

# **Dimensions of Chinese Anarchism**

**An Interview with Arif Dirlik**

Arif Dirlik

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## Interviewer's Introduction

From 1905 to 1930, anarchists exerted a broad influence on Chinese culture and politics. They were at the center of the emerging social radicalism of that period and their activities left a significant mark on later decade's revolutionary movements.

Arif Dirlik is among the few historians writing in English to treat the Chinese anarchist movement, which he has chronicled and analyzed in several works, most notably his *Anarchism in the Chinese Revolution*. He has also written numerous explorations of contemporary problems in radical politics and theory.

I spoke with Dirlik on May 19, 1997. I asked him about Chinese anarchism, his experience as a radical social theorist in the university, and the future of his work. ~ Chuck Morse

See Also: Arif Dirlik: A Short Biography and Selected Works

## An Interview with Arif Dirlik

**Most histories of anarchism begin by establishing the principles of anarchism and then narrate the lives of those who embraced these principles. You chose a different approach in *Anarchism in the Chinese Revolution*. You describe the Chinese anarchists as both subjects and objects – products and shapers – of the larger revolutionary process in China, and your book traces the dialectic between the anarchists and this process. Why did you choose this form of exposition? Is there something about the Chinese anarchists that makes this necessary or does it reflect larger methodological commitments?**

It's the latter. I believe in approaching concepts, theories, or political orientations historically. While some kind of notion of what one means by these concepts is necessary for analysis, establishing first principles tends to dehistoricize the approach to them. In other words, you establish first principles – as if they were true everywhere at all times – and then begin to analyze people in terms of those principles. This leads to ahistorical judgments, in my opinion, on “who is or isn't a true anarchist” or “who is or isn't a true Marxist?”

It leads inevitably to unproductive questions of orthodoxy – unproductive both intellectually and politically. This also results in certain kinds of sectarianism, since it leads to a question of truthfulness rather than historical variation. So, this didn't have anything to do with Chinese anarchism per se, but rather my approach to intellectual history and concepts.

**Unlike Peter Zarrow in *Anarchism and Chinese Political Culture*, you de-emphasize the role of Daoism and Buddhism in the constitution of Chinese anarchism. Why is this?**

There is a methodological problem here ... There has been a long-standing tendency – I'm tempted to call it an Orientalist tendency even – to attribute everything new in China to Chinese tradition, which is another way of saying that there is never anything significantly new in China, anything that cannot be explained in terms of the past.

I have been a critic of this tradition in Chinese historiography. I believe that Chinese society was as subject to change as any other society, whether or not we are willing to recognize it. So, I was hesitant, therefore, to attribute the emergence of anarchism, Marxism, or anything for that matter, to some Chinese tradition or another.

The problem is that the Chinese tradition has been used to explain everything, from communism and Maoism to anarchism, and these days it's fashionable to explain Chinese capitalism in terms of tradition. I don't know how valid that is as an explanation, that notion of tradition, when it can explain so many different and contradictory things.

I came to study Chinese anarchism by tracing the origins of this notion of social revolution, and I believe that Chinese anarchism was a *radical, new idea*. There may be Taoist elements in it, there may be Buddhist elements in it, there may even – through Tolstoy – be Christian elements in it: nevertheless, my concern was with the new ideas that anarchism brought into the Chinese intellectual scene, chief among them this idea of a social revolution. So, I think this emphasis explains some of the differences.

Also, we need to make a distinction between the past as a determinant of the present and the past as a reservoir of ideas upon which people can draw to deal with the present. There is no question that some of the Chinese anarchists – Liu Shipei was the outstanding one among them, and then Shifu – drew on Taoism and Buddhism. However, this is not just the determination or constitution of Chinese anarchism by Daoism or Buddhism, but rather a two way, dialectical process. In other words, the Chinese past is being read in new ways with the help of anarchism and conversely there is a rereading of anarchism through Taoist and Buddhist ideas. What is important to me is the dialectic, and I stay away from the notion that the Chinese were somehow unconsciously under the sway of this or that tradition that then shaped their readings of anarchism.

**You claim that the emergence of Chinese nationalism actually created many of the theoretical and political preconditions for the emergence of Chinese anarchism. This seems contradictory at first glance. How did this happen?**

This reflects a particular appreciation of nationalism on my part. While we obviously are concerned with many of the negative manifestations of nationalism, it is a rather radical idea at its origins. It calls for both a new conception of state, a new conception of the relationship between state and society, and a new conception of the political subject as citizen. In that sense, it breaks radically with earlier forms of political consciousness that rested legitimacy in the emperor and rendered the subjects into passive political subjects, whereas nationalism called for active political subjects. Aside from the question of the citizen, nationalism's notion of the relationship between state and society requires a new kind of accounting for society, both in the sense of who's going to participate in politics, what are the qualifications for participation in politics, and what are the factors that militate against political participation. As I argue in my book, in some ways these changes lead directly to questions of social revolution.

In the case of China, there is another element. There's at least some kind of historical coincidence between the emergence of a nationalist consciousness and a new kind of supra-national utopianism, if you like. It's as if the building of a nation becomes the first task but somehow not the ultimate task; that once the nation has been built and society has been reordered, there would, in the future, be a way of transcending that nationalism.

It's tricky ... I believe I described this as a counterpoint to nationalism. If you recall the parts in the book about Liu Shipei – and here the differences between anarchists become really important – there's a feeling that nationalism opens up new questions that prepare the ground for anarchism, if you like, but also created new kinds of threats. For example, someone like Liu Shipei, could see correctly that for all the theoretical despotism of the Imperial State, nationalism promised far greater and far more intensive intrusion in society than had been the case under the imperial

state. At this point, anarchism becomes a way of asserting the autonomy of the society against an intrusive nationalist society.

And, while I don't want to generalize too much, this may be a fruitful way of thinking about other circumstances. This notion of nationalism – representing a new kind of politics, raising new questions, calling for new solutions, and playing some part in the emergence of socialism and anarchism – may be relevant to more than China.

**Was there something unique about circumstances in China at this time that made Kropotkin – as opposed to other anarchist theorists – most pertinent or influential?**

There are probably two reasons. First, Kropotkin's anarchism is thoroughly tied to a program of social transformation and, given the concern among Chinese radicals with the question of social revolution, one can see why they would find Kropotkin more relevant than some of the other anarchists. Another interesting element is the importance of Social Darwinism in Chinese intellectual circles around the turn of the century. Chinese Social Darwinists almost adopted the Euro-American idea that the so-called progressive societies are progressive because they had won in the conflict for survival, and through this there was an element of the new world as a world of competition and conflict, where those who didn't succeed might in fact perish. They were very preoccupied with the examples of the American-Indians and Africans, and some Chinese were convinced that those two groups, the black and red races as they called them, were doomed to extinction.

So, this called for a strengthening of China to struggle in this new world, but the counterpart to this was a dissatisfaction with this world view based on conflict. And, the discovery of Kropotkin under these circumstances – with his argument that it was not conflict and competition but rather mutual aid that served human progress – served as a significant antidote to this and also resonated with the utopian strain to which I referred earlier.

**Kropotkin and Reclus were very important to Chinese anarchists and also quite Eurocentric thinkers, at least in their conception of world history. Did the Chinese anarchists take issue with this or attempt to develop alternatives?**

I don't think so. It was really not of much concern to the Paris anarchists. And the form in which Kropotkin and Reclus reached the Tokyo people did not really suggest a Eurocentric interpretation of Asia or China.

Although we are presently very sensitive to questions of Eurocentricism, the Chinese anarchists in Paris were much more down on Chinese traditions than anybody in Europe at the time. These are people who were calling for a revolution against Confucius. So, if they learned any of this in Europe, they were much more enthusiastic about the repudiation of the Chinese past for its backwardness than Europeans themselves.

In the case of Liu Shipei, who had very high opinions of Chinese past, I think it was somewhat different. There the influence of Tolstoy may have been quite important. Liu Shipei's objection was not so much to Europe as to a new idea of politics and the idea of economic developmentalism that came with Europeans.

**The anarchists took a strong stand against the anti-Manchu racism implicit in the Revolutionary Alliance's arguments against the Manchu government. Was there an attempt to develop an anarchist theory of ethnicity?**

I'm not aware of any such attempt. I think they took a stand against anti-Manchu racism because they thought it was a distraction from the whole issue of politics. In other words, it was not the Manchus that were the problem, but the centralized political state system and, to the

extent that racism was raised as an issue, it distracted from this more fundamental problem of the state.

**Feminism and anarchism have had a difficult and complicated relationship in Europe and America, yet feminism was apparently integral to Chinese anarchism and not even a contentious issue within the anarchist movement. Is there a reason why feminism was so easily integrated into the anarchist movement in China?**

I'm going to make a distinction between a concern for women and feminism in answering this question. The description of the Chinese anarchists, including people like He Zhen, as feminists may be somewhat misleading: it fits in with current fashions, but I think the concern was more with the oppression of women and what could be done about it than with a specifically feminist agenda.

The anarchist involvement in the question of women, when we rephrase the problem in that manner, followed almost automatically from their concern with the family as an oppressive institution. They were concerned with that throughout, and I think this brought them to the question of women, which was also a diffuse concern in Chinese society around 1920.

**You write that you wanted to facilitate the emergence or re-emergence of a more democratic socialism by recalling and examining the history of Chinese anarchism. Did you also intend to assist in the revitalization or reemergence of anarchism?**

When I began working on Chinese anarchism I sensed that there was a renewal of interest in anarchism, in a very broad sense, and I hoped to write this book as a contribution to that. And, by the 1980's the failure of the promise of the Chinese revolution was becoming more and more evident, and I found that anarchism provided an interesting critical perspective on what had gone wrong. Also, to the extent that anarchism is laden with such valuable insights, obviously it is important to revive it and bring it to the forefront of discussions.

**You are a unambiguously radical scholar of Chinese revolutionary movements and a full professor at a capitalist university in America, the center of world imperialism. How could you be employed in such a setting? Have you been pressured to de-radicalize or depoliticize your work? If not, what does this reveal about the relationship between the university and radical social criticism?**

Contradictions (laughs) ... No, I've never been pressured to deradicalize or depoliticize my work. If there's pressure it's indirect; you know, sometimes people say "what do you do?" and I'd say "I'm writing a book on Chinese anarchism" and all they can say is "oh". There's a sense that you are doing something marginal and playing games. That kind of pressure doesn't bother me.

I think I've been lucky. You know, I've had friends who have suffered for being radicals. There have been hints of slight discrimination with regard to salaries and things like that, but I do not know whether to attribute that to the fact that I am a radical scholar or because I'm of third world origin. There may be a number of explanations here.

We forget sometimes that elite uni-versities really need their radicals. Elite universities, committed to giving their students the broadest education possible and making them function in the world, cannot afford to produce narrow ignoramuses who have never heard of Marxism or anarchism. This may be why there's probably more tolerance for radicals in the elite universities than in smaller places. That's what I had in mind when I jokingly said "contradictions."

In some ways, this is the strength of the American education system, in comparison, let's say, to the Chinese education system where if something was politically un-desirable it was kept out,

with the consequence that you end up with a bunch of people who didn't know anything about the world other than what they've been fed by way of ideology. We are much more subtle with our controls and, under current circumstances, so long as you are not an activist, there are not serious reprisals.

We have a very intelligent power structure here. For example, about ten years ago somebody came to see me from the CIA. They were looking for students to recruit and were particularly interested in my students, because they figured they would know about Marxism, anarchism, etc., and if you want intelligent analysts you need well informed people who know about these issues. I think that's where the power establishment here differs, say, from the People's Republic of China or the former Soviet Union, where undesirable knowledge will simply be cast aside rather than incorporated into an understanding of the world.

**You just published a book on post-colonialism, *The Postcolonial Aura*. How does this work relate to your studies on Chinese anarchism? Also, please explain your discussion of postcolonialism as post-revolutionary.**

In *The Postcolonial Aura* I tried to raise the question of third world intellectuals. There has been a preoccupation recently with Eurocentricism and the Euro-American oppression of other peoples which sort of sweeps aside the importance of capitalism in shaping the world and how many of those rejected Euro-American values are actually transmitted to the rest of the world through capitalism. It seemed to me, to the extent that capitalism has globalized, it has globalized through the complicity of third world intellectuals, professionals, states, whatever, and, therefore, a critique of power and authority in our day cannot be satisfied with a critique of Eurocentricism or Euro-American domination of the world, but rather must include a criticism of third world intellectuals, professionals, states, power structures, etc.. That's what I seek to do in this work.

As for the post-revolutionary aspect, this grew out of a historical curiosity about the meaning of postcolonialism: we have been post-colonials for some time now, why should postcolonialism gain such currency in the late 1980's? After all, even when we had the radical movements of the 1960's, most third world societies were already post-colonial or clearly becoming postcolonial, and yet there was a sustainable radicalism in those years, unlike the 1980's or 1990's. The question became: What's the difference? What's happening here? Why are we talking about postcolonialism, all of a sudden, instead of colonialism, domination, and capitalism, etc?

The tendencies that have gained the greatest popularity, in the United States especially, are those which tend towards an obsession with ethnicity, inter-ethnic relations, identity politics, etc., tendencies that question and even deny the possibility of collective identities. To me there is no meaningful political activity, especially revolutionary activity, without the sense of a collective identity. It is this undermining of notions of collective identity, combined with the circumstances I referred to earlier, that led me to assert that what we are dealing with was really a post-revolutionary, not just postcolonial, orientation.

***How do you see your work developing in the future?***

Well, I think any radical has enough reason to be depressed these days: there doesn't seem to be anything happening and radicalism has sort of been highjacked by conservatives and liberals, and rendered into identity politics.

On the other hand, some of the recent work I and others have done indicates that there is a great deal of resistance and protest going on which is not visible in the old ways because it isn't happening in major labor unions or big, visible communist parties, etc.. There are people fighting for their livelihoods, trying to create new social forms from the bottom up. Some of it is

dangerous, some can be right wing, but much of this has to do with people's efforts at survival under what's happening with contemporary capitalism. And there is a proliferation of these movements: women's movements, ecological movements, social justice movements. They are happening all over and yet contemporary radicals, such as they are, are unwilling to see them.

These are not movements that you would associate with conventional left (read: Marxist) politics. They are movements from the bottom up. I'm not going to call them anarchist – some are feminist, some are ecological – but if there were anarchist movements going on, they would be some-thing like that. I think it is important to draw attention to these movements and theorize them as much as possible. This is what I'm working through: how to really conceptualize radical movements from the bottom up.

## **Arif Dirlik: A Short Biography & Selected Works**

Arif Dirlik intended to be a nuclear physicist. Born in Mersin, Turkey in 1940 (or 1941, if you ask his mother) he received his undergraduate degree in engineering and came to America to study science at the University of Rochester.

Shortly after arriving at Rochester, Dirlik decided to abandon the sciences entirely and apply himself to history. He was welcomed into the field by a group of intellectual historians there, who expressed no surprise that he would make such a transition.

It was here that his interest in Chinese history developed, and he completed his dissertation on the origins of Marxist historiography in China. This work was the beginning of a larger investigation into Chinese political thought, particularly the origins of the idea of social revolution in Chinese radical movements. It was also the springboard for his engagement with the Chinese anarchists, which he began to vigorously research in the early 1980's.

In addition to writing numerous books and articles, Dirlik has taught at Duke University since joining their History department in 1971. He is also the father of two sons, one of whom is a graduate student in film and, the other, an aspiring rock musician.

When I asked Dirlik to identify the main influences on his work, he paused for a moment and then cited Marx, Mao, and Dostoevsky. He did not mention an engineer or a physicist.

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