My Feelings on the Death of Mr Cai Jiemin

Chen Duxiu

This obituary was added by Hu Shi or his friends in Taiwan to the Free China Press edition of Chen Duxiu’s last writings; it is absent from the original Shanghai edition. Cai Jiemin is another name of Cai Yuanpei (Ts’ai Yuan-p’ei) (1868–1940), who was a member of the Shanghai group of terrorist assassins (which Chen Duxiu briefly joined) and a supporter of Russian nihilism before he joined the Guomindang, of which he became a veteran leader. Cai was China’s most outstanding liberal educationalist. He sponsored the May Fourth (or New Culture Movement) around 1919 in his capacity (between 1916 and 1926) as Chancellor of Beijing University. He founded and became President of the Academia Sinica.


‘Who since ancient times has not died?’1 Life is short, and death counts for little, yet I cannot help but grieve the death of Cai Jiemin, not only because of his contribution to the public weal, but also on account of the personal relationship between us! Thoughts and feelings about society and politics over the last forty years!

The first time I collaborated with Mr Cai was in the last years of the Guangxu reign [1875–1908] of the Qing dynasty. In those days, Yang Dusheng, He Haiqiao, Zhang Xingyan,2 and others in Shanghai launched an organisation committed to studying the use of explosives in a projected campaign of assassination. Xingyan wrote a letter inviting me to join, and once I had reached Shanghai from Anhui, I did so. I stayed in Shanghai for more than a month, and each day I experimented together with Yang Dusheng and Zhong Xianchang3 in manufacturing explosives. Mr Cai too used to attend frequently in order to conduct experiments and get together for a chat. The second time I collaborated with

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1 A line from a poem by Wen Tianxiang, a national hero and poet captured by the Mongol army and finally put to death because he refused to serve the new Yuan dynasty. The following line says, ‘Let my red heart glitter in history’.
2 Zhang Xingyan (1872–1973) (another name of Zhang Shizhao) achieved fame as a journalist, writer, and politician. He was one of Chen Duxiu’s old friends, but his politics were extremely unstable. He changed from a radical into a conservative, and from a cabinet minister in a warlord’s government into an admirer and supporter of Mao Zedong.
3 A member of the Shanghai terrorist group.
Mr Cai was from 1916 to 1918, at Beijing University. That period of joint activity lasted relatively long, and I got to know him much better.

Generally speaking, Mr Cai was a benign and uncontentious person, a lovable man who would offend no one. Sometimes, however, when his moral integrity or some matter of principle was at stake or when he had already resolved on a certain course of action, he became stubborn and unbending and was no longer prepared to accommodate others, even though he continued to adopt a mild and gentle attitude. That was the first thing that caused people to admire the old gentleman. After the Reform Movement of 1898, Mr Cai himself often inclined towards the new progressive movement, but while he was President of Beijing University, he employed all sorts of people whose scholarship he admired: not only [radicals like] Hu Shi, Qian Xuantong, and Chen Duxiu, but conservatives like Chen Hanzhang and Huang Kan and even people such as Gu Hongming (who wanted to restore the Qing) and Liu Shipei (who participated in the Hongxian movement). Such magnanimous toleration of dissident and alien viewpoints and respect for academic freedom

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4 The Reform Movement, inaugurated by Kang Youwei in 1895 and supported by Liang Qichao, Tan Sitong, and other leading thinkers, advocated the transformation of Confucianism into a religious movement, to provide the basis for modernising the state and the education system and for establishing representative institutions. It came to an abrupt end in 1898, when the reactionary Empress Dowager, Cixi, carried out a coup against Kang and his supporters.

5 Qian Xuantong (Ch'ien Hsüan-t'ung) (1887–1939) became an anti-Manchu revolutionary in 1903 and later leaned to anarchism. He taught linguistics at Beijing University. During and after the May Fourth period, he played an important role in reforming written Chinese and in propagating the new culture in general. In some respects he went even further than Chen Duxiu and Hu Shi. Later on, however, he devoted himself entirely to the study of ancient Chinese history.

6 Huang Kan (Huang K'an) (1886–1935) was a leading disciple of Zhang Binglin (1868–1936), the famous classical scholar and revolutionary; in 1915 he recommended Qian Xuantong to Beijing University.

7 Gu Hongming (Ku Hung-ming) (1857–1928), born of Chinese ancestors in Penang, Malaya, was known as an ’imitation Western man’; he was fluent in several European languages but not in Chinese. He wore a queue and hated both foreign colonialism and Chinese republicanism.

8 Liu Shipei (Liu Shih-p'ei) (1884–1919) was an early Chinese advocate (in Japan) of socialism. At first he was an anti-Manchu revolutionary. Later he became a conservative literary man and favoured the restoration of the monarchy in China.

9 In August 1915, Yuan Shikai, president of the newly established Chinese Republic, launched a movement to restore the monarchy, with himself as emperor. He announced as his reign title ‘Grand Constitutional Era’ (hongxian), which was to begin with 1916. Within six months, Yuan was discountenanced and dead; his Hongxian dynasty lasted a mere one hundred days.