

THE COMINTERN ROLE IN THE FORMATION OF THE UNITED FRONT IN 1924 IN CHINA

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Background

During the first two decades of the twentieth century, the communist wave had entered China, and was slowly replacing western democratic and socialist beliefs. One of the prominent figures in the May Fourth Movement, Ch'en Tu-hsiu¹ (1879–1942), began dismayed with western ideals, and tried to adapt the idea of Marxism to China. With his influence and with help of the Communism International or the Comintern (CI),² the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) was set up in July 1921. It aimed to overthrow foreign imperialism and the feudal warlords, in order to unify China and establish a socialist government under proletariat rule.

Before it could achieve this objective, the CI had ordered the CCP to cooperate with the Koumintang (KMT)³ in a United Front. The CI sent its messengers to China to co-ordinate the co-operation between these two parties. When all problems had been resolved, a Sun-Joffe manifesto was released in 1923, which received Russia's support of Sun Yat-sen's struggle for national unification and independence of China.⁴ The official co-operation between The CCP and the KMT was officially sealed at the Kuomintang's the Reorganisation Conference of January, 1924.⁵

The United Front and the Opposition

The road to this United Front was rocky. Originally, the CCP opposed any collaboration with the KMT. They did not believe in Sun Yat-sen⁶ (1866–1925) after the failure of the 1911 revolution. The KMT's image among the young Chinese intellectuals had deteriorated. Furthermore, the KMT was a bourgeois party, and had very different aims from the CCP. The KMT would confront their aim to create a socialism government.

However, the Second Congress of the CI had adopted Lenin's thesis to support the national movement that was led by the bourgeoisie. The Congress of the Toilers of the East Asia in January 21, 1922, also took the same stand. This situation forced the CCP to follow the same line. At the Second Congress of the CCP, they had adopted the proposal to form an alliance with the KMT, in effect a two-party alliance.⁷ But Sun rejected the CCP policy. The CI changed tack and touted the CCP cadres to join the KMT as individuals, thus conducting their activities under the aegis of the KMT individually.⁸

The problem here was the question of how the United Front should come about? Should their ploy be extra-party co-operation, or inter-party co-operation? By joining the KMT as individuals, the CCP's members might have been confused. According to Chang Kuo-t'ao⁹ (1897–1979), joining the KMT could not be compared with the Western European Communist movement.¹⁰ This deadlock had led the CI despatched Hendricus Sneevliet (Maring) to "advise" the Chinese communist to joining the KMT to form the United Front.¹¹ However, under pressure from Maring the CCP accepted as an irrevocable decision from the CI the need to join the KMT on an individual basis. Before the CCP accepted this proposal, Ch'en had demanded an oath of allegiance to Sun personally, and signing of the oath with their fingerprints must be revoked.¹²

As this problem had eroded, the CI gave several guidelines for the CCP to enter the KMT. The CCP had been warned not to merge with the KMT or "fold up its own banner." Membership in the KMT should not be entered into if it would mean an effacement of the special political characteristics of the CCP. They also had been urged to prevent the KMT from attempting to court the capitalist powers and their agents. In addition, they had responsibility to influence the KMT toward unifying its efforts with the policies and undertakings of Soviet Russia in its struggle against European, American, and Japanese imperialism.¹³ Lastly, as the vanguard of the proletariat, it was her role to lead the proletarian movement.

Lenin's Thesis

A main reason behind the CI's order to the CCP to enter the United Front with the KMT lies in Lenin's thesis to the Second Congress of the CI in July 19 - August 6, 1920. Lenin had prepared a plan which attempted to generalise a strategy for revolution in a vast and heterogeneous area of "backward and Colonial" countries including China, Persia, Africa and the Dutch Indies.¹⁴ According to his thesis, he called for a world-wide struggle against imperialism, and a close alliance of all national and colonial movements with Soviet Russia. This movement would be led by bourgeois-democratic elements in colonial and backward countries, and the Communist Parties and the CI must support these movements.¹⁵ This action had to be taken due to the conditions prevailing in backward and colonial countries that had limited industries. It was impossible to apply a dialectical theory to these countries. Entering the bourgeois liberation movements were deemed a desirable measure.

It also urged the Communist Parties to enter into an alliance with the national bourgeois-democracies in colonial and backward countries, but not merge with them. In addition, the Communist Parties should preserve the independence of the national proletarian movements, even in its most rudimentary form.¹⁶ However, Lenin's thesis was criticised by Manabendra Nath Roy¹⁷ (1887-1954). As a compromise, Maring¹⁸ (1883-1942) informed the Congress that the term "bourgeois-democratic movement" would be changed to "revolutionary national-liberation movement."¹⁹ This term can be defined as those "whose leaders would not oppose us (the communists) in our efforts to educate and organise the peasantry and the masses of exploited people in general, in revolutionary spirit."²⁰

In China's case, the CI had adopted a resolution that named the KMT as the only "serious nationalist-revolutionary group in China."²¹ Since the independent workers' movement was still weak and the central task was national revolution against the imperialist and feudal warlords, the Executive Committee of Communist International (ECCI) found it necessary to co-ordinate the activities of the KMT and the young CCP.²² Moscow's view of the KMT was that it could be her Trojan Horse for gaining control China.²³ By entering the KMT as individuals to form a block from within the communists could control the only organisation which was capable of attracting mass support, and at the same time they could prepare for the destruction of the bourgeois leadership in the Chinese revolution.²⁴

The 'block within' strategy had two main aims. Firstly, by aligning with the KMT, the people of China would be united in forming

the national movement can create the Great Revolution in China to overthrow the imperialists and warlords in China. When China was united and independent from imperialism, the second stage, where the proletariat would begin the struggle against the national bourgeoisie, in order to establish a socialist regime in China under the leadership of the proletariat, would be ushered in.

The Problem of the CCP

The CI idea to establish the United Front was due to the perceived weakness of the CCP. It could not afford to depend totally on the infant CCP to make the Great Revolution in China alone. Furthermore, the CI could not rely solely on students and the professors in the CCP.²⁵ The CI wanted a party that was strong, and had much more influence among the Chinese people. The KMT filled that criterion, although it was not very strong. Compared to the CCP, the KMT was more mature. In addition, the KMT had the aim of unifying China, and creating a democratic government. The CI viewed the KMT as the true revolutionary party in China.

Also, the CCP had several intrinsic weaknesses. When it was first established, it only had 58 members. Its membership only had increased to around 300 by the late summer of 1923.²⁶ In the 1920s, China's working class was in its infancy (among a population of a hundred million) and it was deemed difficult to create a true proletarian movement. At the Hangkew Plenary at West Lake (西湖, Hsü Hú), in Chekiang province of eastern China, in 1922, Maring had pointed out that China was not facing a socialist revolution, but a national democratic one.²⁷ He added that, by joining the KMT, communists could revolutionise the KMT from within. By doing so, they could also influence the working masses.²⁸ He told Ch'en that the proletariat in China was still too small to maintain an independent struggle by itself, and that the peasantry had little political understanding.²⁹ The failure of the Peking-Hankow Railway strike³⁰ in 1923 showed the weakness of the CCP.

The co-operation between the CCP and the KMT was important in highlighting that the fact that the working class and the CCP was unable, left to their own devices, to overcome their colossal problems. Furthermore, Maring told the CCP that the KMT was not a bourgeois party, but that it represented an alliance of all classes.³¹ In Moscow's eyes, the KMT was seen as a bloc of four classes, namely the bourgeoisie, the petty bourgeoisie, workers, and peasants. The bloc of four classes in the KMT could create the national movement in order to make the Great Revolution in China.

At the Fourth Congress of the CI, the CCP representative Liu Jen-ch'ing stressed several points, highlighting how important the co-operation with the KMT was to the CCP:-

. . . , our party has decided to form a united front with the national revolutionary party Kuomintang There are two reason[s] for this. In the first place, we want to propagandize the many organized workers in the national-revolutionary party and win them over [to] us. In the second place, we can only fight imperialism if we combine our force, the forces of the petty bourgeoisie and the proletariat. We have the intention to go into competition with this party in regard to the organisation and propagandizing of the masses.³²

In Liu's speech, he gave two important reasons that argued that the United Front was necessary. He knew that the KMT could be useful in order to organise the workers. In addition, the CCP could join forces with the KMT in order to fight imperialism and the warlords.

He warned the CCP that they would lose the masses' support, if they did not join the United Front with the KMT.

If we do not join this party [the KMT] we shall remain isolated and we shall preach a communism which consists of a great and noble ideal, but one which the masses do not follow. The masses certainly would follow the bourgeois party, and this party would use the masses for its purpose. If we join the party, we shall be able to show the masses that we too are for a revolutionary democracy, . . .³³

The CCP's goals would perish without support from the masses. They could not rely solely on the small proletariat in China in order to achieve their goals.

The Failure to Co-operate with the Warlords

Before the CI forced the CCP to co-operate with the KMT, they had collaborated with General Wu Pei-fu³⁴ in Loyang. Gregory Voitinsky had built up an understanding with General Wu. In the beginning, this co-operation appeared to be going well. General Wu had allowed workers to initiate the General Trade Union under albeit his control. Not only that, General Wu had given the CCP to use of the railway administration and its facilities, to improve communication, as and a means for increasing the party's strength.³⁵

With this support from General Wu, the union became stronger, and initiated a general strike in the Peking-Hankow railway on February 7, 1923. This marked the watershed of the relationship. General Wu suppressed the strike ruthlessly, and executed 39 people in its wake. Forty people, furthermore, were sentenced to prison and 1000 were dismissed. All railway labour unions were dissolved.³⁶ The incidents highlighted the futility of communists' alignment with warlords.

After this, the communist could not find suitable allies in China to co-operate with. General Chang Tso-ling was pro-Japan, and also obstructed the democratic government. When the communists looked south, there was only General Chen Chung-ming a rather small warlord, he was based in Kwangtung. The warlords were self-interested and tried to maintain their power base in their own territory. They were not concerned with a programme to make a national revolution. Furthermore, the warlords were easily swayed by the imperialist powers.

So, the CCP's only potential alliance, was the KMT. The KMT was the true national revolutionary party, which looked towards, and was concerned with China's future. Its ideas and interests were similar to the communists. When Maring had an interview with Sun, he was much impressed with the KMT. After this the CI began to turn its attention toward the KMT as a potential ally, and initiated talks with Sun.

Sun Yat Sen's Request

After the Ch'ing Dynasty was overthrown in 1911/1912, Sun Yat-sen's dream of seeing the Republic of China as a strong democratic government was thwarted when President Yuan Shih-kai established his authoritarian rule. However, Sun's dream did not fade, and he continued in his attempts in South China only to be betrayed twice in 1918 and 1922 by southern warlords. Sun Yat-sen, apart to get support from the Chinese overseas, also look support from foreign powers.³⁷ His idea was that with this support he could mobilise his revolution movement against Yuan Shih-kai and later warlords. Firstly Sun Yat-sen tried to approach the American and Britain but failed. Next he turned to the Russian.³⁸

After the victory of the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia, Chinese's eyes were turned toward Russia. Both countries had similar characteristics, defeated they both had been by Japan, both had tried to modernise their countries, and both were undeveloped countries. Sun described France and the United States as old-fashioned republics, and the Soviet Russia as the new type of republic. He looked back to

his past with apprehension, "I have been disappointed in almost everything I previously believed in. Now I am convinced that the only real and sincere friend of the Chinese Revolution is Soviet Russia."³⁹

To recognise the victory of Russian Revolution, Sun sent a telegraphed to Lenin on June, 1918 congratulating him on behalf of the South China Parliament and the Chinese Revolutionary Party, and hoping that the Russian and Chinese parties might join together in a common struggle.⁴⁰ From then on, relations flourished, with a CI delegation visiting Sun, for discussions. Maring talked with Sun in December, 1921, in Kweillin, and established unofficial ties between the KMT and Russia.⁴¹ He was also very pleased with the KMT's policy toward the Labour Union. The Canton government supported the Hong Kong seamens strike, which broke out on January 12, 1922, by lending \$100,000 to help the striking seamen who sought refuge in to Canton.⁴²

Some of the KMT's policies were attracting to the CI, such as the *T'ung-meng-hui* Manifesto, which called for a degree of fairness in the distribution of land, and full employment;⁴³ also the "the people's livelihood" in the Three Principles of the People, was often referred to as socialism.⁴⁴ Furthermore the KMT was the revolutionary party that best suited Lenin's thesis. With it being seen as a party of all classes, the Third Congress of the CCP had acknowledged the KMT as the "central force in the national revolution."⁴⁵

Sun also needed aid from Russia after he failed to get support from Britain, the United States and Canada. He knew the KMT had degenerated, and only Russia could help to rebuild it.⁴⁶ As a condition for the co-operation, Sun agreed to admit CCP members into the folds of the KMT, but was not prepared to establish an equal partnership between them.⁴⁷ The CI agreed with Sun's conditions, and ordered the CCP to join the KMT as individuals. Sun did not think that communists had any relevance for a China where there were no rich and poor, but only poor and poorer.⁴⁸

Russian Foreign Policy

Russia had two main objectives in relation to China; to protect and advance the interest of the Russian nation in the East Asia, and to advance world revolution and weaken Russia's enemy, the capitalist states.⁴⁹ In East Asia, Russia's long border with China was open to interference from the capitalist countries. Russia's biggest enemy, Britain had a huge economic interest in China.⁵⁰ Moscow thought it was useless to attack the capitalists in Europe, given that they had so much economic strength in their colonies. China was seen to be its

platform to destroy the capitalist resources. The caricature in figure 1 illustrates the British community's opinion regarding the Soviet Union's motive to disturb the British interests in China.

After it was defeated by Japan in 1904-05, Russia was very apprehensive over Japan's activity in China. Japan was very interested in China's resources and had their pro-Japanese puppet government in China, lead by General Chang Tso-ling. This was a danger that could jeopardise Russia's goals. Furthermore, Japan and the western powers could be seen to give support to Russia's rival. The memory of the counter-revolutionary by Horvarth, in 1917, with Japanese and western backing, still it remembered. The Soviet government's attention to the east intensified when the Red Army⁵¹ was defeated in Poland in the summer 1920, as well as the collapse of urban industry at Russia.⁵²

Figure 1



Source: *The North China Herald*, 18 July 1925.

Russia needed an ally in China for her diplomatic strategic and national interest but it sought not the warlords, but the KMT, to satisfy this CI end. In a country dominated by imperialism, and undeveloped to boot, it was necessary to unite as many strata of the population as possible against the common enemy.⁶³ It was the communist duty to accomplish this by joining hands with the KMT in order to launch a revolution against capitalism.

Conclusion

The United Front was regarded by the CI as a tool to continue the class struggle in the world. As a semi-colonial and semi-feudal country with limited industries, it was not possible to apply the dialectical theory in China. Lenin's thesis planned to make a 'block within' strategy to penetrate the bourgeois liberation movement to achieve their goals, and established a socialist government. The CCP had been ordered to combine forces with the KMT to mobilise the masses, and transform them into the national revolutionary movement. When the first aim was achieved, then the CCP can initiate the proletarian struggle against the national bourgeoisie. So went the argument.

With the CCP's limited numbers and its first attempts at organising the labour movement a failure, it was seen as necessary to form the co-operation with the KMT. Furthermore, the KMT welcomed this co-operation with the CCP. Sun had recognised Russia as the true friend of the Chinese Revolution. The CI also had defined the KMT as the real revolutionary party. Other parties were seen as not suitable to achieve the communists' aims. The first attempt to align with warlords had failed; the CCP-KMT co-operation was a second attempt. In addition, the KMT had several characteristics that attracted the CI. As the all classes' parties, it could mobilise the masses to launch the national revolution.

On the other hand, this CI policy was directly related to Russia's foreign policy towards the East Asia. Russia knew that China was a vulnerable and chaotic country with rivalry rampant between warlords and imperialists, interfering with her internal problems. It was also alarmed with existence of Japan and the western powers in China that could make insecure her internal affairs. This forced Russia to look for an ally that could curb the foreign interference, and at same time act as a counter attack against the capitalists in China.

Notes

- ¹ Ch'en Tu-hsiu was born in Anqing (安慶) in Anhui (安徽) province. In 1915 he founded the journal *New Youth* in Shanghai. He, Li Ta-chao and Hu Shih encouraged Chinese youth to create a new culture free from old Chinese belief such as Confucianism. He was dean of the school of arts and sciences of Beijing University from Jan., 1917, until forced to resign under conservative pressure in March 1919. Ch'en was converted to Marxism in the period following the student-led intellectual revolution known as the May Fourth Movement (1919).
- ² The Comintern was an international Communist organization founded in March 1919, by Vladimir Lenin and the Russian Communist Party (Bolshevik). This organization intended to fight "by all available means, including armed force, for the overthrow of the international bourgeoisie and for the creation of an international Soviet republic as a transition stage to the complete abolition of the State."
- ³ The Kuomintang (National People's Party) was established in 1912 by Sun Yat-sen and Sung Chiao-jen.
- ⁴ Robert North, *Moscow and Chinese Communists*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1963, Second Edition, p. 71.
- ⁵ Lucien Bianco, *Origins of the Chinese Revolution, 1915-1947*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1986, translated by Muriel Bell, p. 55
- ⁶ Sun Yat-sen known as "father of modern China" was born in 1866. He played an important role in the overthrow of the Ch'ing Dynasty in 1911. Then he became the first provisional president when the Republic of China was founded in 1912. He later co-founded KMT where he served as its first leader. Sun was a uniting figure in post-Imperial China, and remains unique among twentieth century Chinese politicians for being widely revered in both mainland China and in Taiwan.
- ⁷ Harold Issacs, *The Tragedy of the Chinese Revolution*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1961, p. 58.
- ⁸ Lee Feigon, *Chen Duxiu: Founder of the Chinese Communist Party*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983, p. 175.
- ⁹ Chang Kuo-t'ao was born in Pingxiang (萍鄉). He was a founding member and leader of the CCP during the late 1920s and 1930s.
- ¹⁰ Chang Kuo-t'ao, *The Rise of the Chinese Communist Party 1921-1927*, Wichita: The University Press of Kansas, 1971, p. 254.
- ¹¹ S. A. Smith, *A Road is Made: Communism in Shanghai, 1920-1927*, Surrey: Curzon Press, 2000, p.52 and Dov Bing, "Sneevliet and the Early Years of the CCP," *The China Quarterly*, No.48, Oct.-Dec., 1971, p. 681.
- ¹² Chang Kuo-t'ao, *The Rise of The Chinese Communist Party 1921-1927*, pp. 254-255.
- ¹³ North, *Moscow and Chinese Communists*, p.72, G.Kara-Murza (comp.) and P. Mif (ed.), *Strategiia i taktika Kominternu v natsional'no-kolonial'noi Revolutsii na Primere Kitaia*, Moscow, 1934, p. 112.

- ¹⁴ C. Martin Wilbur and Julie Lien-ying How, *Missionaries of Revolution: Soviet Advisers And Nationalist China 1920-1927*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989, p. 23.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁶ Allen S. Whiting, *Soviet Policies in China 1917-1924*, Stanford: University Press, 1968, pp. 49-50.
- ¹⁷ M. N. Roy was Indian revolutionary. He also an international Communist leader and theorist, though he later denounced communism.
- ¹⁸ Maring or Hendricus Josephus Franciscus Marie Sneevliet, known as Henk Sneevliet was a Dutch Communist, who was active in both the Netherlands and the Dutch East-Indies.
- ¹⁹ Wilbur and How, *Missionaries of Revolution*, p. 24.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, p.24.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, p.58.
- ²² *Ibid.*
- ²³ North, *Moscow and Chinese Communists*, p. 66.
- ²⁴ Whiting, *Soviet Policies in China 1917-1924*, p. 96.
- ²⁵ Benjamin I. Schwartz, *Chinese Communism and the Rise of Mao*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1961, p. 38.
- ²⁶ Bianco, *Origins of the Chinese Revolution, 1915-1947*, pp. 54 and 55.
- ²⁷ Chang Kuo-t'ao, *The Rise of The Chinese Communist Party 1921-1927*, p. 253.
- ²⁸ Wilbur and How, *Missionaries of Revolution*, p. 52.
- ²⁹ Feigon, *Chen Duxiu: Founder of the Chinese Communist Party*, p. 179.
- ³⁰ Wu P'ei-fu, the Northern Warlord, ordered his troops to break up the strike. At end the massacre of sixty workers on February 7, 1923.
- ³¹ Feigon, *Chen Duxiu: Founder of the Chinese Communist Party*, 169.
- ³² North, *Moscow and Chinese Communists*, p. 70, from *Protocoll des IV Kongresses der Kommunisticken internationale*, Hamburg's, 1923, p. 615.
- ³³ *Ibid.*
- ³⁴ Wu P'ei-fu was one of the Chinese Warlords, who had dominated Republican China from 1916 to 1927.
- ³⁵ Chung-Gi kwei, *The Kuomintang -Communist Struggle in Chin 1922-1949*, The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1970, p.15.
- ³⁶ *Ibid.*, p.16.
- ³⁷ Marie-Claire Bergere, *Sun Yat-sen*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998, p.305.
- ³⁸ *Ibid.*
- ³⁹ Wilbur and How, *Missionaries of Revolution*, pp. 34 and 35.
- ⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p.21.
- ⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 34, from Sneevliet, "Report to the Executive of Comrate H. Maring," pp. 369, 371-72, and Teng, "A True Record," p. 1411.
- ⁴² *Ibid.*
- ⁴³ Shanti Swarup, *A Study of the Chinese Communist Movement*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966, p. 27, taken from First Manifesto of the CCP on

- the Current Situation; in Brandt Schwartz, and Fairbank (eds), *Documentary History of Chinese Communism*, London, 1953, p. 62.
- ⁴⁴ Michael Lynch, *China: From Empire to People's Republic 1900-49*, London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1996, p. 34.
- ⁴⁵ Bianco, *Origins of the Chinese Revolution, 1915-1947*, p. 57.
- ⁴⁶ Hu Sheng, *A Concise History of The Communist Party of China*, Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1994, pp. 56 and 57.
- ⁴⁷ Chang Kuo-t'ao, *The Rise of The Chinese Communist Party 1921-1927*, p. 253.
- ⁴⁸ Jack Gray, *Rebellions and Revolutions: China From The 1800s to the 1980s*, Oxford: The Oxford University Press, 1990, p. 211.
- ⁴⁹ Wilbur and How, *Missionaries of Revolution*, p. 22.
- ⁵⁰ The significance of trade may be demonstrated by the level of British investment in China. In 1902 this represented 33 percent of total foreign investment in the country, rising in 1914 to 37.7 percent and falling a little in 1931 to 36.7 percent. See C. F. Remer, *Foreign Investments in China*, New York: Howard Fertig, 1968, p. 76.
- ⁵¹ The Red Army or Workers' and Peasants' Red Army was the armed forces first organized by the Bolsheviks during the Russian Civil War in 1918 and that, in 1922, became the army of the Soviet Union.
- ⁵² Arthur N. Holcombe, *The Chinese Revolution: A Phase in the Regeneration of a World Power*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1930, p. 157.
- ⁵³ Schwartz, *Chinese Communism And the Rise of Mao*, p. 38.