Modernization without Modernity: Tai Chi-t’ao, a Conservative Nationalist

W. G. SAYWELL

University of Toronto, Toronto, Canada

TAI CHI-T’AO was born in Kwanghan, Szechwan province on January 6, 1891. After studying in Japan between 1905 and 1909 he returned to China where he became a known radical and influential journalist. Shortly after Sun Yat-sen’s return to China to accept the Presidency of the new Republic in January 1912, Tai became his personal secretary a post, he held until Sun’s death in 1925. Writing for the Shanghai newspaper the Min-ch’uan pao throughout 1912 he was one of the sharpest critics of the Republic’s politics and President Yuan Shih-k’ai.¹

After the failure of the second revolution in 1913 Tai fled to Japan where he served as Sun’s interpreter until his return to China in March 1916. In exile he helped Sun establish the Chung-hua ke-ming tang and wrote for its journal the Min Kuo.² He was one of the first revolutionaries to support the New Culture movement.³ Later, in 1919 he published one of China’s first major translations of a Marxist treatise.⁴ Although he readily acknowledged his Marxist beliefs at that time and was a close associate of those who founded the Chinese Communist party he appears never to have joined it. By late 1920 he had begun his swing away from Marxism and when the Kuomintang admitted Communists into its reorganized ranks in January 1924 Tai only reluctantly continued to work for the party. Upon Sun’s death in 1925 Tai became a leading interpreter of Sun Yat-senism. His major writings of that year laid the ideological ground-

¹ Tai wrote for the Min-ch’ian pao under the name Tai T’ien-ch’ou. These articles were later published in Tai T’ien-ch’ou wen chi, (The Collected Works of Tai T’ien-ch’ou) first published as Yü-fu T’ien-ch’ou wen-chi, (Shanghai, 1913) reprinted (Taipei, 1962).
² Tai appears to have supported the literary revolution and in particular the pai-hua movement long before Sun gave it his ambivalent support and probably before most members of Sun’s parties. He implies this himself in Kuo-min ko-ming yü Chung-kuo kuo-min-tang, (Shanghai, 1925), p. 47. For his earliest proposals on the literary revolution see “Tu-yü” in Min-kuo, (May-August, 1914), pp. 203–225.
³ Tai Chi-t’ao, trans. “Ma-k’o ssu tzu-pen lun chieh-shuo” (An Analysis of Marx’ Capital) A translation of Karl Kautsky’s Karl Marx’s Oekonomische Lehren, published in Chien-she, vol. 1, no. 4, (November, 1919), no. 5 (December, 1919) and vol. 2, no. 1 (January, 1920), no. 2 (March, 1920) and no. 3 (April, 1920). Also reprinted as Tzu-pen lun chieh-shuo (An Analysis of Capital) This translation was completed by Hu Han-min (Shanghai, 1927).
work for Chiang Kai-shek’s rupture with the Communists in 1927 and for Kuomintang policy after it came to national power in 1928.

Between 1912 and 1928 Tai Chi-t’ao endorsed most of the major suggestions at one time or another offered for China’s modernization. He supported all the basic components of constitutional government and republicanism. He demanded a free press, administrative reforms, modern budgetary procedures, and a two-party system. In the economic sphere he supported Sun’s principle of the min sheng which he explicitly equated with national socialism. He urged China’s rapid industrialization based on a scientific and technological revolution and supported by a communications revolution. He called for the abrogation of the unequal treaties, the adoption of a protective tariff and suggested novel schemes for the control of foreign investment and loans. He wrote at great length on the need to develop modern banks and banking laws, and supported the formation of joint stock companies and cartels. He shared the revolutionaries’ dreams of opening and colonizing China’s vast frontiers and fully exploiting their virgin timber lands and rich mineral resources.

In the social sector Tai promoted major educational reforms emphasizing the need for compulsory primary education and the importance of vocational and technical schools. He also suggested improved methods of public health and sanitation. He was an early supporter of workers’ co-operatives and labor unions and drafted detailed laws for their operation. In short, Tai Chi-t’ao considered himself a modernizer and a modern man. But from the outset he betrayed attitudes and assumptions which critically inhibited him from fully embracing modernity as a way of life.

In the critical years 1912 to 1928 Tai Chi-t’ao swung across much of the ideological spectrum. Political changes and perhaps opportunism motivated these shifts. Yet there remained in his ideas a compelling intellectual consistency, for Tai like many of his generation was intent primarily upon the restoration of a great China. Thus he interpreted, accepted, or rejected each ideological option with the single criterion of its relevance to the reconstruction of a great civilization based on national wealth, power and international respect.

All nationalists share a characteristic belief, or the psychological need to express a belief, in the distinctiveness and value of their own historical tradition. But not all nationalist movements spring from the decay of a tradition which believed in the cultural superiority and universal applicability of its values. Chinese nationalism did. Modern Chinese nationalism sprang from the humiliating recognition of China’s physical weakness in the face of foreign imperialism and was motivated by a quest for the restoration of a great China. Inevitably Manchu rule was the first scapegoat, imperialism the later antagonist. As the years passed and the revolutionary tradition began to polarize between Communist and Conservative, concepts of the Chinese nation and culture changed, but the connotation of “restoration” remained an essential ingredient in its development.

Nineteenth century attempts at modernization within the Confucianist tradition failed. Tai and other revolutionaries, strongly influenced by changes in