
UNIT 12 FORMATION OF THE COMMUNIST PARTY AND THE GUOMINDANG*

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12.0 OBJECTIVES

This Unit deals with the emergence of the Communist Party in China (CPC). After reading this Unit, you will be able to:

- learn about the early ideas of the CPC;
- familiarize yourself with the early activities of the CPC; and
- comprehend the political and social milieu under which the CPC functioned.

12.1 INTRODUCTION

The Chinese Revolution, like the Indian National Movement for independence, was a long fought struggle in which thousands laid down their lives. The twin aims of the Revolution (achieved in 1949) were:

- i) To free their country from imperialist control, and
- ii) The emancipation of the Chinese people from their own ruling classes.

The successful accomplishment of the Revolution led to the crumbling of the entire old world and the building of a new economic, social and political order, an order which was considered more just and in the interests of the people. Though the fight against old ideas had to continue even later in the post-revolutionary China, the Revolution did bring about a transformation in the mental make up of the Chinese people.

In this varied transformation the Chinese Communist Party played a very significant leading role. It has to be noted here that in just 28 years after the formation of CPC in 1921, the communists made their revolution and had formed the government. The most well-known of its leaders were Mao Zedong, Zhu De, Chen Duxiu, Liu Shaoqi, Zhou Enlai and **Hsiang Ching-yi** — one of the first female Marxists in China. But apart from them there were thousands of other active party members who formed the backbone of the Party structure and came from among the workers and peasants of China. It is important to comprehend the ideas and the role of the Communist Party of China in the revolutionary movement.

This Unit takes into account the social and political milieu within which Marxist ideas emerged and grew; the beginnings of the Chinese Communist Party (CPC); their early ideas and attempts at organizing the working people of China. The Unit also discusses the influence of CPC among the educated sections, the intellectuals and students. It also assesses its contribution in radicalizing the Chinese people; contributing to their forms of protest; and shaping the nature of the revolutionary movement till 1923. The 1923 wave of repression against the working class marks the end of the first phase in the history of the CPC. The reasons for this major defeat of the CPC, have also been dealt with.

12.2 THE BIRTH OF MARXISM IN CHINA

Marxism did not grow overnight in China. The Chinese intelligentsia travelled a long way of intense debate over the issues of nationalism, liberalism, democracy (See Unit 11), and the larger interests of the Chinese working people, before intellectual activity and political practice began to be shaped by Marxism. It was only after intense struggle that the Chinese Marxists were able to establish an inseparable link between their own goals of a Socialist future and the movements of the working people in China.

In 1921 since almost 90 per cent of China's population was illiterate, the new ideas that had begun to take root in Chinese society in fact had a very narrow social base. The workers and peasants had no access to them.

The first revolutionaries were, therefore, from the more privileged middle classes. In earlier Units we have seen how a variety of factors had contributed to the growth of nationalist and anti-imperialist sentiments in China.

As part of nationalism there also emerged a scathing critique of the existing religious, social and political system, which was seen as backward and an obstacle to the growth of a modern, liberated China (See Unit 11). The blueprint or model for these critiques was the Western democracies which were seen as modern and powerful, and embodiments of the achievements of science and culture.

The workers and peasants had their own grievances, born out of the terrible conditions of their lives. Their own experience of struggles was teaching them new things. On the one hand the Chinese intellectuals were making an effort to educate them politically. On the other hand the movements of the workers and peasants were opening up new perspectives of struggle for the Chinese intelligentsia. It was a two way process that was extremely crucial, because it bridged the gap between the political struggles of the Chinese intelligentsia and professional sections for democracy, new culture, science, and a free China,

and the struggle of the working people which was beginning to threaten the vested interests in the society. This represented, in fact, the coalescence of the goals of national liberation and social emancipation. In this process both were transformed into social forces capable of higher forms of political action. Above all, this led to the projection of socialism as an ideal model for the organization of society.

The new consciousness, which came from this linkage between the progressive ideas emerging in the Chinese society of the 1920s and the struggles of the working people, was given an organizational shape with the formation of the CPC in 1921. The formation of the CPC was a reflection of this new consciousness. It became the basis for the emergence of a left stream within the Chinese revolutionary movement. The left was committed to the overthrow of the entire system and the building of Socialism as its larger goal.

12.2.1 The International Context

The international context, in which the Chinese revolutionary movement developed, contributed to the spread and acceptance of Marxist ideas in China. Discontent that arose from the colonization of Chinese economy had taken various forms at different intervals of time. In all such societies which sought to overcome their 'backwardness' vis-a-vis the more advanced West, for example, India, Russia, and later Latin America and the African countries — there was an intense intellectual debate. This was over whether to catch up with the West by rejecting the backward features or by fighting the West which was oppressing them. The West, could be thus seen as 'corrupt' by a renewal of the best features of their own societies. In China too, the debate revolved around these two themes (see Unit 9). The Marxists in China stood for fighting Western and Japanese imperialism by building a new modern China. They thus synthesized and accepted what was in the interest of the large sections of the Chinese people from both arguments.

Two international developments contributed to the receptiveness of their arguments in China.

- i) The Shandong Resolution at the Paris Peace Conference by which Germany's rights and privileges over Shandong were transferred to Japan instead of being restored to China, created a massive disillusionment in China with the West. The 'democracy' of the West began to sound hollow and false. This sentiment clearly took a turn against Western imperialism. Lenin's theory of Imperialism and Revolution seemed valid to the Chinese intelligentsia.
- ii) The success of the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia equally attracted the attention of the Chinese intelligentsia. Russia became a prime and concrete example of a backward country overthrowing their old system as well as defeating Western imperialism. Marxism showed itself successful as a practical guide to political action and provided the Chinese intelligentsia with a philosophy by which it became possible to reject "both the traditions of the Chinese past and the Western domination of the present." Marxism, henceforth, became a powerful current in the Chinese national liberation movement.

On July 15, 1919 came the declaration of the new Bolshevik government addressed to the Chinese people and to the government of China, (North and South) by which it gave up all the privileges and interests enjoyed by the old Russian Tsarist government in China without any compensation. This was in striking contrast to the Shandong declaration and the Twenty-one Demands.

In China, as in India and other colonized countries, there, thus, emerged a sentiment of support for Soviet Russia as opposed to Western Imperialism, and the recognition of an identity of interests between national liberation movements in the East and the Socialist struggles of the West. This was precisely what Lenin and the Chinese Marxists like Chen Duxiu had been advocating.

12.2.2 The Political Climate

The May 4th movement of 1919 was an important landmark in the transformation of the political climate in China in the direction of Marxism. Chen Duxiu and Li Dazhao, the founders of the CPC, were also leaders of the May 4th movement. For about fifty years the leadership of CPC came from the May 4th generation, most notable among them being Zhou Enlai and Mao Zedong. A very large number of the rank and file membership also had their first revolutionary political experience in this movement.

Anti-Confucianism, the spread of new education, the tremendous growth of the press and literature in the language of the people, publishing houses, medicine and the modern courts played a significant role in becoming the vehicles of modern ideas during the May 4th movement. But it was its fundamental critique of all that was oppressive in the Chinese social system, as well as its positive espousal of science, democracy and anti-imperialism that was completely appropriated by the Marxists in China. This entire heritage was combined with the ideas of socialism to give the working people a stake in the movements for these new ideas. Some translations of the Marxists texts, such as the Communist Manifesto, Engels' Origin of Family, Private Property and State, and Socialism, Utopian and Scientific had already been made prior to 1919. Those who knew either Japanese or some Western language had read much more and there was a vague sympathy for socialism in some intellectual circles. But it was the incorporation of the reactions to the Western post-war settlements and the Russian Revolution that the May 4th movement itself assumed a direction from which the Marxists could take off and spread their ideas rapidly in 1919 and 1920.

The close and active association of the intelligentsia with the workers during the May 4th Movement had also contributed to the spread of Marxist influence. A number of study societies devoted to the study of socialism were formed in the Peking university. New magazines, greatly influenced by the Russian revolution and the Bolshevik critique of imperialism, appeared on the scene.

China's first general strike took place in 1919 during the course of the May 4th Movement. In the entire strike wave of the 1919-21 the intelligentsia participated along with the workers. In May 1920, the New Youth, the leading magazine of the left wing intellectuals devoted an entire issue to the discussion of labour problems. The May Day celebrations were attended by professors, students and workers. The next step was to give this interaction an organizational shape. This happened with the formation of the CPC in 1921.

12.2.3 The Social and Political Milieu

The social milieu within which Marxism emerged was the terrible living conditions that prevailed among the working people from one end of China to another.

In the countryside, poverty, abuse, and early death were the only prospects for half a billion people. It was a society in which people were forced to:

- sell their children,
- eat grass and bark in bad times, and
- pay rent and taxes far beyond their means.

All this went on while a tiny elite lived a luxurious life. The rapid commercialization of parts of rural China and monetization (emergence of market and money economy) integrated the rural economy into the world capitalist economy. But, it also led to an intensification of the oppression of the peasantry. The grain merchants, moneylenders and administrative officials all came from among the landlords and dominated the entire rural economy.

A Chinese peasant's existence in the early 20th century was far more precarious than in the eighteenth century as all studies on rural China show. The peasant's standard of living declined during the modern era. Population growth put greater pressure on the land. The fall in grain prices and the increasing concentration of landownership was turning more peasants into rural wage workers, while widespread unemployment was leading to a fall in wages. For the peasant, ravaged by poverty, oppression and wars, there was no way out of the rural crisis except a radical transformation of the existing social order.

The agrarian question or the peasant-land question became an important social issue in the 1920s. There were increasing attacks on landlordism. The upheavals of the early 20th century had begun to undermine the landlord's dominant position. Rural China was becoming an increasingly fertile ground for the growth of revolutionary upheavals. It was the task of the left intelligentsia to integrate the rural revolutionaries into their scheme of revolution. Moreover, the peasantry constituted numerically the major portion of Chinese society. Hence, it was evident that without a transformation in the lives and consciousness of the peasantry there could be no modern development in China. In 1921, however, the political horizon of the peasantry was still extremely limited. On the other hand, the CPC was also yet to realize the full potential of the peasant upheavals. This it did only after 1925. From then on the communist movement in China drew its major strength from peasants.

The working class, though numerically a very small force in China, became politicized because the big industrial areas where it was concentrated were also the "main political centres of China. Its experience, of struggle for higher wages and other demands related to its daily life also brought home to it the identity of interests between the political authorities and the factory owners. The working class was, therefore, brought into direct conflict with the political authority.

Their strikes were met with brute force by the police which was the direct arm of the state. A major section of the workers was employed in foreign factories. This brought them into direct opposition to the forces of Imperialism. Therefore, the complexities of the nationalist struggle against Imperialism and the struggle for social emancipation of the working people from the Chinese

ruling classes were confronted by them even in the early stages of the labour movement in China. The construction of large factories in the early stage of industrialization itself led to a concentration of large numbers of workers in one factory in opposition to a factory owner. This made it possible for the workers to share grievances, have solidarity and led to the emergence of class consciousness at an early stage.

The political milieu in the urban areas, created by the May 4th Movement, the growth of the press, public meetings, the expansion with all this of the audience for new culture ideas and literature, and above all participation in the events of 1919-1921 were of immense significance in opening for the workers a whole new world. In May 1919 the Peking teachers, with their salaries unpaid for months and hard hit by prices, went on strike along with the workers. In 1920 the workers widely participated in the anti-Japanese boycott. There were by 1921, 28,000 literate workers who returned from France after the war. They helped to radicalize the May 4th Movement. The Communist groups and these workers found themselves as natural allies in the given situation. This alliance culminated in the formation of CPC, a working class party, in China.

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) Mention the international developments that contributed to the receptiveness of Communist ideas in China. Answer in about ten lines.

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- 2) What was the political climate in China during 1919-20? Answer in 100 words.

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12.3 THE COMMUNIST PARTY:1921

The study groups formed during the May 4th Movement were the first attempts to spread Marxist ideas on an organized basis among the Chinese intellectuals. From the summer of 1920 Communist political organizations began to be set up in different parts of China, the first being found in Shanghai, Chen Duxiu had founded the Shanghai group and he brought out its official organ, New Youth. It established contacts with the Communist International and Grigori Voitsinsky, a Russian communist, came as the envoy to China. In April 1921, a Chinese Comintern office was opened in Irkutsk.

In autumn 1920 Communist groups were formed under the leadership of Li Ta-Chao in Peking and soon they were formed in other cities. From August 1920 the Shanghai group published a weekly called *The World of Labour* and by January 1921, twenty-three issues had been brought out. From Peking, Li Dazhao brought out, *The Voice of Labourer* and in Canton the group published *The Workers*, and *Women at Work*. All these papers featured discussions on

Marxist theory and problems of the Chinese working class. Zhou Enlai and Mao Zedong organized study groups in Hunan. A number of Chinese communists were also active in France. All these activities helped to bring around the communists more and more intellectuals, and students.

A meeting of these groups took place in July 1921 at a girls' boarding school in Shanghai, in hiding from the police. The police, however, got wind of it and the venue was shifted on board a pleasure boat at the tourist centre in Zhejiang. This came to be known as the First Congress of the CPC.

Twelve delegates were present, representing 57 members of seven different groups. There, was also a delegate from the Communist International. Here it was decided to form the CPC. Chen Duxiu and Li Dazhao, who could not make it to the Congress because of strict police repression of communist groups, were declared the co-founders of the party. Chen Duxiu was the first Secretary-general of the Party.

Thus, the international developments, a growing workers movement, the growing radicalization of the political milieu and the development of the idea of a revolution and a revolutionary party to lead it culminated in the formation of the CPC. This introduced a totally new element in the political scenario of China.

12.4 THEIR EARLY IDEAS

The CPC drew its inspiration from the October Revolution in Russia, based itself on Marxism-Leninism and believed in the 'vanguard' role of the Party. The movements of the working people were considered very crucial — particularly the leading role of the working class or the proletariat.

The impact of the October Revolution, as discussed earlier, was felt by all sections of the Chinese intelligentsia. The Chinese Marxists, however, understood from it not only the possibility of success in a backward country, but that of overthrowing the yoke of Western Imperialism. They also saw in the social and political framework of the post-1917 Russian society a model for their own. For them it was a blueprint for what they sought to build in their own country i.e. a society which is classless (free from class exploitation) and in which:

- private property, the root of class oppression, is eventually destroyed, and
- the political structure is guided by the interests of the working people (i.e. socialism).

They believed, as Marx had written and the Russian Revolution had concretely proved, that such a change can only come about by revolution. The revolution—based on the ideas of Marx — was to be achieved through class war or class struggle. They believed that the interests of the ruling classes and the working people are in conflict (i.e. there is a contradiction between them). This was because the profits and luxuries of the rich ruling classes are based precisely on the fruits of labour of the working people for which the working people are underpaid.

Again, on the basis of Marx's ideas they considered the working class to be the most revolutionary social force (the leading role of the proletariat) because it had "nothing to lose except its chains." Since it is only the working class that earns its income entirely from its labour, having no property, it is the only

class that has no stake in a social system based on private property. Hence, it was natural that the working class would be most interested in Socialism, which would enable it to have the full fruits of its own labour (to each according to his labour). In order to achieve these aims it was necessary that the CPC organize the working class and it saw its own role as that of educating the workers politically because it had the representatives of the most advanced section of the working class.

In having these goals, the conception of change and social transformation of the CPC was far ahead of that of the nationalists led by the Guomindang. For the communists it was not enough to throw off Western dominance and the dominance of the Warlords in China. Their aims were far more egalitarian (for social and economic equality).

Influenced by Lenin's thesis 'Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Revolution' and the experience of the Russian Revolution, they believed that because capitalism had a weaker base in Russia, therefore their country had greater possibilities of overthrowing the capitalist system. But they also saw that, as in Russia, they would have to first overthrow the system of Warlordism and feudalism. This was to be done in alliance with the peasantry and the National bourgeoisie (middle classes) whose interests were also opposed to Warlordism and feudalism (because they hampered the development of capitalism which was in their interest). In other words as in Russia, the Chinese Revolution too would not be a one stage revolution. The necessity was to first build democracy. This stage too, they believed, would have to be accomplished by the working class in alliance with the peasantry as the bourgeoisie was weak.

Here we must remember that these ideas, based on the experience of the successful Russian Revolution were not accepted blindly. They tried to apply their Marxist ideas and the lessons of the Russian experience to the conditions in China. This was done in order to build their own political practice. Till 1923, however, they were still grappling with the complexities of the Chinese society. What stood out starkly in this complexity was the great surge of the working class. They, therefore, applied themselves primarily, in these years, to advancing the working class movement.

12.5 THEIR EARLY ACTIVITIES

There were 46 working class strikes in 1920, and 50 in 1921. It was largely due to the efforts of the Communist groups that the working class became politically conscious. Apart from running classes and journals for the workers, they also addressed large public meetings of working class audiences. Their efforts included :

- the setting up of Shanghai Metal Mechanics Union.
- establishment of close contacts with the Hunan Workingmen's Association.
- organizing the strike of the rickshaw men in Hankou, and
- formation of a railway men's union.

Many evening schools for workers were also organized. For example in Changsha, Mao and his wife started an education movement. In August 1921 a self-education college was started. By 1922, 30,000 to 40,000 workers and

small artisans were involved in it in some way or the other. In the Anyuan mines Mao successfully organized a party cell with 7 miners, which led eventually to the formation of unions among them.

A Committee for Labour Movement was also set up with the purpose of organizing workers in printing, tobacco and textile factories at Canton. The first Chinese Trade Union Congress was held on May 1, 1922. The first large strike by women in the history of China took place in August 1922 in the silk-spinning mills of Pudong.

These activities were, moreover, not taken kindly by the warlords in their respective areas. There followed a brutal wave of repression. Unions were closed down, strikes disrupted, lockouts declared and workers massacred. So ended the first heroic phase of Communist activity and the working class movement. Not all the strikes were successful but the role of the CPC was obvious in the increased political consciousness of the working class.

The reasons for this were that the working class could not by itself meet the full power of the warlords and their government. The workers needed allies. Hence the Communists made their first efforts to organize the peasants, but this was only in Canton. They could not yet create a worker-peasant alliance based on strong workers and peasants' movements. The nationalist bourgeoisie, fighting against Imperialism and Warlordism was not yet organizationally linked with the activities of the CPC. They functioned separately and were, in fact, in a disarray. This phase was a political lesson for both the CPC and the Guomindang that they would have to:

- reorganize themselves.
- base themselves more firmly on the alliance of all the forward looking social forces in China, and
- formulate a policy of fighting unitedly against common enemies.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) What were the ideas of the CPC in its formative phase? Answer in ten lines.

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- 2) Discuss the early activities of the CPC in about ten lines.

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12.6 LET US SUM UP

The Chinese Communist Party founded in 1921, played a very significant role in giving a new ideology to the people of China. The May 4th Movement can be considered as the first attempt to spread Marxist ideas on an organized

scale. Following the May 4th Movement was the spread of the press, increase in public meetings, new literature etc. that contributed to the growth of new ideas. The CPC was responsible for the increase in the political consciousness of the working class. The first phase of the CPC and the working class came to a halt due to a wave of repression.

12.7 KEY WORDS

Coalescence : Coming together in forming one whole

Egalitarian : Relating to the principles of equal rights for all persons

Espousal : Supporting the cause

Milieu : Social surroundings

Upheaval : Drastic social change

12.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) Base your answer on Sub-section 12.2.1
- 2) Base your answer on Sub-section 12.2.2

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) Base your answer on Section 12.4
- 2) Consult Section 12.5 for your answer