Democracy, Enlightenment, and Revolution: Cantonese Marxists and Chinese Social Democracy, 1920–1922

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Abstract
This article discusses two different attitudes toward elections and democracy among the early Chinese communists. It argues that apart from some communist leaders in Shanghai who saw nothing of value in participating in elections, there were members of the party who favored social democracy. Two Cantonese Marxists, Chen Gongbo and Tan Pingshan, heavily influenced by German social democrats, especially Karl Kautsky, attached great importance to elections and “the enlightenment of the masses” on the road to communism. This led them to oppose their comrades in Shanghai, and to support the federalist self-government movement advocated by Chen Jiongming. After 1922, this rift between communists in Guangzhou and Shanghai grew into a serious intra-party conflict. Eventually, the Cantonese social democratic approach was politically discredited and largely forgotten. Exploring this Cantonese approach will clarify the connection and tension between democracy, enlightenment, and socialism in May Fourth China.

Keywords
elections, social democracy, Karl Kautsky, Chen Gongbo, Tan Pingshan

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The relationship between democracy and revolution has been a subject of debate in the long history of the twentieth-century Chinese revolution. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) discredited the term “democracy” at a very early stage. In the early 1920s, some well-known CCP leaders in Shanghai understood the Marxian notion of “the dictatorship of the proletariat” as the dictatorship of the few or even of a single person. The most valuable experience of Lenin (1870–1924) and the Russian Bolsheviks, they believed, was that, to succeed, a revolution must be a violent rebellion by a small group of professional revolutionaries to seize political power and then suppress any enemy. This conception entailed the establishment of a clandestine, disciplined party led by revolutionary elites and a preparatory period of illegal, underground activities, and ruled out legal political struggle. Democracy and elections in this view were merely bourgeois tricks to captivate and trap the proletariat, and any attempt to win at the ballot box was deemed a capitulation to the enemy. At the same time, enlightenment 启蒙 of the people and rational thinking cherished by May Fourth intellectuals had to give way to political indoctrination and agitation by the revolutionary party. This abandonment of democracy and enlightenment echoed the disillusionment with liberalism and parliamentary politics in the West, but it clashed with the atmosphere of the May Fourth era.

In the early 1920s, in Guangzhou there existed a different approach, which has been almost completely forgotten by historians. Chen Gongbo 陈公博 (1892–1946) and Tan Pingshan 谭平山 (1886–1956), who helped establish the communist organization in Guangzhou, insisted that communism could be achieved not through any form of dictatorship and suppression, but instead only through the enlightenment and participation of the masses. Inspired by German social democracy and Karl Kautsky (1854–1938), they argued that democracy and elections provided a path, if not the only one, to fostering class consciousness and political knowledge among the proletariat. Only democracy could awaken the political instincts of the masses and nurture their capacity to achieve genuine proletarian rule.

As this article shows, this fundamental difference between the communists in Guangzhou and Shanghai led to differing judgments on the political and social reforms advocated by Chen Jiongming 陈炯明 (1878–1933) in Guangdong. One of the most prestigious leaders of the Chinese federalist movement 聯省自治運動, Chen launched comprehensive reforms in Guangdong, which for a time offered the Cantonese Marxists a possible path to socialism. However, in the end, this hope was dashed after Chen clashed with Sun Yat-sen 孙中山 (1866–1925) in June 1922. This incident not only changed the fate of the federalist movement, but became a significant watershed in the history of the Chinese revolution. The debate between Cantonese
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and Shanghai leaders regarding Chen Jiongming, therefore, provides another reason to investigate Chen Gongbo and Tan Pingshan’s political experiment in Guangzhou.

The scholarly literature has paid much attention to the role of Lenin and Bolshevism in shaping Marxism in May Fourth China (Schwartz, 1951; van de Ven, 1991; Pantsov, 2000). There have also been studies on other intellectual resources that influenced early Chinese Marxism, including anarchism, Russian populism, Japanese socialism, and Confucianism (Dirlik, 1989; Zarrow, 1990; Meisner, 1967; Ishikawa, 2012; Yeh, 1996; Jin and Liu, 2006). However, little attention has been paid to the role in May Fourth China of German social democracy—which from 1890 to 1914 served as the bellwether and prototype of European Marxism. Shiu Wentiang has discussed the establishment of the Chinese Social Democratic Party (CSDP) in France in 1924, but Chen Gongbo and Tan Pingshan’s political activities in Guangzhou not only predated the CSDP but were more fruitful, thanks to their connection with the Guangdong authorities and Cantonese political elites (Shiu, 1992). I have briefly mentioned Chen Gongbo and Tan Pingshan’s political thought in a recent article, but that work neither provides a systematic comparison of the two approaches within the CCP nor positions Chen and Tan’s political ideas and activities within the local historical context of early 1920s Guangdong (Zhao, 2019). Vivienne Xiangwei Guo’s recent article discusses Chen and Tan’s close connections with Chen Jiongming, but it does not reveal the fundamental differences between the Cantonese communists and their comrades in Shanghai, which I think can be attributed to their different interpretations of Marxism (Guo, 2020).

This article rediscovers this social democratic approach in the context of May Fourth China where democracy and self-government were widely glorified. The section that follows describes the Shanghai communists’ interpretation of Bolshevism and their attitude toward elections. The second section discusses Chen Gongbo and Tan Pingshan’s connection with Karl Kautsky and their attempts to integrate enlightenment and self-government into their socialist agenda. Finally, the third section explores how the two different approaches in Shanghai and Guangzhou led to different evaluations of Chen Jiongming’s rule in Guangdong and how the social democratic path was dismissed and stigmatized.

Before starting our analysis, it is necessary to define “social democracy,” a term that has been used by Marxists and historians broadly and ambiguously. To Engels, Kautsky, and even Lenin (at least before 1917), “social democracy” and “Marxism” were almost interchangeable. Adam Przeworski includes in the category of social democrats not only orthodox Marxists but
revisionists such as Eduard Bernstein (1850–1932) and Jean Jaurès (1859–1914) who advocated a reformist and parliamentary approach to achieve socialism (Przeworski, 1985: 9–16). Sheri Berman, by contrast, only focuses on revisionism and reformist socialism when discussing European social democracy (Berman, 2006: 6). Berman’s definition is basically the same as that of Anthony Giddens, who has advocated a “renewal of social democracy” as a “third way” (Giddens, 1998: 6–11). In this article, I follow orthodox Marxists and treat social democracy as an ideology based on historical materialism and class struggle, which combines democratic participation of the proletariat with a particular notion of revolution.

“The Dictatorship of The Proletariat”: Communists in Shanghai

Marxian revolutionary ideas were largely based on Marx and Engels’ observations of the economic and political situation of mid-nineteenth-century Western Europe. Engels’ investigation of the English working class, for example, showed the close connection between the emergence of this class as the “vast majority of the English people” and the Industrial Revolution.

When master artificers were crowded out by manufacturers, when large capital had become necessary for carrying on work independently, the working-class became, for the first time, an integral, permanent class of the population, whereas it had formerly often been merely a transition leading to the bourgeoisie. [. . .] Now, for the first time, therefore, the proletariat was in a position to undertake an independent movement. In this way were brought together those vast masses of working-men who now fill the whole British Empire, whose social condition forces itself every day more and more upon the attention of the civilized world. The condition of the working-class is the condition of the vast majority of the English people. (Engels, 1892 [1844]: 16–17)

Compare this with the situation in China. Apart from some treaty ports, China right after the Great War neither experienced an industrial revolution nor did workers emerge in numbers sufficient to transform the social structure. In this regard, Benjamin I. Schwartz points out that “Marxism in its pre-Leninist form must have seemed most irrelevant” to Chinese intellectuals (Schwartz, 1951: 7). In fact, some prestigious Chinese intellectuals such as Liang Qichao 梁啟超 (1873–1929) and Zhang Dongsun 張東蓀 (1886–1973) had already argued that communism could mean nothing to China before the country reached the economic level of the developed Western world (Zhang, 1920;
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Liang, 1921). This irrelevance rendered any discussion of Marxism in China moot. It also left considerable room for different interpretations of socialism and ways to achieve it in China.

Once communist cells were established across China in 1920 and 1921, their founders spent much effort in arguing that Marxism not only mattered to the country but was actually its savior. In Shanghai, in May 21 Shi Cuntong 施存統 (1899–1970) published an important article, “How Do We Make a Social Revolution?” 我們要怎麼樣幹社會革命？in The Communist 共產黨, 4 in which he discussed the relevance of Marxism to China and frankly acknowledged that “Chinese capitalism has not been fully developed, which has deprived China of the necessary economic basis for communism” (C. T., 1921: 13). Nevertheless, he argued that communism was still the only hope for China. First, Shi contended, it would be ridiculous to advocate capitalism in China while the Western capitalist system was collapsing. When a “humanistic world” 人的世界 had been created by Soviet Russia, a capitalist China would surely be excluded from this new world and thus would have no hope of ascending to the ranks of the “advanced countries.” Second, Western capitalism was demonstrably immoral and inhuman; the only alternative that would culminate in a “humanistic life” 人的生活 was communism (13–14).

But how could China proceed to communism without a solid economic foundation, violating the basic tenet of historical materialism? Shi Cuntong here distinguished “economic inevitability” 經濟的必然 from “people’s hard work” 人們的努力 (C. T., 1921: 10). A social revolution, according to Shi, required both a material basis and a revolutionary spirit. Although in China the objective conditions were absent, to reject out of hand a revolutionary ideology like communism would be to succumb to the fallacy of “mechanism and fatalism” 機械論和宿命論. Shi believed that a great effort by the Chinese people to construct an adequate foundation could compensate for this economic deficiency (14–16).

How could the people create this foundation? One way would be to boost the capitalist economy and, at the same time, enlighten, educate, and organize the proletariat, in the expectation of a mass revolution in the future to overthrow the bourgeoisie and achieve large-scale social production. Shi, however, preferred a more radical approach which required a revolutionary vanguard organization to seize political power, followed by the use of force to suppress counterrevolutionaries, abolish private property, and organize social production (C. T., 1921: 16–23).

Facing a densely populated agricultural country with few industrial workers, most of whom were illiterate and disorganized, Shi held out no hope for a bottom-up proletarian revolution. Instead, inspired by the October Revolution, he believed it was a determined minority with a knowledge of
scientific socialism who could spark a revolution. He even called himself a “fanatical believer” in a revolution led by the few 少數人革命 (C. T., 1921: 19). A logical conclusion of this elitist belief was that the “dictatorship of the proletariat” should be replaced with the “dictatorship of the few” 少數人專政 (19). In an “economically and educationally backward country” like China, Shi even anticipated a “dictatorship of one person” 個人專政 (C. T., 1921: 29). It should be obvious that Shi’s take on the “dictatorship of the proletariat” distorted Marx and Engels’ meaning. This largely stemmed from Shi’s skepticism of the worth of Chinese workers: “How can we allow the unconscious, untrained, and disorganized proletariat to wield political power? Would they not destroy communism?” (20). Hence, it was not just “will” that should play an overwhelmingly significant role, but the “will” of the few or even a single person.

Shi’s views were shared by many Shanghai communists. Zhou Fohai 周佛海 (1897–1948), who participated in the Shanghai communist cell and organized another cell in Japan together with Shi in early 1921, agreed that only violence and dictatorship could defend the workers’ regime against reactionaries and promote industrialization. Zhou highlighted the importance of what he called an “absolute,” “close-knit,” and “unanimous will” 絕對的緊密的意志的一致, which would emerge only when the masses submitted to a single person (Zhou, 1920: 10). Zhou also argued that despotism was a necessary evil, since it was impossible to hope for the emergence of a mature class consciousness and an organized labor movement from below in the near future (Wuxie, 1920: 12). Zhou’s depiction of the Chinese proletariat was even gloomier than that of Shi: they would commit all manner of crimes once their shackles were removed; this necessitated an unchallengeable authority to discipline and tutor them (Wuxie, 1920: 12). Ironically, Marx imagined a paradise where workers would throw off their chains, but Zhou sought to put them back in chains.

Shi’s and Zhou’s articles were produced during the May Fourth period, when concepts such as democracy, mutual assistance, enlightenment, and self-government set the tone. Anarchists’ calls for absolute freedom and the abolition of all authority and hierarchy were ever-present. Therefore, these communists’ worship of the “dictatorship of the few” and even the “dictatorship of one person” would surely have grated on the ears of many May Fourth intellectuals. Zhou did feel the tension between the egalitarian atmosphere of May Fourth and the advocacy of dictatorship and violence. He conceded that the “strongest and most valuable” criticism targeted the dictatorship of the proletariat, since it contradicted the principle of democracy and equality (Wuxie, 1920: 7). Wen-hsin Yeh also notes Shi Cuntong’s astonishing betrayal of himself. Only two years earlier, Shi had still embraced
Kropotkin and resisted coercion and force: “Compared with his writings of the May Fourth period, the most striking aspect of Shi Cuntong’s thinking in the 1920s was not merely his acceptance of the necessity of coercive means, but also his ready espousal of brute force in the form of collective violence” (Yeh, 1996: 236).

Like Shi Cuntong and Zhou Fohai, Chen Duxiu 陳獨秀 (1879–1942) and Li Da 李達 (1890–1966) also favored an insurrectionist approach, with violent class war, though they did not go so far as to try to justify the dictatorship of one person. Also like Shi and Zhou, as cultural activists who helped shape the May Fourth ethos, Chen and Li experienced a similar rupture with their past by embracing force, coercion, and militancy as a necessary step toward socialism.

In line with this shift, they condemned Western democracy, which they regarded as purely hypocritical and deceptive rhetoric to fool the common people. The disillusionment with liberalism and parliamentary politics across the globe after the Great War equipped them with an ideological weapon against democracy. Chen Duxiu, Shi Cuntong, and Cai Hesen 蔡和森 (1895–1931) on different occasions all expressed disgust with the terms “elections” and “democracy” and denounced the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD) for its “betrayal” by mobilizing the German workers to participate in elections (Chen Duxiu, 1993: 161–64; Shi, 1980: 328; Cai, 1980a: 64–66). In Chen Duxiu’s and Cai Hesen’s opinion, there was little difference between Bernstein and Kautsky, since both urged the workers to vote in “bourgeois” elections, which amounted to nothing more than surrendering to capitalism (Chen Duxiu, 1993: 253–55; Cai, 1980a: 64). Shi Cuntong also maintained that it was Bolshevism rather than Kautsky’s “orthodox socialism” 正統派社會主義 that deserved the title “genuine Marxism” 純粹的馬克思主義 (Shi, 1980: 328).

Chen Duxiu, Shi Cuntong, Zhou Fohai, and Li Da all counterposed “parliamentary policy” 議會政策 with “direct action” 直接行動. Zhou claimed that the core controversy between the Bolsheviks and the Mensheviks was over direct action and parliamentary politics (Wuxie, 1920: 3). Both Li Da and Chen Duxiu agreed that the strategic change of the SPD from direct action to parliamentarianism was the most characteristic symptom of its degeneration (Chen Duxiu, 1993: 162; Li, 1980: 34). Shi Cuntong also believed that only the direct action of the proletariat, students, and soldiers could overthrow the establishment (C. T., 1921: 23–24).

The translation and spread of writings of Lenin and Bukharin, such as *The State and Revolution* and *The ABC of Communism*, contributed to the prevalence of the discourse about violence and permanent revolution among the Shanghai communists. They believed that only those taking uncompromising direct action could be called genuine communists.
However, the term “direct action” was never used by Marx and Engels, nor was it favored by Lenin. Instead, the term is closely related to anarcho-syndicalism, which rejects parliamentary elections and claims that forceful actions, such as strikes, sabotage, and demonstrations are essential to overthrowing the capitalist system (Carter, 1973: 5; Graeber, 2009: 206). Rudolf Rocker (1873–1958), who joined the SPD in 1890, was expelled a year later, and went on to become a prestigious syndicalist theoretician, argued that direct action is an attempt to save the workers from the fetishism of parliamentary elections:

practical experience has shown that the participation of the workers in parliamentary activity cripples their power of resistance and dooms to futility their warfare against the existing system. [. . .] Anarcho-Syndicalists, then, are not in any way opposed to the political struggle, but in their opinion this struggle, too, must take the form of direct action. (Rocker, 1989 [1938]: 114–15)

It is well known that Chen Duxiu, Shi Cuntong, Zhou Fohai, and Li Da in the early 1920s actively debated with Chinese anarchists. What distinguished them from the anarchists was their position on such issues as whether class struggle could be avoided and whether a proletarian dictatorship and state should be established. What they shared with the anarchists was a determined rejection of the ballot box. In short, they exalted direct action as an alternative to parliamentary democracy. Li Da even went so far as to praise syndicalism as a “revival of Marxism” 馬克思主義的還原 because of its militant and uncompromising nature (Li, 1980: 96).

Arif Dirlik (1991: 213) believes that what Li Da advocated was a “Bolshevik-style” direct action. I argue, however, that when Li and his comrades counterposed direct action with parliamentary struggle, they had already absorbed some elements of anarcho-syndicalism into their political thought, which helped drive them to a stance even more extremist than that of Lenin and Trotsky. For example, in 1920 Li called for the absolute independence of trade unions from any political party, a position closer to syndicalism than Bolshevism (Li, 1980: 37). Lenin believed that only under the leadership of a Marxist party could labor movements rid themselves of “bourgeois” trade-unionist ideology and defend socialism:

We said that there could not yet be Social-Democratic consciousness among the workers. This consciousness could only be brought to them from without. The history of all countries shows that the working class, exclusively by its own effort, is able to develop only trade-union consciousness. [. . .] Hence, our task, the task of Social-Democracy, is to combat spontaneity, to divert the labor
movement, with its spontaneous trade-unionist striving, from under the wing of the bourgeoisie, and to bring it under the wing of revolutionary Social-Democracy. (Lenin, 1932 [1902]: 32–33, 41, emphasis in the original)

Unlike the communists in Shanghai who favored direct action, Chen Gongbo and Tan Pingshan in Guangzhou underlined the significance of mass political participation in elections as a tool to educate and mobilize the proletariat and finally achieve socialism. Influenced by Kautsky, they insisted that socialism could not be achieved through the dictatorship of the few but required an organized, conscious, and enlightened mass movement. Even after converting to Marxism, Chen Gongbo and Tan Pingshan still stuck loyally to the tradition of May Fourth enlightenment discussed in Vera Schwarcz’s influential book (Schwarcz, 1986: 138–44).

Social Democracy: Chen Gongbo and Tan Pingshan’s Understanding of Marxism

Hailing from Guangdong, Chen Gongbo and Tan Pingshan studied at Peking University from 1917 to 1920, during which time the Erfurt Program, drafted by Kautsky and Bernstein in 1891, left Tan Pingshan with a very positive impression of German social democracy (Tan, 1919: 816–18). Espousing egalitarianism and democracy, Tan was touched by Kautsky’s statement in the program about “the abolition of every form of privilege”一切特權之廢止 (Tan, 1919: 819): “The Socialist Party, accordingly, struggles, not for any class privileges, but for the abolition of classes and class-rule, for equal rights and equal duties for all, without distinction of sex or race. In conformity with these principles it opposes in present-day society, not only the exploitation and oppression of wage-workers, but also every form of exploitation and oppression, be it directed against a class, a party, a sex, or a race” (Kautsky, 1910 [1892]: 160).

Although Chen Gongbo did not write directly about Marxism and social democracy during his time at Peking University, his close companionship with Tan and his articles published in 1920 on Soviet elections and universal suffrage showed that he and Tan held similar opinions (Chen Gongbo, 1920a, 1920b). After graduation, both Chen and Tan returned to Guangzhou and ran a newspaper, The Social 廣東群報 (Guangdong qunbao). In early 1921, they helped establish a communist organization in Guangzhou and became its leaders.

Although Chen and Tan admitted that China was basically an agrarian country, the huge regional disparity across the country convinced them that some areas had already entered a stage of class struggle between capitalists and workers. For instance, in an article in Guangdong qunbao, Tan
estimated that in Guangzhou there were over a hundred thousand impoverished workers who made their living by selling their labor. He also reminded his readers that a labor dispute in a factory in Guangzhou would likely end up in a strike since negotiations between the owner and the workers were on the brink of a breakdown (Tan, 1921b). Therefore, it was not only necessary but also imperative to discuss class struggle and socialism in Guangzhou.

When thinking about the role of the masses in the struggle for socialism, Chen and Tan agreed with Shi Cuntong and Zhou Fohai that blind and sometimes irrational mass psychology could turn the rule of the people into mob rule (Bo, 1921c; Tan, 1986: 195–96). However, their personal experiences and reflections on the 1911 Revolution led them to believe that a revolution without genuine mass enlightenment and participation could easily degenerate into oligarchy or autocracy. They never gave up their opposition to individual dictatorship, and the Erfurt Program confirmed to them that socialism was in no way connected with oppression. In fact, their newspaper never used the term “the dictatorship of the proletariat” 無產階級專政 but “the rule of the proletariat” 無產階級執政. This nuance revealed how cautiously they treated any form of dictatorship, even one where power was wielded by glorified laborers.

Chen and Tan believed a solid socialist foundation could only be achieved when the workers became educated, conscious, and organized. They maintained that the ability to participate in politics and the sociality to live a collective life were inherent in every individual; the task of the intellectuals thus was merely to awaken that nature of the proletariat (Tan, 1986: 151–52). This was the reason they gave their newspaper the English title The Social (Tan, 1986: 150–51). They believed that the ignorance and weakness of the common people originated not from a lack of talent and ability but from a lack of an equal right to education and to participate in politics (Tan, 1921a). In their opinion, once the consciousness of the Chinese workers was awakened, they would demand their political rights.

Chen and Tan praised Soviet Russia for different reasons than the Shanghai leaders. They focused not on how the Bolshevik leaders disciplined party members or how the party suppressed counterrevolutionaries, but on how people elected and supervised representatives in the grassroots Soviet organizations and how they attempted to equalize salaries between party members and ordinary workers (Guangdong qunbao, 1921a). Bottom-up democracy and mass politics, of which they had been deeply convinced since 1919, shaped their understanding of the October Revolution.

It was Chen and Tan rather than Shi Cuntong, Zhou Fohai, Cai Hesen, or Chen Duxiu, who understood the “dictatorship of the proletariat” in a way that Marx and Engels would have endorsed. In the 1891 introduction to
Marx’s *The Civil War in France*, Engels emphasized the two characteristics of the Paris Commune mentioned by Marx which distinguished the workers’ government from all previous governments in history. Engels believed that the two aspects could prevent the state from degenerating from being the servant of society to being the master of society, and it was precisely this point that Chen and Tan underlined,

In this first place, it filled all posts—administrative, judicial, and educational—by election on the basis of universal suffrage of all concerned, with the right of the same electors to recall their delegate at any time. And in the second place, all officials, high or low, were paid only the wages received by other workers. [. . .] Well and good, gentlemen, do you want to know what this dictatorship looks like? Look at the Paris Commune. That was the Dictatorship of the Proletariat. (Engels, 1920 [1891]: 19–20)

It was hardly possible for Chen and Tan to get a full copy of Marx’s *The Civil War in France* in Guangzhou in 1921, nor could they ever have read Engel’s introduction. Yet their interest in Soviet Russia coincided with Marx and Engels’s assessment of the Paris Commune in terms of its electoral and pay systems. However, this is not so surprising if we consider their connection with Kautsky, whose combination of democracy, enlightenment, revolution, and Marxism offered a framework to Chen and Tan. In this way, bottom-up democracy and self-government of the proletariat not only resonated with the slogans of the May Fourth Movement—democracy and enlightenment—but pointed to an avenue toward socialism:

This conquest of political power [through democracy] by the proletariat is of the highest value exactly because it makes possible a higher form of the revolutionary struggle. This struggle is no longer, as in 1789, a battle of unorganized mobs with no political form, with no insight into the relative strength of the contending factors, with no profound comprehension of the purposes of the struggle and the means to its solution; no longer a battle of mobs that can be deceived and bewildered by every rumor or accident. It is a battle of organized, intelligent masses, full of stability and prudence, that do not follow every impulse or explode over every insult, or collapse under every misfortune.

On the other hand, the elections are a means to count ourselves and the enemy, and they grant thereby a clear view of the relative strength of the classes and parties, their advance and their retreat. They prevent premature outbreaks and they guard against defeats. [. . .] They are also of value as a means of practically familiarizing the proletariat with the problems and methods of national and municipal government and of great industries, as well as to the attainment of that intellectual maturity which the proletariat needs if it is to supplant the bourgeoisie as ruling class.
Democracy is also indispensable as a means of ripening the proletariat for the social revolution. But it is not capable of preventing this revolution. (Kautsky, 1916 [1902]: 80–82)

These words are from Kautsky’s classic, The Social Revolution (1902), which the editors of Guangdong qunbao read and absorbed and finally translated and serialized in early 1922 (Guangdong qunbao, 1922a). Chen Gongbo suggested five major political reforms in Guangdong, including the abolition of the post of military governor, the restructuring of the provincial government and assembly, and the development of municipal and county democratic self-government. He then added that “in this sense German social democracy will be meaningful if we are to make a peaceful revolution” (Bo, 1921a). In the run up to the 1922 provincial assembly election, Chen urged workers to campaign for their voting rights, as “the more people who vote, the more consolidated the solidarity and power of the common people will be” (Bo, 1922). Tan Pingshan also claimed that, though the parliament and assemblies were not the ultimate targets for Marxists, elections still mattered if the workers were to defeat the bourgeoisie and seize power:

We are living now in Guangdong where people can enjoy some political freedom, and we should definitely make use of this opportunity to mobilize and enlighten the masses so that their inherent ability to politically organize themselves can be realized. In this way, they will realize the importance of political power. I particularly want them to get some political training in preparation for the rule of the proletariat in the future. (Pingshan, 1922b)

A declaration that the Cantonese Marxists drafted for the union of Cantonese construction workers highlighted universal suffrage as an indispensable step toward communism:

Mr. Marx, the first mentor of the laborers, in his Communist Manifesto tells us that to achieve happiness we should first seize political power! Completely seize political power! Now, voting rights are only a part of political power, but they are the first step toward happiness. Brothers, move! Do not hesitate! (Guangdong qunbao, 1922c)

Mobilizing the masses was accompanied by a mass enlightenment project. In Shanghai, Shi Cuntong, Zhou Fohai, and Li Da all showed little interest in long-term educational programs for Chinese workers, which, in their opinion, would be useless for immediate direct action (C. T., 1921: 18–19; Wuxie, 1920: 12; Li, 1980: 54). Chen Gongbo and Tan
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Pingshan, by contrast, believed that only education could awaken workers’ class consciousness and reveal the truth of scientific socialism. Chen and Tan thus campaigned for labor education 勞動教育 and night schools 工人夜校, trying to improve Cantonese workers’ literacy, teach them some basic social knowledge, and arouse their interest in politics (Tan, 1921a; Mingqian, 1921).

The editors of Guangdong qunbao also endeavored to build a new cultural space in Guangzhou, where they hoped the idea of socialism could reach out to local intellectuals and workers through reason rather than through the indoctrination and agitation favored by many communists in Shanghai. As Guangdong qunbao grew increasingly influential, Chen and Tan expected different theories, ideas, and arguments to be debated and to compete with each other. They initiated debates on several controversial issues, including universal suffrage, gender equality in education, and the abolishment of Confucius-worship.

Facing criticism from other Cantonese newspapers that Guangdong qunbao was too polemical, Chen Gongbo responded that his critiques were based simply on rational judgment and that only debate could promote the enlightenment of the masses (Chen Gongbo, 1921a). An article in Guangdong qunbao drew a distinction between “criticism” 批評 and “abuse” 謾罵, with the former being a logical and rational pursuit of the truth and the latter merely an unscrupulous and hysterical personal attack (Guangdong qunbao, 1921b). This definition reminds one of the famous “Eight Rules of Dialogue” disseminated among the Czechoslovak protesters during the 1989 Velvet Revolution, though in a very different historical context:

1. Your opponent is not an enemy but a partner in search of truth. The goal of our discussion is truth, in no case intellectual competition. Participation in dialogue assumes a triple respect: toward truth, toward the other, and toward the self. 2. Try to understand each other. If you do not correctly understand the opinion of your opponent, you can neither refute his claims nor accept them. [. . .] 6. Don’t undercut the personal dignity of your opponent. Whoever attacks the person of his opponent, rather than his thought, loses the right to participate in dialogue. 7. Don’t forget that dialogue requires discipline. In the end it is with reason, never with emotion, that we form our claims and judgments. He who is unable intelligibly and calmly to express his opinion cannot conduct a worthwhile conversation with others. 8. Don’t confuse dialogue with monologue. Everyone has the same right to express himself. Don’t get lost in minor details. Consideration toward everyone else can be expressed by your ability to save time. (Krapfl, 2013: 91–92)
The seemingly dispassionate rhetoric these political activists adopted did not mean that they were value-free; quite the opposite. During the revolution, Václav Havel (1936–2011) and his Civic Forum (Občanské fórum) soon became the leading force against communist rule. With the Eight Rules, they attempted to wield open and reasoned dialogue and debate about the problems of the one-party system as a tool to propagate their liberalist political opinions, discredit the establishment, and eventually undermine the communist regime. They believed that reason and rationality alone would reveal the absurdity of the regime, and thus its legitimacy would evaporate. They succeeded and Havel became the first elected president of Czechoslovakia after the downfall of communism. Similarly, Chen Gongbo and Tan Pingshan believed that public dialogue should be dispassionate not because they themselves had no stance, but because they believed that this would ultimately lead to the triumph of the “new culture” and truth—or, more specifically, the triumph of socialism and the proletariat. Using similar strategies, Havel sought to bring down a corrupt communist government while Chen and Tan aimed to exalt socialism.

To enlighten the workers, Chen and Tan were also concerned with the reform of Cantonese culture. Soon after it was established, Guangdong qunbao began to attack traditional Cantonese operas 粵劇 and Cantonese folk songs 粵謳 (Yueou) that took form in the late imperial period. At the same time, the editors glorified iconoclastic and anti-capitalist “new” operas and songs. Chen Gongbo not only wrote reviews of several operas, denouncing their capitalized operations (such as the financial patronization of actresses and various ways of self-promotion) and their lewd suggestiveness, but also encouraged young students to produce new compositions (Shiwo and Gongbo, 1921; Gongbo, 1921a, 1921b). Chen and Tan also themselves wrote a new drama, Bihai lianxiang 碧海憐香, a tragedy revealing the absurdity of patriarchy and arranged marriages, hoping to initiate a tide of new socialist opera in Guangzhou (Guangdong qunbao, 1922b). Over forty years before Madame Mao 江青 (1914–1991) engineered her “revolutionary model operas” 革命樣板戲, these two Cantonese Marxists had already begun revolutionizing drama in the name of socialism.

Guangdong qunbao also noted that Yueou could be used to promote socialist values among the masses. Rising in the late Qing period in the Pearl River Delta, Yueou were initially composed to express affection and sorrow between young lovers, though on some occasions they were also produced as satire condemning social inequalities. Qunbao called for strengthening the
latter aspect while downplaying the theme of love. One of the most interesting “new songs” 新粵謳 was “Money” 錢:

Money: someone says you are the root of all evil,
Those having you become heavy-jowled and pot-bellied,
Those without you can only live a shabby life.
I find that you can neither satisfy my hunger nor keep out the cold,
You are the most useless thing ever in the world, but also the most hazardous abyss.
Thieves and prostitutes originate from you!
The capitalists are captivated by you!
Why not open your eyes and take a look at the poor?8
I will never make friends with you, but only wish no one will lose his life in your vortex! (Xiu, 1921)

The song might remind one of a passage in Marx’s *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, which quotes from Shakespeare’s *Timon of Athens*:

Gold? Yellow, glittering, precious gold? No, Gods,
I am no idle votarist! . . .
Thus much of this will make black white, foul fair,
Wrong right, base noble, old young, coward valiant.
. . .Why, this
Will lug your priests and servants from your sides,
Pluck stout men’s pillows from below their heads:
This yellow slave
Will knit and break religions, bless the accursed;
Make the hoar leprosy adored, place thieves
And give them title, knee and approbation (Marx, 2010 [1844]: 323)

*Guangdong qunbao*’s cultural experiments not only predated those in Anyuan, discussed by Elizabeth Perry (2012: 4–11), but, unlike prestigious communist leaders, such as Mao Zedong, Li Lisan, and Liu Shaoqi, who largely exploited traditional symbols, rituals, and beliefs to facilitate propaganda among the workers, Chen Gongbo and Tan Pingshan tried to create new cultural symbols and discourses that could direct the masses onto a social democratic road to socialism.
Chen Jiongming’s Rule: A Reactionary Regime or a Path to Socialism?

Chen Gongbo and Tan Pingshan’s project was made possible by the rule of General Chen Jiongming, a senior leader of the Guomindang (GMD). The ten years from 1911 to 1920 witnessed numerous battles in Guangdong. When Chen Jiongming expelled the Guangxi army from Guangzhou in November 1920, he was determined to restore the health of the economy and put his modernization plan into practice. Chen’s object was to turn Guangdong into a “model province” 模範省, promoting economic prosperity and public works, developing education and local self-government, advocating the “new culture,” increasing revenue, establishing municipal governments, and demobilizing the army.

The reputation of Chen Jiongming as a “socialist general” rose rapidly after 1919. At that time, his temporary base in Zhangzhou, Fujian, was described as the “Russia of southern Fujian” 閩南的俄羅斯. For a time this praise misled Chinese political and cultural circles into believing that Chen was an enthusiastic follower of Lenin and Bolshevism (Rushan, 1920). Indeed, Chen did write a letter in May 1920 to Lenin, humbly calling him “my teacher” and claiming that a new China would “walk with the new Russia hand in hand.” In the letter he further stated that Bolshevism would “bring happiness to the human beings” and he would “spare no effort to facilitate this institution across the world” (Chen Jiongming, 2007: 1.442–43). His overblown rhetoric thus produced an illusion that the Chinese communists, including both Chen Duxiu and the Cantonese Marxists, could establish a solid base under Chen Jiongming’s rule.

The Russian communists were equally excited about Chen Jiongming’s courtship. Li Yuzhen even speculates that the Comintern had a plan to provide support to a pro-Russian government led by Chen (Li, 1996: 138–40). Though Li’s conclusion merits further investigation, there is no denying that the Comintern did think highly of this so-called socialist general who led an army of more than twenty thousand soldiers.

After occupying Guangzhou in November 1920, however, Chen Jiongming gradually revealed his real political stance. Beyond doubt, he agreed that capitalism should be brought down and Chinese workers should unionize to fight for their interests. Yet Chen’s understanding of labor movements was by no means in accordance with the Marxist theory of class struggle. On the contrary, he believed the government should arbitrate and settle conflicts between employers and employees, and the two sides should cooperate and work together harmoniously.  


His more immediate concern, however, was dealing with Sun Yat-sen, the GMD’s supreme leader, whom Chen had helped restore to power in Guangdong in 1921. Chen and Sun fundamentally disagreed about the direction of national reform. Chen favored federalism, whereas Sun believed the first priority was unifying the country and developing a strong central government controlled by one party, the GMD. Using Guangdong as a base, Sun planned to launch what later became known as the Northern Expedition, a military campaign against the government in Beijing and regional warlords. This set the stage for a collision between Sun and Chen, which erupted into an open armed conflict on June 16, 1922. Commanded by General Ye Ju 葉舉 (1881–1934), Chen’s army attacked Sun’s temporary presidential office in Guangzhou, forcing Sun and his entourage to hastily flee to a gunboat.

The falling-out between Chen Jiongming and Sun Yat-sen presented the CCP with a dilemma. Chen Duxiu complained that Chen Jiongming had “no knowledge of or belief in socialism at all,” but it was “equally hopeless to reckon on the cooperation of Sun Yat-sen” (Chen Duxiu, 1985a: 55). The CCP leaders eventually decided to enlist in the GMD as individual members in mid-July 1922. The party published a declaration that for the first time criticized Chen Jiongming for launching a “reactionary” coup to expel the “democratic forces” of Sun Yat-sen (Guangdong qunbao, 1985 [1922]). The CCP escalated its rhetoric against Chen over the next few months, denouncing him as “the king of Guangdong,” “a feudal warlord,” “a running dog of the imperialists,” and “a traitor to the Chinese people” (Cai, 1980a: 101–6, 119–25, 150–52).

However, the Cantonese communists thought otherwise. In Chen Gongbo and Tan Pingshan’s opinion, the conflict between Sun and Chen was in no way a manifestation of class struggle. Chen Jiongming to them was neither a heroic bourgeois statesman nor a feudal stumbling block to the forthcoming revolution. The Cantonese leaders already recognized that Chen Jiongming was neither a fellow traveler of Marxists nor a spokesman of the proletariat. Instead, he was a pragmatic politician, heavily dependent on support from nearly all social groups, from merchants, workers, intellectuals, to foreigners. Thus there was no reason for him to side exclusively with the proletariat. Intellectually, his socialist ideas were closer to those of the anarchist Peter Kropotkin (1842–1921) than to Marxism. Chen, as noted above, advocated class cooperation rather than class struggle. His contact with some anarchists, such as Liang Bingxian 梁冰弦 and Ou Shengbai 區聲白, had been well known since at least 1920, when he occupied Zhangzhou (Guo, 2020: 166–73). His interest in anarchism can actually be traced back to the collapse of the Qing, when he and Liu Shifu 劉師復 (1884–1915) organized the “Shina Assassination Squad” 支那暗殺團, which targeted senior officials of the Qing government (Kuo, 1997: 26–27).
However, unlike the communist leaders in Shanghai, Chen Gongbo and Tan Pingshan did not lose hope in Chen Jiongming simply because he rejected class struggle. Their faith in Kautsky’s thinking led them to expect the proletariat might well come to power through Chen’s reforms, which gave workers the opportunity for education and a certain level of political freedom. Understandably, Chen Gongbo and Tan Pingshan expressed special interest in the new local elections of magistrates and members of the provincial assembly and municipal council, the modernization of the educational system, and the legalization of the labor movement. Although Chen Jiongming turned his back on any political project leading to a workers’ government, Chen Gongbo and Tan Pingshan regarded these reforms—which would strengthen the labor movement and foster class consciousness—as an indispensable stepping stone to the communist revolution to come.

Meanwhile, Chen Jiongming seemed to be the only provincial governor in China who could not only provide stable rule but also promote widespread discussions of socialism and advocate labor protections. In Tan Pingshan’s opinion, “although the current Guangdong government cannot be called socialist, it helps the workers considerably” (Pingshan, 1922a). Furthermore, the new local elections launched from 1921 gave Tan a certain hope for the future political participation of lower-class people: “we Cantonese people are so lucky to have easily obtained what people in other provinces are desperately struggling for” (Tan, 1986: 205). In the two months leading up to the provincial assembly election on May 10, 1922, Guangdong qunbao frequently published appeals from Chen Gongbo and Tan Pingshan for a revision of the electoral law. They were concerned that the provincial assembly was the last governmental institution in Guangdong that was not selected through direct elections and universal suffrage, which violated the democratic spirit of Chen Jiongming’s political reforms (Gongbo, 1922; Pingshan, 1922b).

The position of the communist leaders in Shanghai was very different. As we have discussed, most of them simply equated democracy and elections to capitalist politics, which posed democracy and revolution as antithetical. Though in 1921 Chen Duxiu developed a close relationship with Chen Jiongming, the former never expressed any interest in the local elections of Guangdong. On the contrary, when visiting Guangzhou in May 1922, Chen Duxiu turned up his nose at people’s celebration of democracy and freedom under Chen Jiongming’s rule. For Chen Duxiu, this was a superficial reaction that failed to recognize that the freedom the Cantonese people enjoyed was illusory, “the freedom of slaves”, and only blood could bring real freedom. Chen argued that elections would ensnare the workers in capitalist politics and only class war could lead to communism (Chen Duxiu, 1922).
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Chen Gongbo agreed that a real Marxist should not repeat the mistake of Ferdinand Lassalle (1825–1864), who put his faith in Otto von Bismarck (1815–1898) and expected that the Prussian state would institute universal suffrage for workers, while in fact Bismarck’s policies led the workers to bow down to the ruler (Bo, 1922). Yet he and Tan Pingshan insisted that elections did mean something to Chinese Marxists and workers. Chen Jiongming’s federalist self-government policy in Guangdong offered them a political and legislative environment that to some extent resembled the situation in early 1900s Germany, despite a very different economic and cultural context. Tan Pingshan particularly wrote an article in June 1921 supporting the federalist self-government movement (Tan, 1921d). For the Cantonese Marxists, Kautsky’s theory provided a map to proletarian revolution in this movement that was sweeping China in the early 1920s.

At the same time, Guangdong qunbao criticized Sun Yat-sen’s GMD for its rejection of democracy and suppression of free speech. The editors of Guangdong qunbao argued that hiding behind political slogans such as “popular sovereignty,” “democracy,” and “equality,” Sun actually believed in elitism and autocracy (Yansheng, 1921). Given that Chen Gongbo and Tan Pingshan had joined the Tongmenghui 同盟會 in the 1900s, they were quite clear about Sun’s dictatorship within the party since 1914. Compared to Chen Jiongming’s plans to nurture popular self-government, these lofty words from Sun sounded hypocritical.

Chen Gongbo and Tan Pingshan’s confidence in Chen Jiongming was not unreasonable. During his two-year rule in Guangdong, his concern for the poor, his respect for political freedom, and his project to educate the masses and fight what he considered to be moral corruption were widely acknowledged. For example, after Chen Jiongming took power in early 1921, the Cantonese anarchists concluded that “the current situation in Guangdong is better than before, and those in power are willing to respect public opinion and the freedom of the people,” and on that basis decided to restore their journal, The People’s Voice 民聲, which had been suspended in 1916 due to the suppression of warlords and a lack of funds (Guangdong qunbao, 1921c). When Jiang Menglin 蔣夢麟 (1886–1964), the acting president of Peking University, visited Guangzhou in 1921, he gave a speech in which he praised Chen Jiongming’s political and municipal reforms, which he thought could turn Guangdong into a model province (Guangdong qunbao, 1921f). Gao Yuhan 高語罕 (1887–1948), a socialist and a prestigious figure advocating “new culture” in Anhui, was among the many visitors impressed with the progressive atmosphere in Guangzhou. Gao attended the seventh congress of the National Union of
Provincial Educational Associations in Guangzhou in October 1921 and observed the labor movement, educational reform, and municipal construction there. Gao wrote in his diary:

I do not regard Mr. Chen Jingcun [Chen Jiongming] as a general nor a politician. I only see him as a protector of humanism 人道主義. He does not indulge in any unsavory pastimes and does not love money either. His everyday life is no different from that of the common people. This shows his personal virtue. He has spared no effort in serving the public, and this shows his public virtue. When the situation became unfavorable to him [in 1918], he was willing to withdraw and station his army in Zhangzhou, two years after which his army finally came back and expelled the Guangxi warlords. This shows his steadfastness, shrewdness, and wisdom. Even when the government badly needed money to meet its military budget, he firmly rejected legalizing the gambling industry in Guangzhou, which could have brought in more than ten million yuan of revenue. This shows his greatness. Looking through all the political and military figures across China, who else but Chen Jingcun deserves these compliments 陳競存而外還有誰! (Gao, 1922: 230–31)

Nevertheless, this did not mean that Chen Gongbo and Tan Pingshan, like others, embraced Chen Jiongming without reservation. Far from it. Vivienne Xiangwei Guo describes Chen Gongbo and Tan Pingshan as intimate collaborators with Chen Jiongming and somewhat downplays the disharmony between them (Guo, 2020: 175–82). My observation reveals the other side of the story. As time went by, Chen Gongbo and Tan Pingshan were in fact increasingly disappointed with many of Chen Jiongming’s reforms. The local elections did not proceed as well as had been expected, since the elite (gentry, leaders of social organizations, and so on) still controlled and manipulated the voting process. The electoral registers were often inaccurate. Vote buying was widespread. Candidates unscrupulously defamed one another by any means they could think of. The majority of the common people, by contrast, were still left unaware of the significance of these elections. Naturally, they were indifferent to the outcomes.¹⁰ Chen Gongbo was so frustrated that he wrote that he “disagrees with the current politics and is not willing to participate in the elections within the existing political framework, since these elections will only benefit the privileged class rather than the common people” (Bo, 1921b). In view of the increasingly depressing political reality, an enlightened, well-educated, and well-organized working-class ruled society that Chen and Tan envisioned seemed to be a distant, if not illusory, dream.

Chen Jiongming’s close relationship with the Cantonese merchants also raised questions. Chen had a long friendship with some Hong Kong and Cantonese commercial tycoons, such as Robert Hotung 何東 (1862–1956),
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Toney Afong 陳席儒 (1859–1936), Lau Chu-pak 劉鑄伯 (1867–1922), and Chen Lianbo 陳廉伯 (1884–1944) (Chung, 1998: 84). Considering the tight fiscal situation throughout Chen Jiongming’s rule, loans from Cantonese merchants were crucial for Chen’s military operations and municipal reforms. Hence, throughout Chen’s rule, he carefully cultivated ties with business elites. Afong became Chen’s relative by marriage and even bought him all the machinery from an American arsenal (Gilbert, 1921). After expelling Sun Yat-sen in June 1922, Chen Jiongming managed to convince the provincial assembly to elect Afong as the governor of Guangdong. This reflected the very close relationship between the two since throughout the history of Republican China, it was extremely rare for a businessman to become a provincial governor.

The backing from businessmen came at a cost, however, as they expected favors from the governor in return. In April 1921, after Chen Lianbo had promised to lend a million yuan to the provincial government, he was appointed “Master of the Mint,” thus giving him control of the province’s finances.11 Four months later, at the request of Chen Lianbo and some Cantonese merchant leaders, Chen Jiongming allowed them to establish a stock and commodities exchange in Guangzhou. This aroused widespread objections from various social groups, and Guangdong qunbao joined the protests. Having observed the financial bubble in Shanghai when attending the first congress of the CCP, Chen Gongbo predicted that this projected bourse would lead to the same result. He believed stock exchanges in backward China would only produce speculation and disorder rather than real industrialization and prosperity. More importantly, in his view they were only derivatives of Western capitalism, and thus socialists should oppose them (Chen Gongbo, 1921b: 6). Despite the protests, in the end Chen Jiongming signed a proclamation backing the merchants:

The stock and commodities exchange can not only promote economic development but also build up people’s savings. Also, it can stimulate finance and business, which is why there is no metropolitan area in the world that does not have an exchange. [. . .] Cantonese people lack economic knowledge, and thus there are often doubts and misunderstandings around establishing an exchange. [. . .] If there is still anyone who tries to thwart this, the police should promptly arrest him so as to reassure the merchants. (Chen Jiongming, 2007: 2.690)

On the other hand, Chen Jiongming did not want to lose support of the workers. Workers were critical to his government in terms of his reputation and construction projects. Since his days in Fujian, Chen had been widely seen
as a protector of the interest of workers, which bolstered the legitimacy of his regime in Guangdong. Conflict with workers would definitely harm his reputation. Furthermore, construction projects in Guangzhou required a large number of workers. And during times of war, worker organizations from various sectors—transportation and so on—could backup Chen’s troops, as was demonstrated during the two wars against the Guangxi armies in 1920 and 1921.

Under these circumstances, Chen Jiongming consistently tried to strike a balance between capital and labor, rather than acting exclusively as a proletarian leader. Guangdong qunbao condemned Chen Jiongming’s attempt to smooth over labor-capital relations, arguing that capitalists would continue to exploit workers unless the entire capitalist system was abolished and that any attempt to balance capital and labor would only provoke more conflicts (Tan, 1921c).

It was therefore clear that Chen Gongbo and Tan Pingshan were neither die-hard opponents nor loyal followers of Chen Jiongming. They did place hope in his reforms, but at the same time they were realistic enough to recognize that Chen Jiongming was not a Marxist. Moreover, Chen Jiongming’s socialist ideals often gave way to practical political considerations. An “anarchist governor” already sounded like an oxymoron, let alone a governor allied with wealthy businessmen and powerful gentry. Chen Jiongming excoriated warlords, politicians, bureaucrats, and political parties as the “four devils” plaguing China, but ironically Tan Pingshan found in Chen himself a mixture of a warlord, a politician, and a bureaucrat (Dijin, 1922).12

While the Cantonese Marxists found something of value in Chen Jiongming’s project, by June 1922 Chen Duxiu and many other communist leaders in Shanghai had come to regard him more as a hypocritical bureaucrat than a wholehearted socialist. This was why Chen Duxiu dismissed Chen Jiongming as someone having “no knowledge of or belief in socialism” (Chen Duxiu, 1985a: 55). Hence the divergence between the Marxists in Shanghai and Guangzhou. This distinction derived from their different views on Marxism and different imaginations of what the “dictatorship of the proletariat” should be like and how it could be achieved in early 1920s China.

With the CCP determined to ally with Sun Yat-sen, other stances were no longer tolerated within the party. Simply because of Chen Gongbo and Tan Pingshan’s vague attitude toward Chen Jiongming, the GMD leaders questioned whether cooperation with the CCP could continue (Ma, 2009: 46–47). To appease the GMD leaders, Chen Duxiu punished Tan Pingshan and Chen Gongbo; the former was removed from his leadership position and the latter was dismissed from the party. These punishments were
followed by political stigmatization. During the Third Congress of the
CCP in June 1923, Chen Duxiu reported that “our comrades in Guangzhou
made some severe mistakes on the issue of Chen Jiongming, and recently
they have been correcting them” (Chen Duxiu, 1985b: 173). In a 1926
article reviewing the early history of the CCP, Cai Hesen claimed that in
1922 “the Cantonese branch of the CCP had already become a tool of Chen
Jiongming” (Cai, 1980b: 39).

The literature has tended to interpret the punishment of Chen Gongbo
and Tan Pingshan as a response to “regionalist resistance to centralization”
(van de Ven, 1991: 102–3). However, as I have demonstrated, it also
reveals the political differences between Shanghai and Cantonese leaders.
The incident was a crucial watershed for both Chen and Tan and the CCP
as a whole. Tan Pingshan was removed from Guangdong and Chen Gongbo
angrily quit the party and went to Columbia University for further study.
The path envisioned by the Cantonese Marxists faded away. Although
1925 saw the reunion of Chen and Tan, by that time they had become
senior leaders of the GMD and CCP, respectively. They had given up their
initial social democratic ideals, but they remained to some extent indepen-
dent thinkers during the National Revolution 國民革命 of 1924–1927 and
both were later denounced as “rebels” by their own parties. Chen initiated
the establishment of the Reorganization Comrades Association 會改組同志
in 1928 in opposition to Chiang Kai-shek’s dictatorship, while Tan was
dismissed by the CCP in November 1927 and founded the Third Party 第
三黨 to pursue an alternative path to revolution, different from that of both
the CCP and GMD. Eventually, after his death in 1956, Tan was com-
memorated in mainland China as a “Marxist patriot” for cooperating with
the CCP, while Chen was reviled and executed in 1946 as the “Number 2
traitor” after he reluctantly followed Wang Jingwei in collaborating with
Japan during the Second World War.

As for the CCP, its leaders decided to join the Comintern and sided with
Sun Yat-sen in the summer of 1922. Under the guidance of the Comintern,
the leaders in Shanghai had to abandon their previous call for “direct
action” and join the “bourgeois” GMD. However, the subsequent National
Revolution never engendered a spirit of enlightenment and worker self-
government. The rational and independent thinking encouraged by Chen
Gongbo and Tan Pingshan was replaced by political maneuvering and pro-
paganda which persisted in both the GMD and CCP over the following five
decades. Political freedom and universal suffrage as a way to train and
organize the proletariat were permanently rejected and gradually displaced
by a party-state model in which a disciplined party monopolized political
power and led the masses.
Conclusion

Chen Duxiu warned in September 1920 that it was very likely that the followers of German social democracy in China would in the future become the most formidable enemy of Chinese communism, though he could not name anyone at the moment (Chen Duxiu, 1993: 162). What he might never have expected, perhaps, was that inside the soon-to-be established CCP advocates of a social democratic approach to revolution would arise.

However, with the break between Sun Yat-sen and Chen Jiongming, Chen Gongbo and Tan Pingshan’s connection with the latter was politically discredited and their political experiment in Guangzhou became largely buried in history. Although the communist leaders in Shanghai changed their initial radical plan after 1922 and aligned with Sun, the “bourgeois leader,” under the GMD government in Guangdong, they never encouraged political freedom and rational thinking among the masses. The setbacks in the late 1920s and early 1930s (e.g., the 1927 Shanghai Massacre of the communists, the failure of the communist rebellions in the cities, and the destruction of the CCP Central Committee in Shanghai in 1931) further isolated the communists from urban workers. During the Second World War, the CCP launched widespread grassroots elections in its resistance bases in North China, but this policy was more a tool for the party to penetrate into rural society than a way to enlighten the peasants (not workers) (Yung-fa Chen, 1986: 223–24). Contrary to Chen Duxiu’s prophesy, social democracy never gained ground in twentieth-century China, and Chinese workers never became the protagonists on the road toward the triumph of the CCP in 1949.

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Notes

1. On anarchism and Chinese Marxism, see Dirlik, 1989, and Zarrow, 1990: 23–237. On populism and Chinese Marxism, Meisner (1967: 71–89) provides a classic monograph on Li Dazhao’s view of Marxism through a populist lens. Ishikawa Yoshihiro (2012) has done a comprehensive study of the connection between Japanese socialism and Chinese communism. As for Confucianism, see, for example, Yeh, 1996, and Jin and Liu, 2006.

2. On the position of German social democracy in European Marxism, see Kolakowski, 1978: 2.9–11.

3. During the May Fourth period, Gao Chengyuan 高承元, later the general secretary of the CSDP in 1929, together with Chen Gongbo and Tan Pingshan, organized a small society at Peking University called Zhengheng She 政衡社 that discussed social democracy.

4. Shi by that time had left Shanghai and gone to Japan where he established with Zhou Fohai a communist cell. Both Shi and Zhou were members of the Shanghai communist cell, and when they studied in Japan, they kept in touch with their comrades in Shanghai and continued publishing articles in The Communist.

5. Chen Gongbo mentioned that the only materials they could get in Guangzhou at this time were the Communist Manifesto, John Spargo’s Karl Marx: His Life and Work, and several pamphlets mailed from Shanghai (Chen Gongbo, 1945: 217).

6. The translator was Liang Kong 梁空, Tan and Chen’s classmate at Peking University and a teacher at the Guangdong Provincial Publicists School 廣東省立宣講員養成所. Chen Gongbo was the principal of the school.

7. Cecil Clementi, who later became the governor of Hong Kong, translated a collection of Yueou into English in 1904, and rendered “Yueou” as “Cantonese love-songs.” This accurately conveys the purpose behind Yueou (Clementi, 1904).

8. The “eye” here is a pun, since the Chinese copper coin 銅錢 has a square “eye” in the middle.

9. Chen Jiongming’s views on the labor movement can be found in several signed official documents in 1921 and 1922 (Chen Jiongming, 2007: 2.627, 861, 938).

10. Reports on the chaos and other problems during the election campaigns are rife in Guangdong qunbao. See, for example, Guangdong qunbao, 1921d, 1921e.

11. Whether Chen Lianbo actually took up the position requires further investigation. There has been little evidence about this appointment apart from a mention in Compilation Committee, 1994: 31.

12. Tan’s assessment could have been bolstered by a news report in 華字日報 (The Chinese Mail). See “陳炯明欲去四兇之談話” (Chen Jiongming aimed to get rid of the four devils) (Chen Jiongming, 2007: 2.950).

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