

Introduction

Communism was not Chinese; rather, it was a by-product of the Industrial Revolution in mid-nineteenth-century Europe. Despite its status as an influential ideology that eventually spread throughout the entire global community, communism was not introduced to China instantly. Only during the early twentieth century was it imported by a group of radical Chinese intellectuals. In just three decades after the first Chinese scholar embraced this foreign creed, this alien ideology propelled the Chinese Communists to score a stunning victory through a major national revolution, triumphantly turning what was then the world's most populous country into a communist state. Because communism has significantly reshaped modern Chinese history, it has attracted the attention of Western scholars, who devote their scholarship to the Chinese acceptance of this foreign ideology. Now, a number of questions naturally pop up: Who was the first communist in China? Why did he embrace communism? When did he become a communist? Where did he find this foreign ideology? Through what approach did he spread the communist doctrine? What role did he play in the early communist movement? How did he impact twentieth-century China?

These questions are all fundamentally scholarly issues. Without a deeper understanding of this particular man, the evolution of modern China would be elusive and the defining moment of Chinese history ambiguous. Hence, it is imperative to study this man, his personal odyssey, his individual pursuit, his faith in communism, and his leadership role in the early communist movement. In other words, this man's conversion to communism and his dedication to the communist revolution must be scrutinized in order to trace the historical trajectory of his nation.

This man was Li Dazhao (1889–1927), who did not live a long life but exerted a significant influence upon his country. At first, how-

ever, he was not a communist at all; rather, he was a democrat who pursued Western-style democracy for a long time. Yet he was the man who became China's first communist in 1919 and who blazed a path steering his country in a new direction. In many ways, his acceptance of communism symbolizes the Chinese search for a new approach to state building and nation building. As Sun Yat-sen lamented, the Chinese seemed befuddled at "the way" of national reconstruction after the collapse of the old imperial system.¹ Indeed, Li Dazhao was also seeking "the way," working as an intellectual in Beijing (Peking) and later treasuring communism as "the way." He accepted this foreign ideology just a few years after the establishment of the Republic of China, at which time he organized study groups, drew in young students, and guided them into the communist path. He used the media of the time, such as newspapers, journals, and magazines, to disseminate the communist creed and doctrine. His large quantity of publications exhibits his passion for this ideology. More importantly, he was not only a theorist but also an activist. It was Li who organized one of the first communist cells. Immediately afterward, he became a cofounder of the Chinese Communist Party. He was instrumental in forging a united front with Sun Yat-sen's Nationalist Party for the National Revolution against warlords and the imperialist powers, for which he sacrificed his own life. Li was much more than an ordinary historical figure; he was a catalyst for China's ongoing revolution and the nation's quest for a new identity.

Li Dazhao's salient status has long been recognized by scholars, who have bestowed upon him various glowing sobriquets. Outside China, he has been called "the father of Marxism in China," which acknowledges his indispensable role in initiating the communist movement.² Inside China, he is portrayed as "China's Prometheus" who dedicated his life to his cause, disseminated the communist ideology, and impacted a generation of Chinese youth.³ Consequently, Li was a "bell-man" (*zhuangzhongren*) who struck the alarm bell to inform the people of the coming of daybreak and to press them to cradle the fresh new morning.⁴ He was extolled, because of his heroic deeds, as "a brave gunman" (*yonggandeqiangshou*) who fired his shots at the old culture and as the disseminator of a new ideology.⁵ He was depicted as "a seed-sower" (*bozhongzhe*) who planted the seeds that grew and bore fruit.⁶ For communists, Li has attained a saintly status. Mao Zedong in March 1949 praised Li as his teacher, just before his proclamation of the establishment of the People's Republic of China. Communist leader Jiang Zemin respected Li as an erudite "scholar."⁷

Chinese scholar Hu Qiaomu granted Li multiple titles: “patriot, revolutionary, educator, scholar, writer, and intellectual.”⁸ While celebrating the one hundredth anniversary of Li’s birthday, Chinese historian Hu Sheng commended Li as “a tree planter” (*zaishuren*) and remarked that “we commemorate Li Dazhao, as if we are remembering the tree planter in front of the tall tree he had planted.”⁹

Glorious titles aside, Li Dazhao’s role in directing the path of modern China must be highlighted. This book, however, is not a hagiography to glorify him; rather, it is a scholarly inquiry into his life in which he is presented as a man, as a democratic intellectual, as China’s first communist, and then as a professional revolutionary. To the dismay of modern liberals, China’s march towards communism, which was initiated by Li, was a big loss for China’s burgeoning liberalism during the early post-imperial era.¹⁰ Regardless of whether it was a bewildering and unexpected occurrence, it was the path modern China took. A close examination of this road demonstrates Li’s crucial role in setting his foot on it and leading others onto it. As a cofounder of the Communist Party, he was a key figure in all major events of the early communist movement. Li’s life symbolizes his nation’s development, signals the dramatic transformation of Chinese intellectuals, and represents the modification of one of the oldest cultures in the world.

In fact, Li Dazhao’s conversion to communism was a lengthy journey that requires a thorough study. Yet the dominant paradigm in mainland China emphasizes the magic moment of the Russian Revolution and its role in inspiring the Chinese to accept communism. This simplistic perspective lacks an in-depth analysis because it elevates the trigger of the Russian factor and neglects the long-term pursuit that shaped Li’s embrace of the foreign ideology. This book traces Li’s life vertically and connects his life horizontally with Chinese history in order to situate him at the intersection of multiple national events. It differs from the existing literature that focuses on his thoughts; instead, this study tracks his odyssey as well as his ideas, aiming to avoid obscuring his individual experience and intending to underscore his gradual travel to communism.

The historical era in which Li Dazhao lived, the family within which he grew up, the social milieu he endured, the national condition he encountered, and the international situation he experienced all helped remold him into what he would become. Li was born during the late Qing dynasty, in a period of theatrical transformation from empire to republic. It was a time of imperial decay, political chaos, foreign inva-

sions, social instability, and rising nationalism. His upbringing seemed similar to that of his contemporaries. Yet he had his own distinctive childhood: his parents passed away when he was very young, which led him to a special life. His early education in classics enabled him to absorb traditional culture and to become an erudite individual and an effective writer. Li was also exposed to modern education, and he adroitly combined his classical expertise with the newly introduced Western learning. He used his pen to deliver poignant writings and to spread new ideas. Experiencing China's decline and witnessing China's sufferings, Li became nationalistic in his pursuit of national salvation. Growing up, he was an enthusiastic learner and demonstrated a sharp mind; he became a sarcastic critic, a loud proponent and a sonorous mouthpiece for national salvation. He wrote extensively, published prolifically, and publicized his opinions constantly, from which we can glean information to trace his long path toward communism.

Li Dazhao's life was deeply impacted by what happened in the late Qing and early republic eras, which were imposed upon by a large number of so-called unequal treaties (*bupingdengtiaoyue*) engendered by the imperialist powers. China not only suffered from its territorial cessions but also bemoaned the loss of national interests. Consequently, the underpinning political culture of the time was rising nationalism. By the beginning of the twentieth century, three sides of nationalism coexisted, as elaborated by Jonathan D. Spence: xenophobia, official nationalism, and Han nationalism.¹¹ Chinese scholars confirm this new trend, and one claims that Chinese nationalism emerged at the start of the twentieth century.¹² Li Dazhao was impacted by all three of these political sentiments. He lamented his nation's impotence in the face of imperialist invasions, although he was not a xenophobic zealot. He supported the late Qing constitutional reform but quickly became disillusioned with it. He soon switched to Han nationalism to topple the Qing dynasty but gave it up after the establishment of the republic. In postimperial China, he continued to witness imperialist invasions, from which he acquired a national trauma syndrome, which impelled him to become a radical intellectual seeking national resurgence and cultural renaissance.

Li outgrew those three types of nationalism but continued to carry on his nationalist fervor to champion national independence and cultural revival. The emphasis on nationalism might seem irrelevant when we focus on Li as China's first communist, but it is pertinent because nationalism was a potent force in his thinking. To analyze his long odyssey

to communism, nationalism must be deliberated, reconceptualized, and reinterpreted. For Li, nationalism not only meant a genuine love for his country but also denoted actions necessary for the modernization of his nation, the reform of its culture, and the extreme makeover of the existing regimentation by destroying the old evils, wiping out the woes, and leading the people to pursue a new identity. Although his nationalism was originally a patriotic sentiment, it evolved into a zeal for transforming China into a constitutional, democratic, and modernized republic, then into an anti-imperialist and anti-warlord independent nation-state, and finally into a modernized country with communism as a guiding ideology. Even on his very last day, Li remained adamant in defending his nationalistic stance. His communist ideology relied as much on his nationalism as on his political pursuits and social quest. In a unique way, his nationalistic sentiment compelled him to move onto the path of communism.

Although the underlying motivation of Li Dazhao's ideological pursuit was his ardent nationalist enthusiasm, he picked up diverse ideas in the process of his quest for national salvation, including anarchism, nihilism, liberalism, constitutionalism, democracy, and other elements. Ultimately, he turned to communism. His nationalism, like other forms of nationalistic sentiment, was so cohesively adhesive that it easily bonded with other ideas to make his thought a potpourri of diverse origins and an intermixture of sundry elements that comprised multiple forms, exerted multiple impacts, and nestled within multiple functions. A close examination shows that Li mainly absorbed new ideological imports from the West, even if sometimes through the detour of Japan. He kept hold of the essence of China's traditional culture while relinquishing undesirable elements, selecting valuable ingredients, pursuing a new culture, and ultimately choosing communism. He did not completely abandon what he had previously acquired, which blotted his version of communism with assorted elements—in particular, nationalism, which continued to be the constant binding force in his discourse of communism for national liberation, national revival, and national modernization.

Since his death, the study of Li Dazhao has undergone a few different periods, each possessing its own characteristics. The first period ranged from 1927 to 1949, during which the communist movement faced the relentless extermination campaigns of Chiang Kai-shek (Jiang Jieshi) while the communists continued to carry on their revolution. During those years, the study of Li was limited to sporadic publications. As soon

as Li died, Gao Yihan wrote a biography of Li Dazhao for *Central News Daily* (*Zhongyangribao*) in Wuhan on May 23, 1927, which is regarded as the first biography of Li.¹³ In 1934 in Tianjin, Wang Senran published a short biography of Li Dazhao in *Ta Kung Pao* (*L'Impartial*), a famous newspaper, in which Li was praised as an erudite scholar. In 1935, Guo Zhanbo praised Li as a great philosopher in his monograph on modern Chinese philosophy. Amazingly, those latter two publications came out during Chiang Kai-shek's merciless anti-Communist censorship.¹⁴ Under these unfavorable circumstances, the compilation of Li Dazhao's writings was conducted secretly by Li Leguang, who packed what he had gleaned into *The Complete Works of Li Dazhao* (*Li Dazhao quanji*); it was published in April 1939 by Beixinshuju in Shanghai, and the famous Chinese writer Lu Xun contributed a preface. Lu Xun applauded Li's writings as "a heritage of the pioneer and a giant monument of revolutionary history."¹⁵ Nevertheless, the Nationalist government immediately banned its publication and confiscated the printed copies. It was not until June 1949 that it was republished by the same publisher, soon after the communist forces occupied Shanghai.¹⁶

It is wrong to assume that the study of Li Dazhao immediately reached a climax after the victory of the communist revolution, although the post-1949 political situation became favorable for it. Nonetheless, the period between 1949 and 1966 witnessed publication of related books and articles. Zhang Cixi authored the first book-length biography of Li Dazhao in Beijing in 1951, tracing Li's life from birth to death. Zhang called Li "a giant" (*juren*), hoped that his book would "cast a brick to attract jade," and expected to see more Li biographies.¹⁷ In spite of Zhang's optimism, not many books on Li were published before 1966. It is worth mentioning that a couple of books indeed were issued to celebrate what would have been Li's seventieth birthday in 1959. One was *The Collected Works of Li Dazhao* (*Li Dazhao xuanji*), which included Li's major articles. Another was a long epic offered by the poet Zang Kejia, which served as a biographical sketch of Li's life. In this saga, Zang utilizes modern free verse to spotlight Li's life and showcase him as an amicable figure and as an example of a great revolutionary.¹⁸ During this period, the Chinese were much preoccupied by Mao Zedong's fervor to construct a socialist state, for which Li was utilized as a heroic martyr to foster socialist zeal.

The ten-year Cultural Revolution from 1966 to 1976 was a setback for the study of Li Dazhao. Not only did the national upheaval create an adverse scenario, but also the political mentality of that era forestalled

an objective inquiry into the history of the Chinese Communist Party. During the Cultural Revolution, an unprecedented cult elevated Mao Zedong to demigod status, and any positive assessment of other communist figures became a taboo. Mao loomed large, and then appeared gigantic and brooked no rivals, while others such as Li were quarantined in the backstage. Many have blamed the Gang of Four led by Mao's wife Jiang Qing for this detrimental milieu. Indeed, Kang Sheng, an abettor of the Gang of Four, intended to remove Li from history, as he viewed Li as an insolent opponent of Mao's holy prominence, for which Li was even smeared with a distorted image.¹⁹ Li's contributions to the communist cause vanished from the historical annals during this time. No longer was Li viewed as in the vanguard of Chinese communism; on the contrary, he was regarded as a liability and even as an apostate. Li's children suffered from persecution; his daughter Li Xinghua was seriously beaten, lost her eyesight, and was hastened to an unfortunate death in 1979. Those who studied Li Dazhao were victimized, and some among them were persecuted to death.²⁰ Rarely was anything about Li published during those ten years, marking an ill-fated disruption to the study of Li Dazhao. Only when the post-Mao era started was Li's reputation restored.

The post-Mao era has witnessed an upsurge in the study of Li Dazhao. The removal of the Mao cult led to a tolerant milieu in which scholars could study other communist figures, which gave rise to the admiration of "the red martyrs" through printed materials, mass media, and governmental support.²¹ In particular, Li drew special attention as China's first communist. In 1989, the nationwide Li Dazhao Study Association was established to promote scholarly inquiries. Chinese scholars have investigated Li's contributions to modern Chinese culture and his legacy upon the nation. As a result, recent publications on Li tend to be exhaustively detailed and widely circulated. Almost all of them adopt a positive stance to eulogize Li, highlight his glorious life, emphasize his enduring influence, and underline his immortal status. About ten book-length biographies were published, over one thousand articles came out, and other forms of related literature also appeared. According to a statistical source, besides monographs, seventy articles on Li were published each year between 1978 and 1994, peaking in the two years 1979 and 1989: 140 in 1979 and more than two hundred in 1989. Between 1994 and 2005, more than forty articles came out each year.²² In the past decade, monographs, dissertations, and theses on Li have continued to enrich the growing literature.

Interesting to note is that more of Li Dazhao's own writings have been discovered and identified in the recent decades, not only in mainland China but also in Taiwan, Russia, Japan, and other countries and regions. For example, in 1985, the Russians published four articles Li authored during his visit to the Soviet Union.²³ Li's articles were also found in Taiwan's archives. One letter to Sun Yat-sen, coauthored in 1923 by Li Dazhao, was discovered in a Dutch archive.²⁴ The tallies of Chinese characters in different editions of Li's works help us to underscore the quantity of the new findings. In the 1959 edition of *Selected Works of Li Dazhao*, the total word count was 390,000, but it increased to 1,100,000 in its 1984 edition.²⁵ The new edition of *Li Dazhao quanji* (*The Complete Works of Li Dazhao*) published in 2013 is counted at two million words.²⁶ In other words, more than half of the trove of Li's writings were newly found in the post-1976 era. Of course, scholars have debated their authenticity, purporting to figure out whether or not they were truly his writings given that he used numerous pen names.²⁷ Scholars have challenged one another and defended their own approaches to identification.²⁸ This assessment of apocryphalness may well continue, and perhaps more new articles by Li will be recognized in the future.

Li Dazhao's voluminous writings have attracted the gaze of Chinese scholars, who have devoted their expertise to the study of his works. Some sift the writings to ascertain their truthfulness, while others examine the contents to highlight their canonical value. The recent efforts amount to a new level of hermeneutical studies. Textual criticism aside, they have started to annotate Li's writings with detailed commentaries, while other scholars criticize one another in their elucidation of footnotes to Li's original writings.²⁹ Some scholars have reproached the editors of his works for offering insufficient information in footnotes.³⁰ This exegetical criticism has compelled the publisher to not only update Li's writings but also add more information to the footnotes in the new edition; consequently, the 2006 edition of *The Complete Works of Li Dazhao* was republished in 2013 with newly revised and added footnotes.

Given his prominent role in the shaping of twentieth-century China, Li Dazhao's name has not gone unnoticed outside China. Japanese scholars have devoted considerable scholarship to him, while European scholars, particularly those in Italy, Germany, and France, have written pamphlets and articles on Li's role in the communist movement as well as his philosophical ideas. In contrast, only one book has been published in English, by Maurice Meisner in 1967, although a few articles have come out exploring Li's career and thought. Meisner's monograph

remains a classic in terms of its interpretation of Li's ideas. According to Meisner, Li was the "first true leader and . . . martyr" of the Chinese Communist Party.³¹ However, this book lacks biographical information. Of course, the skin-deep recognition of Li as a historical figure can be found in the newly published monographs, textbooks, and encyclopedias that highlight Li's role during the May Fourth Movement and the early communist movement. The absence of a badly needed biography is due to the pre-1976 lack of relevant primary and secondary sources; most of the valuable sources concerning Li's life were published after 1976, including Li's daughter Li Xinghua's memoir about her father. Nevertheless, Li Dazhao's major articles could be found in libraries before 1976, which allowed scholars of the period, such as Meisner, to study Li's philosophy but not Li's life. Consequently, Li was not accorded a truly sensed and full-blooded biography. Since 1976, abundant primary and secondary sources have been published, including memoirs, collections of reminiscences, Li's own writings, scholarly monographs, and journal articles, all of which contain anecdotes, his activities, and vignettes concerning Li's life. Altogether, the sources now are so rich that it is an opportune time to obtain a fuller view of Li as a historical figure and to confer on him an informative biography.

This biography rests squarely upon rich primary sources and abundant secondary sources, including Li's personal writings, Li's friends' and family members' memoirs, and recently published monographs and articles. During the investigative process for this project, a large amount of data was examined, especially those post-1976 publications. The exceptionally large quantity of valuable sources opens up an entire new world, broadening the scope for viewing Li and shattering the previously simplistic assessment. Of course, the values of those sources have been incorporated into this book through assessment, reflection, and interpretation. This book does not follow any dogmatic rules; rather, it adopts a critical approach for a rational analysis that hopefully will stimulate the reader to ponder more deeply Li's role in his nation's transformation. Although countless materials were read, assessed, and used, it is to be admitted that the limited space cannot allow all to be directly cited. Consequently, only a small portion of those sources are utilized, unfairly leaving out numerous important ones—a regret and apology surely shared by other scholars in their own scholarly endeavors.

Two dichotomous approaches have coexisted in the study of Li Dazhao: one pursuing his philosophy, and the other examining his life. Neither are static, because his thought advanced as he grew older. Chi-

nese historians have achieved much in both modes, but Western scholars lag behind. The urgent need to understand modern China necessitates a careful study of Li in those two categories. Western scholars so far have explored Li's thought, but his life has not been fully examined. A critical biography should reveal the track of his life and demonstrate the evolution of his unique ideas. This biography traces Li's life and integrates his personal odyssey with his ideological transformations. An overall evaluation demonstrates that he went through several periods marked by personal maturation and ideological progress. The first period ranged from 1889 to 1905, during which Li was nurtured in the classics while imbibing his initial simplistic patriotism. From 1905 to 1913, Li acquired a modern education and developed his patriotic zeal. His study abroad in Japan from 1913 to 1916 was an opportunity for learning more about Western civilization, yet Japan's harsh demands on his home country heightened his nationalism and turned him into an activist. From 1916 to 1918, while serving as an editor of various newspapers in Beijing, he became passionate about national resurgence, constitutional rule, and the democratic system. Beginning in 1918, Li worked at Beijing University and became a rising star in China's cultural arena. His pursuit of national salvation continued to lead him along the communist path. From 1921 to 1924, Li participated in establishing the Chinese Communist Party and led its early operations. Between 1924 and 1927, he was instrumental in forging a united front with Sun Yat-sen and then served as a leader of the ongoing National Revolution. The last period comprises the remaining days of his life, during which he was arrested, secretly put on a trial, and promptly executed by Zhang Zuolin. Each of those periods represents a milestone in Li's life, underlining his role in the shaping of his country, and thus they lend themselves well to structuring the chapters of this book.

Li Dazhao's short life of less than thirty-eight years mirrored his nation's transformation from empire to republic and reflected his country's move toward the communist revolution. Although he died young, his legacy has persisted. This study provides a window into the time during which Li lived, worked, and died. In a sense, this biography is concerned more with modern China than narrowly with Li's life. To understand China's national transition, we have to familiarize ourselves with the genesis of the communist movement for which Li was indispensable. Western readers, in spite of their traditional stance against communism, need to know its genesis in China in order to attain a deeper com-

prehension of it, for which Li Dazhao truly requires a fresh look and demands a new inquiry. The writing of such a biography should be a welcome undertaking in today's international situation, as the demand of reassessing Chinese communism is an urgent necessity in the West. It should not be ignored due to traditional anti-communist sentiment, which is one of the reasons so much less ink has been spilled over Li in the West. The author here believes that Li's odyssey would rightly help anyone understand the trajectory of modern China and expects that this biography will serve to fill the gap in Western academia. Li Dazhao deserves a serious scholarly exploration, warrants a deeper analysis, and merits a comprehensive biography that does not so far exist.