

XXth Century Chinese revolutions - I - Chinese Communist Revolution, 1925-1949

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Retrospectively, we know the importance of the period opened in China by the overthrow in 1911 of the Qing Dynasty: it concluded, nearly four decades later, with the victory of the Communist Revolution in 1949 - an event of historical scope. However, at the time, the future of the country looked very uncertain. Power was fragmenting in China, but the European states were not in a position to seize this opportunity to impose their colonial domination on the Middle Kingdom and were soon going to be at war with each other. The new imperialist powers (the United States and Japan) were not yet ready to replace them and claim for themselves the conquest of China. But it was only a matter of time. China seemed to be condemned to be dismembered into Nippo-western zones of influence.

Born amid the commotion of World War I, the Russian Revolution of 1917 showed that an alternative was possible: even in a country deemed backward, communism could be the answer to the threat of imperialist domination and could at the same time save the oppressed classes and the nation. However, China was not Russia. It belonged to another cultural world and another social formation, the product of a very different historical past. Modern political movements like the Guomindang (Nationalist Party) were at the initial stage of formation and their characteristics had yet to be defined. The fact that the European revolution had started in Russia rather than Germany had been a great surprise for Marxists. That the torch would be passed to East Asia meant a leap into the unknown. Russian Marxism did offer a political paradigm for the first Chinese communists, as it had

to conceptualize revolution in a country with a large pre-capitalist social structure. But Chinese communism still essentially remained to be invented.

To add to the uncertainties, during a few decades of civil and world wars, two new actors made their entrance on the world scene via the Chinese question. On the one hand, there was the USSR, which played an important role because of its influence on Chinese political movements. On the other hand, there was imperial Japan, which revealed its Asian ambitions in wanting to conquer China. Also, for the first time, at least from the 1940s, the United States affirmed its superiority in the Asia-Pacific theater. The Great Powers game became more complex.

China and Modernization

The Manchu Dynasty in China was overturned before the start of the great revolutionary struggles of the 1920s. The First Chinese “republican” Revolution in 1911 only mobilized limited social forces, even if a great variety of political forces were involved. While it rapidly lost its dynamism, it did cause people to think about how China could be modernized. In the aftermath of the Second Chinese Revolution (1925-7), the Guomindang on one side and the Communist Party (CCP) on the other took form. After having allied against China’s warlords, they fought one another violently during a long civil war, confronting each other head on over the essential issue of modernization: whether in a backward country like China, modernity meant capitalism and subservience to the West.

The crisis of the Middle Kingdom obviously did not mean the disappearance of traditional social relationships, especially in the vast rural areas. The Guomindang willingly put up with this, but not the CCP. The revolution that the CCP carried out was social, spearheaded against the old order and the desire of hegemony asserted by the Chinese bourgeoisie. It was national and anti-imperialist, aimed at safeguarding the unity of the country and its independence. It also had a vision of modernity potentially opposed to the dominating conceptions of the time, for which the capitalist West incarnated the future of the world. The search for a “Chinese way” was, from the very beginning, a subject of continuous debate within the newly emerging revolutionary left.

In reaction to the 21 Demands of imperial Japan in 1915 and in the wake of World War I, this national mood was reinforced among traders, students and intellectuals, workers, and employees of foreign “settlements.” It was further strengthened when the Versailles Peace Conference rejected the claims of the Chinese delegation: the rights and privileges of Germany in Shandong were not cancelled to the advantage of China, but were transferred to Japan, which was starting to play the role of policeman in the Far East against the Bolsheviks in Siberia. The May 4th movement in 1919 was shaped within the new urban intelligentsia. It initiated a period of intense intellectual activity where everything was subject to debate: nationalist ideals and the future of China; tradition and modernization; opening to the world and the protection of cultural heritage; the philosophy of the Enlightenment; anarchism and socialism.

Against the ancient dynastic order and the conservative grip of Confucianism, the radical intelligentsia was open to western thought, but the same movement set Chinese national identity against imperialism and western cultural pretensions. The Chinese revolutionary milieu was thus pluralist, with libertarian and anarchic currents, or non-Marxist socialists. Under the influence of the Russian Revolution, key personalities of the May 4th movement such as Chen Duxiu and Li Dazhao helped with the foundation of the Communist Party, which held its first congress (it then had 57 members) in 1921. A decade of social and political commotion later, it was Marxism (itself plural) that imposed itself on the revolutionary side.

China is one of the countries of the “third world” where Marxism took hold early on. In doing so, it

had to cease being an imported ideology and find new national, cultural, and political roots and “become Chinese.” This fundamental process of “sinisation” was facilitated by the existence in the Middle Kingdom of a state history more ancient than in Europe. The Chinese revolutionaries had to fight strong conservative traditions which their enemies made good use of. But the transplanting of Marxism proved successful.

Second Chinese Revolution

The First Chinese Revolution had started in 1911 in Wuhan (Hubei) on October 10, in the center of the country, with a military upheaval. The Second Revolution started in the South in 1925 amid increasing social and national struggles. Sun Yat-sen, a great figure of the national democratic movement, was at that time president of the revolutionary government of Canton – his power was only regional. A large part of the territory was under the military control of warlords. The goal of the Chinese revolutionaries was the reunification of the country in the framework of a republic. During the revolution of 1925–7 new social actors appeared on the scene. In addition to the rural classes, an important role came to be played by the urban bourgeoisie and the (semi-) proletariat. Thus, during the 1920s, the national movement went through intense class conflicts. The First Revolution had closed a chapter of Chinese history: the imperial era. The Second opened the next chapter: that of the relationship between national war and social revolution.

Most waves of industrialization in China were very recent – the end of the nineteenth century and the first years of the twentieth, and during the 1910s and 1920s. This was the golden age of Chinese capitalism, with modern rice and oil mills, a cotton industry and weaving looms, tobacco, silk, and the heavy metallurgy of the Yangtze valley and Manchuria. In 1915–20 the young working class was estimated at 650,000 all over China and 1.5 million by the beginning of the 1920s (there were at least 250 million peasants). Coming from urban plebeians and the rural poor, the new working class experienced the trauma of being uprooted and savage exploitation. It remained a very small minority in the country, and much of China’s textile and garment production remained a cottage industry. Capitalist expansion affected China in a very unequal manner. A large part of the semi-proletariat was composed of unskilled day laborers, the coolies. The industrial working class was often concentrated in big factories, which, like in Shanghai, employed more than 500–1,000 workers.

The trade union movement and the Chinese Communist Party both emerged at the same time. Hong Kong’s seamen led a victorious strike in January–March 1922. The first national All-China Labor Congress was held in Canton on May 1 that same year (it claimed 300,000 members). Communist militants, though very small in number, were already present in the metallurgical industries, docks, mines, and textile industries. Repression intensified in the North and center of the country, where the union movement retreated.

In the rural world, the crisis of central power contributed to unsettling the village’s traditional balance. A lack of arable land and the partition of properties heightened the tensions between the peasantry and landlords in many provinces, and within the peasantry itself, between richer and poorer. The vast hinterland evolved much more slowly than the coastal zones, the Yangtze valley, and Manchuria. However, in these regions the impact of the agrarian crisis still made itself felt, as the proletariat and the urban poor still maintained links with their families in the countryside. Then, after World War I, western capital and goods made a strong comeback, directly competing with the Chinese industrial sector. Thus, conditions were such that, in some places at least, rural upheaval could link with urban struggle.

At the beginning of the 1920s underlying tensions were social, and in coastal China the political

mood was largely anti-imperialist. The western powers, at the time of the Washington Conference in November 1921-February 1922, had forced Japan to return Shandong, but they were also taking advantage of the political fragmentation of the country and in 1923 demanded control over the railways. The weakness of China was obvious. The Communist Party was then too small to claim the leadership of the national movement. This role was incumbent upon the Guomindang, based in Canton, under the mobilizing theme of Northern Expedition: the reunification of the country via a military campaign against the warlords and the Beijing government, allied with the big powers.

The Guomindang benefited from the prestige of Sun Yat-sen, but was disorganized and divided. It turned to Moscow to strengthen its organization and for military training and aid. The offer of collaboration with China came at the right moment for the Soviet leadership: in 1923, after the failure of the German revolution, revolutionary expectations were postponed in Europe. As the western horizon was shut, the geopolitical importance of China in the East grew. In this context, on the advice (or rather orders) of envoys of the Komintern, members of the CCP, in spite of hesitations, integrated with the Guomindang. The Third Congress of the Communist Party ratified this unusual tactic of "united front from within" or "bloc within" in June 1923; it had then 420 members. The Guomindang did the same in January 1924. Alliance with Moscow was sealed. Three communists, one of whom was Li Dazhao, were elected to the Central Committee of the Guomindang; six others were alternates, one of them the young Mao Zedong. After disappointing beginnings, the alliance between the Guomindang of Sun Yat-sen, Moscow, and the CCP proved very dynamic. After the frustration of the 1911 revolution, it gave new life to the national movement.

On May 30, 1925 police under English leadership shot dead demonstrators in Shanghai's International Settlement who were denouncing the assassination of a Chinese striker by a Japanese foreman. It was the beginning of a colossal movement of protest against imperialism. Solidarity with Shanghai's strikes spread to the North and the South. On June 23, 1925 it was the turn of Franco-English forces to shoot at a demonstration in Canton, killing 52 people and provoking the boycott-strike of Canton-Hong Kong, which lasted 15 months. A strike Central Committee was established and became an effective "second power" in the region. People's military detachments guarded the coast. Nationalist in its goals, the movement was proletarian in form and popular in its roots, opening the possibility in some regions of the center and the South of an unprecedented convergence of urban and rural mobilizations. Peasant unions started to see the light of day under the Guomindang flag, with the help of some communist militants active in the countryside, like Peng Pai in the Guangdong. The Northern Expedition against the warlords actually began in July 1926: the army of the Canton government progressed rapidly thanks to the accompanying mass upheaval.

It is in this context that the trade unions, the peasant movement, and the CCP rapidly expanded. In May 1926 the third national Labor Congress (where the role of Liu Shaoqi was important) announced 1,240,000 members; in April 1927 it was 2,800,000. In March 1926 Mao Zedong published his *Analysis of the Classes in Chinese Society*. The first National Congress of the peasant movement was held in April of that year and in 1927 some 10 million peasants would have been under the influence of the Communist Party, especially in the Guangdong and the Hunan. In 1925-6 CCP membership grew from 1,000 to 30,000, reaching 57,000 on the eve of the counterrevolution of 1927.

The nationalist May 30th movement had started in 1925 in the industrial metropolis of Shanghai as a vast inter-class mobilization, with the participation of workers' unions, student organizations, associations of small traders, and the chamber of commerce (the big modern bourgeoisie). Chinese social elites soon became worried by the rapid rise of this popular movement and the increasing influence of the communists. Sun Yat-sen died in March 1925, leaving the way clear for the right wing of the Guomindang represented by Chiang Kai-shek, who rapidly took anti-communist measures: proclamation of martial law, disarmament of workers' pickets, arrest of Communist Party

members, and restriction of trade union activities.

It was clear that a decisive show-down was looming within the Guomindang and the national movement. Chen Duxiu informed the Communist International and requested that the CCP withdraw from the Guomindang in order to insure its organizational independence. The policy of the “bloc within” had been proposed (against Chen’s opinion) by the Dutch Henk Sneevliet (Maring) and later supported by Joffe (a friend of Trotsky), then the official delegate of the Communist International in China. Sneevliet was inspired by previous experience in Indonesia. In 1926, however, as the situation evolved, Trotsky and his comrades supported the position of Chen Duxiu. Two years after the death of Lenin, factional struggles were raging within the Soviet Communist Party. The “Chinese issue” became locked in the ongoing political conflicts of the USSR. On the orders of Stalin and Bukharin, the Communist International, at the plenary meeting of November-December 1926, rejected the constitution of left communist “factions” within the Guomindang and any perspective of getting out of it. At that time, the CCP was not in the political position to reject the discipline imposed by Moscow and the Communist International. It therefore lost the initiative while Chiang Kai-shek organized the counterrevolution. The defeat of the Second Chinese Revolution was played out in three bloody acts in 1927.

The first act began in Shanghai on March 21, 1927, when trade unions and the communists led a successful uprising. In conformity with the policy of the Communist International, they did not oppose the occupation of the town by Chiang Kai-shek’s military forces. On April 12 thousands of labor activists were massacred by the “National” army operating jointly with underworld gangs and bosses’ goons. On May 21 the Guomindang launched another massacre in Changsa. Some 10,000 communists were killed in Hunan province’s capital and its surroundings.

The second act played in Wuhan, the capital of the province of Hubei in the center of China. Wang Jinwei and the “left-wing” government of the Guomindang (its leadership split) were based there. Moscow and Stalin gave them their support. On May 11, 1927, however, Wuhan’s government turned against its communist ally and repressed it violently in order to reconcile with Chiang Kai-shek.

Finally, the third act played in Canton. Faced by the disastrous evolution of the situation, Moscow abruptly decided to organize an insurrection in the South on December 11, 1927. Isolated, the “Canton Commune” could not hold out. Repression was again ferocious.

Civil War: 1928-1935

The CCP paid a high price for the counterrevolution. Throughout the country, numerous militants and some central leaders like Li Dazhao were killed. The CCP only retained its forces thanks to the insurrections of the summer of 1927. The right wing of the Guomindang controlled most of the nationalist armed forces, but communist influence was sometimes great, like in the Fourth Army, which rebelled on August 1, 1927 (celebrated afterwards as the founding date of the Red Army): this was the Nanchang Uprising, led by Zhou Enlai and pro-communist officers like He Long and Ye Ting. In September, a peasant insurrection erupted in Hunan, where Mao Zedong was then: this was the Autumn Harvest Uprising. Mao withdrew into the mountains of Jinggangshan, at the border of Hunan and Jiangxi, where Zhu De joined him. Further to the north, in the region of Wuhan, Peng Dehuai also commanded a significant military force.

In 1930 most of the communist military forces commanded by Mao Zedong, Zhu De, Zhou Enlai, and Peng Dehuai ended up grouping themselves in the new Soviet republic of Jiangxi. In spite of the series of defeats, the CCP still controlled some 300,000 soldiers in the whole country, which

indicates the scope of radicalization in 1925–7. The Red Army was therefore born from mass upheavals, great social struggles, and military rebellions, not from small guerilla units. This explains its longevity: born within the Second Chinese Revolution, it became the spearhead of the Third Chinese Revolution and of the 1949 victory. The Red Army thus bridged the gaps between all the big revolutionary episodes from 1920 to 1940.

In the USSR the Stalinist faction consolidated its power. Instead of criticizing itself for the orientation it had imposed in China, it placed complete responsibility for the defeats on successive leaders of the CCP from 1927 to 1930: Chen Duxiu, Qu Qiubai, Li Lisan, etc. This was extremely unfair considering that the CCP was a young party in the midst of a revolutionary storm just a few years after its birth and which very naturally placed its trust in the Russian comrades and envoys of the Communist International. The CCP was one of the first parties to have been directly confronted with the international consequences of the Stalinist victory in the USSR.

Chen Duxiu, one of the greatest surviving figures of Chinese Marxism, joined for a while the International Left Opposition (the Trotskyist movement) and its criticism of the process of bureaucratization of the revolution. Returning from Moscow officially to take the leadership of the Communist Party, Wang Ming remained faithful to the Stalinist faction. In Jiangxi, however, the new leadership constituting itself around Mao started more pragmatically to distance itself from the Soviets, convinced that from now on it was up to the Chinese to decide the orientation in China. The conflict between the Wang Ming and Mao factions marked the whole history of the party for the next two decades. It started early on in the Soviet republic of Jiangxi. Mao was elected president on November 7, 1931, but the members of his faction were kept from significant positions in 1933, and he himself was isolated. It was only two years later, during the Long March, that the Maoist leadership began to consolidate its authority. Meanwhile, the Red Army had to abandon its bases in South China.

From 1930 to 1934, Chiang Kai-shek led five big anti-communist extermination campaigns against the zones controlled by the CCP, mobilizing enormous military means. The bases in Henan, Hubei, and Anhui had to be rapidly evacuated, but the base in Jiangxi – where Mao remained – resisted. It was only in August 1934 that the abandonment of the base was decided on. The Red Army broke through the blockade: it was the beginning of the legendary Long March, a real epic but also a strategic retreat that ended only in October 1935, in Yan'an, in Shaanxi, in the Northwest of the country. When he started out on the Long March, Mao's army corps counted 86,000 soldiers. After a long and perilous journey of 10,000 kilometers, when it reached Shaanxi, they were less than 5,000. Thanks to the arrival of troops from other regions, the Red Army, finally based at Yan'an, increased to 40,000 fighters, a derisory figure for China.

The new Maoist leadership team was steeled through such trials, but was not yet unified (it divided again in the years that followed). Around Mao Zedong there were key politico-military leaders like Zhu De, Peng Dehuai, Lin Biao, Chen Yi or the "One-eyed Dragon" Liu Bochong, as well as major political figures who previously often opposed Mao, like Zhou Enlai. Cadres operating in zones other than Jiangxi afterwards integrated into this leadership, especially Deng Xiaoping and Liu Shaoqi.

While revolution and counterrevolution confronted one another in the nationalist camp, imperial Japan reinforced its positions on the continent. In September 1931 it invaded Manchuria in the Northeast, where it created in the following year a protectorate: the state of Manchukuo. In January 1932 the Japanese attacked Shanghai, breaking resistance after three months of siege and an atrocious massacre. In 1933 it occupied Jehol and penetrated into Chabar. These were the early signs of World War II in Asia. During this period, Chiang Kai-shek made agreements with Japan to concentrate its army against the communist strongholds. For its part, the CCP symbolically declared war on Japan and presented the forced retreat of the Long March as instead a means of approaching

the Japanese.

Thus, in the midst of the civil war, the national question remained at the heart of the Chinese political situation. In the early 1920s a large array of social forces had closed ranks in opposition to Japanese, British, or French rule. The political evolution of Sun Yat-sen's Guomindang seemed promising. The workers' movement itself was created within the national movement. However, as soon as the anti-imperialist fight gained strength – thanks to the workers and popular and peasant mobilizations – social contradictions sharpened and the unity of the nationalist movement was smashed. Chiang Kai-shek's Guomindang became an instrument of the bourgeois counterrevolution. Class antagonisms prevailed over national unity.

Maoism did not yet exist in the mid-1920s. It took form as a distinct political current in the heat of the Second Chinese Revolution and the violent confrontations that followed. It then passed through a formidable experience of urban and rural struggle; a rich and complex political experience, especially as regards the relationship between the Guomindang, the CCP, and the USSR. It learnt at a very early stage from extensive military experience against the warlords, then in the civil war launched by Chiang Kai-shek. It experienced the intimate connections between national and social questions. It suffered the merciless violence of the counterrevolution and was toughened by defeat.

Anti-Japanese Resistance: 1937-1945

At the end of the Long March the young Maoist leadership was socially and geographically marginalized and had fallen back on Yan'an. But, matured through the experience of the years 1925-35, it was able to take the political initiative as soon as the situation would allow it. This proved the case when, in July 1937, Japan launched the conquest of China. The old Middle Kingdom this time was running the risk of being integrated into the Japanese zone of influence. It was also a major turning point for the whole region: World War II had begun in the Far East. In some countries the pan-Asian nationalism promoted by Tokyo obtained temporary favorable interest from sectors of the national anti-colonial movement, but in China the imperial army was perceived as a brutal occupation force. The Rape of Nanking remained in the memory as the symbol of the atrocities committed by the occupants, after six weeks of massacres from December 1937 to January 1938. The nation looked to Chinese political parties to fight the invader. The issue of national alliance was again raised.

In 1937 Chiang Kai-shek had established his control over most of the Chinese territory. The warlords were defeated militarily or otherwise integrated into the new regime. In the towns the labor movement was crushed, both by the Japanese army and the Chinese bourgeoisie. Communist cadres were decimated and the main representatives of the left opposition incarcerated (Chen Duxiu, Peng Shutze). The Guomindang had built a dictatorial regime with fascist characteristics (its Blue Shirt thugs wreaking terror) around the slogan "One Doctrine, One Party, One Chief." Chiang Kai-shek did not want to leave any democratic space which would have allowed the social movements to make a comeback or a "third force" to exist. He did not succeed in crushing definitively the Communist Party under the Maoist leadership – a failure which proved fatal.

Thus, the Sino-Japanese conflict involved the Japanese army, the forces of the Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek, and those of the Communist Party. The Guomindang and the CCP formed an Anti-Japanese Front in 1937, but this fragile alliance did not end the class conflict that opposed the two parties.

Two wars were waged simultaneously from 1937 to 1945: a war of national defense against Japanese invasion and the civil war between the revolutionary and counterrevolutionary forces. Neither Chiang nor Mao was fooled by the alliance they built against Tokyo. Both of them knew that the

question of power would be posed in China immediately the Japanese were defeated. Thus, in the midst of the "united front" period, violent battles sometimes opposed the "whites" against the "reds." In January 1941 the South Anhui Incident showed where this antagonism could lead: a communist army of 9,000 was decimated by the Guomindang. Chiang Kai-shek had to pay a heavy political price for this crushing military victory: in the eyes of the public, he had massacred nationalist fighters moving up to the front against Japanese occupying forces.

Chiang Kai-shek had a rational conception of the anti-Japanese resistance from what we might call his class point of view. He wanted to preserve his military forces as much as possible and weaken those of the CCP in order to be in a favorable position when the Japanese defeat left the two Chinese armies face to face. To this end he used the immensity of the Chinese territory, retreating gradually with the advance of Japanese troops: he was losing space but gaining time. This strategy was reinforced when the United States entered the war after Pearl Harbor in December 1941: Japan would be defeated in the Pacific by the Allies; all the more reason to economize forces in China. The Achilles' heel of the Generalissimo's strategy was political: his retreat left the population defenseless, while the communist guerillas stood firm and infiltrated enemy lines to organize resistance alongside the people. Nationalist opinion progressively tilted in favor of the CCP. Chiang Kai-shek also underestimated the efficiency of the alternative strategy implemented by the Maoist leadership: the protracted people's war.

In China the civil war preceded by many decades the conquest of power, while in Russia it succeeded it. The social structure of the two countries was moreover very different. To what extent, then, could the Chinese communists draw their inspiration from the Russian Red Army – or rather from the national traditions of peasants' wars? From 1932 the debates of the CCP leadership on the "Chinese road" took the form of a long military controversy between those who held to "Russian orthodoxy" and those who followed the "Chinese archaism" of Mao Zedong. These debates were neither simple nor static – some critics of Mao later joined his leadership team – but the basic disagreements between the Wang Ming faction and the Maoists continued throughout the 1930s and 1940s, with the Wang Ming faction of the CCP advocating a more conventional military policy that relied more on the alliance with the Guomindang.

The Red Army arose from mass insurrections (urban and rural) and military upheavals. The retreat to Yan'an was not a free political choice, but an option imposed by defeat. Mao would have preferred to hold on to "red" zones in the South from which to launch anti-Japanese resistance. Therefore, in the mid-1930s and after a major defeat, he wondered how he could preserve the social and military forces that escaped the disaster, and how to take back the initiative. His answer was deeply political and expressed another class point of view to that of Chiang Kai-shek.

The redeployment of communist armies to the North is a clear example of Mao's bold choices. At the end of the 1930s the Maoist leadership took a very daring decision to expand communist networks in the whole country, but to send a large part of the best military forces to the North, behind Japanese lines, even if it meant withdrawing troops from their traditional strongholds. This decision took into account military, political, and social factors. Recourse to the mobility of the partisans and the great operational flexibility of a guerilla war made it possible to confront a well-armed enemy. The Red Army would operate in the Northern provinces without getting into direct conflict with Chiang Kai-shek's forces (which remained on the other side of Japanese lines) and take the opportunity to liquidate the residual power of the Guomindang. Faced with the brutality of Japanese occupation, it could easily gain a mass base even in the zones where it did not have any organization. By responding to peasants' demands it transformed the war of national defense into a real people's war, thus giving it considerable strength. In this way the CCP could create new liberated zones under its sole control.

The CCP took a big risk in redeploying its armies so radically: the Guomintang moved into the regions from where troops were withdrawn and could even (in 1947) capture Yan'an, the "war capital" of the communists. But the Maoists gained a lot. Their conception of a protracted people's war allowed them to accumulate important military, social, and political forces. In 1945, at the time of Japanese surrender, the liberated zones under their control had nearly 100 million inhabitants, or 20 percent of the population. It became an effective territorial form of dual power, an alternative to Chiang Kai-shek's regime.

Third Chinese Revolution

The Japanese army was bogged down and exhausted in its attempt to conquer China. By emphasizing essentially the battle of the Pacific and the intervention of American forces (and British and Australian), western authors often underestimate the essential role of the Chinese resistance in Japan's defeat. Nevertheless, the Japanese surrender was precipitated by the nuclear devastation (arguably, war crimes) of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The Chinese general staffs were surprised by the rapidity of events, when all their forces were then engaged in a race to reinforce their positions in expectation of the Japanese crumbling.

On August 6, 1945 the first atomic bomb hit Hiroshima. On August 8 the USSR entered the war against Japan and penetrated into Manchuria. On August 9 Mao called for a general counter-offensive against Japan to seize its armaments. On August 14, Tokyo signed the surrender. Soon after the capitulation, the Allied command ordered Japanese troops stationed in China to surrender only to the Guomintang. Chiang Kai-shek's forces were then positioned in the Southwest, enormous air resources were deployed by the United States to transfer them rapidly to the Central and Northern provinces, keeping the communists from conquering the principal urban centers. With such help, the Guomintang recuperated most of the spoils of war.

In spite of the American intervention, the Communist Party succeeded in extending its liberated zones. It concentrated forces in Manchuria. However, in Manchuria, the Soviets occupied the terrain up to 1946. It was Moscow that accepted the Japanese surrender and took the opportunity to bring back to Russia the industrial infrastructure of the region, rich in Japanese investment. Moscow also left the Guomintang to take control of the main towns, but the CCP reinforced its own bases and armaments.

In parallel with this race for advantage, the Guomintang and the CCP engaged in peace negotiations. Their forces had attained an unstable equilibrium. The population looked for peace and each political party had to show that the eventual resumption of the civil war was the responsibility of the other. The United States and The Soviet Union were also negotiating. Moscow took its time in leaving Manchuria, but fundamentally the Soviet leadership respected the Yalta Agreement in which China's buffer state became part of the western zone of influence (Stalin in fact did not believe that a communist victory was possible in China). The United States efficiently supported the Guomintang, but they were not in a position to involve themselves in a new war on the continent. Chiang Kai-shek was in control of formidable military might, but he needed time to redeploy its forces, and the first attacks made against CCP zones soon turned sour.

Retrospectively, the resumption of the civil war seems inevitable, despite peace negotiations. The battle for peace was for a while an essential terrain of political confrontation between the revolution and the counterrevolution. The negotiations were held under American aegis and rapidly bogged down. The return to civil war began in March-April 1946. Fighting spread throughout that summer. One year later, the Red Army (renamed the People's Liberation Army) (PLA) took the offensive in

Manchuria. The national collapse of the Guomindang started at the end of 1948. Communist forces won Beijing in January 1949, Shanghai in May, Canton in October, and Nanning (at the border with Vietnam) in December. Severely defeated, the Guomindang retreated to Taiwan, to the great displeasure of the population of the island.

While battles were still being fought in the Southwest, the People's Republic was proclaimed on October 1, 1949. The victory of the PLA was remarkably quick, even though the military balance of power was very unfavorable. It was the evolution of social forces that allowed the communists to win in such a way: the Chinese civil war really became a social revolution.

There was not always agreement between the aspirations of peasant movements and the CCP's action program, which was more or less radical depending on fluctuating alliance policies. The party was sometimes bypassed by sudden spontaneous mobilizations of poor peasants, while in other places or times it required intense efforts to free the most disadvantaged people in villages from subjection to clans. From the end of 1945 the question of agrarian reform (and not only the reduction of rents) became more and more important. In May 1946 the central slogan "The land to the tiller" was launched nationally. In September 1947 the CCP called a conference on land to adopt the principle of an agrarian law abolishing the system of feudal and semi-feudal exploitation. It advocated radical measures that later it had to moderate so as not to alienate itself from richer peasants.

The agrarian structure varied considerably in China, which did not help when it came to devising specific programs of reform. Where land was particularly scarce, poor peasants turned against richer peasants, not just the wealthy and the landlords. The CCP tried to moderate its policies in the course of 1948, but nevertheless a real agrarian revolution took place during the Third Chinese Revolution, and was generalized after the victory. In many cases, in villages, the change in power was radical, with the disintegration of the class of landlords and the marginalization of rich peasants.

In the aftermath of World War II, Chiang Kaishek could still hope to stabilize his regime in the urban centers of the coastal areas. However, his authority rapidly dwindled. Corruption, malpractice, factionalism, and authoritarianism alienated democratic opinion. Students initiated a vast campaign against American occupation after two navy officers were accused of raping a young Chinese woman. Inflation reached gigantic proportions, crashing headlong into the middle class and civil servants. The working class entered into struggle, showing a combativeness that allowed it to obtain in 1946 a sliding scale of wages. Demonstrations and strikes multiplied in 1947-8. However, the urban proletariat was much less politicized than in the 1920s. The CCP retained a militant network in the workers' movement, but it was very weak. On the other hand, corporatist traditions were powerful.

The Chiang Kai-shek regime also alienated national opinion when it seemed ready to enter into a new international alliance with the United States and Japan. Looked down upon and hated, Chiang Kai-shek lost the war politically in the urban areas before any military battle. The final confrontation with communist forces began on the occasion of a great national crisis.

End of Four Decades of War and Revolution

Four decades after the Chinese Revolution of 1911 and the Russian Revolution of 1917, China changed sides: it was one of the first (with Yugoslavia) and worst failures of the Yalta conference. Without breaking with the Stalinist leadership of the Communist International, the CCP had gained its independence and elaborated its own strategic orientation. Somehow, Mao Zedong seemed

personally to incarnate the formation of a “sinisied” Marxism. As a student, he had read a lot and worked on translations of European thinkers, comparing philosophical approaches and classical political theories, and only coming to know of Marxism when he was 26 years old. He devoured the press and followed world events with care. He was subject to numerous intellectual influences and was interested in many trends, especially anarchism. However, in spite of great effort, he never succeeded in mastering a foreign language. He never traveled out of China (except briefly to meet Stalin) and quoted more willingly Chinese philosophers than the fathers of western Marxism. In this way he was very different from the other main personalities of Asian Marxism like Ho Chi Minh, who incarnated to perfection the Vietnamese figure of “Uncle Ho,” but who also made his debut in France and in the Komintern. Nevertheless, there were other strong personalities in the Maoist leadership team, including those who knew the world well, like Deng Xiaoping and Zhou Enlai.

The “sinisation” of Marxism was neither limited to Mao Zedong nor to Maoism. Other figures – like the founders of the CCP Li Dazhao (assassinated in 1927) and Chen Duxiu (who died in 1942) – and other currents (libertarian, left opposition, etc.) contributed to the diffusion of Marxism in China. But 25 years of war and repression suffocated the pluralism of the Chinese revolutionary movement. The CCP under Maoist leadership emerged as the only party to have passed through this ordeal. The pivotal role of Mao was undeniable.

The Maoist revolution possessed numerous authoritarian and repressive characteristics. The new leadership of the CCP was forged in a permanent, merciless, military fight and intense factional struggles. It retreated into remote regions, socially very conservative. It leant back against an international “camp” dominated by Stalinism and built the personality cult of Mao as opposed to the cult of Stalin. Long before the conquest of power on a national scale, a politico-administrative bureaucratic structure was created in the vast liberated zones of the North.

The Maoist revolution was also the product of intense social struggles which raised the issue of modernization from the point of view of the dominated class. The fact that poor peasants spoke out and seized part of the power in villages represented a major democratic act. It was the same for the mobilization of women in the countryside. Maoist doctrine concerning women’s liberation varied through time: it was very libertarian at the time of the Soviet republic of Jiangxi, but much more conservative at the time of Yan’an. But the involvement of peasants in the struggles, the creation of women-communist structures in the villages, the multiplication of mass women’s organizations, and the famous “speak bitterness meetings” during which the poor and the women villagers reached a collective consciousness of their oppression and asserted their rights, shook the traditional oppressive relationships of domination. The criticisms (often justified) of Maoist authoritarianism should not hide this important dimension of the Chinese agrarian revolution. It was a democratic dimension sanctioned by the adoption of two important laws by the new regime: on land reform and on the family and women’s rights.

Under the dictatorial regime of the Guomindang, Chinese society also evolved, but confined essentially to urban society. The condition of rich or educated women changed, but the “national revolution” of Chiang Kai-shek could not challenge the oppression of the poor peasant or the female villager, as he had to depend on the traditional authority of the wealthy, the landlords, and the clans in the countryside. The bourgeoisie (Chinese or international) was not anti-feudal. In the towns and surrounding rural areas the development of capitalism dissolved traditional social relationships, but under such exploitative conditions that it prevented it from acquiring a democratic dimension.

During the civil war there were, in the towns, important changes of opinion that prepared the way for the revolution of 1949, including anti-imperialist mobilizations, evolution of intellectual and nationalist opinion in favor of the CCP, rejection of the Guomindang, and growing student identification with the Red Army. The communists won the battle of legitimacy, but their networks

were too weak in the urban metropolis to organize from within the popular classes. As much as the proletariat revealed itself pugnacious on social demands after World War II, it remained largely passive at the political level.

Scenting victory, the CCP took a major political turn. In March 1949 Mao Zedong announced that from then on the center of gravity of communist action had to again be in the urban centers, while, from 1927 to the beginning of 1949, it was in the countryside. The CCP declared in its March 5 report to the Central Committee: *"The period 'from the city to the village' and of the city leading the village has begun."* This implied, as Liu Shaoqi emphasized on March 12, an enormous effort to organize the working class:

"Our party used to have close ties with the working class, but later we were compelled to move to the countryside. The Guomindang has been operating among the workers for so many years that, through its influence, it has made the ranks of the workers more complicated. Moreover, our ties with the workers have been weakened and our cadres (including members of the Central Committee) do not know them very well and are no longer good at working among them. Hence, we must study assiduously."

The sociopolitical trajectory of the CPC is one of the most surprising characteristics of the Chinese Revolution: obliged to retreat to the countryside, it remained for more than twenty years immersed in the rural world. It depended on the peasants to continue a fight started in the towns. In spite of this, and contrary to prognostics, it did not become a peasant party. As soon as it resettled in urban centers, the town "commanded" again, to use Mao's expression. This is what allowed the CCP to rebuild a state on the scale of China, opening a new chapter of the country's history, that of Maoism in power.

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* On the International Encyclopedia of Revolution and Protest, see on ESSF:

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