

Ch'en Tu-hsiu: A Powerful Voice for Modern China

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Ch'en Tu-hsiu (1879-1942), co-founder of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), was one of the major intellectual figures who strongly advocated anti-Confucianism during the May Fourth Movement in 1919 on the basis that in order for China to survive in the modern world, it was necessary for China to reject the totally outdated tradition of Confucianism and adopt wholeheartedly Western methods and ideas, such as individualism and even Christianity. While the hard-line conservatives viewed that the way to reform China was in upholding Confucianism as unifying factor, Ch'en viewed Confucianism as a formless philosophy that kept China back from the process of modernization.

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Ch'en's Vision for Modern China

Serving as the Dean at Peking University and the chief editor of the progressive magazine, *The New Youth*, Ch'en sought to spread the vision of modernizing China by promoting Western ideas of individual freedom, democracy, and science over the suppressive teachings of Confucian concepts such as filial piety, observance of rituals, and societal order via the hierarchical system, which was often used to justify the legitimacy of an autocratic government. Teaming along with the literary revolution of Hu Shih and the general nationalistic fervor of the May Fourth period, the anti-Confucian movement encouraged the Chinese people to reexamine the validity of traditional values and be open to Western concepts to reform and modernize China.

After many humiliating defeats that China had experienced under many foreign powers, Chinese intellectuals, like Ch'en, began to point out to the Chinese people that they had a false sense of superiority in their view that Chinese civilization was the best in the world. The humiliating defeats made China aware that they were, in fact, not the best civilization in the world and that they needed other ways to survive in the modern world. China looked to the Western nations because they had demonstrated repeatedly with their superior weapons and technology that they were actually superior and more powerful. For the longest time, unfortunately, China had been a victimized country, being the fighting ground for other foreign and imperialist nations who uninvitingly invaded China to utilize its soil and people for their imperialistic purposes. The Opium War, for instance, is one example of how the Chinese people have been treated inhumanely at the hands of foreign powers. Even though the Chinese people finally rebelled against the oppressive regime of outright imperialism by foreign nations, their efforts were futile as they were eventually slaughtered by the unmatched

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weapons that the foreign imperialists possessed. Moreover, China's humiliation was more deepened when even a smaller country of Japan defeated China in the Sino-Japanese War in 1894-5.

The May Fourth Movement of 1919 marked a significant period of Chinese history that represented a climax of the feelings of frustration and hopelessness of China. The movement was sparked by a national concern to revitalize China and to undergo a complete "facelift" of China's ways. Chinese nationalists, which included many youths, were not going to sit back while China gave into the ridiculous Twenty-one Demands that were made by the Japanese as repercussions from the war—basically, these demands would increase Japanese control of Manchuria and the Chinese economy. Not wanting to see China being exploited again by foreign imperialist nations, Ch'en, the nationalists, other Chinese literati, and the youth wanted to do something about the hopeless situation.

Ch'en realized that in order for China to become a modern nation, China had to adopt a new mindset altogether which would be characteristic of the Western culture. Ch'en, along with many other progressive intellectuals reasoned that the supremacy of Western powers was due to science and democracy. It was the ideology that was the backbone of Western cultures and the intellectuals believed that if China also adopted the Western ideology, China would soon be on their way toward modernization. However, he knew that in order to do this, traditional values, which seem to hinder China's process toward modernization had to be uprooted so that new values toward modernization could be planted. Without a new mindset that was adaptable to modernization, Ch'en believed that all changes previously implemented would be futile.

Ch'en believed strongly that unless China changes its old ways, that it was doomed to become extinct. Influenced by the social Darwinian explanation of the principles of survival and the need for change, Ch'en viewed that China needed to change their fundamental way of thinking in order to survive in a world dominated by modern nations. He tried to develop his social Darwinism into a cosmological foundation for his iconoclasm. In his article, *The Power of Resistance*, Ch'en exalted energy and vitality in cosmological terms. He goes on to explain that the "way of heaven (or nature)" was brutal and harsh. He argued that everything had to resist nature in order to survive; the evolution and existence of each thing depended upon whether or not it had this power of resistance. If there was no such power, there was no life, nor motion. Hence, the deepest cosmological reason for China's humiliation under Western powers lied in the absence of the power of resistance among the Chinese people.

For this reason, Ch'en felt that the ethics of Confucianism which encouraged passive submission to authorities would undermine the Chinese people to resist against the forces of foreign powers. Confucianism venerated rites and trained people to yield contributed to the passive submission to the forces of nature, which may threaten to become extinct.

Ch'en's Anti-Confucianism

Ch'en argued that everything "traditional" in China had been corrupted by the influence of Confucianism, which he considered as "a formless instrument that unifies and controls our spirit" (Grieder, 1981, p. 295). He contented that Confucianism was not compatible with the modern way of life, whose defining characteristic is the independence of the individual in the spheres of ethics, politics, economics, law, and social relations. The Confucian teachings of social ethics and social norms run counter to the modern way of life on all counts. The

essence of the modern spirit is equality and independence, whereas the epitome of Confucian ethics is the Three Bonds and the Five Ethical Relationships, which can only be defined as the morality of inequality. In his essay *The Way of Confucius and Modern Life*, Ch'en contrasts the differences between the Confucian life and the modern life:

The pulse of modern life is economic and the fundamental principle of economic production is individual independence. Its effect has penetrated ethics. Consequently the independence of the individual in the ethical field and the independence of property in the economic field bear witness to each other, thus reaffirming the theory [of such interaction]. Because of this [interaction], social mores and material culture have taken a great step forward.

In China, the Confucianists have based their teachings on their ethical norms. Sons and wives possess neither personal individuality nor personal property. Fathers and elder brothers bring up their sons and younger brothers and are in turn supported by them. It is said in chapter thirty of the Book of Rites that "While parents living, the son dares not regard his person or property as his own." This is absolutely not the way to personal independence. (Lin, 1979, p. 73)

The promotion of the individual rights of women and children, which had been previously neglected by the male-oriented, hierarchical system of Confucianism was also addressed. Ch'en cited the Book of Rites to show that the wife and the son cannot make independent political judgments because they have to obey the husband and the father, whereas such judgments by everyone are essential to a modern constitutional state. In modern democracies, sons and wives might join political parties other than those of their parents and husbands. But according to Confucianism, sons should accept their parent's beliefs, at least until three years after the latter's death. Furthermore, since women had to obey their fathers, husbands, and sons, women's suffrage was impossible. Also, social intercourse between men and women was not allowed, whereas it is a common and necessary practice in a modern society. Women and young people received a greater share of sympathy and attention in a modern society as they are affirmed of their individuality and are more independent and productive members of the society. Confucianism, however, tended to inferiorate women and younger people in forcing them to be subjugated to men and adults. Again, the whole concept of legitimacy of hierarchy was being attacked and equality was promoted in the modern thinking.

In contrast, Ch'en explained that modern society was composed of individuals acting as independent units, and its laws and ethics were designed to protect individual freedom and rights. Confucianism was based on a feudal society composed of family and clan units. The individual was regarded only as a member of the family, and not as an independent unit in the society and the state. Confucian ethics imposed on the individual filial piety to the family and loyal duty to the ruler, without providing him with individual rights. For instance, Ch'en attacked the promotion of the caste system and the inequality of status of individuals in the state. Again, this system was not compatible with modern governments. As long as such ethical and social principles governed the family and clan systems, neither personal nor economic independence of the individual was possible. In the modern society, free election of virtuous and able successors was to be chosen instead of rulers choosing his blood descendants. All these ethical principles of the feudal ages were highly inappropriate to modern individualistic society.

In support of the notion of the free development of a new identity based on individualism, Ch'en viewed that the concept of filial piety was harmful because even though filial piety helped social stability, it slowed down social mobility and efficient production. Under filial piety, the identity of the individual was suppressed.

When Confucius talked about filial piety, it meant to refer to the respect that one shows to his or her parents. But this notion of respecting one's parents began to take on more materialistic interpretation by the Sung dynasty period during the 11th century. Sons especially were expected to take care of their parents upon their retirement. The ethical concept of the independence of the individual personality was required to sanction the individual's financial independence. In accordance with Confucian theory grown-up children could not possess private property until their parents died, and women were deprived of all financial rights. This clashed directly with modern economic conceptions. To be a filial son was to work for one's parents as an act of filial piety. A son would receive great shame if he did not act filially by being selfish in order to pursue his own desires. Ch'en saw that in this system, individuals were bounded by their responsibilities to their parents to be filial and that they had to always submit their own independence for the sake of their parents.

Ch'en's anti-Confucian campaign reached its zenith at the debate with K'ang Yu-wei who wanted to promote Confucianism as a state religion. K'ang viewed that Confucianism was the saving faith for China and proposed that Confucianism be proclaimed the state religion, that a Confucian department be attached to the central government, and that Confucian "churches" be established throughout the country. In 1916, Ch'en began a totalistic attack in the *New Youth* as a reaction against the renewal of K'ang Yu-wei's obstinate effort to establish Confucianism as a state religion. He argued that Confucianism was not a religion at all because Confucius refused to discuss the soul or life after death, and did not advocate religious worship. K'ang held that morality to be the most important factor in saving China. He believed that moral restraints might be provided by the fear of a hierarchical power or unquestionable obedience to ethical rules enacted by Confucian principles. However, Ch'en contented that the essence of religion was a quest for the salvation of man's soul and that Confucianism, not dealing with the problem, was only a philosophy, which was concerned mainly with man's life on earth. Although Confucianism may have been wrongly used as a form of religion during the Han period Confucianism, Ch'en pointed out that its core teachings did not reflect that it was a religion but merely a guide to ethical codes of conduct.

Ch'en also believed that Confucian ideals had been tied to a Confucian form of government and were incompatible with "a republican constitutional system based on independence, equality, and freedom." He argued that those interested in developing a Confucian religion in China similar to the state religions of Western Europe by maintaining that in Europe "religious and monarchical absolutism, which were related, were abolished at the same time" (Feigon, 1983, p. 116). Europe, he insisted, was moving toward a utilitarian belief similar to the original idea of Confucianism. Therefore, rather than regress by developing a Confucian religion, Ch'en felt that China should develop a society like that of Europe, to be based on an ethic that benefited both the individual and the society, on the principle of freedom of religious belief; he held that if China could adopt European social and political institutions it could also become a creative, enterprising society. Although he believed that the government should not "force the people to espouse a religion," Ch'en advocated the adoption of Christianity in China, saying that Greek and Christian thought were the basis of modern Western philosophy, which China lacked, a real religion that overcomes the material spirit. Ch'en claimed that Christianity had the kind of purity of intention and ideals that he had long felt were essential ingredients to motivate Chinese people. In the end, however, Ch'en's interest in Christianity was short-lived as he became more interested in socialist and Communist doctrines.

Significantly, Ch'en's radical ideas against the Confucian tradition attracted many young intellectuals who were inclined toward liberalism and anarchism in their desire for the emancipation of the individual. He believed that there was a correlation between a greater individual freedom and a strong nation-state. In his famous essay, *Patriotism and Self-consciousness*, which was published in November 1914, Ch'en explains the relationship between individualism and nationalism. Ch'en maintained that there were two different elements that vied for control of men's minds: emotion and reason. Patriotism is a product of one's emotional commitment to one's country. Although patriotism is important, it should not be blindly-guided by emotion but rather by the faculty of reason, which focuses on the sole purpose of "protecting individual rights and to enrich individual happiness." Kuo-chia (one's country) exists for the sake of the individual and not vice versa. If the kuo-chia does not protect individual rights, then it does not deserve to be loved. Furthermore, instead of protecting individual rights and enriching individual happiness, kuo-chia was actually oppressing the people. Ch'en stated that "it is quite proper to love kuo-chia only if kuo-chia can protect its people, but why should the people love their kuo-chia when it is actually oppressing them" (Ch'en, 1920, p. 459)?

What Ch'en meant by kuo-chia was actually "state," (cheng-fu) not "nation or country" (kuo-chia). He believed that the state existed for the people and its only justification of existence was in its ability to respond to the needs of the people. In other words, Ch'en believed that the kind of loyalty to authority on which Confucians had placed a premium should not be confused with genuine patriotism. What he opposed was a blind love of, or an unconditional commitment to the state. He believed that the existence of kuo-chia could be justified only in terms of its function of "protecting individual rights and enriching individual happiness." If nationalism is understood as a "commitment to the preservation and advancement of the societal entity known as the nation," then no tension existed between Ch'en's individualism and his nationalism. His individualism, which was mainly concerned with the freedom of the individual from the shackles of Confucian principles, was related to his nationalism. The freed individual could contribute to both his own good and the good of the nation. Ch'en says that "the nation consists of many persons. When the stature of these persons is elevated, then the stature of the nation is elevated. When the rights of these persons are consolidated, then the rights of the nation are consolidated" (Ch'en, 1920, p. 461). The freedom of the individual was intricately related to national survival as well as to personal moral fulfillment.

Conclusion

It is difficult to adequately assess the contribution that Ch'en made in Chinese history, besides in his ties with Communism. Upon accepting the foreign ideology of Communism, Ch'en may have departed and acquired a different notion of modernization through science and democracy, which he originally viewed in Western nations. In retrospect, it seems that Ch'en was attracted to Communism, specifically the Bolshevik-type Communism, because he was so frustrated with the slow methods of change through education supported by conservative reformers that his strong passion to see China change for the better favored a radical and sudden, Bolshevik-type, revolutionary change in China. But as realistic as his approach was, Ch'en also faced the difficulty of transforming China that has been shaped by the tradition of Confucianism for over two thousand years. Inasmuch as Ch'en was successful in refuting the proposal of K'ang Yu-wei to establish Confucianism as the state religion, Ch'en's efforts of lobbying his vision to reject Confucianism in total and to

adopt Western ways would never be realized because he too, was swallowed up by the tide of Confucianism. But Ch'en will always be known to be a significant catalyst who inspired the Chinese people to be bold to be skeptical and to challenge the validity of their tradition, who captured the hearts of many young, zealous and radical intellectuals, who also wanted to see China become as resourceful and powerful as other Western nations.

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