

# 1921

*The summer of 1921 witnessed the founding congress of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in Shanghai, a development that had momentous implications for the Chinese labour movement. In the early years of the republic, labour organising had been the realm of anarchists and socialist organisations.<sup>1</sup> Sun Yat-sen and his Nationalist Party, formed in August 1912, had championed the need for workers to organise, although this was as much to improve working conditions as to build a strong national economy.<sup>2</sup> With the creation of the CCP, a new actor entered and transformed history. The founding resolution of the CCP defined the basic mission of the Party to be the establishment of industrial unions. Learning from the recent experiences of some members in running worker schools, the document stressed the indispensable role of education: 'Because workers' schools are a stage in the process of organising industrial unions, these sorts of schools must be established in every industrial sector ... The main task of the workers' schools is to raise workers' consciousness, so that they recognise the need to establish a union.' As Elizabeth Perry has noted, this emphasis on proletarian education not only drew on the Russian precedent and contemporary experiments within China, but also was a result of the central place that education occupies in Chinese political culture.<sup>3</sup> This essay traces the relationship between the CCP and the labour movement in those momentous early years, arguing that the Party and its designated class nature were born in China's domestic structural conditions and global position as an exploited and oppressed nation in the epoch of capitalist 'uneven and compressed development'.*

# Setting Sail: The Foundation of the Chinese Communist Party

LIN Chun

**O**n a hot summer day in July 1921, thirteen people representing the earliest Communist groups in China gathered in Shanghai to hold their first national congress. From 23 July, they started using the residence of Li Shucheng, the brother of co-organiser of the congress Li Hanjun, at 106 Wangzhi Road (now 76 Xingye Road) in the French concession. During an evening session on the thirtieth of the month, a stranger came into the house and then rushed out. Suspecting he was a spy, the group dispersed and reconvened the next day on a boat in Jiaxing's South Lake, about 100 kilometres away, in the hometown of Wang Huiwu, the wife of co-organiser Li Da. Minutes later that evening, the police surrounded and searched the house for four hours to no avail. As a result of these providential origins, 1 July was designated the anniversary of the monumental event of the founding of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).

Of the fifty-three formal members that made up the total membership of the Party at that time, each major Communist group elected two people to attend the congress. Participants included Li Da and Li Hanjun from Shanghai, Zhang Guotao and Liu Renjing from Beijing, Mao Zedong and He Shuheng from Hunan, Dong Biwu and Chen Tanqiu from Hubei, Deng Enming and Wang Jinmei from Shandong, and Chen Gongbo and Zhou Fohai from Guangdong. Chen Duxiu and Li Dazhao, the two intellectuals who had led China's first formal Communist organisations, respectively in Shanghai and Beijing, were unable to attend the congress, but Chen was represented by Bao Huiseng. Absent also was any deputy of the Chinese Communists in Europe, who had set up a branch in Paris in late 1920. Others present included Maring (Henk Sneevliet), an experienced Dutch Communist representing the Communist International (Comintern), and Nikolski (Wladimir Abramowitsch Neumann), a young Russian representing the Comintern's Far East Secretariat and the Red International of Labour Unions (Profintern). Maring gave a long speech at one of the first meetings, translated by the delegate Liu, a nineteen-year-old Peking University student.

The delegates elected a provisional Central Bureau. Chen Duxiu became general secretary, with Zhang Guotao and Li Da directors of organisation and propaganda, respectively. The congress adopted a Party platform that set the goals of 'overthrowing the state power of the capitalist class' and 'accepting a dictatorship of the proletariat until class struggle is over and all class distinctions are eradicated' (as was similarly stated in the 'Declaration of the Communist Party of China' adopted by the Shanghai group in November 1920).<sup>4</sup> More specifically, it demanded the 'abolishment of capitalist private property and the expropriation of machines, land, factories, and intermediate products, so as to turn the means of production over to public ownership'.<sup>5</sup> The congress also passed a resolution on 'present works' that emphasised the importance of politically mobilising industrial workers. 'The fundamental task of this Party is to organise trade unions ... in which the Party should imbue the spirit of class struggle'.<sup>6</sup> Chen's written intervention was mainly concerned with organisation, stressing democratic centralism, membership rules, and discipline as critical to building a strong party capable of bringing with it the masses. Concluding that unionised workers should form a 'natural' unity with the peasants striving towards 'a social revolution', the Party centre subsequently assigned key members to develop local branches, unions, and educational classes among urban and rural workers.

Without tracing the diverse personal trajectories of the congress attendees, a minimal sketch is necessary. After the Nationalist Party's (Guomindang, or GMD) betrayal and slaughter of tens of thousands of Communists and sympathisers in 1927 (see S.A. Smith's essay in the present volume), Chen Duxiu and Liu Renjing took separate 'left opposition' positions, for which they were expelled from the Party in 1929. Chen remained a believer, whose two sons, both leading Communists, were killed by the GMD. Despite his commitment, the official historical verdict on his 'erroneous line of rightwing opportunism' remains unchanged. In 1929, Liu visited Trotsky in Turkey on his way back to China from Moscow, but he later distanced himself from the Chinese Trotskyites. Along with Mao Zedong, Dong Biwu, and Li Da, he lived to work in the new China after 1949. Wang Jinmei, Li Hanjun, Deng Enming, He Shuheng, and Chen Tanqiu died as martyrs during valiant revolutionary struggles between 1925 and 1943. After 1923, Chen Gongbo, Zhou Fohai, and Bao Huiseng variously slipped into reactionary camps. Zhang Guotao became a top commander

of the Red Army but joined the GMD after the Long March. Of the two foremost Party founders, Li Dazhao was hanged by an anti-Communist warlord in 1927, and Chen Duxiu died from illness in 1942.

### Catalysts of the Voyage

For decades since the Opium Wars and before ‘the salvo of October’ 1917 that shook the world and brought Leninism to China, the country had been devastated by both domestic unrest and foreign invasions. As rival imperialist powers violently ‘dismembered’ the country with the help of local warlords, landlords, and compradors, the late-Qing reformers’ illusions of imitating the West were shattered. The Xinhai revolution of 1911 failed to either repel foreign domination or reorder society. Riddled by ever-increasing obstacles, Sun Yat-sen’s government was unable to materialise his ‘three people’s principles’ of nationalism, democracy, and popular welfare. Despite China’s shortcomings, Lenin congratulated Asia’s first republic with a series of commentaries on the ‘awakening of Asia’, in recognition of the significance of national liberation. He regarded events in China as a breakthrough for proletarian revolutionaries wanting to unite with the world’s ‘toiling masses.’<sup>7</sup> In 1919, the Comintern was established to promote revolutions globally to provide support, solidarity, and security for the still young and embattled Soviet regime. Communism and internationalism were twinned at birth.

Modern revolutionary nationalism arose in China in what was later theorised as its ‘semicolonial, semifeudal’ conditions inherited from the mid-nineteenth century.<sup>8</sup> In the capitalist epoch of uneven and combined development, the CCP emerged from an agrarian society as an innovative working-class organisation. Although only about two million strong, China’s proletariat in the early twentieth century was politically vital and militant, in response to the substantial foreign presence in the Chinese economy. Li Dazhao articulated this relationship between class nationalism and social transformation by arguing that the ‘victory of Bolshevism for the subalterns’ was ‘of world significance’ and that China’s ‘self-determination’ and liberation as a nation from exploitation and oppression would also be indispensable for reconstructing the globe.<sup>9</sup> The condition of being under siege in a ‘class war’ (阶级战争) between ‘the world’s proletarian subalterns and capitalists’

was ripe for a worker-centred ‘national people’s revolution’ (国民革命), in which democracy meant the ‘populism of labour’.<sup>10</sup> Li’s critiques of Japan’s military expansionist ‘pan-Asianism’ underlined a ‘new Chinese nationalism’ (新中华民族主义) and ‘new regionalism’ (新亚细亚主义) of equality and peace free of imperialism. For him, anti-imperialist and class struggles were mutually indispensable.

In the runup to the formation of the CCP, competing ideas and thoughts—from social Darwinism, vitalism, and pragmatism to guild socialism, anarchism, and Marxist communism—were introduced to China by students returning from Japan and Europe. Liberalism did not find a receptive audience, largely due to its initial arrival in the guise of liberal imperialism. Chinese Communist theory powerfully argued that, since the liberal capitalist path was foreclosed by imperialist intrusion, revolution in China could only pave the way for socialism. In 1915, Chen Duxiu launched *Youth* magazine (青年杂志) and soon renamed it *New Youth* (新青年) during the New Culture Movement that sought to recast millennia of repressive Confucian hierarchy and despotism. On the eve of the May Fourth Movement of 1919, he condemned the ‘darkness’ of Chinese society and greeted ‘Mr Science and Mr Democracy’, advocating a cultural and moral sweep ‘to clean up the old mucks with blood’.<sup>11</sup> The movement was triggered by the Treaty of Versailles, which transferred the former German concessions in Shandong Province to Japan. Demanding the government reject this imperialist deal, student demonstrations and labour strikes in Beijing diffused throughout other cities, making an age of radical mass politics in China part of the global postwar anticolonial and modernising realignments. It indicated a historical moment for the Chinese working class as an independent political subject making history.

The landmark May Fourth Movement moulded the first cohort of CCP cadres. Recognising their position within class politics, the Communist intellectuals were an organic component of the growing proletariat. In May 1919, *New Youth* became a firmly Marxist publication with a special issue on Marxism edited by Li Dazhao. He continued to elaborate his views in ‘My Conception of Marxism’ (我的马克思主义观) and several other articles, delineating how economics, socialism, and historical materialism were ‘fundamentally connected by a golden line of class struggle’.<sup>12</sup> Li Hanjun wrote extensively as well. He translated and edited an introductory text to Marx’s *Capital*, explaining capitalist commodities and surplus value, and the ‘Russian road’ as an alternative.<sup>13</sup> In debating with the anarchists and reformists, Chen Duxiu elucidated a materialist

conception of history, labour value, and the proletarian state. With Chen's 'On Politics' (谈政治) as a Marxist declaration in September 1920, *New Youth* was reissued, with Chen remaining the chief editor.<sup>14</sup>

At this time, the Chinese translation of Marx and Engel's *Communist Manifesto* by Chen Wangdao was published. Ample publications associated with Communist networks were in circulation, such as *Weekly Review* (每周评论) edited by Li Dazhao, *Consciousness* (觉悟) by Zhou Enlai, *New Society Quarterly* (新社会) by Qu Qiubai, *Voice of Labour* (劳动音) by Deng Zhongxia, and the underground *Communist Party* monthly (共产党) by Li Da. The last two were launched simultaneously on 7 November 1920 as a tribute to the Russian revolution. *The Pioneer* (先驱), edited by Deng and Liu Renjing, was briefly the official newsletter of the Socialist Youth League, instituted in August 1920 with Yu Xiusong as its secretary.

By the time the Bolsheviks came to China, local agitation was well under way. In the spring of 1920, Grigori Voitinsky, the deputy head of the Russian Communist Party's East Asian Bureau, went to Beijing and Shanghai, where he assumed the position of acting president of the Comintern's Far East Secretariat, established in May 1920. On his trips, he was accompanied by his translator and assistant Yang Mingzhai, a Chinese worker and Bolshevik Party member in Russia. Zhang Tailei was the first Chinese Communist to head the Comintern's China division. He travelled to the Vladivostok office, attended the second Comintern World Congress in July 1920 concerning national and colonial questions, and accompanied Maring and Nikolsky to Shanghai in June 1921. Voitinsky's team joined meetings and activities, helped prepare for a May Day rally (which fell through after the police raided Chen Duxiu's headquarters), oversaw a conference of socialists and anarchists in July 1921, and jointly ran the *Shanghai Chronicle* (上海生活报, in Russian), *Society Daily* (社会日报), and *New China* (新中国) among their propaganda organs. Moscow and its dispatches played an important advisory role in the creation of the CCP as a branch of the Comintern, despite resistance from Chen Duxiu and Li Hanjun. Scores of Chinese were sent to the 'red Mecca' to attend the Communist University for Labourers of the East in the 1920s. Despite these affinities, from the outset, the CCP was distinctly independent politically, organisationally, and financially; the funds from internationalist donations were negligible. Neither Voitinsky nor Maring

could have accomplished anything in China without what had already solidly developed locally. The CCP's roots in Chinese soil allowed it to cultivate its own distinctive revolutionary ideology and strategy.

### Sacred Labour

Seeing the emancipation and empowerment of labour as its mission, the CCP possessed a proletarian (self-)identity, which informed the way its leaders engaged with China's labour movement. In April 1920, Chen Duxiu spoke about 'labour's consciousness' (劳动者底觉悟) to an assembly of Shanghai dockers.<sup>15</sup> Li Dazhao's 1920 speech at the Beijing University May Day rally popularised the notion of the dignity of labour—dubbed 'sacred labour' (劳工神圣) by the May Fourth intellectuals.<sup>16</sup> In a contribution to the May Day commemoration issue of *New Youth*, he narrated the international eight-hour workday movement, and quoted Karl Liebknecht on why the world's labour should unite against imperialism.<sup>17</sup> Lamenting that May Day was not yet established among workers in China but was only 'a movement of pen and ink on paper', he concluded with a call: 'Rise! Rise!! Rise!!! Hard working workers, today is the day of your awakening!' In August, Chen Duxiu and Li Hanjun initiated *Labour* (劳动界) as a popular weekly digest written by workers themselves. In its short run of twenty-four issues, workers described their experiences and views in their own words in the form of commentaries, poems, stories, and letters. For instance, in 'A Worker's Manifesto' (一个工人的宣言), the author, Li Zhong, a shipbuilder, imagined a 'future society as a workers' society, and the future China as a workers' China.'<sup>18</sup> More publications were launched later, including *Jinan Labour Weekly* (济南劳动周刊), established in May 1921 with the aim of 'raising the consciousness of common labourers', which was soon joined by the *Labour Weekly* (劳动周刊) in Shanghai and the *Workers' Weekly* (劳工周刊) in Hunan, among others.

Although it was not until the Second National Congress of 1922 that the Party delineated its program outlining a phased revolution from a 'new bourgeois democratic' to a socialist one, the Communist revolution's dual nature was defined from the beginning as national and social liberation under the leadership of the working class. The Party and the labour movement literally grew together, as exemplified in a strike by 8,000 workers over humiliating treatment from 20 July to mid-August 1921 in the British American Tobacco factories in Pudong, near the Party's founding congress. Li Qihan, who had worked with tobacco, machinery,

textile, and print workers, was dispatched to lead the victorious strike. Prior to the congress, a number of major worker clubs and unions had been established. For instance, the Beijing Communist group created the Changxindian Railway Workers' Club (see Deng Zhongxia's translation in the present volume), while the Shandong group launched the Jinan Dahuaishu Machinery Workers' Club, and Wang Jinmei organised rail, coalmine, and iron factory workers in the Shanhaiguan and Qinhuangdao regions. In Hong Kong, the Seamen's General Union, which acquired its formal name from Sun Yat-sen, was led by Su Zhaozheng, who would go on to become a leading member of the CCP before his premature death.

On 11 August 1921, right after the meeting on the South Lake, the Party moved to found the Chinese Trade Union Secretariat (中国劳动组合书记部). Zhang Guotao was its general secretary and *Labour Weekly* its official organ. The founding statement, published in the magazine *Communist Party*, proclaimed the imminent advent of a new world belonging to the workers.<sup>19</sup> Five subdivisions of the secretariat were opened, in Beijing, Wuhan, Changsha, Jinan, and Guangzhou. In Hunan's *Workers' Weekly*, Mao Zedong, director of the Hunan chapter, wrote a short article in November 1921 to celebrate the anniversary of the provincial trade union: 'The purpose of labour unions is not only to gain workers better wages and shorter time through such tools as strikes, but also and especially for workers to acquire self-awareness and cohesion of the whole class for its fundamental interest.' He called for the 'right to strike' and the acknowledgement of the 'sacredness' of labour, and concluded with the resounding Marxist slogans 'from each according to his ability, to each according to his worth' (各尽所能, 各取所值) and 'workers of the world, unite!'<sup>20</sup>

The central secretariat tasked itself with promoting Marxism, organising unions, and liaising with the international proletariat. Under its leadership, a triple struggle against foreign imperialism, warlordism, and capitalist conditions brought about the first tide of China's labour movement in the early 1920s. Most legendary were strikes by the seamen in Hong Kong, miners in Anyuan (Hunan) and Kailuan (Hebei), railroad workers along such arteries of communications as the Lanzhou–Lianyungang, Beijing–Fengtian, and Beijing–Hankou railways, and textile and service workers in Shangdong and the Yangzi River Delta. Luo Zhanglong, a leader of several of these strikes who also edited the Party's northern regional newspaper, *Workers' Weekly*, specified the basic distinctions between proletarian unionisation and 'yellow' or fake company unions for grassroots labour, against the backdrop of 'red unions' being sabotaged by foreign capital

and reactionary strike-breakers.<sup>21</sup> Deng Zhongxia, who led the secretariat's northern China division before taking its general leadership, argued for conjoined economic and political struggles, and the importance of both strategies and tactics. To 'eventually achieve the complete emancipation of labour' while facing powerful enemies, he argued, it was necessary that workers seek allies as widely as possible and embrace both reformist demands and 'the fiercest forms of class struggle'.<sup>22</sup> Against localist cleavages, Wang Jinmei advocated for democratically structured institutionalisation by trade across regions. He made the Shanhaiguan Workers' Club into a model of direct elections to layered steering committees backed by standing workers' pickets, of which the Communist core had to be underground. In May 1922, as workers' demands became increasingly political, the CCP held its first National Labour Convention, in Guangzhou, with more than 100 unions in attendance. It was followed in the summer by a high-profile campaign for labour legislation based on the Communist proposal sketched in 'An Outline of the Labour Law' (劳动法大纲).<sup>23</sup> The Second Party Congress's 'Resolution on the Union Movement and the CCP' reaffirmed 'the final goal of the labour movement' as 'completely overthrowing the capitalist system of wage slaves and transforming society by Communist principles'.<sup>24</sup>

In parallel, the CCP focused on mass education and labour training. In the autumn of 1920, Li Qihan and Liu Shaoqi began a part-time workers' school in west Shanghai that offered literature and maths classes as well as political discussions and sports. On New Year's Day in 1921, the Beijing Communists opened the 'Labour School for Continuing Education' (劳动补习学校), soon followed by a workers' club and Party cell, in Changxindian—an important node on the railway that connected Beijing to Hankou. In the summer of 1921, Mao Zedong and He Shuheng started the Hunan Self-Study University for workers in Changsha. Encouraged by Li Dazhao, an evening workers' school also operated in Tianjin. Similar schools and training facilities appeared widely, often using books and pamphlets published by the central Trade Union Secretariat and local labour journals as textbooks. Typically, the Anyuan workers' evening school, set up by Li Lisan in January 1922, played a big part in preparation for the great strike that took place in September that year (see Perry's essay in the present volume). Moreover, the Party also pioneered a Women's School (平民女校) in Shanghai to train its female cadres. Not only did

these schools enrich workers and foster their collective identity, they also became vehicles of class consciousness and sources of disciplined Party recruitment.

### A Century Later

The sailors of the Communist revolution in China embarked young—the average age of the thirteen representatives at the 1921 congress was twenty-eight. Most of the millions who sacrificed their lives for the cause also died young, including the first generation of Communist labour leaders: Gu Zhengong, Xiao Chunü, Xia Minghan, Peng Pai, Yun Daiying, and Ruan Xiaoxian, to name only a few who have not been mentioned earlier in this short account.

This revolution was extraordinarily idealistic, daring, and costly. Time and again, the Party narrowly escaped extinction and did not shun difficulty and danger. The tiny groupings represented on that small boat a century ago have firmly coalesced and developed into one of the largest and most consequential political parties in history. ‘Party-building’ (党的建设) is paramount among Mao’s ‘three magic weapons’ (三大法宝) of the Chinese Communist revolution, along with armed struggle and the United Front after 1927. China’s vulnerabilities and challenges today can be understood and traced in the same vein of the Party line and its class foundation. The ultimate question is whether the CCP can recover its founding commitment to labour, or whether the break from its ‘original heart’ (初心) is beyond repair.