

Shifu (1884–1915)

Daniel Cairns

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Shifu, a Chinese revolutionary, anarchist organizer, and writer, was born Liu Shaobin to a prosperous family in Guangdong. Classically educated as a child, he performed exceptionally well in school but disliked his formal education. In 1902, he traveled to Japan to pursue western studies. There, he discovered radical politics and joined Sun Yat-Sen's Revolutionary Alliance (RA). The RA trained him in terrorism, teaching him to construct and use explosives. He was assigned important missions but never completed them; none of his targets was struck by his bombs, and in fact, he was victim to two of his own devices, the latter of which cost him the lower half of his left arm in 1907. Following that abortive attempt, aimed at a Qing general in Guangzhou, he was jailed for two years, escaping execution because of his father's connections.

While imprisoned, he searched for insights in Buddhism, "national essence" scholarship, and the Paris-based anarchist journal, *Xin shiji* (*New Era*). After his release in 1909, he traveled to Hong Kong to resume RA activities. Eventually, he abandoned reformism, changing his name from Liu Sifu (a pseudonym connoting reforms) to simply Shifu ("teaching renewal"). *New Era*, brought to him by his brother, clarified his own ideas, and by 1911 he was a declared anarchist, dissociating himself from terrorism. He moved to Shanghai and founded the Society of the Cock Crowing in the Dark the same year.

Shifu transmitted anarchist theory but was not the originator of many original ideas. Still, his particular amalgam of evolutionary theory, moral principle, and autonomous revolutionary action was classified as its own distinct ideology, Shifuism. After the fall of the Qing dynasty, revolutionaries in China sought organizations offering systematic programs, something anarchism was seen as lacking; Shifu developed and espoused an appropriate, if utopian, response to this. Following Tolstoy, he wanted to rebuild society in the form of sustainable, collective, agrarian communes.

In 1913, he founded the Commitment Club, through which many non-industrial workers were included in a labor union. The same year, he famously debated Jiang Kanghu, the leader of the Chinese Socialist Party, and Sun Yat-Sen, the leader of the Guomindang (Kuomintang), over the relative merits of their socialisms. Because of his prominence as an oppositional leader, the Yuan Shikai government suppressed him, forcing him to shift locations between Guangdong, Macao, and Shanghai. In 1914, he wrote a report on the Chinese anarchist movement for the International Anarchist Congress. He died the next year. After his death, his disciples formed other anarchist-inspired labor organizations, like the workers' Mutual Aid Society of 1921, an umbrella organization for over 40 smaller labor unions.

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