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LI TA-CHAO AND THE ORIGINS OF CHINESE MARXISM by Maurice Meisner
(Harvard University Press, 1967)

Professor Meisner's study of Li Ta-chao is one of the finest Western studies of Chinese Marxism. This is not merely because it is the only comprehensive study of the first Chinese intellectual to declare his support for the Russian Revolution who was, with Ch'en Tu-hsiu, the co-founders of the Chinese Communist Party. Rather it is because the scholarly analysis did not separate the study of a Chinese Marxist from an equally original study of Marxism itself instead, as so often happens, either identifying Marxism with Communism, or relying on secondary sources when it comes to the question of what the Marxism of Marx was.

Each of the three parts of the work--Part One: The Origins of a Chinese Marxist; Part Two: The Reinterpretation of Marxism; Part Three: Politics--is a logical development both of the man, Li Ta-chao, and the historic period as well as of the politics and philosophy of the revolutionary course in China from the May Fourth Movement to the death (by strangulation of the counter-revolutionary forces) of Li Ta-chao in 1927. There is also a brief epilogue (pp. 257-266) which gives not only a moving description (partly by Li's eldest daughter, Hsing-hua) of the death and courage of Li, but also the continuity and discontinuity between his idea and those of ~~xxxxxxxxxxxx~~ Mao Tse-tung, ~~xxxxxx~~ who was introduced to Marxism when he served as assistant librarian to Li at Peking University. Whether Prof. Meisner deals with the question of the role of the peasantry vs. proletariat, voluntarism vs. determinism, nationalism and internationalism, he at all times carries through the specificity of Chinese of Marxism from its start until now: "The combination of revolutionary voluntarism and Chinese nationalism made for a curious dichotomy in both Li's and Mao's vision of the rebirth of China." (p. 263) In this way Prof. Meisner brought to a conclusion what he announced as the aim of his study in his introduction: "The study begins with the assumption that Marxist theory qua theory has been (and still is) an historical force in its own right which has molded as well as reflected Chinese reality." (*) The key word in that sentence is "molded" not only because the Chinese Marxists "reinterpreted" Marxism for their country and the specific historic period but because, as Meisner continues, (iv) "these changes were never reflections of objective Chinese reality; they were reflections of the images of reality held by Chinese Communists--images that were themselves conditioned by Marxist categories of thought."

I found Li's intellectual development during his three years' stay in Japan before he became a Marxist and while he was studying Western philosophy from Aristotle to Francis Bacon and Hegel most instructive because when a philosophic category gets restated in Chinese, it is not only the language that has changed. This is true also when it comes to translating such Marxist terms as "freedom and humanism." I thought Prof. Meisner was especially profound when he analyzes Li's "Fa o K'ang-ming chih pi-chia kuan" ("A Comparison of the French and Russian Revolutions", from which he quotes, among other analyses, the interpretation of the October revolution as "a manifestation of the general psychological transformation of twentieth century humanity.", and, again, as "the reconstruction of a third great civilization", to which Prof. Meisner adds the essential Li concentrated on "a reconstruction in which China and the

Chinese cultural tradition had a special and essential role to play." p.67

Especially interesting was Li's introduction of words like Surplus energy, where more materialist terms would certainly have been used by Russian Marxists.

One point in Meisner's study I did not find convincing and that relates to Populism. This was not because there may not be such a strain--the belief in the revolutionary nature of the peasant certainly is strong in Chinese Marxists. Rather, it is because Populism, especially when used in relationship to the inter-relationship of Chinese Communism with Russian, nearly always refers to Russian Populism. Prof. Meisner himself shows that Li knew little of Russian Populism and that, therefore, that strain related to the role of the peasantry, the advice to the youth "to go to the village, to the people." Then why introduce the term which would lead to ambiguity?

The real point is in the second part, in the reinterpretation of Marxism. And there the most exciting analysis is not on populism but on "Determinism and Activism." (Ch. IV) Two totally new points here is that, though "sophistication" in Marxist interpretations, may lie with the West, Li was among the first, West or East, who not only translated Marx's articles on China, but saw them as integral to Marx's Humanism, whether those he wrote in 1853, or in the late 1860's and 1870's when Marx reintroduced the idea of "a backward nation" giving the stimulus to proletarian revolution in an industrialized country. It is not only Marx's "Revolution in China and Europe" where Marx makes such a suggestion regarding the T'ai-p'ing Rebellion and a socialist revolution-to-be in the West, that interested Li. His natural activism and confidence in the youth which, even before 1917 made him turn to Marxism, led Li to write in 1916: "When the young have seen the light, they should break the meshes of past history, destroy the prison of old ideas, and suffer no corpses to restrict their activity." (quoted by Meisner on p.125.)

It is in this chapter, I should add, that Prof. Meisner takes up the question of the young Marx, the concept of alienation, not only from the Marxist-Humanist Essays of 1844, but other writings that Meisner quotes directly from the original German writings of Marx. And he further brings these questions of determinism and activism, freedom and humanism, up to the present not only among Chinese Marxists but throughout the world today from Georg Lukacs's writings in 1923 through Herbert Marcuse's Reason and Revolution, Raya Dunayevskaya's Marxism and Freedom, as well as Karl Lowith's and Leonard Kriege's articles. (See the footnotes on p.264.) This brings an international flavor both in Li's writings and activities as well as those philosophic concepts and the revolutions of today. Indeed, this is carried through all the way to the end of his work.

From the two brief pages of the Chronology of Li's life (pp.xvi-xvii) to the lengthy Notes, Bibliog. Glossary and Index (pp.269-326), this is an excellent work meriting close study.

*The expression is from Li's first proclamation in approving the October Revolution and comparing it with the French. Because so little of Li's works have been translated into English I thought Meisner's many quotations are not only useful but give you the feeling of that great Chinese Marxist Li Ta-chao as he wrote: "Because of this isolation, Russia's progress in civilization was comparatively slow with respect to other nations of Europe, and just because of this comparative slowness in the evolution of civilization there existed surplus energy for development. Li's has been one on China always."

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Self Study
Chen-Ming (1992)
Meisner has
done all the
work on
Li's works
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