

The Birth of a Classification

From what I have seen, China's intellectual class has the worst ethos for mutual cooperation and solidarity. In moral terms, China's intellectual class is significantly less ethical than other classes. For example, [its members are] maliciously competitive, brashly frivolous, and divisively opinionated; [they] spread rumors and falsehoods, shamelessly ingratiate themselves with the powerful, and so on.

—ZHANG DONGSUN, “ZHONGGUO ZHISHI JIEJI DE JIEFANG YU GAIZAO,”
1919

Since the 1989 Tiananmen protest movement, writings on intellectuals have flourished in China, thanks to the relaxation of official control over media and academia designed to diffuse state-society tensions caused by the bloodshed, imprisonments, and executions that followed the mass demonstration. The interlocutors include well-known figures such as the late Nobel Peace Prize laureate Liu Xiaobo (1955–2017), the prolific intellectual historian Xu Jilin (1957–), and the exiled critics Wei Jingsheng (1950–) and Yu Jie (1973–).¹ The diversity of viewpoints is unprecedented in the history of the PRC. The accounts reflect and reinforce existing analytical approaches and narratives in the transnational literature on China's intellectuals. Some studies trace the conduct and dispositions of contemporary intellectuals and their pedigrees to the imperial traditions of state service and dissent of literati. These works show the political, ideological, and moral choices that intellectuals made from the late nineteenth century to the 1949 Chinese Communist takeover amid crises of political transition, war, and revolution. Some accounts describe the mistreatment of intellectuals under the PRC as well as their courage, complicity, and resilience. Others identify challenges that intellectuals have faced in a globalized China, or how markets and professions under authoritarian governance have influenced the outlook and behavior of such persons, especially in relation to the state and matters of social justice.

Any definition of a social category, Geoffrey Bowker and Susan Leigh Star tell us, privileges one point of view while marginalizing others.² The narrative of the endless struggle of China's intellectuals, both as a population and as individuals,

obscures how *zhishifenzi* (the intellectual) became a primary classification of people and a central concern of rulers, organizations, and ordinary people under Chinese Communism. This chapter begins our pursuit of an alternative history of the intellectual in contemporary China. I start with the relations, processes, and discourses that nurtured the intellectual classification, conditions comparable to what happened with *les intellectuels* in France during the Dreyfus affair. During the famous May Fourth movement of the late 1910s and the early 1920s, a debate on *zhishi jieji* (the intellectual class) permeated literary and political circles, when *zhishifenzi* had yet to enter the vernacular. Participants denounced members of the intellectual class for failing the nation because of their lack of political courage and moral integrity. The assumptions, arguments, and analyses that saturated the debate would influence how the CCP elites defined, denounced, and deployed “intellectuals.” While the debate raged on, the party was founded under the tutelage of the Third International (Comintern), sponsored by the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. Early CCP leaders, many of whom had been active in the debate and considered themselves part of the intellectual class, condemned this population further with a Marxist-Leninist understanding of class, party, and revolution. Former friends and allies reappeared with the rest of the educated population as ideological enemies of the incipient communist movement, while the leaders promoted themselves as China’s only genuine socialist revolutionaries.

Recovering this embryonic link between the intellectual and Chinese Communism is critical to understanding their entwined development thereafter. For one thing, key conceptual boundaries that would make up the influential classification existed before its deployment by the CCP, associated with a social category known within elite circles as the intellectual class. The latter was apprehended through the prism of core cultural values, beliefs, and ideals as well as the themes, imagery, and language of a stirring protest movement. That is, conventional and contemporary ethos formed the foundation of the emerging classification as much as the foreign ideology of class struggle to be accepted and promoted by the party. Equally significant is how the early party leaders shifted from identifying with to separating themselves from the intellectual class. Similar maneuvers by large numbers of educated party cadres with respect to what they saw as intellectuals would spread across the revolutionary project and muddle the local identification of such subjects. To borrow a biting remark from Foucault, this chapter helps us “catch a glimpse of the radiant city” of Yan’an, Beijing, and elsewhere after the CCP as ruling power declared what intellectuals were and what their role would be under Chinese Communism, hence the narratives and organizations as well as interests, interactions, and experiences to be found in those places.³

I begin with an etymology of *zhishifenzi*. Transnational research often traces the term to its Russian and French counterparts, or *интеллигенция* (intelligentsia) and *intellectuels*.⁴ Such analyses are highly problematic. First, they present little linguistic evidence on how the Russian or the French expression morphed

into *zhishifenzi*. Second, they draw from the terms their positive connotations such as the public-mindedness, civic engagement, or moral integrity of the individuals, but tend to ignore the negative meanings associated with the words from early on, for example, political conceit, effeminacy, or intellectual deformity.⁵ Most importantly, the analyses gloss over why the May Fourth generation of scholars, writers, and students consistently used *zhishi jieji* (the intellectual class) to denote the educated when writing about Chinese or other societies, and why a broad shift to *zhishifenzi* (intellectuals or, literally, members of the educated population) occurred subsequently. I indicate that during the May Fourth movement, the conventional ordering of the Chinese people into *jieji* (class) categories and the popularity of European socialist ideologies based on analysis of relations between economic classes inflected the reception of foreign concepts of intellectuals. This is evidenced by the Chinese rendering of *интеллигенция*, *intellectuals*, and *intellectuals* into *zhishi jieji*, even by political parties. Within the CCP, improved understanding of the Marxist concept of class would guide the leaders to replace *zhishi jieji* with *zhishifenzi*. By the early 1930s, the party had largely removed implications that educated people constitute a class of their own from its official language.

I then describe the May Fourth understanding of the intellectual class in Chinese society. Research on the historic movement has long laid out its immense impact on science, literature, romance, political thought, and other areas of life.⁶ The scholarship explains how scholars, writers, and college students responded to national crises of foreign encroachment, warlord rule, economic backwardness, and stagnant traditions. Yet, insufficient attention has been paid to how these educated people, including those who would join the CCP, portrayed themselves or the broader educated population. Their representations of the intellectual class feature three major characterizations: (1) it is a politically and morally objectionable population; (2) its members must overcome their weaknesses and lead workers, peasants, and others in the struggle to overcome grave national problems of culture, inequality, and governance; and (3) some, especially the younger, members of the intellectual class are better equipped ethically and intellectually than other members to lead the struggle.

It is well known that under Comintern influence early CCP leaders adopted an unprecedented revolutionary identity built upon Marx's and Lenin's teachings on class struggle, labor movements, and the dictatorship of the proletariat.⁷ In the third section of this chapter, I show that the leaders combined those teachings with May Fourth ideas in novel ways and introduced a radical separation between themselves and the intellectual class. The leaders accepted the May Fourth vision that the intellectual class was a distinct population, but rejected the idea that it could develop into a benign and decisive transformative force. They portrayed the intellectual class, instead, as a tool of oppression of the ruling classes. At the same time, the leaders declared themselves genuine socialist revolutionaries as well as part of the working class, that is, proletarian leaders of the struggle to end class

exploitation in Chinese society. In other words, the intellectual class became the Other in the discourse of the budding party, an enemy of Chinese Communism.

FROM “THE INTELLECTUAL CLASS” TO
“INTELLECTUALS”

Compared to its Russian, French, and English counterparts, the term *zhishifenzi* appeared relatively late. As far as we know, it first appeared in print in November 1920 in the inaugural issue of *The Communist (Gongchandang)*, in an article titled “Commemorating the Third Anniversary of the Founding of the Russian Communist Government.” That periodical, the first in China devoted to promoting communism, was published by a small group of communists in Shanghai with help from Grigori Voitinsky (1893–1953), head of the Far East Bureau of the Comintern. *Zhishifenzi* does not seem to have appeared in print again until January 1925, when the Chinese Communist Youth League issued its “Resolution on Propaganda and Agitation” during its third national congress.⁸ From then on, the expression appeared repeatedly in the resolutions, instructions, reports, and meeting records of the CCP and its sponsored periodicals. Existing research does not offer any evidence on how *zhishifenzi* was used outside communist circles after the mid-1920s. Judging from the term’s appearance in the titles of published essays—at least four times in four different periodicals between 1928 and 1932 and another eight times in seven different periodicals during 1933 and 1934—scholars, writers, and students apparently had started to use the term with some regularity by the early 1930s.⁹

Wang Zengjin, who has studied the etymology of *zhishifenzi*, shows that it is not a direct translation of any Russian, French, or English word. The term, instead, was derived from another Chinese term, *zhishi jieji*, which political parties, scholars, and others used during the May Fourth era to denote the educated population in China and elsewhere.¹⁰ *Zhishi jieji* is what Lydia Liu calls a “return graphic loan,” that is, a classical Chinese character compound used by the Japanese to translate a modern European word and then reintroduced into the Chinese language.¹¹ These linguistic loans were very common during the late nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries because of intellectual traffic between China and Japan, facilitated especially by the return of thousands of Japanese-educated college students to China.¹² The Japanese expression in question is *chishiki kaikyū* (the intellectual class), a translation of the Russian word *интеллигенция* (intelligentsia). Japanese sociologists, socialists, and Marxists used *chishiki kaikyū* regularly from 1919 onward.¹³ In China *zhishi jieji* had appeared in print before the 1919 May Fourth protest erupted in Beijing, Shanghai, and other cities. The flowering of literary and political journals that followed greatly increased the term’s circulation. Between 1920 and 1925, more than thirty periodical and newspaper articles had “the intellectual class” in China or elsewhere as the central subject of their investigation.¹⁴

Both the CCP and the more influential Nationalist Party of China (*Zhongguo guomindang*) depicted the intellectual class as a core section of the Chinese population in their reports, resolutions, and instructions.¹⁵ The term's popularity is confirmed by a 1929 translation of a book review from the U.S.-based *Saturday Review of Literature* by the influential magazine *Eastern Miscellany* (*Dongfang zazhi*) published in Shanghai. The book is the English translation of Julien Benda's notable *La Trahison des Clercs* (*The Treason of the Intellectuals*), in which he lamented what he perceived as the abandonment by philosophers, artists, and others of truth, reason, and universal morality in favor of political passions and gains. *Eastern Miscellany* translated "intellectuals" as *zhishi jieji*, even though the editors were probably as aware as anyone of the less-used expression, *zhishifenzi*.¹⁶

A combination of structural, political, and cultural reasons explains why political parties, writers, and others used "the intellectual class" to denote educated populations in China and abroad during the early twentieth century. The abolition of the traditional civil service examinations and the demise of imperial rule shortly after the turn of the century, together with the rapid expansion of urban commerce and industry and the emergence of modern education as well as academic and professional disciplines, had broad linguistic impact. The changes rendered usage of *shi* (literati), *wenren* (literati or scholars), *dushu ren* (men of letters), and other traditional designations for educated people problematic. These terms, which signal the knowledge of Confucian scriptures of the individuals and their common aspiration to public office, did not capture the growing diversity of training, careers, and ambitions of the educated population. Occupation-based classifications reflecting differentiation within this population were widespread by the late teens. The notion of "occupational circles" (*jie*), another return graphic loan, was used regularly in periodicals and newspapers to separate educated personnel into sections such as "academic circles" (*xueshu jie*), "intellectual circles" (*sixiang jie*), "journalistic circles" (*xinwen jie*), and "medical circles" (*yixue jie*). Within this fluid linguistic environment, "the intellectual class" became an umbrella term denoting the constantly evolving population of educated people. At the same time, the term serves to link members of this population in the cultural terms of ancestry, status, and dispositions to previous generations of Confucian literati, as some of the educated continued to study the scriptures and aspire to public office.¹⁷

The use of "the intellectual class" within literary and political circles, furthermore, reflected their members' exploration of European socialist thought and, especially, class analyses. Introduced into China largely via Japan since the last years of the Qing dynasty (1644–1912), different strands of socialist thinking, including social anarchism, guild socialism, trade unionism, syndicalism, social democracy, Marxism, Bolshevism, and state socialism, received immense attention after the May Fourth demonstrations, so much so that a "belief in socialism of one variety or another was shared across the political spectrum."¹⁸ Underlying the enthusiasm were momentous developments inside and outside China. For two decades before

the demonstrations, political groups, scholars, and students in China had been using their newly acquired knowledge of Western values and institutions to condemn traditional ethics, political thought, and institutions as sources of national weakness in the emerging global system of nations and political competition.¹⁹ Urban industrialization had created new kinds of economic inequality and labor militancy that heightened such discontent with the status quo.²⁰ Globally, World War I (1914–1918) was often seen as evidence of the bankruptcy of Western capitalism with its brutal pursuit of land, profit, and power. By contrast, the 1917 Russian Revolution, though still poorly understood within China and elsewhere, was perceived positively and even as a harbinger of further revolutions.²¹ Within these contexts, participants in the May Fourth and later debates on reform and revolution adopted the language of class from European socialist thought to articulate their views—and argued about the role of *the intellectual class* in the struggle.

Most significantly, the use of “the intellectual class” by political parties, scholars, and students suggests that they drew on conventional approaches to social classification in their attempts to understand recent changes in Chinese society. According to Philip Kuhn, *jieji* (class) had been a common term since the Han Dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE). It denotes “a system of social ranks,” “fixed degrees on a continuum,” a rank within “an accepted hierarchy of status distinctions,” or “the gradient that separated social groups,” before acquiring during the twentieth century meanings related to ownership in production based on European socialist thought.²² China’s political and cultural elites had long combined *jieji* with other terms to order the general population into functional and hierarchical categories, often with ethical and political implications. A prominent example is the Confucian division of “commoners” into classes of scholars, peasants, artisans, and merchants according to “the social usefulness of their vocations” and a remaining class of “mean” people that included butchers, actors, and others who were classified as such “by the virtue of the stigma of [their] occupational or inherited status.”²³ When political groups, writers, and others mentioned the intellectual class or, for that matter, any other category of *jieji* (especially during the May Fourth era), conventional ideas about the social rank and status of the population and the vocation of its members came into play. This was probably the case, too, when “the intellectual class” was used in analyses of European and other societies, that is, traditional Chinese values partly informed the analysis of those other educated populations.

Put differently, during the May Fourth era, scholars, students, activists, and others considered the intellectual class a population integral to Chinese society. For centuries, China had reproduced a population of literati with distinct status, offices, and careers. After the demise of the civil service examination, modern secondary and higher education and their privileged graduates embodied this elitist legacy. In 1915, for example, China had over four hundred million people, but only 90,000 secondary school students.²⁴ Competing descriptions of the membership

of the intellectual class existed, to be sure, even among early CCP leaders, because of the diverse culture of intellectual and political inquiry of the period. Zhang Guotao (1897–1979), one of the party’s founders, included secondary school students in the intellectual class, but not existing officials, whom he assigned to a “scholar-official” (*shidafu*) class because he believed that their characters were as offensive as those of officials under imperial rule.²⁵ Qu Qiubai (1899–1935), another party leader, was also critical of existing officials. However, he placed such individuals in an *old* intellectual class that he characterized as a legacy of ruinous imperial rule, and classified schoolteachers and students and others who worked in banks, railroad companies, and other modern establishments as part of a somewhat promising *new* intellectual class.²⁶ Other definitions of the intellectual class persisted outside Communist circles, often with emphasis on modern education. The 1930 *Wang Yunwu Dictionary* defines the intellectual class as “ordinary individuals who have received higher education.”²⁷ Jiang Tingfu (1895–1965), a reputed history professor at the famous Tsinghua University, included in the category only professionals and experts whose work produces or disseminates knowledge.²⁸ In 1940, another authoritative dictionary, *Sea of Words (Cihai)*, provided two definitions of the intellectual class: people who have received education and those who use such training to earn their livelihoods, such as schoolteachers and lawyers.²⁹ Neither of the dictionaries has an entry for *zhishifenzi*, even though it had already become a key element in the Marxian schema of social classification of the CCP as well as a term used regularly by some scholars and writers outside the party.³⁰

How, then, did the obscure expression *zhishifenzi* (intellectuals) replace the term *zhishi jieji* (the intellectual class) so thoroughly that the latter was “hardly used at all” after 1949, as Wang Zengjin has correctly pointed out? Wang contends that the switch was purely a linguistic matter, resolved well before the CCP takeover of China. *Zhishifenzi*, he indicates, is composed of two common terms, *zhishi* (knowledge) and *fenzi* (part of a population or social type). Compared to the collective noun *zhishi jieji*, *zhishifenzi* is a “substantially more flexible and useful” term that denotes the educated both as a population and as individuals.³¹ But Wang’s argument is only partly correct. Throughout the 1930s and 1940s, scholars and writers used “the intellectual class” as a singular as well as a plural noun, referring at times to “this intellectual class” or the “middle-age intellectual classes,” or observing that “most of the intellectual classes want reform.”³² The context in which the expression was used (rather than its literal meaning) dictated whether the intellectual class was presented as a social type, a collection of individuals, or a specific person. Furthermore, *zhishi jieji* did not fade away after the term *zhishifenzi* appeared, especially within literary circles. “On the Intellectual Class,” “On the Intellectual Class and Its Responsibilities,” and “On the Fate of the Intellectual Class” are titles of periodical pieces published shortly before the 1949 revolution.³³ By then, some of the authors who wrote about the intellectual class, such as the famous sociologist and anthropologist Fei Xiaotong (1910–2005), were certainly

aware of the Marxist concept of class and its emphasis on ownership in production. Nonetheless, they continued to use “the intellectual class” in their writings because the term captures the traditional belief that Chinese society is composed of categories of people with different functions and levels of prestige. As the next section suggests, the term also expressed ethical expectations toward the educated and their involvement in public affairs based on convention.

The rise of *zhishifenzi* in the Chinese language must be understood together with the growth of Chinese Communism, or how the CCP elites increasingly deployed the Marxist concept of class to promote their revolutionary cause. When the party was founded in 1921, its leaders had been using “the intellectual class” as others did to refer to educated people. As Comintern influence deepened within the party, the leaders drew on Marxism and Leninism to discuss class struggle and revolution *and* continued to refer to “the intellectual class,” even though according to Marxist-Leninist thinking educated people do not constitute an independent social class comparable to the capitalists, the workers, or others. An editor of major CCP periodicals, Qu Qiubai was arguably most knowledgeable about Marxism and Leninism among the party leaders. He spent years studying Russian language and philosophy and had written from Moscow about Lenin, the October Revolution, and the Soviet Union. Yet, in a January 1923 essay, he used a mixture of traditional and Marxian language to refer to educated people in China as an intellectual class. In the article, *zhishi jieji* appeared with “the peasant class,” “the labor class,” and “the merchant class” as a primary population that made up Chinese society. Also, he presented *zhishi jieji* as involved in the class struggle between capitalists and workers, but not a social class by itself. Though its members benefited from “surplus labor of production and the blood and sweat of the working masses,” “the intellectual class,” Qu wrote, “will under no circumstances become the main body (*zhuti*) of society.” Instead, the politicians and other “high-class hooligans” within the social category would serve as functionaries of warlords and magnates, while the most progressive secondary and college students would become a “sharp weapon of the laboring masses.”³⁴ For Qu, as for other party leaders, the intellectual class was situated between the exploiting and the exploited classes, with its members adopting various political stances.

By the early 1930s, the CCP elites had mostly switched to “intellectuals” in their essays, announcements, instructions, and reports.³⁵ *Zhishifenzi* had become a primary classification of people under Chinese Communism. No evidence is available to suggest that the elites deliberated on the terminological change. In all likelihood, as the revolutionary project progressed, its leaders recognized that “the intellectual class” was conceptually and semantically incompatible with Marxist-Leninist teachings on class struggle. Institutional transformations within the party reinforced the switch to “intellectuals.” Two stages of change are noteworthy. Before the Nationalist Party ended its cooperation in the United Front with the CCP in 1927 by massacring CCP members and followers, a development that the

next chapter will address, the CCP elites had largely overcome the “regionalist attitudes and study-society modes of operation” that had originally given shape to the Chinese Communist movement.³⁶ Leninist emphasis on central institutions and formal procedures as well as internal discipline, supervision, and political education had become part of the CCP’s operational norms, even as the party elites continued to deploy traditional values, mores, and practices to approach and organize workers, peasants, and others. After the massacre, some leaders blamed the bloodshed on what they saw as the leadership’s lack of understanding of Marxist-Leninist teachings on class, party, and revolution. The organization of the CCP shifted further toward a centralized leadership, an official party line, and use of Marxism and Leninism as a legitimation and communication device.³⁷ “The intellectual class” did not surface again as a significant term in the party’s lexicon thereafter. When the CCP seized power in 1949, “the intellectual class” was cast into the dustbin of history practically by fiat.³⁸

THE INTELLECTUAL CLASS IN MAY FOURTH IMAGINATIONS

For May Fourth activists, the intellectual class not only objectively existed—it was an objectionable population. The activists extended a trope from the late Qing, when China had begun to experiment with new modes of governance to cope with defeats in the global system of nations and competition. Notable scholars such as Yan Fu (1854–1921) and Zhang Taiyan (1869–1936) had protested that literati in general and scholar-officials in particular lacked functional knowledge and moral fortitude for nation-building purposes, going so far as to label these people as greedy, useless, and dim-witted.³⁹ Attacks against the civil service examination and the literati legacy had been commonplace during the New Culture Movement (1915–1919), as scholars and students took aim at the Confucian tradition. Chen Duxiu (1879–1942), who would become the first general secretary of the CCP, founded the influential *Youth Magazine* (*Qingnian zazhi*) in 1915, which was renamed later as *New Youth* (*Xin qingnian*). He derided the traditional literati as “thugs in the middle level of society” who had kept China economically and politically weak as well as morally and legally underdeveloped, damaging China as much as the politicians at the top and the ruffians at the bottom.⁴⁰ Writing for the magazine, Fu Sinian (1896–1950), a student at the elite Peking University who would head the campus briefly almost three decades later, criticized China’s scholars and scholarship ruthlessly. He ridiculed the scholars as superficial, stubborn, conceited, and narrow-minded, and the scholarship as unsystematic, lifeless, and backward-looking as well as useless compared with Western learning.⁴¹

As May Fourth activists established new periodicals to promote their political and other beliefs and interests, denunciations of the intellectual class multiplied. As before, the reproaches drew on assumptions about power and authority as well

as relations of the individual to society in the Confucian tradition, even as that tradition was vehemently attacked. Many of the complaints, in effect, charged that educated people had abandoned the “perennial ideal of ‘public-mindedness,’”⁴² or the moral sensibilities and duties of the individual that were conventionally understood to furnish society with its coherence and harmony. Educated people had entered officialdom in large numbers to seek fame, wealth, and power. Their hypocrisy, lack of political courage, and apathy toward other sectors of the general population were the major reasons behind centuries of illiberal autocratic rule, or the reproduction of a political system that had condemned China to economic weakness and cultural backwardness compared with Japan and Western societies. After tracing the “sins” of “the intellectual class” since the Warring States Period (475–221 BCE), or how literati from his view had gained and exercised political authority at the expense of ordinary people as well as the structural and moral integrity of Chinese society, one writer observed that the existing intellectual class resembled its predecessors in the self-serving involvement of its members in national politics.

To satisfy their lust for political power, members of the modern intellectual class create parties and associations and recruit lackeys and underlings. To allay their anger at political defeat, they make use of warlords and instigate wars. To attract lapdogs, they talk loudly about political thought and study theories and doctrines. To maintain their own dignity, they fabricate mass opinions and use higher instructions as excuses. The truth is that they engage in such conduct because they long to have a spacious Western-style house, a fast and roomy car, and a beautiful and tender concubine. . . . Whatever others regard as poisoning the thinking of the Chinese people or tearing families apart, they consider necessary means for the pursuit of their own joy, pleasure, lust, and indulgence.⁴³

Outside officialdom too, the activists declared, members of the intellectual class used their training and knowledge for personal gain. Beneath this complaint lies the moral ideal of education in the Confucian tradition, or the belief that the purpose of education is to foster self-discipline and self-realization as well as moral responsibility and humane government.⁴⁴ For one critic, few now pursued higher education for moral enlightenment or even intellectual purposes, still less the edification of the nation. Those who studied abroad went there to “have fun” for two or three years, purchased a sham doctorate or other degree, and flaunted themselves as scholars after returning home. Some stitched various foreign ideas and passages together into “absolutely nonsensical” books and proclaimed themselves leaders of particular schools of thought. Some rushed out pitifully incompetent translations of emerging theories and academic thought and haughtily presented themselves as experts.⁴⁵ Modern education at other levels, another critic concluded, failed to have ennobling impact on the intellectual class. Although secondary and college students endlessly professed devotion to honorable causes, after graduation they

turned their attention immediately to landing a well-paying job, so much so that they resorted to flattery, factionalism, and other dubious and even offensive tactics to achieve their goal.⁴⁶ The dramatic plea of another critic encapsulates the harshness of the complaints: “Oh, the intellectual class of China, there is no hiding the fact that your character is bankrupt. Your scandalous decline in society is almost beyond redemption. Please start afresh now in earnest if you want to rescue yourselves from perpetual infamy.”⁴⁷

Despite their denunciations of the intellectual class, May Fourth activists insisted that its members be on the frontline of national improvement, through promoting science and democracy, spearheading social movements, and pursuing other changes. This paradoxical confidence in the moral, intellectual, and organizational leadership of the intellectual class also embodied major elements of conventional and contemporary thinking, three of which are noteworthy. First, the confidence reflected an enduring moral-cum-analytical assumption in Chinese society. The Confucian tradition stresses the role of the educated in governance, their moral capacity and responsibility for criticizing mistaken policies and priorities as well as inappropriate attitudes and conduct, but dismisses similar potentials in other populations. As Jerome Grieder observes, in the vast Confucian literature “the peasant never spoke—save in the inchoate cries of rebellion.”⁴⁸ Second, the recent New Culture Movement was built upon the same assumption about the transformative potential of educated people. Scholar and student activists sought reform of the Chinese language and culture, of scholarship and education, and of other matters by rallying support from the broader educated population. Third, even though the activists increasingly used socialist thought to promote awareness of the importance of labor and sought to learn from labor movements, they never imagined relinquishing social or political authority to industrial workers or other laborers. Even those who were drawn to social anarchism, the socialist philosophy most opposed to social hierarchy, did not share the anti-intellectualism of European or Russian anarchism.⁴⁹ May Fourth activists believed in their own civilizing missions, that is, they considered themselves responsible for assisting peasants, workers, and others and ultimately helping China to escape from feudal traditions, backward beliefs, warlord rule, and therefore foreign domination.

The following examples reveal the extent of agreement about leadership among May Fourth activists. Zheng Zhenduo (1898–1958), a college student who would become a famous writer, championed a transition to socialism through social movements. But he was skeptical that Chinese workers and laborers would initiate, or make sacrifices for, any kinds of movement, let alone provide leadership comparable to what their counterparts had done in Russia or Europe: “When we traveled ten *li* [about 3 miles] outside the city of Beijing to see the original inhabitants there, we found them virtually living in ancient times! Their extent of stubbornness and foolishness reaches the highest level. They do not have any basic knowledge of science, not to mention the new tides of intellectual thought!”⁵⁰ He ended

another essay with this English remark, an obvious plea to the intellectual class: “Go, seek the [people], live among them, educate them, and with their confidence, if you want to get rid of the yoke of autocracy.”⁵¹ Qu Qiubai had written about social movements, too. While he was optimistic about popular participation, his understanding of leadership qualities, which apparently included academic training, limited the leaders to those who were members of the intellectual class. The leader, he stated, must have “a positive sense of skepticism, unflappable dedication to research, and unwavering perseverance. He doubts, and therefore he is awakened [to the crises of Chinese society]. The outcome of his research can engender new beliefs and worldviews; his determination can smash old habits and institutions.”⁵² Philosopher Zhang Dongsun (1886–1973), shortly before switching from supporting socialism in China to favoring capitalist development, insisted that positive change must start with the intellectual class. Its members must undergo “character reform” to replace selfishness and other flaws with moral standards that nurture sacrifices to nation-building. They must organize social movements and teach, support, and join forces with ordinary people, to such an extent that the intellectual class and the laboring class would become indistinguishable.⁵³

A central question for May Fourth activists was, therefore, who among the objectionable intellectual class were reliable allies? Or, who within officialdom, academia, or other occupational circles could help build broad-based movements to improve Chinese society? Given their ideological differences and oscillations, the activists disagreed on the transformation the country needed. Whatever solidarity they had exhibited during the 1919 demonstrations dissipated as political rivalry and animosity emerged. Yet, the activists shared an ethical-cum-intellectual criterion, at least on paper, for separating friends from foes or potential allies from potential enemies—that is, whether the person had achieved *juewu* (awakening). *Juewu* is an age-old concept with Buddhist roots. It means a realization of truth which leads one to act properly henceforth, giving up unseemly thinking, habits, and ways of life. Chen Duxiu and other proponents of the New Culture Movement had invoked *juewu* as well as *zijue* (self-awakening) widely to muster support for their proposed literary and other reforms.⁵⁴ Across May Fourth writings, *juewu* carried multiple layers of meanings of what educated people should do. First and foremost, they must recognize the moral failings plaguing the intellectual class and overcome those marring their own outlook and behavior. On this foundation, they must awaken others, including workers and peasants, to the sorry state of knowledge, ethics, and governance in China. Equally important, they must study the history, structure, and dynamics of Chinese society as means to identify the proper tactics and procedures to improve its conditions. Wang Guangqi (1892–1936), who was influenced by anarchist and socialist ideologies, believed that the awakened within the intellectual class and other classes should join forces to produce a classless society.⁵⁵ Yun Daiying (1895–1931), who would join the CCP soon after its establishment, suggested that the awakened must cooperate with their

foreign counterparts to combat imperialism, a problem that May Fourth activists regarded as foundational to China's political and economic difficulties.⁵⁶

Chen Chengze (1885–1922), an editor of newspapers and periodicals who had studied in Japan, disagreed with Chen Duxiu and others who wanted to reorganize China on the basis of anarchism, communism, or other radical political thought. Nonetheless, he shared the *juewu* approach to societal change, or the need for a mass awakening led by educated people who would critically interrogate their own thinking and conduct so as to articulate proper courses for national transformation. The problems of China, he asserted, did not stem from hostilities involving social classes or ethnic groups, as they did in Western societies. Instead, the enduring lack of such conflicts in China had fostered “a focus on the self.” This ethic had stunted the development of community, civic, and other forms of associational life, as well as of a national consciousness, and therefore had served to perpetuate imperial rule. Meanwhile, members of the intellectual class had exploited lofty rhetoric and other tactics to empower and enrich themselves. For Chen, any radical political ventures such as social revolution, universal suffrage, or decentralization of authority to provinces would merely redistribute power among those who already held it. The “truly awakened” would not promote grandiose solutions, reckless boycotts, or other forms of rebellion based on manipulation of the passions and naïveté of the populace. Instead, they would patiently develop self-governance and basic literacy across towns and villages as well as nurture labor cooperatives and other grassroots organizations as means to foster a popular agreement on the national developmental path.⁵⁷

It is a well-known fact that May Fourth activists carried forward the New Culture Movement's adulation of young people as political subjects.⁵⁸ For our purposes, this adulation represents another feature in May Fourth interpretations of the intellectual class: that educated young people were imagined as sharing an unparalleled potential to achieve self-awakening and thus deserving a leading role in reform or revolution. While this belief challenged the understanding of moral and intellectual authority in the Confucian tradition, it reproduced the traditional vision of government as an elite-led, moral enterprise built upon an authoritative set of knowledge. The activists replaced Confucian scholarship with Western political and intellectual approaches, and scholar-officials with young people who could adopt such approaches to reorganize Chinese society. To be sure, educated young people were accorded such a privileged position within May Fourth thinking, not simply because modern education was believed to have potential to empower them to challenge conventions or even because some had already led attacks on such conventions. A persistent fear existed among May Fourth activists, as among New Culture advocates, that educated young people would slide into self-interested pursuits of power, wealth, and fame, replicating the behavior of older members of the intellectual class and previous generations of scholar-officials. Faith was therefore necessary to sustain the view that educated young

people would somehow play a leading moral, intellectual, and organizational role in the transformation of Chinese society.

Early CCP leaders were among the May Fourth activists who assumed that educated young people represented the hope of Chinese society. As late as December 1922, or eighteen months after the CCP was founded, for example, Zhang Guotao, used the recent political and labor protests in urban areas to argue that “an extremely small number of members of the intellectual class” had proven to have “the strongest revolutionary spirit.” He proceeded to describe what he considered another disappointing trend unfolding among secondary and college students, or their self-absorption.

As of now, their revolutionary ardor is dimming day by day. Although they have made many tactical mistakes, the biggest reason is that they have been taken in by the hubbub of the movement in the cultural sector. What are the outcomes there? Students who have announced that they would fight for national salvation are pushed back into the classroom. Leaders of the May Fourth movement are learning to publish poetry and essays in the vernacular, going abroad to study, researching literature, philosophy, and science in the university, and applying themselves to reorganization of national cultural heritage.⁵⁹

Rather than giving up on such young people, Zhang reaffirmed their place in revolutionary change. Peasants everywhere were waiting to be led out of the “fiery pit” of bandit and warlord oppression, and workers in foreign-owned plants were “ceaselessly calling for help.” The role of educated young people, he stated, was to go to “every village, every factory, every shop, every school, and every site” to promote and organize the occupants for revolutionary struggle.

THE INTELLECTUAL CLASS AS THE OTHER

In July 1921, slightly two years after the May Fourth demonstrations, the CCP was formally established in Shanghai. As Arif Dirlik observed, Grigori Voitinsky of the Comintern, who had arrived in China in March 1920, was crucial to the party’s founding. He met with Chen Duxiu, Li Dazhao (1888–1927), and others who would become the party’s initial leaders. He discussed with them Marxism and class struggle, the October Revolution and the Soviet Union, and the Russian Communist Party and the Comintern. His visit stimulated the formation of Marxist study societies in Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, and other places. Until then, Chinese reception of Marxism, mainly via translations of Japanese works, had been lukewarm. Writings on Marxism formed but a small part of the rapidly growing modern political literature. They emphasized Marx’s economic interpretation of history and society, focusing on such concepts as wage labor, surplus value, and capital accumulation, but not his theory that class struggle drives history forward. The theory, which conjures up sectional interests and rivalries as

well as violent revolution followed by the imposition of new forms of state control, squared poorly with influential proposals to improve China through reforms of education, politics, and cultural tradition, not to mention the deep-rooted Confucian emphasis on social harmony. Furthermore, class struggle as a principle contradicted the ideal of mutual aid and social unity underlying the anarchist vision of revolution, a main medium through which Chen, Li, and others had encountered Marxism.⁶⁰

Under the Comintern's ideological, organizational, and sometimes economic support, the Marxist study societies promoted communism by translating and publishing Marxist works, launching periodicals, and growing their own membership. Chen Duxiu and others used their improved knowledge of Marxism and Leninism to engage fellow May Fourth activists in debate on issues of reform and revolution. Their goal was to elevate Marxism-Leninism above competing political thoughts, establish it as the theoretical orthodoxy among the increasing number of CCP members, and convert other socialists to their cause. The tone of their engagement with other socialists ranged from courteous to acrimonious, depending on the ideas and proposals under interrogation.⁶¹ All the while, Chen and other party leaders could not but confront the question of the intellectual class within a new theoretical context—one dominated by Marxism and Leninism and markedly different from the Confucian and other intellectual traditions that had previously informed understandings of the social category. How did the intellectual class fit into the Marxist schema of classes? What were the relations of the intellectual class to class struggle and revolution? What roles would members of the class play after the revolution? And what were their own relations to the intellectual class as leaders of the CCP?

It is necessary to outline Marx's and Lenin's understandings of the relations of intellectuals to class, party, and revolution before explaining how the early CCP leaders combined these foreign views with May Fourth thinking to redefine the intellectual class as a social type. For Marx, classes are based on relations to the ownership of land, raw material, machines, and other resources shared by individuals in the realm of production.⁶² Class struggle, which determines the acceptable form of ownership in a society, and classes are, respectively, the driving force and agents of social change. Marx provided no more than "brief and fugitive glosses" about the educated as a people in his class analysis.⁶³ Yet, what he said, did, and signaled had major influence on the organization of communist movements. His early work and political activities suggest that the transition of a workers' movement to a socialist revolution must be guided by the right kind of learned people, or those who understand the dynamics of class struggle in the society in question. These communists, as he and Friedrich Engels pronounced in the *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, "have no interests separate and apart from those of the proletariat as a whole"—but they do "have over the great mass of the proletariat the advantage of clearly understanding the line of march, the conditions, and the ultimate

general results of the proletarian movement.”⁶⁴ In addition, Marx stressed labor vigilance against other kinds of leaders involved in labor movements, “regarding his [ideological] adversary either as misguided by erroneous principles or as unscrupulously using principles as a disguise for selfish interests.”⁶⁵ In particular, Marx believed, anarchists and other socialists “often wrought considerable havoc” on such movements, and writers, schoolteachers, and students usually lacked “revolutionary steadfastness.” Even with proper intellectual guidance, socialist revolutions would occur only when workers have “gradually and painfully attained the level of class consciousness and political organization necessary for the overthrow of capitalism.”⁶⁶

In his reformulation of the relations of intellectuals to class, party, and revolution, Lenin resolved some of the gaps, tensions, and ambiguities in Marx’s vision, but only to enunciate “a remarkable heresy.”⁶⁷ Building on Marx’s class analysis, Lenin indicated that professors, clerical staff, civil servants, technicians, and other white-collar workers form an intelligentsia between the exploiting and the exploited classes in capitalist societies. This heterogeneous population of educated people generally do not own any means of production or engage in direct production like workers or peasants. Instead, they obtain their livelihoods through services to the major classes and occupy the interstices of the class structure. Like Marx, Lenin believed that the working class is the agent of the socialist revolution. Unlike Marx, however, he insisted that workers on their own would develop at best “trade-union consciousness,” or a bargaining and compromising mentality that impedes insurgent movements, not to mention the socialist revolution. Revolutionary thinking must be brought to labor by a revolutionary socialist intelligentsia, or communists who are trained in theory and organization and who serve as “the ultimate guardian” of the revolution. The communist party is the tool for uniting “revolutionaries from the intelligentsia” with “worker-revolutionaries.”⁶⁸

Furthermore, Lenin extended Marx’s attack against the politics and dispositions of other educated people. Not only did Lenin disparage the kinds of reform or revolution proposed by ideological competitors; he persistently criticized ordinary educated people.⁶⁹ His famous work *One Step Forward, Two Steps Back* was written in 1904, amid his struggle with fellow Russian revolutionaries to define the organization of the communist party. The following passage captures the crux of his attack. His view anticipated the extensive role that the party assumed in controlling and reforming educated people after the October Revolution of 1917.

No one will venture to deny that *the intelligentsia, as a special stratum* of modern capitalist society, is characterized, by and large, *precisely by individualism* and incapacity for discipline and organization. . . . This, incidentally, is a feature which unfavorably

distinguishes this social stratum from the proletariat; it is one of the reasons for the flabbiness and instability of the intellectual, which the proletariat so often feels; and this trait of the intelligentsia is intimately bound up with its customary mode of life, its mode of earning a livelihood, which in a great many respects approximates to the *petty-bourgeois mode of existence* (working in isolation or in very small groups, etc.). (Italics in the original)⁷⁰

For all intents and purposes, Chen Duxiu and other early CCP leaders had switched from a May Fourth to a Marxist-Leninist interpretation of the intellectual class by mid-1923, as the party began to develop into a unified revolutionary organization guided by Marxist-Leninist teachings and a strong central leadership.⁷¹ *New Youth*, which had become the party's flagship organ, did not publish any debate, if it occurred, on the change in perspective, nor did other forums used by the leaders to explain class struggle, worker revolutions, and the dictatorship of the proletariat. In a December 1923 article in which Chen analyzed China's class structure, he repeated much of Lenin's perspective on the intelligentsia. The article offered support to the Comintern policy that the CCP should form a united front with veteran revolutionary Sun Yatsen (1866–1925) and his Nationalist Party (*Guomindang*). The Comintern wanted the CCP to work with the *Guomindang* to wage a "democratic revolution" to remove foreign powers and warlords from China before mobilizing the working class in a socialist revolution. "The intellectual class," Chen wrote, was not "an independent class" with any "firm and unshakable" political character. It was part of the petty bourgeoisie with members furnishing ideological and other forms of support to landlords, capitalists, and warlords. Because the intellectual class lacked "any specific economic foundation" of its own, or the material basis for a shared class consciousness, some of the members supported reform and even revolution, but only with transient "romantic" sentiments and "fantasies of [themselves] transcending class interests." Nonetheless, Chen stated, members of the intellectual class would be critical for bringing together different sections of Chinese society in the democratic revolution.⁷² A year later, Peng Shuzhi (1895–1983), who had worked at the Moscow branch of the CCP, pulled no punches on attacking "the intellectual class," stating that 80 to 90 percent of its members in capitalist societies were "lapdogs" of the bourgeoisie. Some of the members of China's intellectual class had "passionately" supported revolutionary efforts and even joined revolutionary organizations, only because these people shared "the psychology of the bourgeoisie" but had seen their financial and professional goals harmed by warlord rule and foreign occupation and themselves snubbed, insulted, and abused by these powers.⁷³

In other words, CCP leaders extended the May Fourth attack on the intellectual class with a Marxist-Leninist logic. Their reinterpretation challenged the

May Fourth assumption that the intellectual class constituted a relatively autonomous political force and that some of its members, especially secondary and college students, could turn over a new leaf and lead the effort to transform Chinese society. The intellectual class, the leaders concluded, had never been and would not be a decisive transformative force. Under this interpretation, former friends and allies who had been promoting anarchism and other forms of socialism reappeared alongside ordinary educated people as part of a global “intellectual class” serving class exploitation and capitalist political rule in one way or another. For example, the June 1923 special “Comintern” issue of *New Youth* carried lengthy articles about capital-labor relations and the international communist movement as well as the October Revolution and the Soviet Union. In two successive pieces, Qu Qiubai restated Lenin’s and the Comintern’s attacks on the “opportunism,” “economism,” and “revisionism” of various socialist ideas and programs to discredit their Chinese advocates. The ideas of Karl Kautsky, Eduard Bernstein, Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, Henri de Saint-Simon, and other famous European and Russian socialists and anarchists, and the activities of various European socialist parties, were criticized for paying little attention to the history of class struggle, the nature of capitalist development, and the revolutionary role of the working class. Qu observed that members of “the intellectual class” who were active in politics dreamed up “an ideal society” and sought to “implement the details” of organization that they had supplied. Anarchism was idealistic and utopian because its “petty-bourgeois” proponents failed to understand the workings of politics. Social democrats who pursued “class cooperation” were part of the “bourgeois” enemy.⁷⁴ Labor unions, another article suggests, had become “the last refuge of the international bourgeoisie” and the tools of so-called reformers “to divide the working class” and disrupt communist movements.⁷⁵ Vanished from these writings was the courtesousness that the CCP leaders had recently extended to some of their ideological rivals.

For CCP leaders, their reinterpretation of the intellectual class as a harmful force for the socialist revolution could not but raise questions about their own identities. Were they still part of the intellectual class, as they had previously suggested? Were they the revolutionary intellectuals who Lenin had stated must lead communist movements? What were their relations to Chinese labor? The leaders did not offer any definitive answers in the contemporary reports, analyses, and declarations published by the party. Enough evidence, however, suggests that they were assembling for themselves a novel revolutionary identity while attacking the intellectual class with a Marxist-Leninist perspective. Their vehement attacks on the politics and behavior of the intellectual class imply that they no longer identified themselves as part of that population. By their own definition, the intellectual class was at best an unreliable ally of the working class and an enemy at worst. But the CCP leaders, unlike Lenin, did not claim with any consistency that

the educated persons leading communist movements constituted the genuinely revolutionary section of the intelligentsia. The leaders reserved the phrase “revolutionary members of the intellectual class” (*geming de zhishi jieji*) and “revolutionary intellectuals” (*geming de zhishifenzi*) mainly for other educated people within the party or working with it, while implying that these persons, though useful to Chinese Communism, harbored petty-bourgeois and even bourgeois values and habits that were obstacles to its success.⁷⁶

The CCP leaders also did not seem to share Lenin’s pessimism or even their own previous doubts about the revolutionary potential of labor. Their writings, instead, echoed Marx’s view on how the socialist revolution would be won. Qu Qiubai proclaimed that the proletarians worldwide would combine their “basic inclination toward collectivism and organization with ability to use social science” (that is, Marxism) to arrive at “general and practical principles” to be deployed against capitalist rule.⁷⁷ Peng Shuzhi contended that Chinese workers could provide leadership to the democratic revolution that the CCP would sponsor together with the Guomindang before launching their own socialist revolution.⁷⁸ We arguably see a glimpse of how the leaders wanted to define their relations to the intellectual class, the working class, and the socialist revolution as early as July 1922. “We the proletariat have our own class interests,” the Declaration of the Second Congress of the CCP announced, and the purpose of the CCP “is to organize the proletariat.”⁷⁹ Although the party leaders had relatively privileged backgrounds and educations, they wanted to be recognized first and foremost as part of the proletariat and organizers of its revolution.

Put differently, early CCP leaders creatively combined Marxism, Leninism, and the May Fourth discourse in an effort to turn themselves into members-cum-leaders of the proletariat. From Marxism, the leaders accepted the idea of the revolutionary proletariat, that is, that the working class would ultimately acquire the class consciousness and organizational skills needed for the socialist revolution. From Leninism, they borrowed the notion of the revolutionary vanguard, which expects the communist party and its leadership to guide, nurture, and organize the proletariat. From May Fourth discourse, they adopted self-awakening as a prerequisite for leadership in social change. They asserted that through their studies of politics and society they alone recognized the revolutionary path that China must follow to save itself from foreign encroachment, economic backwardness, political tyranny, and other crises, all considered to be consequences of class exploitation and its recent intensification under capitalist development in Chinese society. The leaders suggested that they constituted an entirely different category of educated people compared with scholars, officials, college students, and other educated people. They were the proletarians and communists at the forefront of the Chinese socialist revolution; the others were members of the intellectual class, working against it in one way or another. The political ideas and ideologies of the

intellectual class, however sensible they might seem, had to be defeated along with its members. For the CCP leadership, the intellectual class became the Other, an enemy of Chinese Communism.

The fact that millions of Chinese categorized themselves and were classified by the state as intellectuals during the Mao era has nothing to do with the changes that occurred in China's division of labor after the 1949 revolution. Like other industrializing countries, China saw a diversification of work, skills, and careers, which should have impeded the assignment of this heterogeneous population to the same social category. Nor would the wide range of political or other conducts of these persons justify giving them a common classification. The transformation of these people into "intellectuals," instead, reflected an interplay of discourse, relations, and processes across Chinese society, in which the CCP played the dominant role. So objectified was the intellectual that many would deprecate themselves as embodiments of the inferior, greedy, and conceited subject as alleged by the state; so objectified that others protested as, with, and for intellectuals when there were opportunities to speak out; so objectified that otherwise perfectly ordinary people were hounded to death and even murdered publicly during the Cultural Revolution, because of an imagined fear that the scourge of intellectuals would incurably infect Chinese Communism.

A quarter of a century before the CCP takeover of China, key conceptual boundaries of the intellectual as an official classification of people had already emerged, associated with a social category known as the intellectual class. For the party leadership, the intellectual class was a diverse yet distinct population consisting of professors, writers, lawyers, schoolteachers, college students, and other educated personnel. Members of this population shared an intermediate position in the class structure, or one that fostered outlooks, ideas, and habits at odds with the objectives of Chinese Communism. Still, recent secondary school graduates and other young people in the population had potential for political and moral self-improvement. These boundaries that defined the intellectual class did not come only from Marxism and Leninism, the internationally influential revolutionary thought borrowed by the leadership to interpret and publicize the plight of a beleaguered nation; more importantly, the boundaries reflected deep-rooted cultural assumptions as well as powerful contemporary thinking about Chinese society, or ideas restated in innumerable accounts and analyses during the May Fourth movement. The Marxian synthesis of various political thoughts by the party leaders led them to assert a distinction between themselves and the intellectual class, even though the leaders were as educated and privileged as those whom they criticized. These conceptual boundaries would become foundations of revolutionary policy and later sovereign classification.

Formed at the cusp of the May Fourth movement, the Comintern's intervention in Chinese politics, and the CCP reception of Marxist-Leninist ideology, *zhishifenzi* as a social classification had an inauspicious beginning compared to the Russian *интеллигенция* or the French *intellectual*. The Russian radicals, liberals, and conservatives who popularized the term *интеллигенция* during the late nineteenth century were undoubtedly divided about its meanings. The word nevertheless had multiple positive connotations: intellectual enlightenment, service to the people, superior moral qualities, and intelligence.⁸⁰ Likewise, the much-debated French term featured honor, civic engagement, incorruptibility, and moral authority in its original meanings. In comparison, "the intellectual class," the predecessor of *zhishifenzi*, was rife with negative imports such as selfishness, greed, vanity, timidity, and lack of discipline, reproaches against educated people popularized by the May Fourth movement. When the CCP leadership reinterpreted and further denigrated the intellectual class within a Marxist-Leninist framework of class, party, and revolution, the discourse conjured up the perception of a tenacious enemy of Chinese Communism—the intellectuals.