



# Leftism in Republican China: A Historiographical Review

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## Abstract

*The research explores the historiography of Chinese leftism in the 1910s and 1930s, known as the Republican China, the studies of which was conducted by the Euro-American scholars from the 1980s to the 2000s. Framed under the modernist theory, historians of China in the 1980s investigated the rise and the fall of leftism in Republican China by focusing on state formation, party politics, militarization, as well as the capitalist development of industrialization and urbanization when imperialism, colonialism and global wars had fundamentally changed China's politics and the state-society relationship. In the 1990s, especially after the PRC's reform of market economy in the post-Mao era, historical studies of leftism sought for the roots of liberal democracy in the past that led to the political liberalism in the post-socialist China. It was until 2000, that historical research on Chinese leftism eventually departed from the nation-state/party politics and modernization paradigms. Instead, critical research of China's political and intellectual history has positioned Chinese leftism and leftists into the global history of anti-colonialism, internationalism, and national independent movements in the 20th century.*

**Keywords:** Chinese leftism, Republican China, historiography, state-society relationship, political history of modern China

## Introduction

1920s-30s China is generally discussed under the rubric of Chiang Kai-shek's Nanjing regime, as "Republican China" prior to Japan's seizure of Nanjing in December 1937 and the establishment of a wartime capital in Chongqing. This periodization has privileged the state and contending party politics of the Nationalist Party (hereinafter the GMD, the Guomindang) and the Chinese Communist Party (hereinafter, the CCP), the consistent feature of historical analysis. From the Cold War period to the 1980s, historical narratives of Republican China heavily relied upon modernization theory to construct a comparison between China's modernization and that of its Euro-American peers, in which state-organization, militarization or industrialization became the focus of investigation.<sup>1</sup> Since the 1980s, writings on Republican history have been influenced by various theories of globalization, and in particular, new methods of cultural, social, and intellectual history have been introduced. At the same time, the state-party has remained as the agent or rigid designator against which various tendencies—collaboration, participation, or resistance—have been measured.<sup>2</sup>

## The Cold War Paradigm

During the Cold War period, Chinese left-wing intellectuals were conventionally considered exclusively as Leninist-Maoist members of the CCP.<sup>3</sup> In the 1980s, they began to be seen as democratic liberals within the GMD

<sup>1</sup> See William C. Kirby, *Germany and Republican China*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, California, 1984; Eastman, Lloyd E, *The abortive revolution: China under Nationalist rule, 1927-1937*, Cambridge, Mass.: Council on East Asian Studies, Harvard University, 1990; "Fascism in Kuomintang China: The Blue Shirts", in *China Quarterly* 49 (Jan-Mar 1972): 1-31; "The Kuomintang in the 1930's" in Charlotte Furth, ed., *The Limits of Change*, Cambridge, Mass., 1976, pp. 191-210; "Fascism and Modern China: A Rejoinder," in *China Quarterly* 80 (Dec 1979): 838-842.

<sup>2</sup> See Merle Goldman, Timothy Cheek and Carol Lee Hamrin, ed., *China's Intellectuals and the State: In Search of a New Relationship*, Harvard Contemporary China Series 3. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1987; Jerome B. Grieder, *Intellectuals and the State in Modern China: A Narrative History*, New York: The Free Press/London and Toronto: Collier Macmillan, 1981; Merle Goldman, *China's Intellectuals: Advise and Dissent*, Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1981.

<sup>3</sup> See Maurice Meisner, *Li Ta-chao and the origins of Chinese Marxism*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967 and *Marxism, Maoism, and utopianism: eight essays*, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1982.

who fought against Chiang Kai-shek's fascist totalitarianism. Because GMD leftists supposedly encouraged mass participation during the 1920s and 30s, the state-party politics of the Nanjing period could be viewed as containing possibilities harboring hitherto unseen democratic potential.<sup>4</sup> However, either because of factional conflicts within the GMD left or because they attempted to separate themselves from the CCP, leftwing intellectuals were removed from the political center-stage in 1935.<sup>5</sup> Hence, the seeds of democratization/modernization were never germinated.

### The Modernization Narratives: Cultural and Intellectual Histories

Along with the narrative of a failed democratization project, 1920s-30s Chinese leftists have been studied by cultural and intellectual historians to demonstrate modernity in China as an alternative to the Euro-American peers. Historical analyses have suggested that the arrival of modernity created a series of "alienated" social settings<sup>6</sup> that led to the emergence of a Chinese leftist youth that suffered a sense of "coming cultural disaster"<sup>7</sup> and came to resent China's patriarchal fascist state-politics under the Jiang regime.<sup>8</sup> Cultural historian Wen-hsin Yeh uses the term "alienation" in a wider Max Weberian sense to emphasize the psychological confusion, frustration, disillusion, pessimism and despondency among students and professors when they encountered the Western language, knowledge and cultural imperialism.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, a liberal leftist tendency as the resistance against state-party politics was discovered in the rise of popular culture. Romantist literature, known as the Butterfly and Mandarin Duck style emerged as a palliative during the 1920s-30s.<sup>10</sup> Research on the relationship between left-wing intellectuals and state-party also have focused on their inter-dependent but critical interactions.<sup>11</sup>

Some literatures have studied the emerged cultural Enlightenment movement carried out by Chinese left-radicals in the 1915-1919 New Cultural Movement, which was oppressed by state or party politics from the Republican era until the post-Mao period.<sup>12</sup> In these cultural and intellectual narratives of 1920s-30s Chinese leftism, although China's failed project of modernity is refuted, three presumptions have remained. First, the reified concept of modernity has been retained as a standard to identify the traits of China's modernization, through which China's comparability with its Euro-American contemporaries is able to be constructed. Secondly, the Chinese leftists' position is still exclusively configured through their collective relationship with the state and the parties, which assumes a hierarchical relationship between elite intellectuals and the general Chinese people—Chinese society—in the sense that they could project themselves outside of social life and are thus able to abstract the values of society so as to study them as object. Third, related to the previous two, the separation of the state, Chinese (left-wing) intellectuals and society (the masses) have become the necessary condition to both identify and sustain their reified character and arbitrary relationship.

### Leftists as the Dissidents

Interventions that have challenged the state/party-centered and elitist narratives of Chinese leftists have focused upon the emergence of Chinese leftists as autonomous and independent from both state-party and the Chinese common people. In this regard, they have been endowed with three identities. First, they have been seen as independent nationalists who shared a victimized sentiment with the general Chinese populace during the China-Japanese war. Chinese leftists during the 1920s-30s, are perceived as emotionally responding to the masses' demand for national resistance against Japan, while the Jiang Regime is presented as rational in its execution of an "internal pacification before external resistance" policy that claimed China to be lacking capacities to fight against

<sup>4</sup> See Huang Jianli, *The Politics of Depoliticization in Republican China: Guomindang Policy towards Students Political Activism, 1927-1949*, Peter Lang, 1996; So Wai-chor, *The Kuomintang Left in the National Revolution, 1924-1931: The Leftist Alternative in Republican China*, Hong Kong: East Asian Historical Monographs, Oxford University Press, 1991.

<sup>5</sup> Huang Jianli, *The Politics of Depoliticization in Republican China: Guomindang Policy towards Students Political Activism, 1927-1949*, Peter Lang, 1996, p.190.

<sup>6</sup> Wen-hsin Yeh, *The Alienated Academy: Culture and Politics in Republican China, 1919-1937*, Cambridge, Mass.: Council on East Asian Studies Publications, Harvard University Press, 1990, pp.119-121.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> See Perry Link, *Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies: Popular Fiction in Early Twentieth-Century Chinese Cities*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981; Leo Lee and Andrew Nathan, "The Beginnings of Mass Culture: Journalism and Fiction in the late Ch'ing and Beyond", in David Johnson, Andrew Nathan, and Evelyn S. Rawski, eds., *Popular Culture in Late Imperial China*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985.

<sup>11</sup> See Merle Goldman, Timothy Cheek and Carol Lee Hamrin, ed., *China's Intellectuals and the State: In Search of a New Relationship*, Harvard Contemporary China Series 3. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1987; Jerome B. Grieder, *Intellectuals and the State in Modern China: A Narrative History*, New York: The Free Press/London and Toronto: Collier Macmillan, 1981; Merle Goldman, *China's Intellectuals: Advise and Dissent*, Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1981.

<sup>12</sup> Vera Schwartz, *The Chinese Enlightenment: Intellectuals and the Legacy of the May Fourth Movement of 1919*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986.

Japan because of the “internal chaos” created by the CCP.<sup>13</sup> Secondly, Chinese leftists from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century to the Republican period are understood as independent social actors who were willingly cooperating with the state actors to create the modern rituals of nationhood, which produced lived practices of everyday life—a new sense of modern citizenship with a Chinese character.<sup>14</sup> Third, Chinese leftists in Shanghai are seen as professionals who organized themselves into professional associations in the Republican period (1912-1937).<sup>15</sup> These professionals are understood to form one part of the larger Shanghai bourgeoisie, distinguished by their commitment to their public ethics—their objectivity and neutrality outside of social life. They simultaneously desire both autonomy and recognition from society and state and have little in common with traditional literati generalists. Chinese leftist professionals were in a unique position because they were, or at least saw themselves as, leaders in processes of modernization that were being pursued by both society (in a practical sense) and the state (in a political sense), especially after the Jiang regime was founded in 1927.<sup>16</sup>

Although these analyses went far to refute the state-party-centered and elitist modes of historical narration, they assumed the ethos of 1920s-1930s leftists to be politically autonomous and neutral, while retaining certain assumptions of earlier scholarship. On the one hand, the symbolic relations between the state-party (the signifier, i.e., the rational and the true politics) and Chinese leftists and with Chinese society (the signified, the irrational and the practical) have continued. While state, intellectuals, and society are seen as separate entities, Chinese left-wing intellectuals function as a pure mediation—either as disinterested or emotional—to connect and reveal the separation and symbolic relations between state and society. On the other hand, nationhood, national citizenship and professionalization have each been taken as traits of universal true modernity—emerging and developing naturally from the turn of 20<sup>th</sup> century through the 1920s-30s.

In these historical narratives, the earlier Cold War paradigm asserted Chinese leftists were homogenous, either the puppets of Mao’s CCP or overwhelmed by Chiang’s fascist regime, which preserved the reified categories of Communism/Maoism/Utopianism/Fascism as statist-partisan vis-à-vis capitalism and imperialism. The liberal democratization/modernization paradigm perceived them as homogenous and non-partisan, as a resistance or alternative to state-party politics. Furthermore, while nationalism in the Cold War paradigm was seen to function as a tactic or veil to preserve statist-partisan communism and capitalism, it later functioned as an effective apparatus for party domination to attract the masses’ participation or for their demand of catching up to their more modern contemporaries. In this light, these historical writings affirmed that only the state-party could make nationalism function effectively and rationally for military resistance, while Chinese leftists only exhibited sentimental or emotional nationalism, which led to the fall of Nanjing under the Japanese attack in 1937.

### Critical Studies: From the Origins to The Synchronous History

Nevertheless, there have emerged several historical writings on Chinese leftists and the rise of nationalism that challenged the reified category of Communism/Maoism/Utopianism/Fascism as state-partisan vis-à-vis capitalism and imperialism. Below, I first examine Peter Zarrow’s and Arif Dirlik’s historical examinations of Chinese leftism, in which Chinese leftists attempted to fashion a particular form of worldview/universalism and politics. Second, I consider Rebecca Karl’s historical research on the creation of nationalism at the turn of 20<sup>th</sup> century China as the political articulation of activism and organization against imperialism and statism. For Karl, the rise of nationalism in China should also be seen as the conceptual articulation of a particular universalism that was formulated through Chinese intellectuals’ rethinking of the *synchronicities* of global anti-colonial struggles in diverse places, in which China’s position in the world was imagined and realized.

In the last two decades, historical research on Chinese leftists has considered how leftism, such as anarchism, emerged as a distinct social ideology in the late Qing period and developed into an influential political discourse during the 1910s and 1920s. In *Anarchism and Chinese Political Culture*, Peter Zarrow argued that from the late Qing to the 1930s, Chinese anarchists articulated two strikingly divergent strains of thought, which played an important role in the intellectual world. Their notions of peasant revolution, militant feminism, utopianism, iconoclasm, political vocabulary, class analysis, and concepts of social revolution became a major part of the conceptual context in which Chinese communism and Maoism later emerged. Anarchism not only served as an ideological precursor of the May Fourth movement in certain respects, it also helped to set the tone for the intellectual climate of twentieth-century China. Meanwhile, Chinese anarchist leftists challenged both the status quo and other ideologies such as Republicanism and Marxism. They did not perceive themselves as copying the

<sup>13</sup> Parks M. Coble, Jr. “Chiang Kai-shek and the Anti-Japanese Movement in China: Zou Tao-fen and the National Salvation Association, 1931-1937,” *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 44, No. 2 (Feb., 1985), pp. 293-310.

<sup>14</sup> See Henrietta Harrison, *The Making of the Republican Citizen: Political Ceremonies and Symbols in China 1911-1929*, Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2000

<sup>15</sup> See Xiaoqun Xu, *Chinese Professionals and the Republican State: the Rise of Professional Association in Shanghai, 1912-1937*, Cambridge England; New York: Cambridge University Press 2001.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

West, for the West itself was far from realizing anarchism. The anarchist goals were proclaimed in the name of all humanity—not exclusively in the name of any national or local community.<sup>17</sup>

Zarrow's interpretation of Chinese anarchism is compelling in several respects. With Zarrow's intervention, we can see China's reformism, communism/Maoism, and Enlightenment/scientism in the 1910s-30s were no longer an exclusively concern of party-state, or of a limited group of westernized elite intellectuals (May-fourth radicals, for example). Instead, they were seen as the products of the intertwined interactions of multiple varied political discourses. On the other hand, Zarrow does not approach anarchism as a school of thought, but he investigates, the contradictory nature within the anarchists, each of which were historically specific in their visions and activisms. Nevertheless, his examination is limited because it lacks of an explicit historical analysis of the relationship between anarchism and its social role within the changing historical contexts in which anarchists lived. This is partially because his research intends to prove that revolutionary theories (Marxism/Maoism) in China did not come from the West or from the Comintern. Instead, revolutionary theories were constituted by the radical roots native to Chinese political thought (Neo-Confucianism and Daoism). In other words, Chinese anarchism in the 20<sup>th</sup> century was culturally indebted in China's philosophical tradition.<sup>18</sup> Nevertheless, what remains unexplored is what Chinese anarchists had experienced that would cause them to rely on two fundamentally different theoretical resources (Neo-Confucianism vs rationalism). In other words, what had compelled Chinese revolutionaries to embrace anarchism, an anti-state political universalism to transform the Chinese society upon the fall of the Qing empire?

Arif Dirlik, in *Anarchism in the Chinese Revolution* and *The Origins of Chinese Communism*, attempted to address these questions. Similar to Zarrow, Dirlik sought to assess anarchism's contribution to the evolution of increasingly revolutionary intellectual alternatives at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Anarchism in the Chinese revolution provided a concept of society against the state for communism, Maoism and other political theories.<sup>19</sup> Also along with Zarrow, Dirlik refuted the conventions that Maoism, Communism, and socialism in China were manipulated or oriented by the Comintern and the European Marxism.<sup>20</sup> Unlike Zarrow, however, Dirlik refused to place anarchism into the context of Chinese traditional political thoughts (Confucianism/Daoism). Rather, Dirlik situated it within the intellectual tensions and interactions between the May-fourth radical anarchism and socialism. The intellectual interactions were perceived as the product of the history of the May-fourth period when capitalist industrialization and labor movements emerged after the 1910s.<sup>21</sup> By the same token, in his earlier book *Revolution and History*, Dirlik studied the emergence of Marxist historiography during the 1920s-30s and how its promotion of Marxism as a scientific method to explain exploitations in Chinese society. In Dirlik's rendering, it was the exacerbation of social crises in the 1920s-30s under imperialism and capitalism that prompted Chinese leftists to search for theoretical explanations.<sup>22</sup> Both Peter Zarrow and Arif Dirlik contend that anarchism never became the mainstream political discourses in China's revolutionary history of the 20<sup>th</sup> century because it lacked or refused a coherent organization.

What remains unresolved and ambiguous in the intellectual histories of Chinese left-wing politics as the responses to global imperialism and capitalism is the question of how to deal with the relationship between their internationalism and nationalism. Peter Zarrow sees anarchism in China was deployed by nationalism or political discourses against authority, for it was only in the overseas Chinese communities that the anarchist movements with its anti-capitalist agenda, its goal for social transformation and its universalism could be realized. While Zarrow draws a distinction between anarchist universalism and nationalism, Dirlik from a Marxian point of view, believes that the Marxist and anarchist formulations of the problem of social revolution are ultimately an internationalist point of view, while nationalism is seen as its counterpart. Although both Zarrow and Dirlik have taken pains to unfold Chinese leftists' distinct political imaginations of a different future, they have overemphasized the arbitrary relationship between leftist universalism and nationalism. This is because, theoretically, in their work it becomes necessary to separate leftist politics contra capitalism viz. state authority as an internationalist project, from a nationalist endeavor against imperialism.

By contrast, Rebecca E. Karl's book *Staging the World*, suggests a dialectical relationship between political universalism and nationalism articulated by diverse Chinese thinkers at the turn of 20<sup>th</sup> century. Karl situates Chinese intellectuals' political concern within a broader spatial scale of a global *alliance* against colonialism/imperialism. To ensure the survival of all colonized people, China's position in the world was imagined and realized.<sup>23</sup> Karl also focuses on Chinese intellectuals' rethinking of modes of political action and

<sup>17</sup> Peter Zarrow, *Anarchism and Chinese Political Culture*, New York: Columbia University Press c1990, p.254-255.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p.256.

<sup>19</sup> Arif Dirlik, *Anarchism in the Chinese Revolution*, Berkeley: University of California Press c1991, pp.1-10.

<sup>20</sup> Arif Dirlik, *The origins of Chinese Communism*, Oxford University Press, 1989, pp.5-18.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.20-48.

<sup>22</sup> See Arif Dirlik, *Revolution and history: the origins of Marxist historiography in China, 1919-1937*, Berkeley: University of California Press c1978.

<sup>23</sup> Rebecca E. Karl, *Staging the world: Chinese nationalism at the turn of the twentieth century*, Durham, NC : Duke University Press 2002, pp.3-26.

organization by heeding the *synchronicities* of global anti-colonial struggles in diverse places, in which China's historical past was effectively employed to legitimize China's position in the world. The temporal configuration of the present and the geopolitical configuration of the global anti-colonial alliance were articulated and conceptualized by Chinese thinkers through a particular discourse of "Asia" and a set of concepts of "Chinese people," "*wangguo*" (the loss of nation). The conceptualizations suggested a new social relation derived from a particular reason of anti-colonialism and a universalism confronting the official hierarchical social relations that were sustained by imperialists and state.<sup>24</sup> Nationalism was understood as the configuration of China's position as a member of a global anti-colonial alliance and its attendant activism; nationalism is seen as an inflection of internationalism derived from a particular mode of anti-colonial politics.

## Conclusion

Critical research of the history Chinese leftism by Peter Zarrow, Arif Dirlik and Rebecca Karl have contributed to the critique of historicism deployed under the framework of modernization and globalization theories can be summarized in three ways. First, the position of Chinese leftwing intellectuals and the meaning of their politics are no longer defined by the state; they are presented as responding to the very historical context of imperialism and capitalism simultaneously with the state. Secondly, Chinese left-wing intellectuals were no longer conceived as the embodiments of traits of a global modernity that functioned to construct an alternative modernity comparable to the Western model. Their political imaginations are no longer mediated through the concepts of psychological pathology, such as "trauma" and "sentiment" reducing their desires to those of lacking, lagging behind, or catching up with more modern ones. Rather, Chinese left-wing intellectuals were deeply involved in social transformations towards a different futurist vision. Third, by unfolding a new universalism, their presentation of left politics suggests a gap between the state's response to imperialism and capitalism and that of intellectuals, through which the multiplicities and complicities of the Republican China are able to reveal.

More importantly, Zarrow, Dirlik, and Karl have shed light on what the present meant for Chinese leftists. To Zarrow, "Chinese anarchism offered a way out of the nightmare of the present";<sup>25</sup> for Dirlik, the present situation after 1927 was one of urgent social revolution;<sup>26</sup> for Karl, the present situation at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century marked a synchronic global anti-colonial struggle.<sup>27</sup> Though they show greater concern for the affectivity of the temporal configuration of the present that drove Chinese leftists to search for solutions for social transformation, they do not specifically address how this consciousness of the present was formulated. For example, in Zarrow, if the present was perceived as a nightmare shared by different generations and different social thinkers from the late Qing to the 1940s, what constituted these "nightmares" is never clearly explained. For Dirlik, after 1927, Chinese Marxists believed the present marked the failure of social revolution. It remains unclear whether this temporality of the present was already conceived from a scientificist Marxist view of "class determinism" or whether it was formed on all sides of the quickly deteriorating socio-political spectrum in China and world. For Karl, the transposition of China's social-political crisis onto the global crisis of the colonized world is considered as the result of the Sino-Japanese war, the Russo-Japanese war and the political decline of the dynastic regime. In other words, the present was formulated through the leftists' observation of international and national/local historical problematics. The Chinese leftists' relationship with the society is rather ambiguous.

The historical analysis of left politics should not only be assessed by the fact of its emergence and influence upon the development of other theories. Rather, the political effectiveness of leftism should also be interpreted through two considerations. It should first be seen as a product of contestations and overlaps among the web of social and political discourses and representations. It also should be considered at the mass social level by looking into how leftist political proposals were deployed by/through activists for social transformation and struggles against imperialism and capitalism in China's 1920s-30s. Under the rubric of synchronic history, historical research of Chinese leftism could establish oppositional politics, voices that are for the most part conspicuously absent from or repressed in much of the recent attempts to rethink the relation between history (as society, as the masses, etc.) and intellectuals.

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., pp.83-116.

<sup>25</sup> Peter Zarrow, *Anarchism and Chinese Political Culture*, New York: Columbia University Press c1990, p.258

<sup>26</sup> Arif Dirlik, *Revolution and history: the origins of Marxist historiography in China, 1919-1937*, Berkeley : University of California Press c1978, pp.19-56.

<sup>27</sup> Karl, pp.3-26.

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