

Social Causes of the Chinese Revolution

By Walter S. Zapotoczny

While revolution in China began with reaction to imperialism and was influenced by Western ideas, in the end, it was the internal pressures and the lack of reforms by the Kuomintang regime that are the most important reasons for the 1949 revolution, bringing the Communists to power. The Kuomintang regime failed to adequately deal with the condition of the peasant masses and with the conditions of the urban classes. In *Origins of the Chinese Revolution, 1915-1949* Lucien Bianco writes, "Discontent and the bankruptcy of rural society created an inexhaustible supply of potential revolutionaries, but it was the Chinese Communist Party that gave this blind force purpose and direction." Almost nothing was done to satisfy the peasants' most basic needs. No steps were taken to protect them against excesses and the violence on the part of the military. Nothing was done to reform and expand the system of agriculture, or to reduce the despair caused by land tax and land rent. It was this failure to deal with the China's rural social conflict that contributed the most to the Chinese Revolution.

China's basic social conflict was both urban and rural. In the countryside the two opposing sides were the peasant masses and the landed upper class. Alongside the dire poverty and exploitation suffered by immense numbers of peasants, all other problems seemed minor. Urban problems were never insignificant and at times became critical, both for the working class and for the course of Chinese politics. It is the condition of the urban class that we will examine first.

The limited and geographically restricted growth of modern industry in twentieth-century China gave rise to the class that lived and worked much as others had done in England, France and in Russia years before. A long workday, infrequent days of rest, extensive use of ill-paid female and child labor in the textile industry, a high frequency of crippling accidents and occupational diseases, widespread tuberculosis, random deductions from wages, cruel rules and regulations, an almost total absence of welfare legislation, an extremely low standard of living, and for many workers chronic indebtedness made up the life of the urban worker. All of these factors can be compared to the social history of nineteenth-century Europe. A quote from *The Chinese Labor Movement, 1919-1927* by Jean Chesneaux describes conditions in a typical factory:

Pale, sickly creatures move around there in almost total darkness, amidst indescribable filth, and breathing an atmosphere that is insupportable to anyone coming in from the outside. At ten o'clock at night, or sometimes even later, they are still at work, and the feeble light of a few oil lamps lends the factories a still more sinister aspect. A few breaks are taken to snatch some food while still at work, or to eat a meal in a courtyard covered with excrement and filth of all kinds. When the time to stop work finally comes – these miserable creatures doss down in any place they can find – the lucky ones on bales of waste material or in the attics if there are any, and the rest on the workshop floor, like chained dogs.

Little by little, the situation of workers improved. From 1936 to 1946 real wages rose significantly, the workday was shortened, child labor almost completely disappeared, and the gap between men's and women's wages diminished. On the eve of the revolution, the problems of the working class had become less acute and affected only one percent of the Chinese population. The small size of China's working class did not prevent it from becoming a great revolutionary force. The workers were concentrated in a small number of industrial

centers that were also the country's leading political centers. After such promising beginnings as the Hong Kong strike of 1922, the Chinese labor movement grew so rapidly and dramatically that it became a major force in the revolutionary uprising of 1925-27.

"Even though the labor movement played a negligible role in the last and decisive phase of revolution," writes J. M. Roberts in *The New History of the World*, "the Communists did benefit enormously in China from the fact that capitalism could easily be represented as the unifying, connecting principle behind foreign exploitation and aggression." Neither major strikes nor urban uprisings contributed greatly to the Red Army successes. There were very few workers in the victorious Red Army. It was comprised essentially of peasants who were led by other peasants and intellectuals. It is the condition of the rural peasants that we now turn our attention to.

The life of the peasant in pre-revolution China can best be described by one word – misery. The source of the revolution and the real strength of the Communist Party can be found in the living conditions that prevailed from one end of China to the other. Poverty, abuse, and early death were the only prospects for nearly half a billion people. There were several factors contributing to the misery of the peasants.

The peasants were still bound to medieval traditions and beliefs that the dragon that dispensed rain would spare their families in time of drought. Bianco adds, "I believe that objective conditions, i.e. economic and demographic conditions, were in themselves sufficient to make the distress of the vast majority inevitable." Adding to this, China's already vast population tripled in 200 years, from 120-140 million in 1651 to 350-543 million in 1851. All of this growth came before any real contact with the West and before the beginning of industrialization. On the eve of the revolution, the pressure of population on land in China was greater than it had ever been. The Chinese agriculture was by no means primitive. The Chinese farmer's refined techniques and infinite painstakingness have been compared to the highest form of gardening. But the Chinese farmer's art belonged to a pre-scientific era, which meant that no matter how tireless and resourceful his efforts he could never hope for more than a modest yield. His choice of seed was left to chance with no consideration for irrigation. Even if he had some knowledge of the application of soil and plant sciences to land management and crop production, the crudeness of his equipment would have kept him from applying it. The peasant farmer's plight was further complicated by all sorts of psychological, social, and cultural patterns and practices. Among these were a tendency to adhere to established routine, which inhibited the acceptance of new practices and plant varieties. The Chinese peasant accepted poverty as his fate. He accepted the fact that other men were rich and lived off his misery.

As land owners, the rich received land rent from their tenants. As holders of all sorts of local administrative responsibilities, they received various fees and gratuities. As grain merchants, they were almost automatically speculators under the market conditions then prevailing. As moneylenders, they set the high interest rates creating chronic indebtedness. The upper class as a whole dominated all sectors of the rural economy. The large landowners were almost the only people who did not work the soil. With few exceptions, all other classes participated in productive work of one sort or another. The small landowner who worked his own land was on the brink of poverty. Two of the greatest ills that struck the peasant masses were land rent and land taxes. On the eve of the Second World War, land rent probably averaged around 45 percent of the total harvest.

Land taxes were the second great agony of rural life. The peasant had no idea what the legal tax rate was, so no collector could be held to account. Often the theoretical amount of the tax was doubled by so-called surtaxes, and sometimes it was increased tenfold. After

surtaxes, the most striking exploitation was collection of the land tax before it supposedly fell due. The last abuse was the monopoly on tax collection sometimes held by a hereditary cast, which kept its account books closed even to the district magistrate. Inequities of all sorts were accompanied by numerous inconsistencies and irregularities.

In *The History of China* David Wright tells about the popularity of land reform among the peasants. After being perused by Chiang Kai-shek's forces, Mao Zedong and Zhu Enlai eventually relocated to Jiangxi province, where they organized a rural soviet (council), a Communist-led regime that confiscated land from greedy landlords, punished or executed them, and redistributed their land to poor peasants. This simple program of land reform was tremendously appealing to Jiangxi's peasantry, and by early 1930 Mao's Communist movement in the province was gaining enormous popular support.

The Kuomintang regime did make an attempt to improve the condition of the peasant. A number of government agencies were charged with improving agricultural economy and peasant life. These new organizations cooperated with others in such activities as taking socioeconomic surveys, promoting technological improvements, launching irrigation and reforestation projects and trying to improve peasant health and hygiene. But all these measures affected only a few areas, and those only on the surface. The government provided a small amount of money in their budget for these measures. Most of the government's measures were concerned with the rural economy as such, not with any deeper problem. Some of its programs seemed to be based on the supposition that the peasant problem came down to the need for agricultural upgrading, others on no supposition whatever. As a result, whereas there was limited progress of sorts in different directions, no concentrated effort was made on the problem as a whole. Almost nothing was done to satisfy the peasant's most basic needs. No steps were taken to protect satisfy their basic needs or to eliminate reform and expand the system of agricultural credit, or to reduce the misery caused by land tax and land rent.

In conclusion, China's basic social conflict was with its workers. In rural areas the two opposing sides were the peasant masses and the landed upper classes. Rent and land taxes plagued the peasants. The urban class suffered many of the same problems experienced in other industrialized countries – long workdays, use of ill-paid female and child labor, crippling accidents and occupational diseases. In the end though, it was the internal pressures and the lack of peasant reforms by the Kuomintang regime that are the most important social cause of the Chinese Revolution. The government's inability to deal with the basic needs of its people allowed the Communists to be successful in 1949. As Bianco writes, "The class that listened that listened to the revolutionaries, the class they cultivated, the backbone and flesh of the Chinese Revolution, was the poor peasant class, which is to say the backbone and flesh of China herself."

Bibliography

Bianco, Lucien. *Origins of the Chinese Revolution, 1915-1949*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1971.

Chesneau, Jean. *The Chinese Labor Movement, 1919-1927*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1968.

Roberts, J. M., *The New History of the World*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2003.

Wright, David Curtis. *The History of China*, Greenwood Histories of Modern Nations, 1096-2905. Westport: Greenwood Press, 2001.

Copyright © 2009 Walter S. Zapotoczny Jr.