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# Belonging Before Believing: Group Ethos and Bloc Recruitment in the Making of Chinese Communism

Xiaohong Xu<sup>a</sup>

## Abstract

Why did Communism take root in China during the May Fourth Movement era (1917 to 1921)? I argue that a key factor was the revolutionary vanguard's emergence through taking over existing activist organizations. Using reports and meeting minutes of 28 organizations and individual activists' correspondence, diaries, and memoirs as sources for comparative cross-sectional analysis and processual case studies of the organizational debates over whether to adopt Bolshevism as a unifying *ism*, I find that a crucial factor explaining an organization's positive response to Communist bloc recruitment was whether it practiced *ethical activism*, which engendered a sectarian group ethos that meshed with Bolshevik organizational culture. By contrast, the absence of ethical activism, and the correlative mismatch in organizational ethos, was associated with a negative response to Communist recruitment efforts. Two key mechanisms—frame resonance and group discipline—mediate this selective attraction. I conclude by discussing how organization-level analysis of selective spillover between social movements enhances our understanding of both individual participants' motivations and the distinct style in which a movement responds to its political environment.

## Keywords

vanguard party, ethical activism, group ethos, movement spillover, mobilization, Communism

The revolutionary vanguard was one of the most potent political forces in the twentieth century (Hobsbawm 1994). Because vanguard parties have clout far beyond their numerical strength, conventional social science literature often takes their agency for granted. Structural explanations of revolutions, for example, have simply ignored revolutionary vanguards (Sohrabi 2005). Approaches that do consider their agency are less concerned with their origins and development than with their effects on other actors as organizational weapons or minority influences (Moscovici 1980; Schurmann 1966; Selznick 1952) or with their internal regulation (Bittner 1963; della Porta 1992;

Goodwin 1997). Existing sociological literature tends to treat them as unmoved movers. Little research investigates the social and organizational processes that bring vanguards into being.

This study explores the origins of one revolutionary vanguard: the Chinese Communists. I examine the process of “bloc

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recruitment” (Oberschall 1973:125) whereby the Chinese Communist Movement (CCM) emerged by taking over preexisting activist organizations during China’s May Fourth Movement era (1917 to 1921). By examining intra-organizational debates over the adoption of Bolshevism, I seek to explain why some May Fourth organizations joined the CCM while others did not. This study advances a research agenda that scholars have long advocated: tracing the emergence of social movements out of preexisting organizations (McAdam 1988, 2003; Mische 2003).

Based on a cross-sectional analysis of 28 May Fourth Movement organizations, I discover the five groups that adopted Bolshevism (which I will call proto-CCM societies) shared an organizational identity the rest lacked: they identified as societies for *collective self-cultivation* and sought to use group methods to practice the Chinese ethic of self-cultivation, traditionally practiced in solitude. In contrast, organizations that did not join the CCM (non-CCM societies) derived their form from a different and more entrenched Chinese tradition of dissenting intellectual associations.

I argue that this difference in organizational form and activities led to a different group ethos—that is, the distinct style in which a group aligns its cultural repertoire with organizational practices. Specifically, self-cultivation societies formed a sectarian group ethos that was receptive to the Bolshevik organizational form in two key ways. First, their mixing of members’ self-transformation with social transformation resounded with the Bolshevik frame emphasizing a unifying *ism* for all activists (Clemens 1996; Snow and Benford 1988). Second, their emphasis on group discipline and commitment fostered cohesion-building dynamics that facilitated their conversion to the Bolshevik culture of *democratic centralism*, with its emphasis on ascetic self-discipline and subjugation of the self to collective ends. I use a process-tracing method to compare two critical cases, one joiner and one non-joiner, showing that their internal debates over the CCM were not so much about the scientific

validity of Marxism as about the elective affinity between their group ethos and the Bolshevik organizational form.

My analysis of the rise of the CCM from the May Fourth Movement builds on a burgeoning literature about how movements spill over to or revitalize other movements (e.g., Isaac and Christiansen 2002; Isaac, McDonald, and Lukasik 2006; McAdam 1995; Meyer and Whittier 1994; Minkoff 1997; Olzak and Uhrig 2001; Taylor 1989; Whittier 2004). I enrich this work by addressing the selective character of movement spillover. I draw on the concept of group ethos from Weber’s (1946, 1958) study of the Protestant ethic and Protestant sects in the making of capitalist economy and civic culture and suggest that group ethos can be a useful concept to understand selective spillover of movements. This group-level analysis also helps reveal, at the individual level, the varying motivations that each movement draws from its participants and, at the macro-level, the distinct style in which each movement responds to the larger social environment. In the case of Chinese Communism, my analysis of proto-CCM societies’ ethos illuminates (1) how activists approached Communism as a cause for moral universalism and (2) why, due to their earlier involvement in ethical activism, Chinese Communists invented a distinct revolutionary style, emphasizing self-cultivation, consciousness raising, and thought reform.

The crucial role that self-cultivation societies played in the making of Chinese Communism converges with other recent work that stresses the importance of religious organizations and ethics in the formation of modern social movements (Osa 1997; Smith 1991; Stamatov 2011; Young 2002). I argue that ethical and religious activism can facilitate social transformation in two interrelated ways: through mixing ethical and social transformations, which offers a powerful frame for public discourse (Smith 1991; Young 2002) and organizational form (Stamatov 2011); and through the strength of organizational discipline for mobilizing collective initiatives (Gorski 2003; Walzer 1965).

## THEORIZING VANGUARD CONSCIOUSNESS AND COMMITMENT

Second International Marxism, the institutionalized interpretation of Marxism from the late nineteenth century to World War I, preached a deterministic theory of revolution, claiming that socialist revolution in particular was inevitable because of the inherent contradiction between socialized production and concentrated capitalist ownership of property. The proletariat, it was assumed, would become the revolutionary agent because of its unique class position. It was not until the rise of Rosa Luxembourg, Vladimir Lenin, and other early-twentieth-century revolutionary leaders that Marxism developed a voluntaristic theory of revolutionary agency. To win a revolution in Russia, where industrial workers were a weak minority, Lenin (1969) advocated a disciplined vanguard party whose mission would be to serve as midwife to the emergent revolution. But if Lenin developed vanguard consciousness out of an already existing proletarian movement, Communist movements elsewhere diverged even more from Second International Marxism and Marx and Engels's (1978) general predictions. These movements often emerged not from the proletariat at all, but from intellectuals and student activists. China is a typical case. The Chinese Communist Party was not only founded by non-proletarians, but persevered through extreme hardship and repression to win a revolution based on mobilization of the peasantry, which Marx had considered too politically backward and the organizational equivalent of a "sack of potatoes" (Marx 1934:106). Through this revolution, the CCM transformed China from a "loose sheet of sand," as Sun Yat-sen complained (Fitzgerald 1996:85), into one of the most collectively organized nations on earth (Schurmann 1966). From where did the requisite organizational ethos first emerge? How did this momentous change take place?

### *From the May Fourth Movement to the CCM*

Recent scholarship has moved away from an earlier approach that focused on the evolution

of key activists' ideology (e.g., Levenson 1968; Meisner 1967; Schwartz 1951), and has attempted to contextualize the rise of Chinese Communism against the backdrop of the May Fourth Movement era. The May Fourth Movement took its name from the student protest in Beijing on May 4th, 1919, which spread quickly to other cities and from students to workers and merchants. The four years from 1917 to 1921 marked a dramatic break in modern Chinese history: a world previously dominated by Confucian elites, it became an epoch of revolutionaries. As a collective rebellion against military strongmen and conservative Confucians who strangled the nascent republican democracy, the May Fourth Movement spawned youth activist organizations and periodicals and created a strong sense of solidarity against the old social order. Young activists were absorbing and debating a variety of radical ideas introduced from the West. The rise of Communism in 1920 to 1921, however, divided them and marked the end of the movement (Zhou 1960).

Scholars have noted the centrality of May Fourth organizations in the rise of Communism (Dirlik 1989; see also Van de Ven 1991; Yeh 1996). They point out that individual recruits who did not enter the CCM via these organizations generally exited quickly, because they were not accustomed to the strict discipline and total commitment the CCM demanded. This suggests that receptiveness to the Bolshevik organizational culture was crucial. Dirlik, however, bypasses this factor and argues that the crisis of May Fourth activism pushed activists toward the alternative offered by Russian Bolsheviks. In other words, activists accepted Bolshevism out of necessity. What Dirlik does not see is that many activist organizations never joined the CCM at all (Geddes 1990). This variation raises the question of organizations' selective attraction to the new movement and its organizational form.

### *Explaining Selective Spillover among Social Movements*

So far, the literature on social movements offers important, but inadequate, help in ana-

lyzing the kind of inter-movement selection that existed between the May Fourth Movement and the CCM. Indeed, scholars have long recognized that movements feed upon each other. As Oberschall (1973:125) argued, movements often emerge through “bloc recruitment” of existing networks of movement participants and organizations: “Rapid mobilization . . . occurs as a result of recruiting blocs of people who are already highly organized and participants. In fact, many movements result from a sudden merger of a number of preexisting associations.”

Scholars have since examined inter-movement spillover (Meyer and Whittier 1994) in tactics, repertoires, and personnel through mechanisms of abeyance structures, spin-off, and revitalization (Isaac and Christiansen 2002; Isaac et al. 2006; McAdam 1995; Minkoff 1997; Olzak and Uhrig 2001; Taylor 1989). This literature has significantly expanded our understanding of how movements inspire or compete with each other. Yet, meso-level analysis of how participants of one movement *selectively* decide to join another movement is lacking (Gerhards and Rucht 1992; Whittier 2004; Zald and McCarthy 1980). This meso-level selectivity of movement spillover is, however, crucial to discern the varying motivations driving individual participants to join each movement and the distinctive style by which each responds to its larger political and social environment.

To unpack such selective spillover, it is important to investigate the “cultural appropriation” process of movement emergence (McAdam 1999:xii-xiv; see also Emirbayer and Goodwin 1994; Mische 2003). I suggest that selective spillover depends on how existing movement organizations align cultural repertoires with organizational practices. I call this alignment *group ethos*, drawing on Weber’s (1946) concept in his study of Protestant sects. Whether a given organization would join a new movement depends on whether its group ethos exhibits an elective affinity with the new organizational form. Group ethos shapes selective spillover in two interrelated ways. On one hand, it influences the degree of frame resonance that existing organizations

have with the new organizational form (Clemens 1996; Snow and Benford 1988). On the other hand, it patterns the internal dynamics through which organizations appropriate the new form. A resonating symbolic frame bridges discourse to the new movement, and conducive intra-group dynamics furnish the necessary dispositions and strategies to activate the selective attraction. Group ethos, composed of both ideational and dispositional mechanisms, thus shapes how inter-movement cultural appropriation unfolds in collective action (Swidler 1986).

In the rise of Chinese Communism, I argue, May Fourth organizations that aimed for members’ personal transformation through collective self-cultivation formed a sectarian group ethos and found a deep elective affinity with Bolshevism. First, their emphasis on members’ common pursuit of self-transformation resonated with Bolshevism, which they framed as a coherent approach to a unifying ism (*zhuyi*, literally meaning “master principle”) for their members. Second, they cultivated a sectarian culture of collective discipline and commitment and were cohesive enough to build up the consensus necessary to adopt a new form that demanded even *more* discipline and commitment. As with religious sects (Weber 1946), members of self-cultivation groups often must submit to a period of ethical probation, prove their moral worth through rigorous conduct, keep watchful eyes over each other, and develop an exclusive and sectarian identity in contrast to the wider society. Members of these groups have already internalized the kind of discipline and self-sacrifice demanded by the CCM—and which non-CCM societies lacked. This explains, I argue, their self-selection into the CCM compared to groups without such an organizational pattern.

The elective affinity between a given group ethos and a new organizational form generates emergent properties that infuse the new movement’s character, sometimes quite dramatically. Because these early Chinese Communists generally entered the CCM through self-cultivation societies, their earlier organizational experience contributed to the

movement's distinct repertoires, specifically its stress on revolutionary voluntarism, consciousness raising, and thought reform (Apter and Saich 1994; Schurmann 1966).

### *Linking Ethical Activism and Social Transformation*

Like U.S. religious activist organizations in the 1830s, whose combination of personal and social transformation propelled the first national social movements (Young 2002), May Fourth self-cultivation societies served as a "halfway house" (Morris 1984:139) along the road to revolutionary vanguardism. Moreover, it suggests that ethical activism<sup>1</sup> for personal transformation is powerful not only because it provides a resonating "cultural mechanism" that empowers social activism (Young 2002:661), but also because of the internal strength of organizations in which this cultural mechanism is embedded.

As Walzer (1965) shows in his study of Puritan revolutionaries, the historical prototype of the revolutionary vanguard, Puritans' emphasis on religious discipline afforded them a clear advantage in organizational capacity over their more powerful Royalist opponents. In a rapidly changing English society that gave rise to pervasive moral anxiety, Puritans compensated for loss of control over the world with an increase of control over the self through collective self-discipline. Dialectically, this organizational practice empowered their subsequent mastery of the world through political activism. Similarly, in China in the 1910s, when the Confucian social order was shattering, self-cultivation societies played an analogous role in containing moral anxiety and forming consensus to extend their activism in the CCM. By contrast, non-CCM societies were not able to develop a coherent response to the decline of the May Fourth Movement.

## DATA AND METHODS

My data collection started with a four-volume series titled *Voluntary Societies during the May Fourth Period* (hereafter VSMFP). This collection, which represents the most compre-

hensive survey of May Fourth activist organizations, contains 1,935 pages of organizational reports, publications, correspondence, and meeting minutes as well as related diaries and memoirs. Four Chinese historians compiled the work, with a view to publication in 1962. Due to state opposition, it was not published until 1979, after the Maoist era (VSMFP I 1979:vii). Since then, other scholarly efforts to compile source materials of the May Fourth organizations have followed, generally concentrating on specific organizations and their leaders. These include *Source Materials of the New Citizen Study* (MCR and MHP 1980), *Young China* (1920, 1921), and diaries and earlier writings of Zhou Enlai and Yun Daiying (Yun 1981, 1984; Zhou 1998). (The materials are almost exclusively in Chinese and, when cited, the translations are mine.)

Despite their richness, these data compilations are uneven, which has necessarily shaped my research. Some organizations have hundreds of pages of extant material, a few have only several pages. Original data compilers privileged organizations that were more central to the activist field. This imbalance prevents researchers from conducting in-depth cross-sectional analyses. Fortunately, the imbalance applies to both joiners and non-joiners of the CCM. In both categories, some organizations have a trove of materials and others have fewer sources. My analytic strategy thus combines cross-sectional analysis, based on basic profile information, with in-depth comparative case studies.

I first conduct a cross-sectional analysis of activist organizations that (1) were active from July 1920 to July 1921, the crucial period when debates over the adoption of Bolshevism took place; and (2) had stable and independent memberships and a persistent and self-contained organizational life. Twenty-eight organizations met these criteria (see Table A1 in the Appendix). Among them, five became Communist organizations<sup>2</sup> and 23 did not. I compare joiners with non-joiners and discuss the strength and weakness of the existing explanation (Dirlik 1989), which attributes adoption of Bolshevism to the crisis of May Fourth activism. My results suggest



that pre-CCM societies were not in a more desperate situation than other groups. I also consider alternative explanations based on these organizations' membership composition in age, educational level, and cosmopolitan values as well as their network position. Given incomplete data, assessments of these aspects are not very systematic or completely reliable. They are valuable nonetheless, because based on extant records, it appears impossible to conclude that members of the joining organizations were less educated, less established, younger, or less cosmopolitan than members of other organizations.

Given the limited traction offered by the foregoing explanations, I propose to compare these organizations' group cultures. I identify the emphasis on ethical transformation as the crucial difference in their organizational identity and practices. The evidence I draw on is based on how each organization articulated its goals and related to members' self-cultivation, and the ensuing collective dynamics. To explicate this divergence, I highlight the changing cultural and organizational terrain of intellectual dissent in early-twentieth-century China, when some organizations engaged with the emerging repertoires of collective self-cultivation and others remained in another, more long-standing Chinese tradition of intellectual dissent. I then formulate a hypothesis concerning the causal mechanisms through which this difference in aligning cultural repertoires with organizational practices led to groups' selective attraction to Bolshevism.

In the second part of my empirical analysis, I engage in process-tracing to substantiate these causal mechanisms by comparing two cases, one joiner and one non-joiner (George and Bennett 2005).

## **MAY FOURTH ACTIVIST SOCIETIES AND THE CCM: A CROSS-SECTIONAL COMPARISON**

The May Fourth period began in 1917, when a few intellectuals began to attack Chinese traditions in literature, culture, and politics

and introduced a variety of radical ideas from the West. Politically, it was their response to republican democracy, which was failing after two consecutive attempts to restore monarchy by powerful warlords and conservative Confucians. Structurally, it was conditioned by the rapid growth of Western-style educational institutions in the previous decade, as their anti-traditionalist message found an eager audience among students and fueled student radicalism (Lin 1979; Zhou 1960). Youth activist organizations of this period shared a rejection of the traditional social order and common interests in new ideas, including liberalism, pragmatism, anarchism, guild socialism, syndicalism, Marxism, and cooperativism. This ideological openness and pluralism ended abruptly in 1920 to 1921, when CCM bloc recruitment demanded activists' unifying and exclusive commitment to Bolshevism (Zhou 1960).<sup>3</sup>

In April 1920, the Communist International (Comintern) sent an emissary, Grigori Voitinsky, to China. In the following months, Voitinsky converted Li Dazhao and Chen Duxiu, two influential radical thinkers, to Bolshevism. Li and Chen then mobilized their networks within youth activist organizations to organize the CCM. By the middle of 1921, some of these groups had adopted Bolshevism as a unifying ism and converted into Communist organizations. What explains their selective attraction to Bolshevism?

### *Explaining Away Selective Spillover?*

Until recently, scholarship on the rise of Chinese Communism focused either on key activists' ideological evolution toward Marxism (e.g., Levenson 1968; Meisner 1967; Schwartz 1951) or considered the early CCM as a simple diffusion of Bolshevism from Russia, without inquiring into its indigenous organizational sources (Pantsov 2000; Trotsky 1962). Neither approach attended to the role of May Fourth Movement organizations. As noted earlier, Dirlik (1989) took a big step forward by contextualizing the rise of Communism in the decline of May Fourth activism. He debunked the ideology-centered

**Table 1.** May Fourth Activist Societies' Selective Spillover into Chinese Communism

| Organizational Outcome |                                                                                                                                            |                                                                                                                                             |                                                                                                            |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
|------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Name                   | Joiners of CCM                                                                                                                             | Non-joiners of CCM                                                                                                                          |                                                                                                            |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
|                        |                                                                                                                                            | Schism                                                                                                                                      | Retreat                                                                                                    | Demise                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
|                        | New Citizen Study Society, Mutual Aid Society, Awakening Society, Renaissance Society, Beijing University's Mass Education Lecturing Corps | Young China Association, <i>Citizen</i> Journal Society, <i>Dawn</i> Journal Society, Young Study Society, <i>Zhejiang New Tide</i> Society | <i>New Tide</i> Society, Mass Education Society, <i>Populace</i> Weekly Society, Great Union Co-op Society | Truth Society, Work-Study Association, Equality Society, Youth Study Society, Consciousness Society, Evolution Society, Yongjia New Learning Society, <i>Critical Review</i> Society, New Men Society, Masses Society, Citizens' Co-op Credit Union, Struggle Society, Co-op and Hope Society, Comrades for Co-op Society |
| Total: 28              | 5                                                                                                                                          | 5                                                                                                                                           | 4                                                                                                          | 14                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |

approach by showing that “the radicals who founded the Party became Communists before they were Marxists” (Dirlik 1989:269). Dirlik claimed that the failure of communistic projects and mounting political repression pushed activists into despair and toward the alternative offered by Bolshevism.

Dirlik failed to address, however, that the spillover from May Fourth activism to the CCM was selective. Among the 28 organizations listed in Table 1, only five were incorporated into the CCM. Another five experienced schism over the adoption of Bolshevism, with a faction of members favoring it but failing to convert the whole organization. Another four backed down from their contentious approach and adopted more institutionalized repertoires of action, emphasizing educational and cultural endeavors. The other 14 died out by the middle of 1921.

Given these variegated responses to the crisis of the May Fourth Movement, it remains a question why the five proto-CCM societies were particularly disposed to seize Bolshevism as an extension of their activism. Was their experience with the crisis of May Fourth activ-

ism deeper than others, as Dirlik implies? Did they face more severe state repression and deeper failure in their communistic enterprises? Historical data do not support these claims.

First, scattered extant materials concerning proto-CCM societies' communistic enterprises actually indicate they had more success than non-CCM societies. While the latter fell apart and participants left (as detailed in the following case study of the Young China Association), the former, such as the Benefiting Group Bookstore of the Mutual Aid Society and the Culture Bookstore of the New Citizen Study Society, consolidated group cohesion and carried it over into the CCM. The Culture Bookstore, for example, thrived until the Nationalists' purge of Communists in 1927 (VSMFP I 1979:106). Although we do not have comprehensive data to evaluate them cross-sectionally, it is safe to say that proto-CCM societies did not experience more serious obstacles than did others in this aspect.

Organizational experience with state repression does not seem to account for selective attraction to Bolshevism, either. In Table 2, I



**Table 2.** May Fourth Organizations' Experience with Political Repression

|                   | Joiners of CCM | Non-joiners of CCM |         |        |       |
|-------------------|----------------|--------------------|---------|--------|-------|
|                   |                | Schism             | Retreat | Demise | Total |
| N of Societies    | 5              | 5                  | 4       | 14     | 23    |
| Repression        |                |                    |         |        |       |
| High <sup>a</sup> | 2              | 3                  | 1       | 1      | 5     |
| Low <sup>b</sup>  | 2              | 0                  | 1       | 4      | 5     |
| None              | 1              | 2                  | 2       | 5      | 9     |
| Don't know        | —              | —                  | —       | 4      | 4     |

<sup>a</sup>I code arrest, core members' expulsion from school, and shutdown of periodical publication as a high level of repression.

<sup>b</sup>I code occasional censorship and other minor restrictions, such as members' disciplinary probation, as low levels of repression.

code arrest, core members' expulsion from schools, and shutdown of periodical publication as a high level of repression; I code occasional censorship and other minor restrictions, such as members' disciplinary probation, as low level repression. I devised the coding scheme based on how activists themselves understood political repression, and the coding is consistent with secondary literature (Dirlik 1989; Zhou 1960). If "don't know" cases are counted as non-repression, joiners' direct experience with repression seems higher than the average non-joiner, but it is similar to non-joiner organizations that ended in schism and is only slightly higher than groups that later backed away from radicalism. Two of the five joiners experienced high repression, another two experienced low repression, and the remaining group experienced no repression. In comparison, three groups in the schism subcategory experienced high repression and the remaining two faced no repression. Although the crisis of May Fourth activism that Dirlik identified laid the conditions for the rise of Communism, it did not press the proto-CCM societies particularly hard, and therefore does not explain their selective attraction to Bolshevism.

### *Other Alternative Explanations: Membership and Network Position*

One possible explanation might be differences in membership bases. Groups with younger, less educated, and less cosmopolitan

members may have been more prone to perpetuate radicalism by joining the CCM. It therefore behooves us to examine, within the limits of our historical data, whether such differences might be at issue. Although three of the five joiners and 10 of the 23 non-joiners left complete membership lists, these lists generally contain no other information than members' names.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, we have enough information to assess the general characteristics of their membership bases.

There was no aggregate-level age difference. All but four organizations were largely composed of students in colleges or equivalent institutions. The four exceptions—the proto-CCM Renaissance Society and the non-CCM Young Study Society, Youth Study Society, and Consciousness Society—consisted mainly of high school students. Educational affiliation is only a proximate instrument for estimating age, given that the Western-style education system was newly established and regulation of school entrance age was not strictly enforced (Pepper 1996). At the aggregate level, however, no systematic difference seems to exist between joiners and non-joiners. Some organizations had a small fraction of non-student members who were nonetheless more or less tied to educational institutions. For example, within the proto-CCM societies, we find Li Dazhao, a professor at Beijing University and age 32 in 1920; Yun Daiying, also a college professor and age 25; and Mao Zedong, age 27, a

normal school graduate and a freelance radical journalist engaged in assisting his society's members to study abroad. The former two were also active leaders in the non-CCM Young China Association. A few older members were also present in several other non-CCM organizations, including *New Tide* Society and Mass Education Society. Hence, there seems to be no systematic difference in age composition.

To assess educational level, I use proximity to Beijing University, which was considered the highest educational institution at the time. This is an imperfect index but, given the university's centrality in the May Fourth Movement, it can be used as an approximation. One of the five joiners drew members largely from Beijing University (Beijing University's Mass Education Lecturing Corps), compared to five of the 23 non-joiners (*Citizen Journal Society*, *New Tide Society*, *Critical Review Society*, *Truth Society*, and *Struggle Society*). These ratios are similar.

Cosmopolitanism is difficult to assess. If we take its literal meaning and measure whether a society was founded in a location with extensive exposure to international influence, the result is mixed. Of the four groups founded in Shanghai, none gravitated toward Communism; yet two societies in Tianjin and one society from Wuhan—the other two port cities with large foreign concessions and heavy Anglo-American interests—joined the CCM. Nankai College in Tianjin, home base of the Awakening Society, was heavily influenced by U.S. educational philosophy and was a YMCA center. In fact, members of the Awakening Society often met at the local YMCA. The YMCA's influence on the Mutual Aid Society in Wuhan was also salient (Xu 2010). If we assess cosmopolitanism by leanings toward U.S.-style liberalism and pragmatism, it appears to be negatively correlated with Bolshevism. Three of the four societies that backed down from radicalism (*New Tide Society*, *Mass Education Society*, and *Populace Weekly Society*) were influenced by American pragmatism through John Dewey and his Chinese students. But such measurement is conceptually problematic, given that

Bolshevism itself was at the time embraced as a Western cosmopolitan project. A more neutral measurement might be gender equality, a principle championed by progressives across the board during this period. Interestingly, proto-CCM societies considerably outperformed others in pursuing gender inclusiveness. Among the 28 organizations, only three proto-CCM societies had female members (*New Citizen Study Society*, *Awakening Society*, and *Renaissance Society*). Half of the Awakening Society's members were female students (Cheng 2008).

Apart from membership bases, we can also consider the rise of Communism as a network-based diffusion process (Strang and Soule 1998). Extant materials show that proto-CCM societies were not selectively exposed to the transmission of Bolshevism. Non-CCM societies were also exposed but differed in their adoption. A separate study is needed to analyze the network structure and events of the diffusion of various isms among May Fourth organizations. It suffices here to note that proto-CCM societies were similarly positioned in the activist field as non-CCM societies that experienced schism and retreat, but diverged slightly from the 14 organizations that eventually died out. The latter were generally peripheral organizations and receiving ends of the transmission. Activist organizations were usually exposed to Bolshevism through consortium conferences or shared leaders. For example, five organizations from the Beijing–Tianjin area were first presented with the idea of adopting Bolshevism at a conference they held together in August 1920, but only the Awakening Society later adopted Bolshevism. Likewise, figures like Li Dazhao, Yun Daiying, and Deng Zhongxia held leadership positions in both proto-CCM and non-CCM societies. This indicates that groups' divergent responses to the CCM were not about exposure but about selective attraction in organizational form. It also shows that leadership effectiveness was organizationally anchored and thrived according to different group cultures. I will begin, therefore, by comparing the organizations themselves, focusing on group culture and ethos.

## Comparing Group Culture

Organizations that joined or did not join differed in how they discussed and practiced members' ethical transformation. Specifically, proto-CCM societies generally identified themselves as groups for *collective self-cultivation* (*tuanti xiuyang*), even primarily so before they took a political turn after the May Fourth protest. Their practices of ethical activism deeply shaped their group dynamics and culture. By contrast, none of the non-CCM groups had the same kind of organizational identity and practices.

May Fourth organizations demonstrated their shared interest in questions of ethics through their common antagonism to Confucian morality (Lin 1979; Zhou 1960). They found common resonance with the non-CCM *New Tide Society's* call for "revolution of ethics (*lunli geming*)" (VSMFP II 1979:44). They also lent support to each other in this struggle, such as when the non-CCM *Zhejiang New Tide Society* faced government crackdown for its attack on filial piety in late 1919 (VSMFP III 1979:123). Yet, only the proto-CCM societies were concerned with not only external attacks on Confucian morality but also internal organizational dynamics for individual ethical formation. The one possible exception is the *Renaissance Society* from Tianjin: unlike the other four organizations, we have so few sources about it that I cannot make a definitive judgment.<sup>5</sup> But even this exception may prove the rule because the *Renaissance Society* was largely a junior partner of the *Awakening Society*—another proto-CCM organization from Tianjin—which provided it with its organizational model and strategic know-how.<sup>6</sup>

Let us examine the other four societies more closely. When the *New Citizen Study Society* was founded on April 17, 1918, its constitution defined its purpose as "to reform scholarship, encourage ethical actions, and transform morals and customs" because members felt compelled to organize for "uplifting" (MCR and MHP 1980:2–3). The group established an elaborate ethical code as a requirement for members' admission and excommunication (Tang and Zhao 2008:23). Moral precepts

appeared frequently in its reports and correspondences. Ethical criticism and self-examination was a regular activity in its meetings.

Likewise, the *Mutual Aid Society* in Wuhan, founded on October 8, 1917, defined its purpose as "to use collective tactics and collective power to help oneself and help others" (VSMFP I 1979:118). It was conceived as an organization for "self-cultivation and social services" and explicitly modeled on religious societies like the YMCA but with a nonreligious bent (VSMFP I 1979:118). Like the *New Citizen Study Society*, it also had an elaborate ethical code embedded in its constitution. The society met daily in small groups to meditate together, discuss members' spiritual improvement, recite a text for mutual encouragement, and mete out punishment for failings (VSMFP I 1979:118–23).

The *Awakening Society*, founded by Zhou Enlai and his friends in Tianjin on September 16, 1919, also stressed moral uplifting and regeneration. It enshrined the principle of "reform through reforming the heart" and sought members' "self-awakening" and "self-determination" (VSMFP II 1979:303). In its opening statement, "Fundamental Awakening of the Students," the Society listed 32 kinds of psychological, attitudinal, and behavioral evils and weaknesses prevalent among the youth that it aimed to rectify (Zhou 1998:446–64). Like the *New Citizen Study Society* and the *Mutual Aid Society*, it emphasized ethical criticism and self-criticism as regular activities and requirement for membership. In fact, its emphasis on ethical activism was quite unusual among the societies founded after the May Fourth protest, when youth activism had already taken a social turn. This singularity can be explained by the fact that its leaders earlier on organized the *Officium et Civitas Society*,<sup>7</sup> founded in 1914, whose "ultimate goal is [to promote] morality" (Zhou 1998:6).

Beijing University's *Mass Education Lecturing Corps* was organized by 39 students at the university and represented an increasing interest in mass education in China. Its pre-May-Fourth lectures to the Beijing masses concentrated on themes of moral reform, such as gambling, public morality, family reform,

frugality, and diligence. Political and radical themes emerged on the lecture tours only after the May Fourth protest. In the summer of 1919, the group organized the Morning Garden community, where members aimed to create a “new life” of collective asceticism (Dirlik 1989:181).

In contrast, none of the 23 non-joiners established any organizational mechanism for ethical activism. Extant records indicate that only two groups demonstrated some informal involvement and both later experienced schisms over Bolshevism. Several members of the *Zhejiang New Tide Society*, in the year before its founding in October 1919, formed an informal group aimed at “the moral rectification of the self,” “exercised vigilance over each other’s moral lapses and spurred one another on in serious intellectual pursuits,” and were dubbed by others as “moralists” (Yeh 1996:115). However, this informal involvement was not formalized when the Society was established. Instead, its attention went exclusively to social injustice.

The other exception is the Young China Association. When the group was conceived in the summer of 1918, its mission was to “(1) regenerate the youth’s spirit, (2) study true learning, (3) promote social causes and (4) transform the decadent moral climate” (VSMFPI 1979:220). This mission statement articulated both positive values and ethical prohibitions. But when the Association was formally inaugurated in July 1919, its mission, reflecting its social and political turn, was reframed to “dedicate itself to Social Services, under the guidance of the Scientific Spirit, in order to realize our ideal of Creating a Young China” (VSMFPI 1979:224). Ethical activism was formally dropped from its organizational agenda and no organized self-cultivation took root.<sup>8</sup>

### *Theorizing Group Difference*

To make sense of why differences in group culture provoked divergent responses to Bolshevism, one needs to contextualize these organizational forms. The idea of practicing ethical transformation through collective self-cultivation was novel in 1910s China; traditionally, Chinese literati

practiced self-cultivation only as solitary individuals (Ivanhoe 2000). Collective self-cultivation reflected a particular hybridization resulting from cross-cultural contact. Christian missionaries flocking to China in the early twentieth century catered to the Confucian notion that self-cultivation is the basis of social prosperity. Missionaries claimed Christianity would save China because it had developed the best group methods of self-cultivation, which Confucianism was lacking and which contributed to the prosperity of Western nations. Proto-CCM societies took up this hybrid cultural scheme of collective self-cultivation, albeit with a grain of salt. For example, the founding of the Mutual Aid Society was inspired by the YMCA summer conference that its founders attended in August 1917, where they felt “humbled by the Christians’ vitality of activism, sincerity in words, purity of self-discipline, and consistency in altruism” and decided to form a nonreligious group, borrowing YMCA methods (VSMFPI 1979:118).<sup>9</sup> In contrast, non-CCM societies derived their organizational form from a long-standing Chinese tradition of dissenting intellectual associations that, as Wakeman (1972) shows, dates back to at least the late sixteenth century and experienced a revival at the end of the nineteenth century. In these idea-centered associations, literati magnified their political influence by debating and spreading their ideas.

This difference in organizational form and ethos shaped organizational responses to the CCM through two mechanisms: frame resonance and group discipline. First, because Bolshevism entered into China at a crisis moment for May Fourth activism, May Fourth organizations framed the relevance of Bolshevism as a question of organizational effectiveness for promoting their radicalism. Self-cultivation societies, which combined personal transformation with social activism, were attracted to the Bolshevik idea of one unifying ism (i.e., master principle) for their members. Bolshevism provided these groups a newly coherent frame for integrating their members’ search for meaning in life and their pursuit of effective social transformation. They thus came to see Bolshevism as a natural extension of May Fourth activism. In

contrast, non-CCM societies tended to separate members' self-transformation from social transformation. They regarded members' master principle as a matter of private concern, outside their organizational jurisdiction. This incongruity made it difficult for them to find resonance with Bolshevism (Clemens 1996; Snow and Benford 1988).

Second, self-cultivation societies emphasized collective discipline and shared commitment in affinity with the Bolshevik organizational culture. Through ethical criticism and self-criticism, their members observed one another with watchful eyes. This sectarian character made it relatively easy for them to cultivate strong solidary incentives (McAdam 1999:xiii) and achieve the consensus necessary to adopt a new form that demanded an even greater degree of discipline and commitment (Lenin 1969). Non-CCM societies lacked this cohesion-building mechanism. Even though they might appreciate the effectiveness of having a unifying ism, they were not disposed to adopt it.

The next section compares the New Citizen Study Society, which embraced Bolshevism as a natural extension of May Fourth activism, with the Young China Association, in which Bolshevism was strongly contested. Through this comparison, I trace how frame resonance and group discipline structured organizational responses to CCM bloc recruitment.

The New Citizen Study Society has attracted attention since Mao Zedong's famous interview with U.S. journalist Edgar Snow in 1936 (Snow 1968). Interest in the group stems primarily from Mao's leadership role in it and the fact that many dedicated Communist leaders hailed from it. The Young China Association was the most widely known activist organization at the time and claimed a prestige equivalent to Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) in 1960s America. Like the 1969 SDS Chicago convention, the schism in the Young China Association in 1921 during the Nanjing conference is generally considered a watershed event that marked the end of the May Fourth Movement and the beginning of revolutionary vanguardism in modern China (Chen 2010). Although neither case

indisputably represents the median of their respective clusters, their status nonetheless confers value on a direct comparison.

Source materials concerning these two organizations are also richer than for other organizations. Because these groups symbolize a critical juncture in modern Chinese history, scholars have excavated more of their primary sources than they have for other societies. The accessibility of these important materials makes possible a paired processual comparison.

## SECTARIAN ETHOS AND BOLSHEVISM: TWO CASE STUDIES

### *New Citizen Study Society (NCSS)*

The NCSS was founded on April 17, 1918 by 21 young men in Changsha. According to its first annual report, the original motivation was simply "the uplifting of individual life" (MCR and MHP 1980:2). "We felt our moral character needs to be reformed and our learning needs to be advanced so our yearning for fellowship and mutual aid was very ardent—that was the primary reason for the launching of the Society." The other motivation was that "old ideas, old ethic and old literature no longer appealed to us so we found ourselves dissatisfied with the old quiet and solitary life but longing for a life of action and community" (MCR and MHP 1980:2). The Society grew steadily to 78 members in early 1921, when it decided to adopt Bolshevism and transformed itself into a Communist organization (Tang and Zhao 2008).

From its beginning, the Society was a sectarian group. It stipulated a rigorous ethical code and consciously made itself into a society of moral vanguards. Potential members had to be introduced by five incumbent members, approved by the majority, and be of high moral standing. Members who exhibited "inappropriate behaviors" were to be excommunicated (MCR and MHP 1980:3–4). At least once annually, members were obliged to report to the Society the status of their ethical conduct and learning through formal letters. Collections of this correspondence were a



major routine publication and were distributed to each member because “our moral characters and the Society’s affairs should be absolutely transparent [to each member]” (MCR and MHP 1980:42–43).

To further strengthen moral accountability, the Society organized cohabitation when members traveled to Beijing and then France for study and work. Members shared the same domicile and held discussion sessions regularly (MCR and MHP 1980:6, 136). As the society grew and demand for moral accountability increased, its structure became increasingly formalized. In its inception in April 1918, the Society elected one general secretary and two secretaries to manage its affairs. During the May Fourth protest from May to July 1919, 30 more young men and women activists were recruited. At a general meeting on November 16, 1919, the Society divided its executive department into four sections (education, editing, women’s work, and study abroad) and created a separate “department of criticism (*pinyi bu*)” that oversaw group discipline (MCR and MHP 1980:8–9).

Over time, members’ accountability increased. At the outset, this accountability amounted to little more than regular correspondence and informal mutual admonitions. After establishment of the department of criticism, criticism and self-criticism sessions were regularized and formalized (MCR and MHP 1980:136–39). The earlier general discussion of “members’ moral conditions” and “members’ attitudes” (MCR and MHP 1980:9) was individualized. The spheres of life in which members were held accountable also broadened. Members’ correspondence in 1920 began to extensively discuss issues of love and marriage, previously thought too private to be included. The marriage between Cai Hesen (1895–1931) and Xiang Jingyu (1895–1928) in May 1920 in Paris, two active members who wrote a pamphlet titled “Our Union for Uplifting,” served as an exemplar. When members met for their annual meeting in January 1921, the depth and breadth of topics under discussion was unprecedented:

Members’ personal life plans; Members’ personal life approaches; What attitudes

should our Society and its members take; How do members carry out studies . . . Members’ family and marriage . . . Criticism and self-criticism . . . Member’s health and recreations. (MCR and MHP 1980:15–16)

In explaining the comprehensiveness of personal issues under its organizational scrutiny, the Society proclaimed: “Previously people often saw personal plans as secrets and were not willing to publicize them to the effect that nobody else knew your plan and neither did you know others’. . . As a result, it was difficult to organize mutual aid and collective action.” The Society claimed these “mistakes” could be more easily rectified when members kept each other abreast of their personal plans (MCR and MHP 1980:36).

In August 1920 in Changsha, the Society launched a communistic enterprise called the Culture Bookstore, which sold radical books and publications. It was modeled on the Benefiting Group Bookstore, created by the Mutual Aid Society in Wuhan, another proto-CCM society (Wu 2011:141). The enterprise successfully combined work, study, and activism. It thrived and became a Communist enterprise after the NCSS joined the CCM, until its shutdown during the purge of Communists in 1927.

By mixing personal and social transformation, the NCSS came to approach the question of *ism* as a collective journey, keyed to identify the meaning of members’ lives in making social change. This resonated with the idea of adopting a unifying *ism*, and its members began to frame the Bolshevik project in these terms. In addition, the NCSS’s high level of group discipline and shared commitment to the organizational cause predisposed members to collectively decide to adopt the organizational form.

The first NCSS member converted to Bolshevism was Cai Hesen, who became fascinated with Communist writings while studying in France. On July 6, 1920, 20 NCSS members in France convened in Montargis for a five-day meeting. They proposed to change the goal of the Society from advancing members’ self-cultivation to “remaking China and the World” (MCR and MHP



1980:137; Tang and Zhao 2008:121). In discussing the means to achieve this goal, Cai Hesen vigorously argued for the Bolshevik approach. The assembly was divided, however, with most members inclined toward anarchism. They ultimately resolved to write a detailed report of their various opinions for members in Changsha, seeking feedback (Tang and Zhao 2008:124). Cai also penned a long letter to Mao, trying to persuade members in Changsha of the Bolshevik approach and asking them to start organizing a Communist party (MCR and MHP 1980:130).

At this stage, NCSS members in Changsha were still interested in self-government in Hunan and not Bolshevism, even though Mao and two other members had already met Voitinsky and Chen Duxiu in Shanghai (Tang and Zhao 2008:112–15). Nonetheless, the looming crisis across the activist field called for the NCSS to take quick organizational action to sustain its radicalism. In February, Mao had expressed his hope that the NCSS would become a “cohesive group of lofty, pure and devoted comrades” (MCR and MHP 1980:59). By November 25, Mao and his friends were convinced of the necessity of adopting a unifying ism. Mao reasoned:

The power of moral forces is indeed crucial. The corrupt atmosphere in China is too deep and thick. To transform it, we really need to create forceful fresh air. I think this kind of air demands a group of devoted “persons.” What is especially in need of is an “ism” which all of us will abide by. We cannot create that kind of air without an ism. I think our society should not be merely a collection of individuals or a union of friendship. It should be a union based on an ism. An ism is like a flag. We cannot really have our hope and rallying point until the flag raises. (MCR and MHP 1980:97)

Bolshevism provided a more coherent approach to integrate their quest for self-cultivation and strivings for social change. Only by subscribing to the same master principle, they thought, could they conquer the forces of personal and social corruption.

Moral vanguards were becoming revolutionary vanguards.

On January 1, 1921, NCSS members in Changsha held a three-day meeting. They voted to accept the new goal of “remaking China and the World” proposed by members in France. Twelve of the 16 attendees now accepted the Bolshevik approach (MCR and MHP 1980:26). In discussing concrete methods, they determined to further study their ism with the “underlying emphasis on self-cultivation” and to organize the Socialist Youth Corps, which later became the Communist Youth League (MCR and MHP 1980:28). They also tightened organizational discipline by excommunicating members whose loyalty, dedication, and morals were considered substandard (MCR and MHP 1980:20; Tang and Zhao 2008:194). At the same time, the Society for the World of Work-Study, an auxiliary society created by NCSS members in France, was convening in Montargis for its first annual meeting. Cai and his wife Xiang Jingyu forcefully campaigned for the Bolshevik approach with much more success than they had half a year earlier. To dissipate anarchist influence among members, Cai stressed the necessity of strict discipline for the sake of winning greater freedom (Tang and Zhao 2008:130–32).

On June 29, 1921, members of the NCSS in Changsha, which had by now ceased to exist as an entity, sent Mao Zedong and He Shuheng to attend the founding meeting of the Chinese Communist Party in Shanghai (MCR and MHP 1980:170). At around the same time, members in France took part in the founding of the Young Communist Party, which later became a branch of the Chinese Communist Youth League (Tang and Zhao 2008:133).

### *Young China Association (YCA)*

In comparison, the YCA proved resistant to CCM bloc recruitment, despite its proximity to Communist influence. Li Dazhao, recognized as China’s first Bolshevik convert, was a core leader of the YCA (Meisner 1967). He and his associates made persistent attempts to convert the organization, yet it split and fell

apart. Its internal debates throw into sharp relief its lack of frame resonance and group discipline, both of which made the NCSS receptive to Bolshevism.

The YCA had 112 members at its peak and was the most prestigious activist organization in the May Fourth era (VSMFP I 1979:239–41). Contemporaries acknowledged its members' high moral standing: it was sometimes considered an "insured group of morality" (*daode de baoxian tuanti*) (*Young China* 1921:6–11). Such was its famed ethical purity that when one member insulted a female activist in print, he felt compelled to withdraw from the Association (VSMFP I 1979:241–42). However, its members' good reputation did not translate into organized ethical practices. Instead, befitting its goal to "dedicate itself to Social Services, under the guidance of the Scientific Spirit, in order to realize our ideal of Creating a Young China" (VSMFP I 1979:224), the group oriented itself to discussion of social issues and their reform. Its two periodicals, *Young China* and *Young World*, were the most recognized forums in the activist field for discussing radical ideas (Chen 2010). Internally, however, the Association could not match the group discipline achieved by the proto-CCM societies.

Many YCA members were keenly aware of this weakness. One member complained that the Association focused too much on "outward-looking activities," such as publishing, and neglected "inward-looking activities":

According to my observation, I admit that many comrades are potent individuals but cannot say our Association is a potent group. Because mutual understanding is shallow, the awareness of grouping is weak and there is no common project based on division of labor and mutual aid. If this situation keeps going on, even if our Association could sustain without breaking apart, there will be no causes of the group but only careers of individual members. (VSMFP I 1979:336)

Some members clearly attributed the Association's weak cohesion to its lack of collective self-cultivation. The issue of ethical activism

was critically raised in the YCA for the first time after the failure of its Beijing Work-and-Study Corps in March 1920 (Tian, Ren, and Li 1984:47). The YCA pioneered communistic enterprises in March 1919, which quickly diffused to other activist societies, including proto-CCM societies like the NCSS. But unlike the latter societies' experiences, the YCA project fell apart miserably. Reflecting on this failure and comparing it to the Benefiting Group Bookstore created by his Mutual Aid Society, Yun Daiying (1895–1931), the leader of the YCA Department of Criticism, said:

I think this failure was because, when launching the project, we only recruited people who were frustrated with the wider society but failed to emphasize the necessity of their self-examination; because we only asked him to be independent but failed to give him collective self-cultivation. . . . It is therefore necessary for us to pay attention to each member's self-examination and collective self-cultivation. (Yun 1984:311–14)

The weak cohesion due to the absence of ethical activism eventually proved consequential for CCM recruitment, as the Communists found the YCA inhospitable to the Bolshevik demand for discipline and total commitment.

The YCA confronted CCM recruitment for the first time during a consortium conference with the Awakening Society and three other societies in Beijing on August 16, 1920. At the conference, the YCA's Director of Publication, Li Dazhao, who had converted to Bolshevism, proposed that each society should adopt its ism, because "without an unambiguous ism, it is not sufficient to unify internally" (VSMFP I 1979:327). Three days later, in an internal meeting of YCA Beijing members, Li Dazhao again argued that "without an unambiguous ism, it is not sufficient to unify members' purpose internally and to collaborate with other societies for common causes externally" (VSMFP I 1979:328). The meeting resolved to seriously consider his proposal. From then on, Li Dazhao and his associates began to actively advance the Communist

agenda within the YCA. In a meeting of the Beijing members on February 19, 1921, Li Dazhao's associate Deng Zhongxia again raised the question and said the current mission statement "was too general" and "we should choose an ism to enrich it as a rallying point" (*Young China* 1920:61). He asked members to closely study doctrines of socialism in the next few months, in preparation for the general conference in Nanjing in July.

The Nanjing conference was proposed by Yun Daiying to address the ongoing organizational crisis of the YCA. Yun proposed to organize general membership summer conferences in the fashion of the YMCA. Like the YMCA meetings, the YCA summer conferences were held in scenic locations secluded from worldly settings to concentrate members' attention on their spiritual growth and the Association's organizational matters (VSMFP I 1979:341). Yun hoped the first summer conference in 1921 would resolve the debate over ism that was dividing both the Association and May Fourth activists in general.

When members met in Nanjing on July 1, debate was heated. The fault line lay in how to define the YCA's purpose and whether it was consistent with adoption of Bolshevism. On the one hand, like the NCSS, advocates of Bolshevism framed adoption as a solution to strengthen group effectiveness and moral unity. Deng Zhongxia argued:

The reason why our Association has not made much contribution to the wider society is because there is no unifying ism. We should stipulate our ism so that our pursuit of learning and activism will not go astray; so that we will have division of labor and mutual aid; so that our outward-looking activities will send clear messages and unite with societies with common purpose; so that we will have a standard to evaluate disloyalty and decadence and our security of moral character will be truly ensured. (VSMFP I 1979:354–55)

Another would-be Communist, Huang Rikui (1898–1930), seconded him and complained that members involved in activities outside the Association often resorted to different

isms and thus created confusion in "right and wrong, good and evil," a situation he claimed only a unifying ism could resolve (VSMFP I 1979:356).

Opponents reasserted their understanding of the YCA, which, for them, was a "group for learning, not a society for promoting morality nor a study society for morality" (*Young China* 1921:10). They considered isms to be a moral issue, similar to whether religious persons should be admitted to the Association, whether members should be allowed to participate in politics, or whether the Association should encourage the free love movement (*Young China* 1921:9). As Tai Shuangqiu (1897–1976), one of the foremost opponents, queried:

As we know, the minds of current youth have changed greatly. The old moral standard has been destroyed but the new moral standard has not been established. How can morality, having been without substance, serve as the standard of our grouping? (*Young China* 1921:9–10)

Tai wanted the Association to stay completely away from moral issues, including Bolshevism.

Advocates attempted to define the YCA as committed to members' self-transformation, similar to the proto-CCM societies, and claimed that "the YCA, differing from societies either dedicated solely to social activism or dedicated solely to learning, is also a society organized upon morality" (*Young China* 1921:21). Shen Zemin (1902–1933), while agreeing with his opponent Tai's diagnosis, prescribed a radically different approach:

Most unfortunately, the current world has lost all its moral standards and numerous new tendencies are following their own ways in this time. In so much as the YCA does not represent one tendency among these various tendencies and holds skeptical attitudes toward all tendencies, how can it establish a unifying standard to keep its members' behaviors accountable? If the Association does not even have a determined attitude towards the ideas of decadents, how can it

judge individual behaviors? (*Young China* 1921:22)

For advocates like Shen, adopting a unifying ism inevitably underlined the question of collective discipline, because “if by any chance the activity of a certain member is morally ambiguous and is hard to be judged right or wrong on the basis of its consequence and intension, how can the group discipline him?” (*Young China* 1921:21). The solution, he believed, lay in members’ total commitment:

Individuals should be accountable to the group, not the other way around. That is to say, the group should not compromise its spirit to accommodate the spirits of individuals. When individual moral spirit does not follow the group, the individual should either reform himself or withdraw from the group. In my opinion, individual action and group action would never agree unless the individual devoted all his spirit and all his causes to the group and followed the command of the group. (*Young China* 1921:22)

Otherwise, he reasoned, the group could not interfere in any individual actions other than those one owed to the group, a situation he thought impossible for the YCA, simply because the YCA, as a “society organized on morality,” was obliged to “shed our moral light to the dark world” (*Young China* 1921:24, 21). Shen thus advocated adoption of a unifying ism in the form of Bolshevism, baldly stating that “if the YCA has a determined ism and has its definite stances towards all social problems, the group will be able to command individuals” (*Young China* 1921:22).

Yet, the YCA was not equipped with the group discipline necessary to make such an adoption. Although some members expressed sympathy with the Communists who “perhaps deeply provoked by evil forces, are striving for the stipulation of a unifying ism in order to secure their moral character” (VSMFP I 1979:355), they argued it was impossible to adopt a unifying ism, given the fact that members had such diverse views. Other members claimed that establishing a unifying ism at the

current stage would “inevitably create schism and end up breaking apart” (VSMFP I 1979:355). The Communists retorted that if “stipulating an ism . . . does good to the cause of creating a young China, schism is no big deal” (VSMFP I 1979:356).

The debate in Nanjing was so heated that it amounted to a showdown between the Communists and their opponents. The following day, Yun Daiying, so far a moderating voice in the debate, surprised everyone by proposing that members, instead of maintaining the status quo, discuss how the YCA should confront its schism and prepare for its final breakup. Attendees were shocked but eventually agreed to study the causes of schism more closely and prepare for a “breakup based on principles” (VSMFP I 1979:363–64).

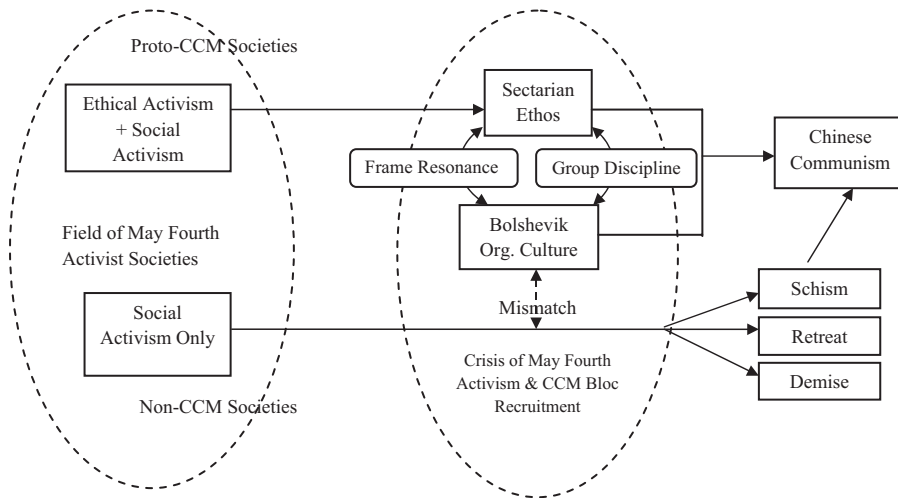
The schism itself pushed many toward Bolshevism, including Yun. In a letter written after the Nanjing conference, he confided:

I acted as a conciliator of the Association in Nanjing . . . but discovered both during the conference and after it that the Association needs to have a determined flag and there is no room for any conciliation. . . . I myself have recently hoped the Association can become a Bolshevik group, which is a great change of my mind after the conference. (VSMFP I 1979:391–92)

After failing to take over the YCA in Nanjing, Deng Zhongxia initiated a caucus group within it in October 1921, which became the rallying point for Communist members until it reached the point of “breakup based on principles” in 1925 (VSMFP I 1979: 277, 390–91).

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The cross-sectional analysis and comparative processual study show that proto-CCM societies joined the CCM because of the elective affinity between their group ethos and Bolshevik organizational culture. Their character as self-cultivation societies resonated with the frame of adopting a unifying ism—Bolshevism—while also creating strong



**Figure 1.** May Fourth Activism and CCM Bloc Recruitment

group discipline that facilitated its adoption. Figure 1 presents the causal pathways.

The concept “elective affinity” was originally a chemical metaphor, which, as McKinnon (2010) points out, was what Goethe, in his namesake novel, and Weber, in his sociological analyses, intended. It involves the simultaneous breakup of old bonds and the formation of new bonds that produce emergent properties. In this process, choice is as indispensable as the enabling condition, which, in our case, is the crisis of the May Fourth Movement. Activists in proto-CCM societies chose Bolshevism as a purer expression of their activism and broke with their May Fourth comrades.

The CCM’s rise from the May Fourth Movement helps us think more broadly about the selective spillover between social movements and the role that group ethos plays in making such spillover possible. While this pertains to organizations, it can also illuminate, at the individual level, what might motivate participants to join a new movement, and, at the macro-level, the distinct style in which a movement responds to its social environment.

In the case of Chinese Communism, my analysis sensitizes us to the fact that activists approached the Bolshevik cause not only in terms of social change but also in their quest for self-transformation. In a widely circulated

essay titled “Material Change and Moral Change,” Li Dazhao disputed the transcendental origins of morality and introduced Darwin and Marx to explain moral phenomena. According to Li’s reading, Darwin demonstrates that morality is a natural instinct for the preservation of human species, and Marx shows that morality is socio-historically conditioned by class, nation, and other social groupings (Li 2006 III:101–117). For ethical activists, this argument insisted on the social causes of corruption and immorality they witnessed and the necessity of class struggle for realizing the moral universalism of humanity. As Yun Daiying (1984:371–73) contended:

Even if your conscience wants to be good, due to your complicated entanglements with the wider society and to your wish for a life of comfort and ease, you will only end up acting against conscience and committing evil. . . . We must see clearly the causes that force us to act against conscience and commit evil. We must destroy these causes. Only by destroying these causes, can we all have good character.

In other words, unless the social system itself changed, the rich and powerful would remain hypocrites and the poor and powerless could never be moral. Marxism thus served as



a science of the relativism of existing morality and Bolshevism as an organizational means for achieving moral universalism. Activists saw themselves as historical agents transcending the relativistic gravity of morality, which other people were subjected to, and presiding over the creation of a future world of moral universalism. My analysis shows the process of sectarian experience through which they collectively self-identified as the carrier of these universal claims. Ethical activism nurtured the sense of belonging and fundamentally shaped subsequent beliefs. If, as Riga (2008) argues, class universalism was Russian Communists' response to the ethnic particularism plaguing imperial Russia, it could be said that moral universalism played an analogous role for Chinese Communism.

This organizational analysis also helps us understand the distinct movement repertoire that the Chinese Communist revolutionaries employed in their struggle for power. Scholars have long noticed the peculiar emphasis these revolutionaries placed on voluntarism, consciousness raising, and thought reform in revolutionary mobilization (Apter and Saich 1994; Goossaert and Palmer 2011; Schurmann 1966). For them, the "objective contradictions" that Marx identified in the social world were also "reflected in subjective thinking, and this process constitutes the contradictory movement of concepts, pushes forward the development of thought, and ceaselessly solves problems in man's thinking" (Mao 2007:73). For this reason, struggle for social change necessarily entails changes in individual consciousness. Liu Shaoqi, Mao's right-hand man, put it succinctly in his 1939 *On the Self-Cultivation of the Communists*:

In the unrelenting struggle against the counter-revolutionaries, we the Communists transform ourselves while transforming the society and the world. . . . An immature revolutionary has to go through a long process of revolutionary tempering and self-

cultivation, a long process of remolding, before he can become a mature and seasoned revolutionary who can grasp and skillfully apply the laws of revolution. (*Youth Study Guide* 1942:71)

The vanguard party thus constitutes the transmission belt between self-transformation and social transformation. The fact that, during the May Fourth Movement era, it was self-cultivation societies, and not other groups, that joined the CCM, illuminates the organizational origins of this distinct revolutionary repertoire.

More generally, the important role that sectarian ethos played in the making of Chinese Communism underlines how religion and ethics often affect politics through organizational dynamics. At least since Tocqueville (1983), scholars have noted analogies between revolutions and religious movements (Kharkhordin 1999; Walzer 1965). Following Voegelin, prominent theorists of political religion (Apter 1964; Gentile 2000) have highlighted the dogmas, myths, rituals, and symbolism of totalitarian movements. Moving from analogy to alchemy, involving a genuine transformation, this article shows how sectarian ethos oriented toward self-discipline was transformed into sectarian politics. In Weber's terms, religious or ethical sectarianism may seek to withdraw from the world to focus on self-mastery, but when provided with compelling bridging discursive and practical frames, it can induce cataclysmic forces that seek to master the world. Like the Puritan revolutionaries, the Communist activists drawn from these self-cultivation societies had a profound historical impact. To this day, as recent work (Pieke 2009) shows, the Party's emphasis on self-cultivation continues to form the basis of its cadre training programs. Although the ideological content has changed significantly, the Party's ability to align cultural idioms with organizational practices continues, helping to explain its exceptional resilience.

# APPENDIX

**Table A1.** Twenty-eight Activist Organizations from July 1920 to July 1921

| Cluster            | Society                                                                                                   | Founding Date        | Founding Location | Repression Experience <sup>a</sup> |
|--------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------|-------------------|------------------------------------|
| Joiners of CCM     | New Citizen Study Society ( <i>xinmin xuehui</i> )                                                        | April 17, 1918       | Changsha          | Low                                |
|                    | Mutual Aid Society ( <i>huzhu she</i> )                                                                   | October 8, 1917      | Wuhan             | Low                                |
|                    | Awakening Society ( <i>juewu she</i> )                                                                    | September 16, 1919   | Tianjin           | High                               |
|                    | Renaissance Society ( <i>xinsheng she</i> )                                                               | January-March 1920   | Tianjin           | High                               |
|                    | Beijing University's Mass Education Lecturing Corps ( <i>Beijing daxue pingmin jiaoyu jiangyan tuan</i> ) | March 7, 1919        | Beijing           | None                               |
| Non-joiners of CCM | Young China Association ( <i>shaonian zhongguo xuehui</i> )                                               | July 1, 1919         | Beijing           | None                               |
|                    | Citizen Journal Society ( <i>guomin zazhi she</i> )                                                       | October 20, 1918     | Beijing           | High                               |
|                    | Dawn Journal Society ( <i>shuguang zazhi she</i> )                                                        | November 1919        | Beijing           | None                               |
|                    | Young Study Society ( <i>shaonian xuehui</i> )                                                            | September 1, 1919    | Beijing           | High                               |
|                    | Zhejiang New Tide Society ( <i>Zhejiang xinchao she</i> )                                                 | October 10, 1919     | Hangzhou          | High                               |
| Retreat            | New Tide Society ( <i>xinchao she</i> )                                                                   | November 19, 1918    | Beijing           | None                               |
|                    | Mass Education Society ( <i>pingmin jiaoyu she</i> )                                                      | October 10, 1919     | Beijing           | None                               |
|                    | Populace Weekly Society ( <i>pingmin zhoukan she</i> )                                                    | Late 1919-early 1920 | Shanghai          | Low                                |
|                    | Great Union Co-op Society ( <i>datong hezuoshe</i> )                                                      | December 1920        | Changsha          | High                               |
|                    | Truth Society ( <i>shi she</i> )                                                                          | May 1917             | Beijing           | Low                                |
| Demise             | Work-Study Association ( <i>gongxue hui</i> ) <sup>b</sup>                                                | May 3, 1919          | Beijing           | Low                                |
|                    | Equality Society ( <i>ping she</i> )                                                                      | May 1918             | Shanxi            | None                               |
|                    | Youth Study Society ( <i>qingnian xuehui</i> )                                                            | End of 1919          | Kaifeng           | DK                                 |
|                    | Consciousness Society ( <i>jue she</i> )                                                                  | Early 1920           | Beijing           | Low                                |
|                    | Evolution Society ( <i>jinhua she</i> )                                                                   | January 1919         | Beijing           | Low                                |
|                    | Yongjia New Learning Society ( <i>yongjia xinxue hui</i> )                                                | July 1919            | Wenzhou           | DK                                 |
|                    | Critical Review Society ( <i>piping she</i> )                                                             | October 10, 1920     | Beijing           | None                               |
|                    | New Men Society ( <i>xinren she</i> )                                                                     | April 1920           | Shanghai          | None                               |
|                    | Masses Society ( <i>qun she</i> )                                                                         | May 1917             | Nanjing           | None                               |
|                    | Citizens' Co-op Credit Union ( <i>guomin hezuoshe chuxu yinyang</i> )                                     | October 1, 1919      | Shanghai          | None                               |
|                    | Struggle Society ( <i>fendou she</i> )                                                                    | January 1920         | Beijing           | High                               |
|                    | Co-op and Hope Society ( <i>hezuo qicheng she</i> )                                                       | December 1920        | Changsha          | DK                                 |
|                    | Comrades for Co-op Society ( <i>hezuo tongzhi she</i> )                                                   | July 31, 1920        | Shanghai          | DK                                 |
|                    |                                                                                                           |                      |                   |                                    |
|                    |                                                                                                           |                      |                   |                                    |

*Note:* I constructed this table on the basis of information available in VSMFP (1979). DK = don't know.

<sup>a</sup>I code arrest and expulsion from school of an organization's core members and shutdown of its periodical publications as a high level of repression; occasional censorship and other minor restrictions, such as members' disciplinary probation, are coded as low levels of repression.

<sup>b</sup>This group was different from auxiliary work-study societies emerging in late 1919 and early 1920 organized by existing activist societies.

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## Notes

1. My use of "ethical activism" instead of "moral activism" broadly follows the conventional distinction in philosophy between Aristotelian ethics as self-care and self-mastery versus Kantian morality as adherence to universalizing rules (e.g., Foucault 1990:91–93).
2. Communist historiography also includes Beijing University's Society for the Study of Marxist Theory (Beijing) and, occasionally, the Reconstruction Society (Beijing and Jiangxi). However, as Dirlik (1989:202) points out, the former's members were drawn from Beijing University's Mass Education Lecturing Corps, which was simply remade into a Marxist study group. And the Reconstruction Society came into existence after 1921 and is therefore out of the critical period of 1920 to 1921 that I examine here.
3. Because Bolshevism was posed as an organizational question of adopting a unifying ism, which no other ism demanded, it provides an ideal case for studying intra-organizational mobilization. Other approaches could be employed to analyze the reception of other isms during this period, a task beyond the scope of this article.
4. There are three exceptions: the *Citizen Journal* Society also has members' ancestral home location (VSMFP II 1979:9–14); the Young Study Society has members' school affiliation (VSMFP III 1979:74–75); and the *New Men* Society has members' mailing addresses (VSMFP III 1979:211–13).
5. The VSMP includes no materials about the Renaissance Society. But the first official history of the CCM, given by Cai Hesen (1980:8) in 1926, gave it great importance. Today, official Communist historiography recognizes the group as one of its founding organizations (PHRCTMCCCC 2010).
6. Two facts corroborate this characterization. First, before its founding, many Renaissance Society members had already coordinated protests in

Tianjin with the Awakening Society, representing local high school students versus the college students who made up the latter. Second, the Awakening Society evolved into the Party cell in Tianjin while the Renaissance Society was converted into the Tianjin branch of the Socialist Youth Corps (OLGT 1991:133; PHRCTMCCCC 2010). The organizational diffusion between them was so apparent that the early Communist historiography assumed its leader, Yu Fangzhou (1900–1928), was a formal member of the Awakening Society (Cai 1980:8). Recent scholarship has disproved this assumption (Cheng 2008).

7. Zhou Enlai and Ma Jun were both leaders of the Officium et Civitas Society (*jingye lequn hui*), founded in the Nankai School of Tianjin, a YMCA center where they attended high school. For the YMCA as organizational model, see Xu 2010.
8. Supplementary materials, regarding my coding and interpretive schemes, are available upon request.
9. These self-cultivation societies were thus a product of colonial modernity rather than the direct inheritance of the Confucian tradition. This suggests the Chinese Communists' emphasis on disciplinary self-transformation was not directly built on a timeless Chinese tradition of self-cultivation, as many scholars (e.g., Thornton 2007) have claimed, but resulted from dynamic processes of responding to Western religious and secularist discourses (Goossaert and Palmer 2011).

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