.

<sup>58</sup>Lee, *Chen Duxiu*, 196.

<sup>59</sup>Both Zhang Guotao's and Zheng Chaolin's memoirs mention that Chen had a "natural authority" within the CCP. See Zheng, *Zheng Chaolin huiyilu*, 125; Zhang, *Wode huiyi* 1:240.

<sup>60</sup>This viewpoint recently is recognized by contemporary Chinese historians. See Wang

quently expressed his views to the new party leadership.<sup>61</sup> In May 1929, through students who had come back from the Soviet Union, Chen learned of Trotsky's opinion of the Chinese Revolution. Chen found out that the policy which he had been commanded to follow by the Comintern had actually been consistently opposed by Trotsky. This knowledge led to his gradual acceptance of Trotsky's viewpoints on the Chinese Revolution.

In July 1929, a clash between the Soviets and the Chinese, known as the Chinese Eastern Railroad Incident, occurred. Opposing the CCP's tactical policy in this event, Chen wrote a series of letters to the CCP Central Committee. However, these letters covered more than just this event, and Chen distributed them among the CCP members without the prior consent of the Central Committee. In these letters, Chen not only criticized the slogan used by the CCP in this event, but also criticized the major policies of the CCP during the period from 1927 to 1929. After the Central Committee condemned him as an opportunist, Chen urged the implementation of democracy within the party:

The debate among comrades about different opinions on theory and policy is a phenomenon of the progress of the party, not a bad phenomenon. . . . If you are always stubborn with your narrowness, do not consider the importance of inner-party democracy, are afraid of different opinions as if they were snakes, and use the authority of the Central Committee brutally to achieve the conformity of the opinions, . . . you are consciously or unconsciously preventing the progress of the party. . . . Whether or not the opinions of comrades different from those of the Central Committee are about theory, about policy, or about the method of work, as long as they do not depart from the position of revolution and the party, these public debates should be permitted by inner-party democracy.<sup>62</sup>

In the above quote, we see that, to Chen, inner-party democracy was the freedom of thought, of speech, and the freedom to oppose the central authority. Democracy to him was the freedom to express a dissenting view.

Chen's refusal to conform to authority should not be a surprise. That

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Hongmo, "The Assessment on the Activities of Chen Duxiu," *Zhongguo shehui kexue* (Chinese Social Science), 1985, no. 5:11.

<sup>61</sup>Zheng, *Zheng Chaolin huiyilu*, 159.

<sup>62</sup>Chen Duxiu, "A Letter from Comrade Duxiu to the CCP Central Committee Concerning the Problems of Chinese Revolution," in *Zhongguo geming yu jihuizhuyi* (Chinese revolution and opportunism) (Xerox copy in the East Asian Library in the University of Chicago), 113-15.

he had retained such a view after he became a communist showed his failure to understand the Leninist party discipline: conformity is what a strong central authority with coercive power seeks. Otherwise, Chen would either have accepted conformity out of a desire for a strong central authority and coercive power, or opposed a strong central authority, the exercise of coercive power, and conformity all at once.

Hard to imagine is that, with his critical analysis of politics, Chen would lack awareness of the linkage between conformity, coercive power, and strong central authority. Two explanations are possible: First, the kind of authority which Chen fought against was derived from oppressive social norms and not from a strong state which penetrates all sectors of society. In other words, he recognized the oppression to individual freedom and human rights from a societal authority—the norms of Confucianism. However, he was not faced with the oppression originating from political penetration—the arbitrary power exercised by a strong central authority over individuals. Second, Chen never consciously let his belief in individual freedom and human rights be overridden by his pursuit of strong central authority and his belief in the conditional use of coercive power. He never thought that individual freedom and human rights should be the price of collective goal. To whatever extent these two reasons can explain Chen's lack of awareness of the unavoidable linkage between coercive power, strong central authority, and conformity, there is no doubt that this oversight led to his failure to understand the nature of a Leninist party.

His naiveté about the practice of democratic centralism aside, Chen's struggle with the CCP leadership was related to his practical political needs. His demand for inner-party democracy undoubtedly could be regarded as a demand for a larger sphere of political influence within the CCP, especially after he was ousted. Chen's nonconformist attitude and the attempt to have inner-party democracy within a Leninist party foreordained his split from the CCP. In November 1929, he was expelled from the CCP with the charges of disobeying party discipline and of being "counterrevolutionary."<sup>63</sup> After his expulsion, Chen became the leader of the Chinese

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<sup>63</sup>Tang and Lin, *Chen Duxiu nianpu*, 364.



Trotskyists. However, the chaotic struggle among different factions of the Chinese Trotskyists limited the political influence of both the Trotskyists in general and Chen himself in particular.

### Reembracing Western Democracy

Chen's views at the end of his life were a consequence of reflections on his own experience within the CCP and a reaction to Stalin's rule in the Soviet Union. In August 1937, he was released from prison where he had been held by the KMT government since 1932. In November, he wrote a letter to a group of friends. In this letter, he declared that from then on, his opinions represented nobody but himself. He no longer belonged to any party or faction and would not accept orders from anyone. He concluded his letter with the statement: "Now I have no idea who will be my friend in the future. I am absolutely not afraid to be isolated."<sup>64</sup> Chen was conveying two messages: First, he wanted to be completely independent in both ideas and action; he did not want any kind of conformity of thought, even as a means for action. Second, the claim that he was not afraid of being isolated implied that after "the profound pondering for five or six years," Chen knew that his new view would be different from his previous thought. These messages were confirmed by his later works.

On July 7, 1937, the Anti-Japanese War began in China. As an intellectual who had devoted all his life to finding a solution to China's crisis, Chen unavoidably became engaged in the imminent crisis of China. He wrote a series of articles discussing the relevant issues of how to fight against the Japanese—articles which reveal his intellectual independence.

In his call for cooperation among all parties and factions in the defense of the country, Chen once again showed his nonconformist attitude:

Unfortunately, some people regard the unification of thought and belief as a prerequisite for cooperation among various parties in the Anti-Japanese War.

<sup>64</sup>Chen Duxiu, "A Letter to Chen Qichang and Others," in *Houqide Chen Duxiu jiqi wen-zhang xuanbian* (Selected works of Chen Duxiu's later essays), ed. Zhang Yongtong and Liu Chuanxue (Sichuan: Sichuan renmin chubanshe, 1980), 80.

This is really a fantasy. . . . If we do want the unification of thought as a prerequisite for cooperation among the various parties, we have no choice but to first fight among ourselves until the elimination of all the different opinions.<sup>65</sup>

Chen's final views as to what kind of political system and socio-economic structure China should adopt were elicited in discussions with friends about the situation of World War II. Refuting the view of his friends, which was consistent with the official claim of the Soviet Union and the CCP that the war was one among imperialist states, Chen regarded the fighting as a struggle between totalitarian and liberal democratic states. These discussions prompted the elaboration of Chen's new opinions on democracy. In a letter to friends, he claimed:

The root of your mistake is that you do not understand the true value of bourgeois democracy. From Lenin and Trotsky on, all are like this. You regard democracy as the rule of the bourgeoisie, which is hypocrisy and cheating. . . . Bourgeois democracy is different from proletarian democracy only in the scope of its implementation. It is not that proletarian democracy is substantively different. Since the Russian Revolution, people have taken the empty abstract name of proletarian democracy as a weapon to overthrow bourgeois democracy. [This attitude] resulted in the Soviet Union under Stalin's rule [of dictatorship] today.<sup>66</sup>

Chen went on to insist that "all the evils of Stalin were rooted in the development of the logic of the dictatorship of the proletariat." He contended: "Twenty years' experience in the Soviet Union, especially the last ten years of bitter experience, should make us reflect. If we do not look for and learn lessons from the defects of the system, we will never be awakened."<sup>67</sup>

The following points can be made about the views of Chen at the time. First, his assertion of the underlying similarity of bourgeois and proletarian democracy boldly challenged the standard Marxist position and reassessed some of his own earlier judgments. After twenty-five years, Chen had finally reached a concrete understanding of the kind of individual freedom and human rights which he claimed to pursue with the advocacy of Western democracy during the publication of *Xin qingnian*. Chen did not

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<sup>65</sup>Chen Duxiu, "How Various Political Parties Should Cooperate," *ibid.*, 123.

<sup>66</sup>Chen Duxiu, "A Letter to Lian'gen," *ibid.*, 192.

<sup>67</sup>Chen Duxiu, "A Letter to Xiliu," *ibid.*, 198.



deny the possibility of socialist democracy, but socialist democracy must consist of an expansion of bourgeois democratic rights rather than a negation of these rights. In his view, the communist movement as a whole had misunderstood the true value of democracy.

Second, that Chen attributed Stalin's rule to flaws in the communist system instead of Stalin's character shows that he had reflected on the mechanism of democracy—that is, on the problem of how individual freedom and human rights can be effectively realized. He recognized freedom and rights in the liberal sense and criticized the Soviet Union where there was "no opposition party, no different factions within the ruling party, no freedom of thought, press, strike, and election."<sup>68</sup> As someone who had always been against the conformity of thought, Chen understandably had to protest when he finally realized that the communist system, in order to achieve a too perfectionist view of human emancipation, aimed not only to eliminate material differences but also differences in thought.

Third, Chen's reflection on the mechanism of democracy unavoidably forced him also to reflect on a strong central authority which exercises coercive power to prevent the realization of individual freedom and human rights. This led him to oppose proletarian dictatorship. His point was that after the proletariat seizes political power, they can use instruments of the state to oppress the counterrevolution of the bourgeoisie. Chen claimed that "there is no such thing as the so-called 'dictatorship of the proletariat.' There is a dictatorship of the party, which then becomes the dictatorship of the leader."<sup>69</sup> His opposition to the theory and practice of what has become known as "proletarian democracy" was, in Marxist terms, an opposition to the idea of a provisional strong central authority. Thus, after reflection on his experience, Chen accepted the idea that a strong central authority is always a threat to individual freedom and human rights. Where he had once wanted to have an "enlightened dictatorship," he now understood the linkage between an unchecked strong central authority and dictatorship, and even the essence of dictatorship.

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<sup>68</sup>Chen, "A Letter to Lian'gen," 199.

<sup>69</sup>Chen Duxiu, "My Basic Opinions," *ibid.*, 204.



Although Chen in his last years, as he claimed, did not belong to any political organization and criticized communism for not realizing democracy, he still identified himself as a Marxist. When he discussed the problem of democracy, he did so in the context of the realization of communism. His continued identification with Marxism was also apparent in the claim that "democracy is not inseparable from capitalism"<sup>70</sup> and in his discussions of the future trends of the world. With his belief in the value of individual freedom and human rights in the liberal democratic sense, and his belief in economic equality, Chen positioned himself, at the end of his life, as a social democrat, even though he himself used the term "proletarian democracy" in reference to his belief.

From a historical perspective, the ramifications of Chen's reflection on democracy should have been a warning to many Chinese intellectuals caught in the tension between two desirable but contradictory goals—the achievement of a vigorous China through the development of individual freedom, and the rapid reconstruction of the Chinese state through a strong central authority. However, these differing goals were not fully recognized by Chen himself or by other Chinese intellectuals who, then or later, lived with the same tension. On the contrary and quite ironically, while Chen was the living embodiment of the recently prevailing Chinese Marxist slogan—"seeking truth from facts," he was slandered as a traitor by a representative of principled, orthodox communism, Kang Sheng (康生).<sup>71</sup>

## Conclusion

Modern China's crisis confronted many concerned Chinese intellectuals with the dilemma of choosing between rebuilding the state with a strong central authority and rejuvenating the society with energetic indi-

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<sup>70</sup>Ibid.

<sup>71</sup>In an article published in Yan'an in 1938, Kang Sheng claimed that Chen was a traitor and was financially subsidized by the Japanese. The real issue was about Chen's being a Trotskyist and his reconciliation with the CCP Central Committee. See Chen Duxiu, "A Letter to the *Xinhua Daily*," in Zhang and Liu, *Houqide Chen Duxiu jiqi wenzhang xuanbian*, 112-13; Wang, "The Assessment on the Activities of Chen Duxiu," 19.

viduals and social groups. Chen's perception and reaction to the dilemma shaped his thought and experience and led to his importance in modern Chinese history.

Chen deserves our attention not only because he was the leader of the New Culture Movement and the founder of the Chinese Communist Party, but also because of his final reflection on the problem of the realization of individual freedom and human rights in Marxism. As China had to solve a total crisis which consisted of problems that Western countries spent centuries to deal with, many Chinese intellectuals in the twentieth century experienced a journey that their Western counterparts undertook over a longer time span. Within twenty years (from approximately 1915 to 1935), the progression of Chen's notion on democracy reflected this situation.

From an iconoclast who aimed to seek Chinese people's emancipation from the constraints of tradition to an expelled communist who emphasized the importance of the concrete contents of human rights, Chen, in his reflection on the problem of the realization of individual freedom and human rights, went far beyond many of his contemporaries in China. For he understood that human emancipation achieved by a communist revolution was a different matter from the realization of human rights. Although Chen is not viewed as a great philosopher, his pioneering reflections on this matter still have historical significance.

Chen was among the few Chinese intellectuals who had an undeniably prominent influence on modern Chinese history. His life experience was probably best summed up in a phrase which Hu Shih once applied to him—"a lifetime oppositionist."<sup>72</sup> There are two ways in which Chen was "a lifetime oppositionist." First, his thought and political activity were always in opposition to authority. He was opposed to the monarchy system while he was a revolutionary, to the Chinese tradition during the May Fourth period, to the Comintern while he was the general secretary of the CCP, to the CCP Central Committee after he was ousted, and to the Marxist-Leninist orthodoxy while he reflected on his own experience with

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<sup>72</sup>That Hu Shih labeled Chen as "a lifetime oppositionist" was revealed in one of Chen's letters to his friend. In this letter, Chen seemed to approve this label. See Chen Duxiu, "A Letter to S and H," in *Chen Duxiu wenzhang xuanbian* 2:209.

the communist system and that of the Soviet Union.

Second, Chen was an oppositionist in the sense that, despite his constant and fervent advocacy of his beliefs, he always understood much more clearly what he opposed than what he favored. While opposing Chinese tradition and advocating Western democracy, his iconoclasm was richer and more recognizable than his liberalism. Similarly, while he was engaged in his final reflections, his opposition to conform himself to strong central authority was clearer than his self-defined notion of proletarian democracy.

Chen the oppositionist was a person of strong moral conviction and conscience. Although eager to find a way to overcome China's crisis, he tried to choose means based on both utility and moral legitimacy. When he first sought the construction of a liberal democratic state as the solution to China's crisis, his supposedly instrumental view of individual freedom and human rights was expanded into a moral standing. His transition from a belief in Western democracy to a belief in Marxism was partially motivated by the injustice inflicted on China at the Versailles Peace Conference by the Western democracies and by the injustices perpetuated by the warlord government in domestic politics. His later advocacy of the important tenets of liberal democracy showed that democracy as defined by Marxism was inadequate for him.

Chen, who had once let his belief in individual freedom and human rights be overridden by concern with state-rebuilding, ended up emphasizing the importance of individual freedom and human rights while still pondering the task of state-rebuilding. This suggests that even though he experienced the tension between these two desired goals, Chen was not convinced that individual freedom and human rights should be the price paid for state-rebuilding.

Despite Chen's final reflection on this matter, modern Chinese history has shown that, to many concerned Chinese, the task of state-rebuilding was overwhelmingly more important than the development of individual freedom and human rights. The historical tragedy is that this attitude has continued to be the case in China, even after a new state was built in 1949.

In recent years, Chen's final reflections, though not shared by his communist contemporaries, have begun to be shared by his counterparts in

contemporary China. The discussions of such topics as the problem of alienation within the socialist system indicate reflections on the realization of individual freedom and human rights by contemporary Chinese intellectuals. The attempt to reinterpret Marxism shows that they are aware that the neglect of individual freedom and human rights is a problem embedded in communist ideology, rather than a problem specific to China. They are confronted with the problem that has been properly addressed by Talmon: "When a regime is by definition regarded as realizing rights and freedoms, the citizen becomes deprived of any right to complain that he is being deprived of his rights and liberties."<sup>73</sup>

From Chen to his counterparts in contemporary China, the journey to reconstruct China has been a long and arduous one. State-rebuilding was already achieved by the communist revolution. However, mobilizing individual capacity and creativity to invigorate China is still proceeding.

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<sup>73</sup>Talmon, *The Origins of Totalitarian Democracy*, 35.

