

# Introduction: Li Dazhao and Bolshevism

  

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As 毛泽东 Mao Zedong famously noted, “The salvos of the October Revolution brought us Marxism-Leninism.”<sup>1</sup> 李大钊 Li Dazhao’s article was written by the founder of the Marxist intellectual milieu in China. While not the first political statement championing the October Revolution published by Li Dazhao, it was probably the most influential among the intellectuals in the New Culture movement.<sup>2</sup> The events of 1917 were enthusiastically embraced by the fervid adherents within a burgeoning New Culture. Its members were closely identified with the journal *New Youth* (*Xinqingnian*, founded and published by 陈独秀 Chen Duxiu in 1915<sup>3</sup>) and Beijing University (北京大学 *Beijing Daxue*, or *Beida*, which was re-established by the philosopher and educator 蔡元培 Cai Yuanpei).

Li Dazhao (1888-1927) was a central figure in both before he was thirty. He was among the leading contributors to the journal and one of the most active and popular professors at Beida, where he also held the post of head librarian. Li was influential in introducing Mao to Marxism when the latter attended his acclaimed seminar on the subject in spring 1919 and later worked as assistant librarian for a few months. Together with Mao and Chen Duxiu, Li was among the founders of the Chinese Communist Party in 1921, and one of the first to advocate the central role of the peasantry in Chinese politics.

In this essay written towards the end of 1918, Li explores the political lessons of the October Revolution for China. Some years earlier he had developed an original theory of subjectivity he called “The spring Ego.”<sup>4</sup> When it appeared in *New Youth* as “The Victory of Bolshevism,” it had a seminal impact on Chinese political thought of the Twentieth Century, starting with Mao. While Marx and Engels had already received mention in China, their writings remained unexplored.<sup>5</sup> “The Victory of Bolshevism”

1 Zedong 1949.

2 Li Dazhao wrote a huge number of long and short articles about the Revolution in Russia. The first “俄国革命之远因近因” [‘The Russian Revolution, remote and proximate causes’], written just after the February revolution and published in April 1917 in the journal “甲寅 Jiayin” [name of a 60-year cycle], was a detailed study of the multiple causes of the situation in Russia. Other articles on the issue appeared in many other journals, but the one presented here in unexpurgated version appeared in *New Youth* and was more influential.

3 Founded in 1915 青年杂志 *qingnian zazhi* (‘Youth’), the journal became 新青年 *Xinqingnian* (‘New Youth’) the following year with the French subtitle *La Jeunesse*.

4 Pozzana 1995, pp. 283-305. Li 1995, pp.306-328. For an anthology of Li Dazhao’s essays in Italian translation, see Li 1994.

5 The first mention of Marx appeared in the journal *Wanguo gongbao* (*World Survey*) in 1899; Engels’s name was cited three months later in a translation of the British social Darwinist Benjamin Kidd’s *The Social Evolution*. See Pantsov 2000. Liang Qichao also made passing reference to Marx in 1902 citing Kidd’s book, which he likely read in Japanese translation. By 1905 the exiled followers of Sun Yat-sen began drawing parallels between in-

would herald the change. Li's essay was the result of a close reading of Marxist revolutionary theories, a detailed exercise that within a year would lead to a systematic analysis based on notes and exchanges from the Beida seminar in his lengthy article "My View of Marxism."<sup>6</sup>

- Li's primary focus is the Victory of Bolshevism, one he viewed as a triumph over war. The other two issues he addresses in the essay are 'democracy' and 'socialism.' The cogently argued, thought-provoking insights Li provides for each were enthusiastically received by the young intellectuals and students of New Culture.

- Ever since its inception, *New Youth* regarded war as a crucial topic. So much so, in fact, that its assessment of war evolved in the span of a few years to keep pace with developments within and without China. Indeed, as its *La Jeunesse* subtitle indicated, the journal was avowedly 'internationalist' in outlook, investing much time and effort in Chinese translations of contemporary political, philosophical and literary works appearing in foreign languages. The young intellectuals of New Culture sought a way to end the oppressive reach of militarism then dominant in post-imperial China and unfolding in Europe as the Great War (World War I).

- The advent of the revolution in 1911 that Sun Yat-sen had worked so unstintingly to achieve sounded the death knell of the imperial regime and the birth of the Republic of China. [It was an event that left a lasting, encouraging, impression on Lenin]. Within a few months, however, Sun's government succumbed to the power of the warlords, themselves holdovers in the long descent into splinter groups of the imperial military forces that had been centralized a few decades earlier. Sun was forced to cede the presidency of the Republic in 1912 to Yuan Shikai, the most powerful warlord, who even attempted to appoint himself as emperor in 1916.

- The militarization then rearing its international head was also directly linked to the situation in China. The focal points there were the 'concessions' and the warlords. The former were trading ports in key Chinese cities that had been granted by Qing rulers to imperialist powers,

surrections against Tsarist rule and the struggle against the Manchu tyrants of the Qing Dynasty. Marx was again mentioned in 1905 by Zhu Zhixin. Though still a student at the time, Zhu wrote two articles praising socialist ideas. The first, on the *Communist Manifesto*, appeared in *Minbao*, the organ of the Japan-based exiles of the *Tongmenghui* ('Chinese United League' established by Sun Yat-sen); the other was on Ferdinand Lassalle and again mentioned Marx. The Chinese translation of the *Communist Manifesto* and the second chapter of Engels's *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* appeared in 1908; the latter's *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific* was published in 1912. As Maurice Meisner duly notes in his fundamental study *Li Ta-chao and the Origins of Chinese Marxism*, very little was really known about Marxism until 1918 despite these initial citations.

<sup>6</sup> "我的马克思主义观 Wode Makesi zhuyiguan" (Italian translation in *Primavera e altri scritti*, pp. 161-180).

which governed them under their own military forces. The latter were the *de facto* rulers of vast swathes of the country, exercising through their armies despotic control over civic society while quashing any form of grassroots political organization. The warlords who held power in the North even controlled the new Chinese Parliament through 'parties' they sponsored. They would also arrange the assassination of thirty-nine-year-old Li and his students in 1927.

- For the contributors to *New Youth* the 'European war' was initially seen as a conflict of nations, particularly a struggle between a France as bearer of the modern civilizing virtues of equality and freedom and a Germany as brandisher of Hohenzollern militarist despotism.<sup>7</sup> Yet, when 'the salvoes of October' rang out, Li came to an altogether different view. He pointed to war itself as a specific mode of governance, one that loosed especially violent and destructive forces over the mass of people. He even went so far in his analysis, and against the grain of public opinion, to attribute victory over Germany not to the Allies but to democracy and socialism. For Li, democracy and socialism were not alternative forms of government. Rather, they constituted a rising tide of political inventions underpinned by the mass mobilization of workers and peasants.

- The lengthy second thinking and indecision that marked New Culture's stance regarding the term 'democracy' was as significant as it was novel. Neither the word nor the concept, which then translated in Chinese as 文言文 *wenyanwen*, had a forerunner in the literature of classical Chinese. In fact, the written language at the time was undergoing transformation. The new model was the spoken idiom, 白话文 *baihuawen*, or 'plain' language, the demotic form used in novellas by contemporary writers like Lu Xun. Indeed, a phonetic transcription – the much used 德谟克拉西 *demokelaxi* – was initially adopted and then yielded to constructions like 民本主义 *minben zhuyi*, literally 'ism of the people' (*zhuyi* in classical Chinese and today the 'ism' suffix meaning 'doctrine'), 庶民主义 *shumin zhuyi*, 'ism' of commoners, and 平民主义 *pingmin zhuyi*, 'ism of popular equality, all these isms being related to 民 *min*, people. Li showed a preference for *pingmin zhuyi*, where *ping* 平, meaning 'equal', evidently carried a more egalitarian connotation. The matter was finally settled a few years later by 民主主义 *minzhu zhuyi*, a term based on a Japanese model that literally means 'ism of popular sovereignty' and is still used today. Yet Li remained unconvinced by this version and subsequently came up with a neologism in the Greek 'ergatocracy' that he translated as 工人政治 *gongren zhengzhi*, 'workers politics,' as

<sup>7</sup> Meisner 1970, pp. 52-70.

opposed to 'workers power' .<sup>8</sup>

• Socialism too came in for scrutiny. Li saw it as an arena for mass political experimentation rather than an alternative form of state polity. He even used the term socialism as almost interchangeable with Bolshevism on the one hand and humanitarianism and mutual aid on the other, a spectrum of thought ranging from Kropotkin and Lenin to Japanese Tolstoians. Far from being the result of a law of historical development, Bolshevism for Li was primarily an eruption of novel political subjectivities capable of experimenting egalitarian collective organizations. Li notably emphasized the subjective version of revolutionary politics. Indeed, he unabashedly cited the words of the British jurist and historian Frederick Harrison who saw Bolshevism as "... an expression of a very firm, broad and deep emotional outburst..." whose manifestations were comparable to those of early Christianity.

• Yet, in the end, Bolshevism for Li Dazhao was a victory over war whose meaning was securely anchored to the theories of Marx and Lenin. War, Li noted, is the result of the destruction of national borders brought about by the development of the productive forces of capitalism and the vector of the unlimited destruction wrought by the conflicts among the great imperialist powers. Li viewed socialism as fully compatible with the end of national borders insofar as such a novel contemporary social condition bore the possibility of experimenting in whatever country collective forms of egalitarian politics. The Bolsheviks clearly had a doctrine but, as Li wrote citing the words of Alexandra Kollontai, they were also "...what they did..." within this horizon of political inventions.

• Li saw the soviets as an altogether novel form of government that overturned all preceding such conceptions and opened up decisive prospects for the situation in China.<sup>9</sup> Whereas the diktat of imperialism would let "...this war enable the victor to ascend from the position of Great Power to that of world empire..." Bolshevism invented the soviets, which included all workers organized in unions each of which "...should have a central administrative soviet council that together would organize the governments of the entire world. There will no longer be congresses or parliaments, presidents or prime ministers, cabinets or legislatures, or

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• 8 In arguing for his own political project, Mao wrote in his 1940 essay "On the New Democracy" that 'democracy' was not an end in itself as a form of the state but a means, an instrument, at the service of an egalitarian politics. Ever since the turn of the Twentieth Century the term per se has been ambiguous and used by all party organizations as an alibi to justify the worst intentions. In effect, that over the last few decades we have witnessed the blood-soaked export of 'humanitarian wars' in the name of democracy is surely a disquieting reminder in our own times.

9 Note that the Bolshevik government rapidly resiled all claims to territorial 'concessions' and other demands of tsarist imperialism in China.

even rulers; there will instead be only the soviets of the unions that will decide everything..." in order to bring about "...a federation of European states and then a worldwide federation".

• A hundred years on from this essay and from that Victorious October the remove from us today is all too evident. No longer are we at the dawn of that 'New age' Li Dazhao saw in the victorious revolution. We are, rather, still grappling with the consequences wrought by the collapse of the socialist states, a demise that continues to raise questions seeking answers. In effect, the three cardinal issues at the core of Li's essay resonate still with contemporary vitality.

• War in the last decades of the Twentieth Century underwent a sea change such as to prompt one scholar of military affairs to speak of "war after the war," a view that sees no constraints to the apparent unlimited spread of the militarization afflicting the world.<sup>10</sup> The idea that war is a form of governance for the social condition is as topical today as it was for the Great War of 1914-1918 and, more specifically, for the situation in China during those same years. Then as now, the proliferation of warlords in vast tracts of the world resulting from the disintegration of national military forces is a phenomenon that the contemporary label 'terrorism' merely masks and aggravates.

• If, as for Li, democracy and socialism are the alternatives to war as a form of world governance, both terms require nothing less than a radical rethinking, and Li's insights can be invaluable to the task. The equation that would have democracy equal parliamentarianism, not to mention the general view of 'democracy' as a form of worldwide governance, is a powerful preventive to potential egalitarian political inventions. Li's vision of socialism is also on this contemporary agenda, especially after the disastrous collapse of the socialist states in the late Twentieth Century, China being the seeming 'exception' to the 'rule'. Evidently inspired by the originality of Lenin's thought, Li advocated the urgent need for the advent of mass political inventions – a horizon altogether different from any government for it would be without 'parliaments, presidents, prime ministers, cabinets, legislatures, or dominators.'

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10 Mini 2003.

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