

Political History and Structure with Dr. Renqiu Yu (part 2)

John Major: In fact, you see the emergence of this class of young intellectuals as a new political force in China. They are looking toward the West; they're looking for new sources of knowledge and also feeling a sense of empowerment that I think is quite new: the idea that somehow this new upsurge of rethinking everything can step in to save China. And that leads to the May 4 Movement, and something really new in China, the whole doubting antiquity movement and the reassessment of China's tradition as a way of trying to move forward into a new era. Now, one of the things that occurs—one of the many things that occur—during this period is the founding of the Chinese Communist Party. So, really with the May 4 Movement, we get into new territory in China, don't we?

Yu: Yes. Once Kang Youwei presented Confucius as a reformer, once Kang Youwei argued that the essential quality of Confucianism is to reform and to adapt to the new reality, which really opened the door for Chinese intellectuals to think about alternatives to the traditional approach. By the 1910s, most of the people followed that strain, although Kang Youwei himself became conservative in the new context. But other people continued to search for alternatives to the traditional approach to solving China's problems.

There was a tremendous sense of frustration and disappointment when the Chinese intellectuals reviewed, or examined, the recent history in China; they just saw a series of failed attempts to save the country, to save the system. That really stimulated them to really think about what were the causes of the failures. The new cultural movement started by Chen Duxiu, Hu Shih¹ and other radical intellectuals in 1917 really encouraged the Chinese intellectuals to think about this alternative and to begin to look to the West. Of course, they had looked to Japan for a while already and now they began to look at the West. They began to think about the Western political institution, democracy and also Western ideology, that is, the liberal idea. Chen Duxiu also called that the "scientific method of thinking."

Major: The visits by Bertrand Russell [and] John Dewey had a tremendous influence in leading people to look at new ways of thinking.

Yu: Yes. Now, to very briefly summarize this, this group of intellectuals encouraged the young generation of Chinese. That's why Chen Duxiu's magazine, founded in Shanghai in 1915, was named *New Youth*. He believed that only the new generation of Chinese can really absorb the new ideas, the new fresh elements from the West, to build a new China. You can see this is really a search for China's identity in the modern world.

China's politics changed very rapidly. The scholars, or intellectuals, had a very general understanding of this Western democracy and political institutions. [The event] which happened very quickly and that...made them rethink this model of Western democracy [was] the imperial powers' decision of the Shangdong Question in favor of Japan at the Versailles Conference in 1919. The concrete historical context here is that at the same time when the imperial powers made a decision to allow Japan to have the German imperialist privileges in Shandong [Province], at the same time the new Soviet government, after the Bolshevik Revolution, announced that it would voluntarily give up its imperialist privileges in China, including concessions and extra territory. That was quite shocking to the Chinese. The Chinese regarded Russia as one of the Western powers. The Chinese thought, why was one of the Western powers behaving differently now? That's why there was a curiosity about Marxism and the Leninist system that was established in the Soviet Union.

¹ Hu Shih was a revolutionary and writer who later supported Chiang Kai-shek.

At the same time, Dr. Sun Yat-sen also became tremendously disappointed and disillusioned with the Western powers and also with Japan. For all those years, he tried to get support from Western powers and from Japan, but the Western powers, for [reasons of] their own interests, liked to support the normal government in Beijing and to observe the treaties and to fulfill the treaty obligations. So the context is that all these Chinese—Sun Yat-sen, the revolutionaries, and the radical intellectuals—were searching for alternatives to the traditional approach at the same time. Then the politics in the world also changed: there was a new model in the world, and that was the Soviet Union. The radical intellectuals turned their attention to that, examined it, and at the same time, [sought to] broke its diplomatic isolation in the world. The Soviet Union sent its agent to China to recruit supporters for a communist cause; [thus], the Chinese Communist Party was founded with the help of a Soviet agent, [Mikhail Borodin], in 1921.

Major: Now what happens after that is that the Communist Party becomes part of, or a unit of, the Nationalist Party in the 1920s and continues to work with within Sun Yat-sen's Nationalist Party, which becomes Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalist Party. In retrospect, that seems like a kind of suicidal move, in that, by exposing themselves to operating within the Nationalist Party, they laid themselves open to the tremendous repressions of the late 1920s. [But] from the point of view of 1924 – 25, it's not so easy to see that this was a mistaken policy.

Yu: Again, the revolutionary nationalism is the key for us to understand this. We understand that a little later on the Nationalists Party and the Communist Party become arch enemies. But in the early 1920s there was really a revolutionary nationalism in China. There was one new dimension of the Chinese national salvation movement. We can see that before the turn of the century that mainly it was elite, like the Reform of 1989 was very much an elite initiative and elite movement. But the May 4 New Culture Movement really began to encourage the young Chinese to go to the masses, to understand the reality of the country, and to understand the workers and the farmers; Dr. Sun Yat-sen's doctrine, People's Livelihood, actually encouraged the participation of the people into politics. After all, democracy is a theory about popular sovereignty.

So you have all these theories there, these approaches there. The Communist Party members were those radical intellectuals in the late 1910s and the early 1920s. They shared this radical revolutionary nationalism with everybody and that [was] exactly Dr. Sun Yat-sen's argument: he believed that his revolutionary movement was a national movement. He had no right to exclude from his movement any Chinese nationalist who identified with this goal. The radical revolutionary nationalism was the basis for the two political parties to work together.

Dr. Sun Yat-sen articulated this very well and that also resonated with the doctrine the Chinese Communist Party articulated in their first party constitution when the Party was founded in 1921. [The doctrine said] that the Party would lead the Chinese working class to fight imperialist powers. Dr. Sun Yat-sen also argued that China must get rid of unequal treaties to win national independence. They could both identify with the same nationalist goals.

Major: A new element in the Chinese revolution after the death of Sun Yat-sen is Chiang Kai-shek, who takes over as the leader of the Nationalist Party. One conventional way of looking at Chiang Kai-shek is to say that he is more of a military man than a politician. Is that a fair assessment or is that too simple?

Yu: We have to examine this question in historical context. Chiang Kai-shek is regarded as a successor for Dr. Sun Yat-sen. We know that Dr. Sun Yat-sen has this theory of revolutionary stages, or three stages of the revolution. Chiang Kai-shek succeeded Sun Yat-sen as the leader of the Nationalist Party; he was also the military commander-in-chief. We have to see how he had really tried to fulfill the goals and [need for] progress that Dr. Sun Yat-sen articulated. In terms of national unification, you have to give Chiang Kai-shek credit. Once he accomplished that, he very much would have liked to strengthen his power and enhance the legitimacy of his national government, and also improve China's

international status. That's why immediately after the founding of his government he engaged in very serious negotiations for the revision or abolition of the unequal treaties with other powers. In this way, he made his government a legitimate government recognized by the Western powers in the world.

To achieve that goal, he actually got the support of the Chinese Communist Party, which organized trade unions in the urban areas and the peasant associations in the countryside to support the Northern Expedition [launched in an effort to defeat the warlords and unify China] from 1926 – 27. The Communist Party really believed in the mobilization and the organization of the Chinese people. In this respect, the historical records show very clearly Chiang Kai-shek did not share that view. Chiang Kai-shek, in the initial stage, got the support of the trade unions and the peasant associations, but as soon as he established his national government, he began to expel the Communist Party from his party and he also began to ban the trade unions in the urban areas and the peasant associations in the countryside. I think he really wanted to demonstrate to the foreign powers that he was the politician and the national leader who could really maintain order and stability and that foreign countries should negotiate with him. In that respect, he was working towards the goal of national unification, and also to defend China's sovereignty, but he certainly did not share Dr. Sun Yat-sen's vision of a social revolution in China. Dr. Sun Yat-sen actually envisioned a three-in-one revolution in China: national, political and social. This was all reflected in his Three Principles of the People. I think Chiang Kai-shek did not share that vision of social revolution. I think that's why he became so hostile to the Chinese Communist Party.

A lot of people raised this question: why did Chiang Kai-shek not implement Dr. Sun Yat-sen's progress of the peoples' livelihood? His own defense, his own explanation, was that he had no time.

Major: Hmm. That seems a little weak to say that there's no time.

Yu: [laughs]

Major: So how do you assess the period in the late 1920s – early 1930s? It seems like a crucial turning point for China in its revolutionary history.

Yu: The lack of vision for social revolution, which is crucial for the building of a modern nation-state, was probably a key element in Chiang Kai-shek's failure in China. He very much focused on national unification in defending China's territory and interest but he needed money. If you check his modernization efforts, he very much tried to modernize China's military forces. Then he allowed T.V. Soong [his Chief Finance Minister and brother-in-law] and others to modernize China's banking system, financial institutions; [he] also tried to collect taxes in the urban areas. In that respect he really ignored the countryside. Therefore, his lack of [a] vision of social revolution provided the opportunity for the Chinese Communist Party to go to the countryside to organize poor peasants for a social revolution.

When Japan took over Manchuria in 1931, the number one issue in China was really how to fight the Japanese and how to defend China's national survival. People, of course, would hold the national government responsible for that. Chiang Kai-shek, I think, did his best to defend Chinese interests against the Japanese invasion, but he was not that competent in dealing with that. Now, the Communist Party was developing [its] guerrilla bases in the countryside and Mao Zedong was really a genius in making political propaganda; he always articulated that the Chinese Communist Party was the real representative of the Chinese national interest.

That's what happened in the 1930s and 1940s. We know that when Japan invaded Manchuria in 1932 and set up the [puppet-state of] Manchukuo, it was Mao Zedong, in his capacity as the president of the Chinese Soviet government [Chinese Soviet Republic, often called the Jiangxi Republic] in Jiangxi [Province], who declared war on Japan. Of

course, there was no real possibility of engaging in war with Japan but that was really a very powerful move by Mao Zedong.

Meanwhile Chiang Kai-shek turned to the League of Nations. Chiang Kai-shek tried to make people understand that China was very weak, very poor and the Chinese military forces were not strong enough to match the Japanese, but he could not say that. At the same time, he tried to keep order in a country with a rising revolutionary nationalism that wanted to expel foreign invaders and foreign imperialists at once. Chiang Kai-shek was in quite a difficult situation in the 1930s and 40s.

Major: It was during the Long March² that Mao seems to have emerged as the definitive leader of the Chinese Communist Party. What's the consequence of Mao taking over as the leader of the Party? Is this really a new vision for Communism in China?

Yu: When Mao became the dominant leader of the Chinese Communist Party, it had a tremendous impact. That is, Mao accepted Marxism but he never went to the Soviet Union to study. Other Chinese communist leaders—a lot of them, actually—studied in the Soviet Union. They were tremendously influenced by the Soviet Union: they were trained by [the Soviets]. A lot of them were quite dogmatic in following the instructions from the Soviet Union. So Mao Zedong really tried to develop his revolutionary theory. He wanted to apply Marxist theory and Leninist principles to the realities of China. The result is the Mao Zedong Thought. Of course, he articulated that in the Yan'an years, in the late 1930s and early 1940s. The most important one is the party leadership; the second one is military force; and the third one is a united front strategy. Mao Zedong worked out this whole theory and whole strategy for the Chinese Communist Party. Now, when we look back, we see Mao Zedong, as the individual to occupy that position, had tremendous impact on Chinese history.

Major: The emphasis on peasant revolution goes back all the way to 1927 and his report on the situation in Hunan Province, where he sees that, in China, which was basically a peasant economy, if you're going to make a revolution, you have to rely on the material that you have at hand. And that is a potentially revolutionary peasantry. That seems to have had a real impact, especially as the 1930s wear on, and in the Yan'an period when Mao was able to experiment with the idea of peasant revolution as a prelude to the civil war of the 1940s.

Yu: Yes, I think it's quite interesting. That was definitely Mao's approach, to go to the countryside to investigate the reality there and to understand the reality there, and, based on that understanding, organize the revolutionary forces and also come up with programs and policies to consolidate their power base and also to deal with the issues of the time. That approach is quite interesting. We know that in the 1920s Mao Zedong actually walked around in Hunan Province, investigating the situation there. (It's quite interesting that, in the 1990s, the Chinese government again began to emphasize the investigation, also the analysis and understanding of *guoqing*, or national conditions.) Going back to Mao, later on, particularly after the 1950s, he himself no longer continued that approach. We can see that he was out of touch with that. But if we go back to the 1930s and 1940s, he very much emphasized the importance of the countryside in the Chinese Communist revolution in China. He firmly believed in the revolutionary power or enthusiasm of the Chinese peasants. He found ways to organize the Chinese peasants into a social revolutionary movement: for example, he went to the countryside to identify the poorer peasants who had grievances against the landlords. [Mao's party] organized them into poor peasants' associations and educated them with very basic revolutionary theory. They explained to [the peasants] that they were poor, in a miserable situation, not because of fate—their bad fate or bad luck or conditions

² The Long March was a massive military retreat undertaken by the Red Armies of the Communist Party of China (CCP), the forerunner of the People's Liberation Army, to evade the pursuit of the Kuomintang (KMT or Nationalist Party) army. There was not one Long March, but several, as various Communist armies in the south escaped to the north and west. (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Long_March)

shaped by other conditions—but [rather] that they could do something to change [their own situations]. [Mao convinced the peasants that they] should have a class struggle against the landlords, so that the peasants could get land from the landowners and own their own land. [Mao] was able to use that program to mobilize the Chinese peasants to support his revolution.