



5 | The Founding of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) 1921

The appeal of Western revolutionary ideas

The revolution that led to the fall of the Qing, the creation of a Republic and the 4 May Movement was not confined to politics. Historians frequently allude to the first quarter of the twentieth century in China as a time of 'intellectual revolution', a reference to the quickening of interest in those Western ideas that offered a solution to China's besetting problems. The University of Beijing became the centre of this renaissance. Professors **Chen Duxiu** (Chen Tu-hsiu) and **Li Dazhao** (Li Ta-chao) encouraged their students to challenge the Confucian-dominated ideas of traditional Chinese scholarship. This was not simply an intellectual pursuit. Indeed, pure theory was seldom attractive to radical Chinese scholars. They were looking for practical answers to real problems. A political theory was appealing to the Chinese only insofar as it could be applied in the real world.

The attitude was an aspect of the utilitarian approach that had long been a characteristic of Chinese politics. The common feature of Chinese revolutionaries was their rejection of the obsolete imperial system that had failed China and had allowed foreigners to impose themselves on the nation. What they were seeking was a programme that would offer a solution to China's

Key question
What developments led to the founding of the CCP in China in 1921?

Chen Duxiu (1879–1942) and **Li Dazhao** (1889–1927) Both played major roles in providing the intellectual justification for the 4 May Movement.

Key figures

ills. The revolutionary movements at this time, whether of the right or of the left, were essentially nationalistic. They were all driven by a desire for Chinese regeneration.

Key question
Why were Chinese progressives so impressed by the Russian Revolution?

The model of the Russian Revolution of 1917

There was a striking similarity in the position of Russia and China in the early twentieth century. Both countries had recently been defeated by Japan, both were trying to come to terms with the need for economic and political modernisation, and both were poor relations when compared with the advanced, wealth-producing nations of Western Europe and the USA. There was, therefore, much about Russia that appealed to Chinese revolutionaries and reformers.

This attraction was intensified when the Chinese learned of the **Bolshevik** success in the **October Revolution**. Chinese intellectuals wrote admiringly of the achievements of **Lenin** (see page 46) and the Bolsheviks in taking power and establishing a workers' state. Admiration increased when the Chinese learned of the Bolsheviks' defeat of the **foreign interventionists** in Russia in the period 1918–20. Here was a living example of the overthrow of Western imperialism, made more impressive by the fact that the nations which the Bolsheviks had repelled were the very same as those currently occupying China.

The influence of Marxism in China

The revolutionary ideas of **Karl Marx** (see page 46) had been known in China since the beginning of the century, but what gave them special relevance and appeal was the apparent failure of the 1911 revolution and of the Republic that followed to advance China's cause. Disillusioned Chinese radicals turned impatiently away from what they regarded as the failure of democracy in China. They were drawn instead to another Western philosophy, but this time one that had been rejected by the West. The fear with which the imperialist nations regarded Marxism gave it an added attraction for the Chinese.

To the young intellectuals who became attracted to Marxist ideas, the great inspiration, therefore, was the successful October Revolution in Russia in 1917. They could now observe Marxism in action in anti-imperialist and anti-capitalist Russia. The rejection of Western values, implicit in the Bolshevik Revolution, appealed greatly to Chinese revolutionaries for whom the main attraction of **Marxism–Leninism** was its explanation of the 'imperialist phase of capitalism', the process which had led to China's current humiliation at Western hands. When one of the first actions of the new Soviet state proved to be the renunciation of Russia's traditional claim to Chinese territories, the respect of revolutionaries in China for the Bolsheviks rose to new heights.

Bolshevik Russia and China

Judging that the unstable situation in China made it ready for revolution, the Russian Bolsheviks made immediate contact with the Chinese Marxists. One of the first moves of the Comintern

Key terms
Bolshevik
The Russian Communist Party.
October Revolution
The seizure of power in Russia by the Bolsheviks in the name of the workers in October 1917.

Foreign interventionists
A large number of countries, including Britain, France and Japan, sent forces to Russia to fight against the Bolsheviks during the Russian civil war of 1918–20.

Marxism–Leninism
The body of Marxist ideas as interpreted and applied by Lenin.

Imperialist phase of capitalism
According to Marxist theory, the stage of history when the capitalist nations progressed from exploiting their own domestic markets to seizing and exploiting overseas territories.

was to send agents to China. Lenin's interpretation of imperialism became especially relevant at this point. The Bolshevik leader's main argument was that Western colonialism marked a definite predetermined phase in the **dialectical process**. As capitalism began to strangle itself through overproduction and competition for declining home markets, it sought to survive by exploiting overseas territories, either as dumping grounds for surplus produce or as sources of cheap raw material and labour. Imperialism was thus an expression of capitalism in crisis. It followed that the historical role of the exploited colonial peoples was to rise up against their oppressors so as to achieve not only their own liberation but also the collapse of international capitalism.

In 1918, **Joseph Stalin**, the Bolshevik Commissar for Nationalities, gave exact expression to the Soviet concept of imperialism as it applied to China:

The imperialists view the East as the fountain of their happiness because it contains an unaccountable amount of natural resources such as cotton, petroleum, gold, coal, and iron ore. In view of its wealth, is the East not the imperialists' 'sweetest fruit'? The imperialists want not only the East's natural resources but also its 'obedient' people, the 'cheap' Oriental manpower which they can utilise for their own selfish purposes. They wish to recruit from these 'obedient' people enough 'boys' to form the so-called 'coloured' army and to use this army to crush their own revolutionary workers at home. This is the reason they call their Eastern colonies and semi-colonies 'inexhaustible' manpower reserves.

The purpose of us Communists is to wake up the oppressed Oriental peoples from their 100 years' slumber and to imbue their workers and peasants with a revolutionary spirit to conduct an uncompromising struggle against the imperialists.

The Marxist-Leninist theory of imperialism offered the Chinese both an explanation of why they had been humiliated by the West and a means of restoring their former greatness. In October 1920, Lenin declared to a Chinese delegation visiting Moscow, 'The Chinese revolution will finally cause the downfall of world imperialism.' Lenin's concepts determined the Soviet approach to colonial struggles. However, although this was not realised at first, his ideas contained a basic flaw which was permanently to distort Soviet Russia's relations with revolutionary China. Lenin equated the movements for national liberation from colonialism with the struggle of the **proletariat** against capitalism. The weakness of this idea was that in few countries did the stage of social and economic development fit the dialectical theory.

It certainly did not apply in China, which had yet to develop a genuine proletariat; in an overwhelmingly rural population of 500 million, scarcely three million could be classified as industrial workers. If China was to experience a revolution of the people, it would have to come from the peasants in the countryside. Yet the

V.I. Lenin (1870-1924)

The outstanding revolutionary who led the Bolsheviks to power in Russia in the October Revolution.

Karl Marx (1818-83)

The German revolutionary who explained history in terms of the dialectic, a constant struggle between the exploiting and exploited classes, the haves and the have-nots.

Joseph Stalin (1878-1953)

Lenin's successor as leader of the Soviet Union in 1924, which he ruthlessly dominated until his death.

Dialectical process

The successive series of class conflicts, which, Marxists believed, would culminate in the victory of the working class over capitalism.

Proletariat

The industrial working class, destined, in Marxist analysis, to be the final victor in the dialectical process.

Key figures

Key terms

Key date

Creation of the Chinese Communist Party: July 1921

Comintern, committed to the concept of proletarian revolution, was to persist throughout its 24 years of activity in China (1919-43) in instructing the CCP to develop as an urban party and pursue an urban revolution.

However, these anomalies lay in the future. In the early 1920s the relations between Moscow and the Chinese Communists were cordial. Two Comintern agents, Grigor Voitinsky and Henk Sneevliet (also known as Maring), were instrumental in the formal setting up of the CCP in July 1920. Twenty representatives from various provinces gathered in Shanghai to adopt a basic revolutionary programme and elect an executive committee with Chen Duxiu as the secretary general. A year later, in 1921, Chen's protégé, Mao Zedong, representing Hunan province, joined the party.

July 1921

Although July 1921 is officially regarded as the date of the founding of the CCP, the evidence is that the party had been formed a year earlier. But, out of reverence for Mao, who was not at the 1920 meeting, the formal date in official CCP histories is always given as 1921.

Summary diagram: The founding of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) 1921

