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L. Bianco [a]

[a] Director of Studies , Ecole des Hautes Etudes ,

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Peasants and Revolution: The Case of China

by

L. Bianco*

'We read of the "conservatism" of the French or German "peasant" in the nineteenth century, or of the "revolutionary temperament" of the Mexican, Russian, Chinese, Algerian and Vietnamese "peasantry" in the twentieth' *[Malefakis, 1972: 192].*[1] What do we mean by such phrases as the 'revolutionary temperament' of the peasant masses of the contemporary Third World? Let us look at what happened in China, the twentieth-century peasant revolution *par excellence.* Studies done so far have concerned themselves less with the peasant movement as such than with the Communist movement in the countryside. Even when special emphasis has been placed on the peasant phases in the history of the Communist movement (the Kiangsi Soviets and Yenan), the rural masses are not often discussed in any great detail. Authors are usually content to analyse the strategies and tactics of the Communist leaders, their agrarian policies, their successive land laws, and other important Communist documents, as well as the definition (more than the implementation) of the Communist drive to mobilise the villagers. The main responsibility for this limitation may very well lie not so much with the authors themselves as with the materials, which—with the noteworthy exception of such rare, revealing documents as *Fanshen [Hinton, 1966]* —usually give us only sketchy and indirect glimpses of the actual response and behaviour of the peasant in the 'Soviet Republic' or in the 'Liberated Areas'.

One way of guessing at the nature of the peasant response to the Communist leadership and its policies and of trying to understand how the fruitful co-operation between the peasant masses and the sophisticated and urbanised revolutionary élite worked, is to assess the widespread non-Communist agitation of the Chinese peasantry during the same period.

I. *Peasant disturbances and rebellions in Republican China not led by Communists*

There were plenty of peasant disturbances; indeed, peasant agitation was chronic even if easily suppressed. Nevertheless, I shall not present a quantitative study of these riots and uprisings. Nor will I attempt to relate their frequency and importance to the economic disruptions brought about by imperialist penetration, to

* Director of Studies, Ecole des Hautes Etudes.

the alleged decline of rural handicrafts and the loss of secondary income, to the crisis which affected speculation in such commercial crops as tobacco and cotton, or, finally, to the variations of time and place in the spread of tenancy, in the amount of land-rent, and in the rate of usury. It would be meaningless to illustrate on a map the fact that there were far more known instances of peasant disturbances in central and southern China, where tenancy was more widespread, than in northern China, where the proportion of *tzu-keng-nung*, or independent farmers, was much higher. It is equally meaningless to represent on a map a telling contrast within a single province like Kiangsu. I located many more cases of disturbances in the southern part of the province, where the Yangtze river and the proximity of Shanghai (that classic symbol of imperialist activities) meant more cash crops and a higher rate of tenancy, than in the relatively undeveloped and unchanged areas of northern Kiangsu. In fact, I found more disturbances in the south because most of the available newspapers which have directly or indirectly provided me with suitable documentation were printed in Shanghai or Nanking. In a similar way, 'my' northern rebellions were often located in Hopeh (near Peking and Tientsin); and in a remote inland province like Shensi, the majority of the rural disturbances I have heard of occurred in the immediate vicinity of Sian, the provincial capital. Failure to allow for the bias in the sample I collected[2] would lead to the disputable conclusions that while the Communist (or revolutionary) peasant movement retreated deep into the barren and desolate Shen-pei (northern Shensi) after having found its first haven in the hills of southern Kiangsi or in the mountainous stronghold along the border of Kiangsi and Hunan, the non-Communist peasant movement preferred Sian and the Wei valley in Shensi, and the lower Yangtze area in China as a whole—that is to say, the most commercialised and easily accessible areas in the country.[3]

Furthermore it is only in exceptional cases that one can obtain detailed data on the social composition of the membership of a particular rebellion or on the social origin of its leaders. Accordingly, an attempt to relate the social structure of a given *hsien* (county) or *hsiang* (district) to the frequency, importance and characteristics of the disturbances themselves can be only highly speculative.

I shall therefore limit my presentation to a qualitative account and a somewhat subjective assessment of some of the characteristics of these peasant rebellions and of the villagers' attitudes and responses to the hardships and exploitation which they had to bear.

1. 'By far the most fertile and important source of riots was official extortion in connection with tax collection' *[Hsiao, 1960: 441]*. That characteristic of traditional peasant agitation in imperial China (as well as in seventeenth-century France, for instance) was still true during the 1930s in Chiang Kai-shek's China.

Tax riots were in particular much more numerous than tenant uprisings against their landlords or his agents. What would appear to have been the most acute area of social tension, namely the tension between the landlord who lived off the land and his tenants who had to remit almost half the value of the crop, produced in fact less frequent and usually less violent conflicts than the conflicts which were generated by the collection of land taxes. There was, to be sure, an attitudinal difference between a taxpayers' revolt against a government which was to a degree impersonal, and a tenants' revolt against the very personal and local figure of the landlord, to whom many individual tenants were bound by different threads.

The only other kind of rural troubles which might have been as common as the disturbances brought about by taxation were the plundering of stores of rice *(ch'iang-mi feng-chao)* or other food products in time of hunger. These, however, were very limited affairs, usually involving no more than a few hundred people at most, who would go and eat at rich people's homes *(ch'ih ta-hu)* or plunder rice bags, warehouses, or stores. Although the majority of these movements were not even reported in the newspapers, in a single *hsien* (Wusih, Kiangsu province) and during a single month alone (11 May-10 June 1932) local newspapers did mention them 25 different times *[Feng Ho-fa, 1935: I, 423]*.

Disturbances related to the land-tax were usually more important and rather less rapidly suppressed.[4] They sometimes led to the establishment of 'anti-taxation armies' *(kang-shui chün, kang-chuan chün)*, which could remain active for months or even years.

Of all the burdens imposed upon the peasantry, the land-tax was probably the one which we can best document as having become heavier during the 'Nanking decade', the ten pre-war years of the Nationalist régime (1927-1937). This is true even in the better-controlled provinces of the lower Yangtze valley, where the increase took the form of surcharges or surtaxes *(fu-chia shui)* added by the *hsien* government to the regular land-tax *(cheng-shui)*. Ordered to undertake various new programmes of rural development, the *hsien* magistrates found it convenient to finance them by levying special surcharges. This happened at a time when the world depression was beginning to affect China, lowering in particular the price of agricultural products and the value of land. As a result, the officially light burden of the land-tax (in any case much lighter than the burden of the land-rent upon the tenants) eventually grew so unbearable that many landowners became incapable of paying it. Usually they would resort to violence only when they no longer had enough cash or grain left to pay their taxes.

2. Tax riots were but one type of movement directed against the government or its agents. The second characteristics of the peasant movements in China during the 1920s and 1930 not led by Communists is the fact that an overwhelming majority of them had

official targets. Few were directed against landlords, usurers or grain-merchants as such; most were motivated by a particular move or practice of the administration and were directed against civil or military representatives of the government. Like the first one, this second characteristic was not peculiar to China *[Vigier, 1970: 27-30]*.

Although not necessarily managed in a corrupt or harsh manner, quite a few administrative measures provoked such resistance that they eventually gave rise to local riots. Some, like the land-surveys, were linked to the administration of the land-tax. In such cases *hao-shen*, or 'bad gentry', were sometimes accused of having induced 'stupid' peasants to resist a move likely to reduce the burden of poorer taxpayers. Other riots were not linked to taxation. Campaigns against superstitious practices or agricultural routine were quite often carried out in an insensitive manner and without sufficient explanation and angered many villagers, inciting some to invade their local market town or to besiege and destroy the office of their *hsien* government.

Uprisings also erupted in connection with the requisition of labour for such public work as the construction of roads and canals. The coolies were usually recruited from among the local villagers and their meagre salary (when they were paid at all) was provided by a special surcharge levied on the same villagers. An important part of the surcharge could be used to cover the maintenance of the armed escort *(lu-tui)* which prevented the drafted coolies from fleeing *[Li Tso-chou, 1935: 73-74]*. Badly fed and often ill-treated, these occasionally huge armies of requisitioned labourers were as quick to experiment with strikes and other forms of struggle unfamiliar to the peasantry (even to farm labourers) as they were ready to engage in bloody battles with the *lu-tui* or in less dangerous preventive attacks against the headquarters of the team in charge of the recruitment of compulsory labour.[5]

The army itself used to recruit its own coolies, to commandeer fodder and to carry out various kinds of authorised or illegal levies. Considered in relation not only to the impressive extent of military extortions but also to the frequent hardships and cruelties inflicted upon the villagers by unpaid soldiers or by former bandits turned soldier, peasant uprisings against isolated units of the army appear to have been rather few in number. The reason for this is obvious: the risks involved were far greater and more immediate. Once the villagers found themselves no longer able to bear the exactions, mistreatment or killings however, their pent-up animosity could suddenly erupt in huge battles, or local wars, such as the one which occurred during December 1931 in the peninsula of Lung-t'ien (north-eastern Fukien), where tens of thousands of armed peasants fought with some 2,500 soldiers *[USNA, 1932: Foochow]*. In such wars there was usually no mercy. The Red Spears of

western Honan, a secret society with a predominantly peasant membership, were said to have killed no less than fifty thousand defeated soldiers during the spring of 1926 *[Tai Hsüan-chih, 1973: 192]*.

The discussion of the armed struggles of desperate villagers from every social class against an oppressive and uncontrolled military garrison would seem to lead us away from our problem (peasantry and revolution) and from the consideration of less superficial or contingent factors of peasant misery and oppression. In fact, however, such a discussion brings us somewhat closer to the point I wish to make. In the meantime, let us simply point out the fact that peasant disturbances could occur more readily in connection with such political factors as the semi-anarchy or chaos which prevailed in parts of the Chinese countryside than in connection with deeper and more permanent conditions of rural distress.

3. This fact should not prevent us from looking at the *social* content of the peasant disturbances and, more generally, at the social consciousness of the rural poor.

If specific cases of *tenant* disturbances were comparatively few, their number grew and the proportion of radical or violent ones among them also slowly increased, as reports about them during the ten years 1922-1931 in two Shanghai newspapers seem to indicate.[6] Various other data *[for instance Chang You-i, 1957: III, 1021-2]* lead us to conclude that among tenants, especially the younger ones, there was a growing restlessness and unwillingness to pay the land rent and that some landlords were reluctant to buy more land because they were concerned about the shaky prospects of getting their rent each year. On the whole, however, the majority of tenant disturbances remained traditional in nature, taking the form of complaints, petitions, and the flight of individuals just before rent was due to be collected. There were even suicides among the 197 cases of tenant disturbances reported in the two Shanghai newspapers mentioned above. Finally, according to the same sources, the increase in the number of tenant disturbances during the ten-year period 1922-1931 was much less significant than year-to-year variations: 46 disturbances (among them 18 serious riots) in 1929 (a bad year in Kiangsu and northern Chekiang, which were first hit by locusts and drought and subsequently by floods) against 20 disturbances (among them only 4 riots) in 1930, a much better year. Not only did tenant disturbances in twentieth-century China remain closely tied to major fluctuations in the weather (like most food riots of the past in Europe or Latin America), but also the slowly growing restlessness of the tenants should not obscure their overall submissiveness. Class consciousness and solidarity among exploited tenants appear to have been felt less generally and less strongly than competition for land among neighbouring tenants compelled to

eke out their livelihood in an environment where people were many and land was scarce.

Even worse off than the tenants were the *agricultural labourers*, who were unable to compete in the renting of land. Agitation among these labourers, however, hardly ever occurred. Extremely low wages and dire oppression were apparently less influential factors in determining their class consciousness than sheer competition for survival and the rivalry between occasional or seasonal labourers and the aristocracy of year-round farm hands. The seasonal labourers came, sometimes in huge crowds, from another province (e.g., from Honan into Shansi province) or from a poorer area of the same province (e.g. from western into central Yunnan) and were hardly welcomed by the indigenous labourers.

For similar reasons, there are few cases mentioned of *debtors* rising up against rapacious usurers. (The person-to-person relationship between money-lenders and debtor led instead to some individual responses; an indebted farmer, for instance, committed suicide in front of the door of a usurer who was insisting on payment of interest.) Likewise there were not many cases of collective action taken by *small producers* squeezed by particular grain-merchants or by a locally pre-eminent or quasi-monopolistic company.

More frequent were actions, often violent, undertaken by communities of salt-producing people *(yen-min)* and fishermen *(yü-min)* living in their own villages and in isolated areas like those along certain parts of the coast of northern Chekiang. Extremely poor and neglected, with hardly any schools and few local institutions through which they could express their grievances, these people were usually despised not only by the authorities but also by the neighbouring peasants themselves. The *yen-min*, once aroused, would not spare the hated police, who in turn would conduct a pitiless reign of terror against them, shooting at will fleeing *yen-min* on the sea *[Meng-yu, 1936: 73]*, or letting arrested salt smugglers starve and die in jail *[Nu Pai, 1936: 80]*. Their arms, their secret-society type organisations, necessary to the smuggling activities which were inseparable from the salt-monopoly, their customary defiance of laws and regulations, their practice of jointly exploiting the same piece of salt-land, their usually more acute poverty which nevertheless allowed sharper fluctuations in income—all these characteristics contributed to make the *yen-min* a marginal and atypical sociological group within rural society *[Chao Tse-sheng, 1935; Meng-yu, 1936; Shu Fan, 1936]*.

It would be wrong, of course, to ignore completely the *social content of the more common peasant rebellions* like those connected with oppressive taxation. In a typical anti-tax riot such as the one which occurred in October 1932 in Yang-chou (Kiangsu province), the homes of the wealthiest people such as those belong-

ing to some of the most important landlords as well as such powerful officials as the head of a *hsiang* (district), the captain of the militia and the leader of the local branch of the Kuomintang were systematically burned *[Tai Wen 1957: 16-21]*. Socially prominent people outside the government were as a rule inter-related with those in the government; together they constituted a single élite social stratum, the local 'grain controlling minority' *[Peck, 1950]*. Rebellious peasants did not distinguish between those among their oppressors who made use of their official position and those outside the government who simply took advantage of their own economic power and official connections. Furthermore, families of officials often refused to pay their land-tax, a charge which they considered disgraceful to their position, and other important landlords could usually manage to pay less than their fair share. The fact that the burden of taxation weighed more heavily on the poorer section of the independent farmers was of course likely to give a specific social colouration to the average anti-tax uprising. That does not mean, however, that such colouration was exactly the one which the authorities of the Soviet Republic in the early thirties or even of the 'Liberated Areas' (in the northern Border Regions) would have dreamed of sometime thereafter. In the rare instances where we have some social data on any rebellion, we find among the rioters a very large 'united front' of taxpayers. (This may help to explain why anti-tax revolts were more common and more successful than tenants' uprisings or the petitioning of agricultural labourers.) Even in the socially conscious Yang-chou affair, the original leaders were small landlords *(ti-chu)* who presumably had been less able than their wealthier counterparts to escape paying part of their land-tax and who naturally had to bear a heavier burden of taxation than the average farmer-owner *[Tai Wen, 1957: 5]*. In Lei-po *hsien* (southern Szechwan), a fiscal riot erupted in October 1934, when the *hsien-chang* (county magistrate) arrested seven people belonging to rich families *[Ta-kung-pao, 1934]*. In the last two cases we are closer to Landsberger's 'better-off sectors of the peasantry' than to Wolf's 'middle peasantry' *[Landsberger, 1969: 39; Wolf, 1969: 291]*.

Many local branches of such *secret societies* as the Red Spears even excluded 'those without property' from their ranks because their first and foremost objective was to defend whatever property there was in a particular village against theft by robbers as well as against excessive taxation or the like *[Liu Po, 1929: 306]*. In other cases such as that of the well-named *fa-ping* ('soldiers of the law') in northern Fukien in 1938, the majority of the villagers were not barred from membership in the society but instead were compelled to become members and used by the gentry leaders of the society for their own ends *[Tung Han-jan, 1938: 82]*.

Again such instances do not mean that the poorer classes never organised their own secret societies. One may cite, for example,

the formation of the 'Bare Egg Society' *(Kuang-tan hui)*, which was sometimes barred to the well-to-do. Also we should not conclude that there was no social consciousness at all among a discontented peasantry. But an individual's personal relationship to a local group, which might be defined in terms of kinship ties or along geographical or professional lines, appears to have come first. Social consciousness was definitely a poor second.[7]

4. Indeed, a fourth characteristic of these peasant uprisings not led by Communists was their *overriding concern with local interests*. Rioting peasants would be pacified once their rebellious attitude had persuaded the authorities to transfer a troublesome military unit to the neighbouring *hsien*, where it could freely squeeze and terrify other helpless villagers. In times of distress, moreover, villagers would usually prohibit the export of grain to other communities and would refuse to extend any help to neighbouring villages. Even in refugee camps after the great Yangtze floods of 1931, peasants complained bitterly against those authorities or well-intentioned people who were 'inconsiderate' enough to waste precious grain by feeding those who would presumably die within a few days. Finally, quite a few instances of peasant disturbances turned out to be 'horizontal conflicts' between neighbouring clans, villages, districts or even *hsiens*. In such a conflict, a united multi-class community fought against another socially heterogeneous community. The most frequent cause of dispute was the utilisation of water or the prevention of flooding. Such a conflict brought about the destruction of entire villages in northern Kiangsu and northern Anhwei during the summer of 1932, when the decision of the inhabitants of one *hsien* (Hsiao-*hsien*, Kiangsu province) to drain two riverbeds precipitated the intervention of thousands of armed villagers from another *hsien* (Su-*hsien*, Anhwei) who filled in the trenches that were dug by the Hsiao-*hsien* villagers in order to keep their own land from flooding *[Ta-wan-pao, 22 June 1932*, quoted in *Feng Ho-fa, 1935: I, 535]*. A similar struggle broke out in the same area during the autumn of 1933 *[USNA, 1933: Nanking]*, in part because old scores had to be paid off.

Needless to say, such facts and attitudes merely reflect the harsh rules of survival. In a similar way, to condemn infanticide or the selling of one's own daughter would be beside the point. The fact remains, however, that the protection of a group's particular interests—something which characterised most of the spontaneous actions of the Chinese peasantry—was not easy to reconcile with the revolutionary goals which the Communist leaders were at the same time trying to instil in the minds of their rural followers. It could be done, but it was a tremendous task.

5. Revolutionary action implies not only an overall objective which transcends the commitment to any narrowly circumscribed group, but also an offensive strategy whose proclaimed goal is

the seizure of power. It is noteworthy, therefore, that most of the spontaneous peasant rebellions were *defensive* in nature. The villagers could react vigorously to outside incursions, but rarely did they take the initiative. In a sense, they remained at the mercy of the adversary whose incursions triggered a defensive action and who could often put a quick end to it.

If most uprisings were defensive rather than aggressive, a few were truly desperate actions taken as a last recourse. We often observe a gradation, as for instance during 1934 in Yü-yao (north-eastern Chekiang), where the rejection of a petition led to elementary acts of plundering which in turn gave way to a wholesale revolt *[Shu Fan, 1936: 105-106]*. During a famine in northern Szechwan in 1937, three to four thousand refugees invaded the offices of the *hsien*-government in Wu-sheng in order to eat the palm-trees which grew there. The attack, as well as the plundering of boats loaded with carrots, happened only after famine conditions had driven some people to cannibalism, others to collective suicide, and still others to banditry. A peasant turned bandit informed an interrogating official that the reason for his illegal activities could be found in his belly if he bothered to have it opened after his execution. This was done and nothing but grass was discovered in the bandit's stomach. Even in such dire conditions, while a starving majority waited for death, only a minority went so far as to begin looting others' property. The defiance of the majority did not extend beyond such acts as committing small crimes in order to get arrested (and be fed in prison) or of affixing their land deeds to the doors of their homes in the hope of being relieved of a land-tax they were no longer able to pay *[Fan Chang-hsiang, 1937]*.

Elsewhere, a similar sequence of events would happen with only minor variations. When the police would come to arrest some landowners who had not paid their land-tax, other villagers who had paid would ask to be arrested at the same time in order to be able to eat in jail. Starving villagers would petition the *hsien* magistrate to be allowed temporarily to plunder in order to survive. Respectful looters would beg a landlord whose home they had invaded not to regard them as ordinary bandits, and they would carefully take nothing but food and would even leave enough behind to meet the needs of the landlord's own family *[Feng Ho-fa, 1935: I, 426* and *428]*.

6. A few other points could be made which would equally fit into the traditional picture of a submissive peasantry, which knew all too well the odds against their fighting for a new world or even of daring to think that their fate might be changed. As a landlord in a famous opera asked rhetorically, will ever 'the sun rise in the western sky?' *[Hinton, 1966: 26]*. But instead of discussing the much described unco-ordinated character of the peasant uprisings, their lack of preparation and deficient organisation, and the lack

of training and modern armaments which made peasant armies no match for the government, let us instead focus our attention upon the real *evolution* which was beginning to take place. We have already noted the slowly growing agitation of the tenants and their gradually increasing reluctance to pay their rents. In 'open' areas like southern Kiangsu, both trends can be related to propaganda in favour of the reduction of land-rent, and therefore to the influence of urban radicals, or at least of 'urbanised' and 'politicised' former peasants coming back to their native village. From the limited data which I have collected for the pre-Kuomintang era, it would seem that the forms of peasant protests (their submission of petitions and their attempts at using gentry members or locally-born officials as emissaries who could intercede in the capital on their behalf) were, if anything, more traditional and the resulting repression more systematic and cruel in the early twenties than a decade later.[8]

Whatever evolution may actually have taken place, however, the main conclusion which emerges from my admittedly impressionistic analysis is that the rural masses did not question the status quo, but only certain new developments which represented a blow to it.[9] They did not rebel against an oppressive established order but rather against a new encroachment on their few rights or against the local deterioration of barely tolerable conditions. For instance, they would oppose such things as a harmful administrative initiative, a governmental abuse, the incursion of a military unit, or the levying of a heavy tax burden at the time of a poor harvest. The following incidents illustrate the course which tax riots or tenant uprisings might take: on 23 October 1932, taxpayers in Yang-chow (Western Kiangsu) protested against a government survey designed to assess the size of each owner's land *(ching-ch'a t'ien-mu) [Hsin-yeh-pao, 1932]*. Again, on 20 October 1934, in Suchow (south-eastern Kiangsu) peasants protested against an inadequate reduction of the land-tax as decided upon by the committee in charge of checking damage wrought by a drought *[Su-chou Min-pao, 1934]*.[10] In the same *hsien* of Suchow, tenants mounted a protest in 1935 not because they questioned the rent or its rate but because they objected to the behaviour and corruption of the newly instituted rent-collectors *(ts'ui-chia) [Hung Shui-chien, 1936]*.

Direct and conscious causes of revolts can and must be related to more general factors. For instance, the spread of rent collectors needs to be related to a growing absenteeism among landlords and that absenteeism itself has its own economic, social and political roots. On the subject, however, of these deeper, less localised and more long-term factors of deterioration in the conditions of the rural masses in twentieth-century China, I am not prepared to accept ready-made interpretations or theories.[11] Furthermore, my point is that what mobilised the peasants psycho-

logically and led them to rebel was not so much the deep and structural causes of their misery and oppression as the factors which they perceived as exceptional or accidental (and therefore less easily accepted)—even if such 'accidents' were as recurring as meteorological fluctuations and poor harvests. The arrival of Communist armies in the Kiangsi hills as well as in other parts of rural China, and the subsequent Japanese invasion were such 'accidents' which made peasant masses more amenable to political mobilisation.

II. The Mobilisation of Peasant Masses by Revolutionary Leaders: A Guess.

As a rule, when I read reports by contemporary Kuomintang or Communist workers in the peasant movement or studies by today's Western social scientists on the peasant movement in China during the 1920s or the early 1930s, I find myself a bit uneasy. I do not quite recognise 'my own' peasant movements (the wrong ones, i.e. the ones which led nowhere) in those accounts of the early stages of the one peasant movement which was eventually to make the sun 'rise in the west'.

Those studies and reports contain either impressive organisational charts or detailed analyses of specific institutions, as well as many even more impressive (although not always reliable or significant) figures concerning the number of local peasant associations, total peasant membership, or the delegates to a Provincial Congress of Peasant Associations. The founding of new institutions often appears to have preceded and to have decisively helped the progress of the movement itself. For instance, in the 'Report on the Peasant Movement in Kwangtung', the 'high tide' *(kao-chao)* of the peasant movement is said to have taken place immediately after the creation of the Provincial Union of Peasant Associations, the movement's most important organisation *[Wan Hsiao-hsien, 1926: 625]*. Even though such an emphasis on institutions makes it hard to grasp all of the social realities, it does help to underline the centralised character of a 'peasant' movement controlled (and sometimes initiated) by Communist leaders — something vastly different in nature from the unco-ordinated riots and *'spontaneous' uprisings* which I have analysed above.

Without even going into the prominent rôle he played in the peasant movement of the *Haifeng-Lufeng* area in eastern Kwangtung, I do wish to note that the illustrious Communist peasant leader, P'eng P'ai, effectively helped the growth of the movement in the distant north-western corner of the province (in Kwangning *hsien)* by delivering a series of speeches there in May 1924 *[Hofheinz, 1966: 105]*. The original leaders of that movement were high school students who left their school in Canton to launch the movement and who came back to Canton on a few occasions to obtain badly needed political support for their activities against

the local *hsien-chang* (county official) *[ibid.: 95]*. In this particular case then, not only did the leaders come from outside the ranks of the peasantry, but a provincial government in the hands of a then revolutionary Kuomintang (with Communists among its members) also represented a decisive political factor. Thanks to the intercession of P'eng P'ai, who made repeated demands of the provincial governor, the hostile *hsien-chang* was finally dismissed *[ibid.: 107]*. Of course, the partial subordination of the movement to the local political context meant that once the latter changed, the prospects for success of such 'peasant' movements generally lessened. As a matter of fact, the peasant movement in Kwangning was condemned as soon as the revolutionary army departed from Kwangtung in order to undertake the *Pei-fa* ('Northern Expedition') of 1926-27 *[ibid.: 173]*.

So much for the beginnings in southern China. A little later in central and south-central China (Hupei, Hunan and Kiangsi provinces), early 'official' or 'mainstream' peasant movements appear to have been exogenous at times in respect not only of their leadership, but also of the social composition of their rank and file. According to strict party directives, peasant revolutionary armies were supposed to assume the primary rôle in the adventurous insurrection known as the Hupeh and Hunan 'Autumn Harvest Uprisings' (1927). Roy Hofheinz's study, however, clearly demonstrates that the heterogeneous insurgent armies were composed more of bandits, secret society members, troops from various military bands or regular units, and finally miners than of villagers from the countless peasant associations which had spread into both provinces on the back of the National Revolutionary army *[ibid.: 273, 318-324;* also *Hofheinz, 1967: 45, 49-50, 56-57, 67-70, 79-80]*. In fact, Mao as well as other leaders in Hunan and Hupeh were criticised for their lack of faith in the peasant masses and for having too 'opportunistic' a dependence on such unreliable elements as bandits and secret society members. Unreliable the latter undoubtedly were, but the Communist leaders who were ordered by Central and Provincial Party Committees to launch a hopeless insurrection had no alternative but to rely heavily on them once they had found the mood and disposition of the peasant associations to be anything but revolutionary, the peasant masses to be 'passive and inert' in some districts and 'afraid' in others, and the few peasant troops whom they had been able to assemble incapable of carrying out sustained fighting *Hofheinz, 1966: 282, 284, 293, 297, 312, 338* and *passim; [Hofheinz, 1967: 48-49, 72, 74-75, 80]*. In similar fashion the celebrated peasant movement of the P'ing-chiang area (1925-1928) was in fact led by students, and Hofheinz speculates with considerable reason that 'the P'ing-chiang-Liuyang peasant armies' were nothing more than 'paramilitary bands' with very true peasants in their ranks and with a leadership composed of traditional secret society type leaders

and more modern, revolutionary intellectuals *[Hofheinz, 1966: 321-322]*. This leads me in turn to suggest that during this early period of the peasant revolution, Communist and other intellectual revolutionary leaders in central and south-central China quite often sought a shortcut to victory through the formation of armies consisting of elements mostly marginal to peasant society.[12] Subsequently, after learning through dedicated and patient work how to deal with the villagers (the well-to-do or 'upper-middle peasants' as well as the poor and landless), they succeeded in mobilising the masses themselves. They succeeded first of all because their agrarian policies responded to an urgent need, a need which the Kuomintang policy—or absence of policy—could not meet. Without taking into consideration the economic exploitation and political oppression of the rural masses at the very start, it is impossible to understand the Chinese revolution *[Bianco, 1971]*. But we have to look beyond that start. This is just what I am trying to do—or rather to begin—here.

Two other caveats are in order. The first one is a repetition: before seeking any 'shortcut to victory', the Communist leaders were in 1927 seeking to survive in the countryside, once the repression had made a continued struggle in the cities hopeless. Out of sheer necessity, they relied on any available means. Mao himself did not try to hide the fact that ex-bandits, rural vagrants, former soldiers coming from mercenary armies and other *éléments déclassés* still made up most of his troops during the winter of 1927-1928 on the Chingkang mountains. Rather he pointed out in his famous report of November 25, 1928 to the Central Committee ('The struggle in the Chingkang mountains') that there simply was nobody to replace them, as peasants (or workers) were not available then: 'few of the peasants in the border areas are willing to serve as soldiers; since the land has been divided up, they have all gone to till it' *[Schram, 1972: 318]*. Not only, Mao added, can one not decrease the number of *éléments déclassés* in our ranks, but it is also not even sure that we will be able to find enough new *éléments déclassés* to compensate for our mounting casualties. 'In these circumstances the only solution is to intensify political training, in order to change their quality' *[ibid.]*. Years later, the Chinese Communists were to find the way to success through 'changing the quality' not only of the *lumpenproletariat*, but of the peasant masses themselves.

This leads us to our second caveat or qualification. The numerous *éléments déclassés* in the tiny Red Army of the beginnings were, of course, not fundamentally different from or alien to the villagers. Most of them were former peasants: disaffected farmers forced to leave the land they tilled and enter a secret society or the 'green woods'; villagers taken as conscripts, in a warlord or a Nationalist army, from which they deserted or were captured by the Red Army, and so on. They still kept various links with the

villagers, as did the miners and other workers who were ex-peasants or sons of peasants and took part in the revolutionary struggle. In a way, these elements, who had seen more than their former neighbours who had remained in the village, and who were more politicised and less hesitant to fight than the sedentary peasant and the owner of a tiny patch of land, represented a kind of vanguard of the peasantry at large. In a way only: the interaction between the 'large masses' and the adventurous or persecuted minority of the masses who left the village (the workers excepted), was in fact more complex and ambivalent. One needs only to remember the deep hatred of the villagers for the soldiers (themselves former peasants), in order to understand that peculiar relationship. The same can be said of the relations between the village and the secret society, which could be successively the self-defence organisation of the peasantry or another Mafia which exacted a heavy toll from the rural population: 'both a mainstay and a threat' *[Bianco* in *Chesneaux, 1972: 220).*

Quite naturally, the villagers first regarded the Red Army also as a threat. That the Red Army did not behave in the way Chinese armies used to act could not easily prevail over the peasants' life-long experience. When a unit of the Red Army first entered or approached a particular rural area, peasants often fled their homes and left their fields untended, fearing the worst from what they regarded as just another 'guest army'. Furthermore, the well-known rules of conduct towards the rural population (the 'three major disciplines and eight-point rules') were not as yet as well observed by the Red Soldiers as they were to be later—one of the reasons for this being precisely the predominance of *lumpen-proletariat* elements among them. Communist leaders themselves did not yet carry out among the rural masses the systematic political work which was to become one of the basic characteristics and strengths of their movement. On the desolate Chingkang mountains, which had been chosen because they constituted a natural mountain fortress, there were few villagers to persuade, to listen to and to organise for support: a scant 'water' for the 'fish'. To be sure, Mao and Chu Teh, as early as January 1929, established the Kiangsi Provincial Soviet Government in Tungku, within a more populated area. But even there, according to one student of the period, they seem to have operated 'in some ways more like warlords than communists' *[Waller, 1973: 51].* The leaders of the 'twenty-eight Bolsheviks' (Mao's one time adversaries in the Chinese Communist party), later charged that the whole pre-Congress period (until the convening of the First National Soviet Congress in November 1931) was characterised by 'guerillaism', a 'feudal' administrative structure, few Soviet elections and little mass participation *[ibid].* Of course, these accusations should be taken no more literally than Mao's similar charges later made against his rival Chang Kuo-t'ao during the

Long March, but they cannot be completely ignored.

It was all the more difficult to avoid the dominance of the military in the newly created rural bases since the peasants' attitude was dependent on the strength exhibited by the Red Army, on its ability to survive and remain in the area. As a rule, the peasants did not take the initiative but rather responded to someone else's initiative, be he a landlord, a local despot, a Nationalist official, or a Communist cadre. They did not even necessarily respond. They tried hard to avoid involvement in any cause or action. Neither the Communists nor their enemies, however, allowed them to remain aloof. The appearance of the Red Army in Kiangsi and elsewhere precipitated a crisis which led to the mobilisation of the peasant masses, whose involvement became nearly compulsory. A typical situation was the one described by the widow of Fang Chih-min, a famous Chinese Communist Party martyr who led an important peasant movement in the north-eastern districts of Kiangsi province. During the spring of 1929 the white army and landlords mobilised thousands of peasants to cut down tens of thousands of trees, in order to prevent Fang and his companions from using the cover of the forests to hide and ambush. The 'clearing forests campaign' ended in complete failure, a failure which the author never relates to any passivity or acts of sabotage on the part of the masses; nor does she suggest that they may have been anxious not to hinder the Red Army's moves. Mrs. Fang's candid account implicitly attributes only two kinds of motivation to the local people involved in the campaign: profit and fear. There was money to be gained from participating and money to be lost by abstaining (a special fee paid to the cutters of trees by the rest of the population). And there were threats from both sides as well. Threats from the Red Army proved in the end more effective and made thousands of tree-cutters flee in panic and become involuntary propagandists for the Red Army, which they described as much more redoubtable than its incompetent opponents *[Miao Min, 1960: 88-91]*.

Nevertheless, the Communists were gradually able to win over the peasantry to their side for other, more positive, reasons. As soon as the rural bases became consolidated, the revolutionary leaders got a chance to demonstrate, and did demonstrate, that their concern for the masses was real and not sheer propaganda. Not to mention other policies, the agrarian policies they quickly began to implement drew a widespread positive response from the rural masses. The extensive help which the villagers thereafter provided the Red Armies could be attributed less and less only to fear and submission to their new leaders. The very responsiveness of the most numerous and exploited peasant classes to the policies implemented by the revolutionaries cannot, however, obscure the fact that the latter entered the villagers' universe as rulers—rulers of a different kind, to be sure, but who were, like

all other rulers, supported and backed by an army. From the time of the consolidation of the first Soviet areas in Kiangsi and other provinces and throughout the entire Yenan period, the process of winning over the peasantry was inseparably tied to the Communists' administrative experience and to their holding of political responsibility within certain restricted areas. By and large, they did not win over the peasant masses outside those areas or outside their immediate neighbourhood.

It would be improper, of course, to consider the peasantry as an undifferentiated entity and it would be misleading too to focus entirely on the way a 'silent majority' felt, acted, or failed to act. I have deliberately ignored, and will not analyse here, the fundamental question of how various social classes in the village differed in their actual response to Communist rule and policies. Our understanding of that problem is still far from clear. There were obvious contradictions between lower and upper strata among the tillers of the land, but the diversity of categories, multiplicity of relationships and variety of interests usually created a situation too complex to be explained away by the simple hypothesis of a universal and clear-cut class struggle opposing the rich peasants to the poor and landless. Certainly we know quite a few instances of rich peasants who infiltrated the ranks of the CCP or of administrative cadres in the young Chinese Soviet Republic who sabotaged Soviet policies, distorted or opposed government agrarian measures; of other rich peasants who fought against the newly acquired freedom of marriage, tried to induce Red Army soldiers to desert, and so on *[*e.g. *Mao, 1946: 76]*. We also know quite a few instances of peasants (poor, and middle, as well as rich) disagreeing with the giving of land to the families of workers *[ibid.: 73];* of poor and middle peasants sharing in the distribution of land and goods without bothering to suggest that the new village cadres and militiamen should also get a share *[Hinton, 1966: 154];* and finally of poor peasants insisting on stripping middle peasants' families of part of their property *[ibid: 550* and *passim].*

The last example seems to indicate a radical attitude to the redistribution of resources: peasant masses wanted a land reform more egalitarian than the one implemented by soviet authorities. Coupled with a propensity to violence and unbridled punitive action against class enemies, which the Communist leaders often tried to curb, this is sometimes taken to mean that peasant masses were way ahead of the Party. I do not agree. While there is no point in condemning the intensity of the hatred the peasantry had for their exploiters—a hatred which revolutionary intellectuals could conceive of or idealise, but not feel—the defence of the interests of one's own class or group should not be identified with being radical. The Communists finally succeeded in helping some of the peasants transcend simple hatred and make the transition to radicalism, but it was a big jump. That they were not always

successful is understandable since most peasants were even more concerned with promoting the interests of their family than those of their class. A typical case is that of Old Lady Wang, as reported in *Fanshen*. Many neighbours protested against her classification as a poor peasant rather than as a middle peasant. She had in vain tried to marry off her son quickly, reckoning that the arrival of a daughter-in-law would mean enough people (and mouths) in her household to justify being classified as a poor peasant family. With a perfect understanding of Mrs Wang's plan and hurry, the family of the bride-to-be tried to extract from her more and more for the match, even asking her to find a dead girl that could be buried alongside the bride's brother, who had recently died. Old Lady Wang would then have to pay half the expenses of the posthumous wedding ceremony and half the expenses of the dead pair's funeral *[Hinton, 1966: 440-441]*. The villagers were more readily preoccupied with such thrilling bargains than with the Communists' sometimes abstract propaganda and exhortations. Again, this is not the whole story and one can reasonably argue that on the whole poor peasants took a proportionally bigger part in the revolutionary struggle than middle peasants and middle peasants than rich. From what we know with certainty, however, and given the fairly large number of rich peasants who served the revolution wholeheartedly and well, class differentiations and antagonisms among the peasantry appear to have been less obvious than, say, the gap between generations: younger people from every peasant class provided the revolution with the most enthusiastic and numerous fighters.

Concentrating on the relationship between the peasant masses as a whole and a specific power élite can help us appreciate the strong authoritarian element which was present from the very beginning, and the continuing importance of this problem from the early phases of the Chinese Communists' peasant revolution. Relations between both the revolutionary élite and the rural masses in the revolutionary struggle have been anything but simple and easy. As early as the Kiangsi period the villagers became weary of the recurring sacrifices required of them *[Kim, 1968: 292]*. It did not matter whether these sacrifices were demanded on account of the constant military pressure exerted by the Kuomintang, as was the case during the Kiangsi period, or as a consequence of subsequent drives for economic development (e.g. during the 'Great Leap Forward). In all cases the resulting tension posed a similar and acute problem. The Kuomintang blockade and the economic and financial distress that it brought, for example, induced the authorities of the Soviet Republic to impose upon the villagers the obligation to buy government bonds. The villagers resented this but yielded to pressure *[Hsü, 1971: 446]*. Like the cadres of the People's Republic of China in similar circumstances

in later years, the officials in the Soviet Republic found it necessary to resort 'commandism' when there was no other way of 'persuading' a reluctant population of the importance of fulfilling the high targets decided upon from above with regard not only to the amount of bonds actually bought but also the proportion of them to be returned to the Soviet government without compensation *[ibid.: 449]*. In these circumstances, some of the masses committed suicide for not being able to buy all the bonds imposed on them; some others were willing to give up their land rather than buy all the bonds demanded of them *[Hsü, 1973: 521]*. The latter situation reminds one not only of similar campaigns in the People's Republic of China, but also of the above-mentioned *(p. 321)* affixing of land deeds by hopeless taxpayers in Kuomintang China. Later, during the Yenan period, peasants voiced complaints about over-organisation. They are doubtless still worrying about it today, but they have learned at least not to air their grievances any more.

'They cannot represent themselves, they must be represented. Their representative must at the same time appear as their master . . .'. In such a manner Marx characterised the French peasants of the mid-nineteenth century—and by extension all peasant 'masses' *[1948: 258]*. To contrast this classical statement with the 'revolutionary temperament' and capacity of the peasant masses of the contemporary Third World is about as misleading as it would be to take in absolute and ahistorical terms the contradiction between Marx's interpretation of the defeat of the 1848 Revolution as the revenge of the countryside over the city on one hand, and Lin Piao's famous declaration in 1965 praising and announcing the revolutionary encircling of the city by the countryside, on the other. As Marx could rightly point out that the French peasants first brought Louis-Napoléon Bonaparte to power in December 1848 *[ibid.: 72]* and that their original vote was finally vindicated three years later by the outcome *[ibid.: 257]*, so Lin Piao was not wrong in recalling that the Red Army soldiers and victors of 1949 were the Chinese peasants.

Clearly, however, that tremendous achievement was a case of 'guided political action', in which 'a closely-knit group of activists, having its own impetus, specific organisational structure, aims and leadership' organises and mobilises the peasantry *[Shanin, 1971: 257]*. In twentieth-century China, peasant masses alone were not capable of seizing power in the countryside. Indeed they were even less capable than in earlier historical periods of conquering the countryside because the existing forces of law and order—the Kuomintang—had more modern arms and more effective and rapid means of communication (e.g. telephone and telegraph) at their disposal than their predecessors, the Imperial Ch'ing régime. The low morale, the lack of militancy, and the military inefficiency

of peasant association members at the time of the Autumn Harvest Uprising was unavoidable.[13] So was the fear which they felt as a consequence of their initial lack of modern weapons, training and discipline. These—as well as the psychological commitment to a dedicated struggle, which represented yet another necessary ingredient of their final victory—the peasants, or at least a sufficient *minority among* them, acquired *from Communist* cadres, who were responsible for bringing about their transformation. The revolutionary élite, whose leadership was to play such an indispensable rôle in the ultimate triumph of the cause, likewise had to undergo an equally profound transformation. The increasingly sophisticated and dedicated mobilisation policies which this élite devised and implemented testify to its inner change.

The uneasy relationship between the leaders and the led has been analysed above in order not so much to point out certain excesses, errors or 'deviations' in revolutionary politics as to suggest how hard it was to bring about meaningful and extensive co-operation between the rural masses and the revolutionary élite. The greatness of the achievement (*the Communists* leaders were in the end able to weld the Chinese peasantry into a revolutionary force) cannot obscure, however, the price which is still being paid for that uneasy, and unequal, relationship: 'the post-1949 Chinese revolution has largely been a revolution from above' *[Ch'en, 1972]*. That is still the case to-day, and the rural masses remain the first and foremost object of mobilisation and manipulation by 'qualitatively distinct leaders' *[ibid.]*.

NOTES

1 Malefakis seems no less dissatisfied than myself with that 'type of mental shorthand' *[1972: 193]*, which did not help him to characterise the *rôle of the Spanish peasantry in the* Civil War.

2 As well as in the samples collected by other students or institutions. An indigenous 'agency for compiling economic data on China' *(Chung-kuo ching-chi ch'ing-pao she)* reported 64 cases of plundering of stores of rice for the year 1934: almost three-fourths of these (47 out of 64) took place in two adjacent provinces, Kiangsu and Chekiang. Yet, as the agency noted, both provinces were usually regarded as a 'paradise' *(t'ien-t'ang)* in contrast to other areas of the country; but the fact was that the news and surveys found in Kiangsu and Chekiang newspapers were far more complete and detailed than those reported elsewhere in China *[Chang Yu-i, 1957: III, 1032]*.

3 On the geography of peasant insurrections and agrarian revolution, the long essay by Roy Hofheinz *[1969]* strikes me as an unnecessary and at times unconvincing exercise which nevertheless reaches some wise common-sense conclusions. In another discussion of the problem, Mark Selden *[1971: 34-6]* rightly rejects two conflicting hypotheses: 1) that the agrarian revolution emerged in China as a direct function of peasant discontent; 2) that there was a high correlation between rural revolution and rural 'modernisation'. As far as the Communist peasant revolution

is concerned, I would myself emphasise strategic considerations much more than economic or social factors in order to explain its location —or its successive locations.

4 Less rapidly, but still rapidly and easily, as I shall emphasise later. As for the plundering of rice, quite often the police did not bother to intervene or felt it wiser not to intervene or had no time to arrive at the village before the movement was over. When the police or the authorities intervened at all, they sometimes distributed some food to the rioters to help disperse them.

5 See many cases of *k'ang li-i* (or 'resistance to the corvée') in Chang Yu-i *[1957: III, 1025-8]*.

6 The *Shen-pao* and the *Hsin-wen-pao*, as analysed by Ts'ai Shu-pang *[1933]*.

7 I will not go into greater detail here, as I already developed this point in my contribution ('Secret Societies and Peasant Self-Defence') to a collective volume on Chinese Secret Societies *[Chesneaux, 1972: 222-4]*.

8 See an example in the Communist Party organ *Hsiang-tao Chou-pao [Lo Chang-lung, 1923]*. Instead of suggesting an evolution, the difference in the nature of repression may, of course, reflect nothing more than a different political context (warlord rule against Nationalist rule).

9 I repeat and summarise here former conclusions *[Bianco, 1968: 125* and *129]*, which are similar to those arrived at by other scholars studying other peasantries and times. About Emiliano Zapata and more generally about contemporary Latin America, Gerrit Huizer mentioned an 'erosion of the status quo' at the start of many peasant organisations and movements *[in Stavenhagen, 1970:387]*. And Eric Hobsbawm said long ago that social banditry was more likely to become a major phenomenon in traditional societies 'when their traditional equilibrium [was] upset' *[1959: 24]*.

10 As suggested by these last two examples, there was a seasonal peak in tax riots during the October tax collection, whereas food riots (notably the looting of rice or other grain) would happen rather during pre-harvest time of late-spring and early summer.

11 For instance, economic and social consequences of imperialist encroachment doubtless disrupted the former system, but brought less obvious destruction and tragedy to the village than did the political chaos of the 1920s and the persistent insecurity and still widespread semi-anarchy of the 1930s. To object that such political factors merely reflected the socio-economic system would at the very least require the important qualification that the demographic trends, whose roots were laid deep in the pre-imperialist era, might well have been more influential than any other single factor in bringing about a fundamental crisis in the Chinese countryside.

12 The beginnings in Northwest China (Shensi province) in the 1920s could be analysed in much the same way, by using Selden's study instead of Hofheinz's: an initial leadership 'drawn from student activists attending middle school' *[Selden, 1971: 20]*; importance of the official connections of these scions of 'prominent landlord families' turned revolutionaries *[ibid: 22; 37-8; 44]*; protection not of a local revolutionary government (there was none in Shensi province at the time), but of the Kuominchün, then supposed to act as a revolutionary army *[ibid: 26]*; fragility of the movement *[ibid: 30]*. In this respect, intellectual leaders of peasant movements in northwestern and southern China in the 1920s were the worthy successors of the late-Ch'ing radical intellectuals, who used their privileges and cultivated their influential family connections in order to prepare and launch their uprisings in eastern China *[Rankin, 1971: 169, 178-181* and *passim]*. The significant point here is not the psychology of the leaders, but the social characteristics

which the social structure of pre-revolutionary China conferred from the outset to the revolutionary movement itself.

13 Let us recognise, however, the influence of an additional, circumstantial factor at the time of the Autumn Harvest Uprising: the massacres of workers in the peasant movement a few months before in the same area, and the general ebbing of the revolutionary movement.

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