

BOOK REVIEW

Li Dazhao: China's First Communist

Patrick Fuliang Shan. Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2024. 332 pp. \$99.00 (hbk). ISBN 9781438496818

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For many years, writing a biography of any early Chinese communist leader other than Mao Zedong proved to be a challenging task for historians outside China, largely due to the inaccessibility of documents that were associated with the person under study. Not until the post-Mao era, and notably from the early 1980s, when Chinese communist leaders were keen to re-emphasize the importance of collective leadership during the revolution, were historians outside China able to overcome this obstacle, thanks to the country's huge publication projects devoted to the biographical study of numerous early Communist leaders and martyrs. Chinese officials and academics alike also published early communist leaders' original political writings, many of them edited and published by the *Renmin chubanshe* (the People's Press), either in Beijing or at the provincial level. It is against this background that Patrick Fuliang Shan has been able to analyse and interpret all the new sources and documents pertaining to Li Dazhao that have become available in recent decades, including the valuable five-volume set of *Li Dazhao quanji* (*The Complete Works of Li Dazhao*, 2013). In so doing, he has provided a long overdue service for anyone interested in "China's First Communist."

Shan's biography of Li Dazhao is the second in the English language, the first being the late Maurice Meisner's 1967 work which is hailed by Shan, and many historians of China, as a classic. However, Meisner's book is basically an intellectual biography. Shan's new publication offers a more comprehensive biography, in which the author strives to maintain a balanced interpretation between Li's personal life and his ideological development as well as documenting his revolutionary activities and assessing his contribution to the Chinese communist revolution, especially during its first phase.

The first four chapters of Shan's book trace Li's development from his early childhood, through his incomplete college education in Japan, to his early political ideas and activities in 1915. Prior to 1915, Li's experiences in search of a solution to save his disintegrating country from further decline seem hardly unique among his contemporaries. Having received a traditional Confucian education, followed by exposure to a modern Western-style learning, he was attracted and motivated by nationalism and certain aspects of Confucianism, as well as Western concepts of democracy and liberty. In his critical assessment of Li's thinking, Shan is right to remind readers that it remains too early to label Li a communist on his return from studying in Japan, even though he was clearly influenced by the Japanese Marxists while there. In discussing Li's political beliefs and activities in Li's pre-Communist period, Shan also convincingly revisits the long-standing argument concerning Li's attitude to Yuan Shikai, refuting the suggestion among many mainland Chinese historians that Li was from the outset critical and hostile to the newly appointed republican president, and maintaining that he became an anti-Yuan activist only when Yuan intended to restore the monarchy. It was also during this anti-Yuan period that Li Dazhao, as highlighted by Shan, "utilized Chinese cultural resources to interpret Western democratic concepts..." (p. 73).

The last four chapters analyse the emergence of Li as China's first communist from the May Fourth era to his execution in 1927. In contrast to the works of Meisner and other historians outside China, such as Arif Dirlik and Ishikawa Yoshihiro, who have explored the nature of Li's Marxist ideology and his contribution to the introduction of Marxism to China, Shan gives more weight to recounting his activities as a leader and organizer of the Communist Party and revolutionary movement. As in the earlier chapters, Shan presents many new narratives about Li's personal experiences and political activities. For instance, apart from re-creating Li's image as a vanguard in China's enlightenment during the May Fourth era, Shan reminds readers that in his capacity as the chief librarian, Li was, in fact, also a pioneer in promoting modern Western library management at Beijing University, which later set the model followed by many universities in republican China. In highlighting the process of Li's conversion to Marxism, Shan also rightly points out that Li's acceptance of communism as a revolutionary ideology was influenced by his adaptability and modification of many ideas, ranging from certain aspects of China's traditional cultures, the Western concept of parliamentary democracy, liberalism to anarchism. Nevertheless, he concludes that the nationalist impulse was deeply rooted in Li's concept of communism.

In analysing Li's political career from the May Fourth period, the author traces in detail Li's role in the formation of the Chinese Communist Party (1921) and later the adoption of a united front policy with the Nationalist Party. In his detailed narrative of Li's entire political career as a communist, Shan also perceptively suggests that the year 1924 was the turning point whereafter Li devoted himself more to revolutionary strategies and tactics than to scholarly discussion of revolutionary theories. From this point, Li became more committed to taking action. Shan's detailed narrative of Li's leadership in North China during the first United Front period (1924–1927), a topic that has long been ignored by scholars outside China, also justifiably retrieves the important contribution that Li made during the last years of his political life. However, the claim that the civil war in the post-Second World War years could be won by the communists firstly in North China, not South China, "was in part an attestation of Li's long-standing influence" (p. 218), perhaps requires further critical analysis.

Shan's detailed and insightful narrative of Li's life-long political activities is impressive. Given that the author suggests that Li was not a sophisticated Marxist ideologist and that from 1924 he devoted himself more to political action than theoretical inquiries, his discussion of Li's Marxism as a revolutionary ideology tends to be brief. Apart from challenging some recent interpretations from mainland China which in general exaggeratedly praise Li's understanding of Marxism, or summarizing the major Western interpretations on this issue, the author has been wary of presenting his own view of Li's perceptions of Marxism, other than claiming that "Li was not bound up by an orthodoxy, and his version of communism remained in a state of fluidity..." (p. 142).

Despite the relatively brief discussion of Li's Marxist ideology, Shan's book sheds much new light on his entire political journey and reappraises Li's position in the context of China's search for modernity. It is a major contribution to the expanding historiography on early Chinese communist movement.