

Review - The Formation of the Chinese Communist Party

Written by Kendrick Kuo

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KENDRICK KUO, APR 22 2014

The Formation of the Chinese Communist Party
By: Ishikawa Yoshihiro (trans. Joshua A. Fogel)
New York: Columbia University Press, 2012

The Formation of the Chinese Communist Party is the culmination of Ishikawa Yoshihiro's years of research into this fascinating political entity. Ishikawa analyzes the three years most important to the history of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), 1919 to 1921—a period that remains a topic of debate. His analysis begins in 1919 with eruption of the May Fourth movement in protest to the Treaty of Versailles, and ends shortly after the CCP's First National Congress in 1921. Ishikawa's detailed treatment of oftentimes complex and confusing relationships between different personalities and shadowy entities makes for dense reading that will likely only interest specialists. At the same time, students of Chinese history will benefit from the window the book provides into the historical debates surrounding this preeminent political organization of modern China.

Official CCP history is largely settled in China; the consensus is that the CCP was formed at the first national congress in 1921. One can visit the location where this took place, in the *xintiandi* district of Shanghai, and explore a museum that closely follows the official account of this momentous occasion. However, Ishikawa argues that Chen Duxiu, in partnership with the Soviet Union and the Communist International (Comintern), founded the CCP prior to the first national congress, in November 1920.

The International Dimension of the CCP's Formation

The orthodox reading of CCP's early history relies on memoirs. Ishikawa brilliantly brings archival evidence to bear on these personal accounts, unearthing documentation from Chinese, Japanese, Russian, and English sources. In so doing, he casts doubt on the veracity of these memoirs. The use of foreign sources also serves the purpose of making a broader point: the CCP was not a natural outgrowth of indigenous intellectuals coming to embrace Bolshevism through an independent journey. Reliance on foreign aid has been largely expunged from Party mythology.

Ishikawa offers a corrective analysis that may be the most important contribution he makes to the wider corpus of Chinese history. The "Li [Dazhao] in the north and Chen [Duxiu] in the south" thesis, which buttresses the independent formation of the CCP without external guidance, is a simplistic and erroneous generalization. In Ishikawa's narrative, the Comintern representatives Gregory Voitinsky and Hendricus Sneevliet (more commonly known by the alias "Maring") figure prominently in their leadership of the nascent CCP, their provision of financial resources, and their push for the Communists to work with moderate socialists and anarchists.

Ishikawa illuminates the voyages of individual Chinese Communists to Japan and their tutelage by Japanese doyens of communist literature. He traces the ups and downs of the communist publishing industry and the financial patronage of the Soviet Union. Surprisingly, he even discovers links with the Socialist Party of America—*New Youth* (*Xin Qingnian*) bore an almost exact replication of the Socialist Party of America's logo.

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Ishikawa examines extensively the impact the translations of communist literature had on the dissemination of communist ideology in China. He argues that *New Youth* acted as a “translation vehicle” for *Soviet Russia*, an English-language magazine published by the Russian Soviet Government Bureau in New York. Knowledge of Japanese was also very important for accessing communist literature. Although Ishikawa does not explore the wider impact of translations on the late Qing and early republican era, one cannot help but see the Chinese Communist experience as merely one stream of a larger river of Western ideas flowing from Japan to China. The great reformer Liang Qichao spent his exile in Japan. Social Darwinian ideas came to China via Japan, as did the notion of *minzu* (nationalities), the definition of which would be contested by the CCP and the Nationalists.

Ishikawa's Heterodoxy

Ishikawa makes several controversial arguments throughout *The Formation of the Chinese Communist Party*. It is generally accepted that Li Dazhao ushered Marxism into the Celestial Kingdom under the pseudonym “Yuanquan”. Ishikawa believes a journalist named Chen Puxian was the real man behind Yuanquan. As Ishikawa acknowledges in the introduction to the English translation of *The Formation of the Chinese Communist Party*, he received a vitriolic response from CCP history scholars who alleged that Ishikawa was claiming the mantle of “discoverer” of Chen Puxian.

Ishikawa views Li Dazhao's Beijing Communist group as much less influential than is generally accepted. The reason is that the early Communist group was an amalgam of moderate socialists and anarchists. In fact, not only does Ishikawa argue for a greater international dimension against the “Li in the north, Chen in the south” thesis, he also finds that the CCP started as several groups. He identifies the Shanghai Communist Group, the Socialist-Communist Party, and the Socialist League as precursors to the CCP. He also contests the number of national congress participants. Mao Zedong said there were 12 participants, whereas Ishikawa argues for a headcount of 13.

An Appraisal

Since its original Japanese-language publication in 2001, Ishikawa Yoshihiro's *The Formation of the Chinese Communist Party* has become a standard among critical appraisals of the official history of the CCP, and for good reason. Ishikawa describes his work as archaeology, trying to piece together archival fossils from different parts of the world in an attempt clarify the historical record. He leaves no square of the digging site untouched—the comprehensiveness of the book is a product of the meticulous nature of his investigative techniques. Yet the sheer vastness of the information Ishikawa has unearthed may have hindered his ability to deliver his findings in a digestible manner.

While readers may admire Ishikawa's scholarship, this does not mean readers will appreciate the organization of the book. Admittedly, the book does not set out to be a conventional history, but this does not excuse the challenging format and pacing of the volume. The four chapters appear logically ordered: 1) Marxism's reception in China; 2) relations between the Chinese Communists, the Comintern, and the Soviet Union; 3) the events leading up to the formation of the CCP as an organization; and 4) the first national congress. But within each chapter, Ishikawa dedicates many pages to detours that ultimately fail to address the main topic at hand. One gets the impression that Ishikawa had so much material that he deemed valuable that he tried as much as possible to awkwardly weave it into the narrative flow.

For example, in Chapter 3, Ishikawa meanders through an excruciatingly close reading of how Zhang Tailei became China's delegate to the Third Comintern Congress. When Ishikawa arrives at his discussion on the national party congress, he sacrifices almost all the narrative's momentum on parsing out the number and identities of its participants. Both examples would serve better in encyclopedias than in a book with great potential to paint broader themes. To the credit of Joshua Fogel—the translator and an established Sino-Japanese historian in his own right—the prose is well-crafted and the text reads smoothly, which is quite a feat given the complex nature of Ishikawa's source material.

While *The Formation of the Chinese Communist Party* is not a suitable read for the China studies generalist, it is a

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worthwhile resource for reference about the specific events and people that helped to establish the CCP. For those who decide to take on the task of reading the whole volume, they will gain an appreciation for the art of historical analysis and a wider vision of the international influences shaping China in the early nineteenth century.

About the author:

Kendrick Kuo is pursuing graduate studies in International Affairs at Johns Hopkins University and received his BA in International Affairs and Religion from the George Washington University. Kendrick is a contributor at Registan.net and blogs at The Asian Crescent.