

Asia Research Centre Working Paper 1

# **THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE CHINESE REVOLUTION IN WORLD HISTORY**

**Professor Maurice Meisner**

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### **THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE CHINESE REVOLUTION IN WORLD HISTORY**

This is, perhaps, not a very auspicious time to undertake a fair and serious assessment of the Chinese Communist Revolution. There is a great deal of anti-Chinese feeling abroad in the world today, especially in the United States, where we appear to be witnessing yet another episode of the "Who Lost China?" witchhunt. One is tempted to say, along with Hegel and Marx, that all historic events occur twice, "the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce." But the farce now playing in Washington is one with potentially deadly implications.

Along with the farce there is an increased questioning of the legitimacy of the "long revolution" that produced the People's Republic in 1949, a half-century after the event. For example, one reads in a recent issue of the *International Herald Tribune* that all of China's failures are "sustained by a mistaken belief in the correctness of the 1949 revolution." The writer, a well-regarded scholar, goes on to say that progress in China (or at least progress in what the writer regards as the right direction) depends on the Chinese renouncing their revolution, recognizing that it was a failure<sup>1</sup>.

As it happens, I do not believe that the Chinese Revolution was a failure, and I will try this evening, to suggest why I do not share that widely-held view. Indeed, I believe that few events in world history have done more to better the lives of more people than the Maoist victory of 1949 and the socio-economic transformations that followed from it. And I say that with an acute and painful awareness of all the horrors and crimes that accompanied the Revolution, followed from it, and were often performed in the name of the Revolution, including the labor camps, the almost continuous political and ideological witchhunts, the denial of basic rights of free expression and association. In addition, there was the terrible famine that followed from the misadventures of the Great Leap; a catastrophe that resulted less from a shortage of food than from the malignant workings of a Stalinist political system.

The Revolution itself, during the 1930s and 1940s, as it developed in the rural areas, was certainly the most massive and the most popular revolution in world history. It was massive in terms of the numbers of people who were directly involved in the revolutionary movement and the even greater numbers whose lives were crucially changed by the outcome of the struggle; popular in terms of the proportion of the population actively participating in the revolutionary effort. It was also perhaps the most heroic of

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<sup>1</sup> *International Herald Tribune*, 9-10 January 1999, p.4

revolutions, a

heroism symbolized and best known to the world by the legendary Long March of the mid-1930s; but a heroism by no means confined to that odyssey, for it was a revolution whose success required enormous sacrifices by tens of millions of people. The Chinese Communist revolution was a genuinely popular revolution, not a coup d'etat carried out by a small group of conspirators.

It is not my purpose, however, to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the 1949 Revolution but rather to share with you some brief thoughts about its long-term historical significance. I stress *long-term* because great social revolutions often do not reveal their true historical meaning until many decades after they occur. For example, it took nearly a century after the French Revolution of 1789 to know that the Revolution had given a powerful impetus to modern capitalist development and had yielded political democracy. For almost 100 years after 1789, the democratic ideals of the Revolution were perverted by Napoleonic despotism, the restoration of the Bourbon monarchy, and the dictatorship of Louis Bonaparte. Indeed, for many decades the great Revolution was virtually forgotten in France; in 1839, save for a few obscure radical political sects, no one celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of the 1789 Revolution. It was not until the Third Republic, established in 1870, that a democratic political system began to take shape in France, based, it was said as time went on, on a resurrection of the ideals proclaimed in 1789.

Thus, it may take many decades, perhaps a century or more, to fully understand the social outcome of the political events that make up a revolution. Further, revolutions must be studied in functional terms, that is, in light of what they actually do historically and socially, rather than simply in terms of what the revolutionaries intended to do. Certainly, it is necessary to know the events that constitute the revolutionary act (in China, a very prolonged act) and also to know the social composition of the revolutionaries. But it is more important to know what socio-economic transformations have issued, from the revolution in the historical long-term, developments that might be far different than the original intention of the revolutionaries. In the case of the Chinese Revolution, for example, it is obviously important to know that the revolution was largely made by peasants, who were organized to "surround and overwhelm" the cities, in accordance with the Maoist strategy. But it is no less important today to know that the revolution the peasants made inaugurated a long-term process of development that is reducing the peasantry to an increasingly small minority of the population. Peasants were both the beneficiaries and

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the victims of the revolution they made.

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Permit me to briefly pause here to explain why I have been "rethinking" the significance of the Chinese Revolution in recent months.

In recent years (in late 1996), I published a book on the history of contemporary China, *The Deng Xiaoping Era: An Inquiry into the Fate of Chinese Socialism*.<sup>2</sup> One chapter in that volume was entitled "Bureaucratic Capitalism," which I argued was the main social outcome of post-Maoist market reform policies; in effect, the result of the marriage of the market with a Stalinist political regime. With that chapter and conclusion in mind, Professor Bruce Cumings of the University of Chicago, in reviewing the book, made the following observation: "It is now an entirely fair question to ask if... the Chinese Communists have created anything enduring that would not also have been accomplished under the Nationalists," that is, the Guomindang, the defeated party in China's civil war.

Professor Cumings, an eminent political scientist and historian, poses a question that echoes a common critique of revolution in general, and certainly the most compelling critique, and that is the argument that post-revolutionary regimes, at best, merely continue the basic socio-economic tendencies that were at work under those they replaced. It is an argument often made by critics of the French Revolution of 1789. In the case of France, it is contended that modern state-building and the development of capitalist forces of production that followed from the Revolution were processes well under way under the old regime. They would have triumphed had the 1789 Revolution never taken place. In short, the Revolution was unnecessary and all the human and material costs of that upheaval are morally and historically indefensible.

There are, of course, other kinds of objections to revolution in general (ranging from an elemental distaste for radical change, a desire to preserve sacred tradition, a concern that it impossible to reconcile the violent means of revolution with the ends revolutionaries profess to seek, and so forth). Indeed, it seems to me that the one that revolutions are unnecessary because they merely continue (at very high cost) basic processes of historical development already taking place-- is the argument that should be taken most

seriously. And it is the one implied in Professor Cumings' query as to whether the Chinese Communist regime accomplished anything worthwhile that would not have been achieved had the Nationalists remained in power.

The question posed by Professor Cumings remained with me long after I read his review last year. It made me think once again about the nature and significance of the Chinese Communist Revolution; what it accomplished, where it failed, and whether it was justified. What I would like to do in the time that remains is to briefly share those thoughts with you, and to invite your critical responses and comments.

In considering the successes (and failures) of the 1949 Revolution, I think first about a crucial episode in modern Chinese history that took place a quarter-of-a-century earlier; namely, the great revolutionary upsurge that swept China during the mid-1920s. At that time, an extraordinarily militant popular revolutionary movement proceeded under the political auspices of an alliance between the Nationalists and the Communists (actually a tripartite alliance between the Guomindang, the U.S.S.R., and the fledgling Chinese Communist Party - in which the latter was very much the junior partner). That alliance aimed to achieve two goals: 1) national unity (i.e., the elimination of warlordism and the establishment of a strong central government); and 2) national independence (i.e., the elimination of the foreign imperialist impingement that had humbled and humiliated China for almost a century).

The alliance broke apart when the social radicalism of workers and peasants went beyond the limited nationalist aims of the political alliance. Chiang Kai-shek turned his Russian-built army to the task of suppressing the Communists, the trade unions, and the peasant associations, beginning with the bloody events that unfolded in Shanghai in April 1927. On the ruins of that popular movement, Chiang established the first national government in China since the Revolution of 1911. But it was an ineffective government, as well as a brutal and corrupt one, and proved incapable of realizing the elemental nationalist aims of unity and independence. Warlords still ruled much of the country, gentry-landlords ruled most of the countryside, and foreigners still held sway in the treaty ports.

And yet these essential goals of national unity and independence, which had proved elusive for so many

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<sup>2</sup> New York: Hill and Wang/Farrar Straus & Giroux, 1996

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years, were effectively accomplished within a few months following the Communist victory of 1949. These were enormous achievements in a country that for over a century had suffered so greatly from internal political disintegration and external impingements with all the human sorrows these entailed. National unity and independence were the essential prerequisites for progress in all other areas of social and economic life.

Perhaps these basic nationalist goals would have been achieved in due course by the Guomindang had it managed to retain power. But the historical credit belongs to the party that actually performed the historic task and not the one that might have done so had circumstances been different. It is of course tempting to speculate about what might have happened had things been different than they were but such speculation, however interesting, is not part of the historical record.

In a sense, then, one can look upon the Revolution of 1949 as a fulfilment of the unrealized aims of the ill-fated Guomindang-Communist alliance of the mid-1920s; namely national unification and national independence. In addition, the Communists can be credited with another crucial achievement in the early years of the People's Republic - land reform. The Land Reform campaign of the early 1950s was profoundly important for several reasons. First, it destroyed China's gentry-landlords as a social class, thus finally eliminating the longest-lived ruling class in world history and one that long had stood as a major impediment to China's resurrection and modernisation. Secondly, land reform brought a measure of social equity to the Chinese countryside, providing at least some land to the poorer members of the rural population. It also tied even the most remote villages to a national political structure through a party-network of young peasant activists. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, land reform created the essential basis for modern industrial development. By doing away with a parasitic landlord class, and by establishing political mechanisms to channel the agrarian surplus (i.e., the fruits resulting from the exploitation of the peasantry) to financing state-sponsored industrialization, the Communist Revolution opened the way for the industrial revolution that has transformed China from a predominantly agrarian to a predominantly industrial country within the space of a few decades. The intimate relationship between land reform and industrial development was understood by the Chinese Communists well before Western modernization theorists stumbled across the insight.

What the Chinese Communists accomplished during the early years of the People's Republic was

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essentially a capitalist or bourgeois revolution, albeit without much participation on the part of what remained of the actual Chinese bourgeoisie. The establishment of centralized state power, the territorial unification of a long disintegrating empire out of which was fashioned a modern nation state, the creation of a national market, and the abolition of pre-capitalist relations in the countryside - these are the common features of bourgeois revolutions, and in China and elsewhere they were the necessary preconditions for modern economic development.

On the foundations of the initial political and social achievements of the 1949 Revolution, industrialization followed over the next half-century, probably the most impressive modernization process in world history over a sustained period of time. To appreciate the enormous progress that has been made, one must take into account the low starting point from which the process began. In 1952 (when production was restored to the highest pre-war levels, i.e., 1936-37) China's primitive industrial base was even smaller than that of Belgium's - a country with a population barely one percent of that of China's. On a per capita basis, industrial production in China was about 1/90th of what it was in Belgium. From that miserable base, China has emerged as probably the world's second largest industrial producer -- and depending on what measurements one employs, China has the world's second, third, or fourth largest economy -- as measured in terms of gross domestic product (GDP).

The transformation is startling. China, long known as "the sick man of Asia," backward even by Asian standards, has over the past half-century achieved by far the highest rate of growth of any major economy in the world -- and indeed the highest rate of industrial growth of any major economy at a comparable stage of development in world history -- industrializing far more rapidly than England in the first half of the 19th century and Meiji Japan in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

It should be emphasized that these high rates of growth (which have transformed China from an agrarian into a primarily industrial nation in terms of the value of production and probably in terms of employment as well) did not begin with the market reform era of Deng Xiaoping in 1979. They began with the long Mao era (1949-1976), about which many Western scholars and commentators have grown strangely silent, in accordance the neo-liberalist political orthodoxy of recent years. Nonetheless, it was during the Mao period that the essential foundations of China's industrial revolution were laid. Without it, the post-Mao reformers would have had little to reform. As the Australian National University economist Y.Y.

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Kueh has observed, Maoist China's "sharp rise [30%] in industry's share in national income is a rare historical phenomenon. For example, during the first four or five decades of their drive to modern industrialization, the industrial share rose by only 11% in Britain (1801-41); and 22% in Japan (1882-1927). In the post-war experience of newly industrializing countries, probably only Taiwan has demonstrated as impressive record as China in this respect."<sup>3</sup>

It is not the case that only the Communist state benefited from Mao-era industrialization, as is often suggested. Even though China's rapidly rising national income (which increased three-fold over the Mao period) did not translate into corresponding increases in income for the working population, there were highly significant improvements in diet, welfare, health care and education (especially at the primary level), resulting in a dramatic near-doubling of average life expectancy during the Mao era, from about 35 years in pre-1949 China to 65 years in 1976. Life expectancy has since increased to approximately 70 years in the post-Mao era, a period when there have been extraordinary (if very unevenly distributed) gains in living standards. It should be noted, moreover, as the Nobel-Prize winning Cambridge economist Amartya Sen has pointed out, that the very extensive development of public education, health care, and social security in the Mao period contributed greatly to promoting and sustaining the economic advances of the post-Maoist market reform period.<sup>4</sup>

These achievements, in both the Mao and post-Mao eras, would not have been possible (or even conceivable) had it not been for the political and social transformations that followed from the Revolution of 1949. Needless to say, there were many economic failures as well, not only in the sluggish growth of agriculture but also in the failure to break decisively with the borrowed Soviet model of industrial organization and all the bureaucratic inefficiency and waste this entailed. But with the exception (and it is a very large exception) of the disaster of the Great Leap Forward, the economic record on the whole has been a highly successful one, both in the Mao and post-Mao eras -- and especially when one considers the wretchedly low starting point from which China began its industrialization drive in the 1940s and 1950s and the hostile international environment which so greatly burdened the People's Republic in its early decades.

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<sup>3</sup> Y.Y. Kueh, "The Maoist Legacy and China's New Industrialization Strategy," *The China Quarterly*, No. 119 (September 1989), p. 421.

<sup>4</sup> *India, Economic Development and Social Opportunity*, part three of The Amartya Sen & Jean Dreze Omnibus (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 59 and *passim*.



The social, human, and environmental costs of industrialization have been high in China, as has been the case with virtually every industrializing country since the early nineteenth-century. In China, most of those costs were borne by the peasantry, the most numerous and poorest part of the population. Yet there was no real alternative. As Barrington Moore has observed: "The tragic fact of the matter is that the poor bear the heaviest costs of modernization under both socialist and capitalist auspices. The only justification for imposing the costs is that they would become steadily worse off without it." <sup>5</sup>

The great failure of the Revolution has been in the political realm, not the economic. The Revolution yielded a Stalinist political system, which, although its more repressive features have been moderated in the post-Mao years, remains essentially Stalinist to this day. Not only did the Revolution fail to realize the democratic hopes to which it gave rise, it failed to yield its socialist promises as well. Indeed, without democracy, socialism is impossible. It is not the case that there was a socialist society during the Mao era that was dismantled by Deng Xiaoping's market reforms. There simply was no socialist system to destroy. Mao's China was not socialist because it lacked the essential feature of socialism - a system whereby the immediate producers control the conditions and products of their labor.

A consciousness of the absence of both socialism and democracy was reflected in the slogan Deng Xiaoping employed to gain support in his drive for power in 1978. "Socialist Democracy" was Deng's promise. But neither socialism nor democracy flourished once Deng achieved power. The means of the capitalist market soon overwhelmed the socialist ends they were originally intended to serve. What resulted was probably the most rapid and certainly the most massive process of capitalist development in world history. To be sure, what has been constructed is hardly a pure model of a capitalist economy (an ideological construct that does not exist in any historical reality, in any event), but rather a system of *bureaucratic capitalism* - one where the creation and functioning of a capitalist market is closely intertwined with the political power of the Chinese Communist Party. But it is capitalism, nonetheless, and indeed a very dynamic version of it.

The phenomenon of bureaucratic capitalism brings me back, finally, to Professor Cumings' question with which I began. Professor Cumings, as you may recall, asked whether the Communist regime achieved anything positive that the Guomindang would not have achieved had it remained in power after 1949.

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<sup>5</sup> Barrington Moore, *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy*, Boston, Beacon, 1966, p. 410

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The reappearance of bureaucratic capitalism in China places Professor Cumings question in sharp relief. The Guomintang, after all, presided over a bureaucratic capitalist system prior to 1949 which the Chinese Communist Party (and others) rightly denounced as corrupt and parasitic. Today, fifty years later, the Communists preside over a seemingly similar bureaucratic capitalism. One may well ask: What has changed?

A great deal has changed, it seems to me. Even the two bureaucratic capitalisms are far different. In the first case, high Guomintang officials preyed on a stagnant economy and reinforced backwardness, whereas Communist bureaucratic capitalism, however corrupt, is associated with an extraordinarily dynamic economy. But it is more important to look at China's economic development in long-term historical

perspective. In the decades since 1949, China has been transformed from one of the most wretched and impoverished lands in the world (known since the beginning of the 20th century as "the land of famine" and "the sick man of Asia") into one of the world's largest and most rapidly growing industrial powers. Its GDP has quadrupled over the last two decades alone.

Possibly, the same results would have come under the Guomintang, had it managed to retain power. But one does not and cannot really know - and it is not terribly fruitful to speculate too long about what might have been had other things not happened. As it is, both credit for the achievements and blame for the crimes of the past half-century must go to the Communists.

The argument that the Guomintang would have modernized mainland China had it remained in power is usually derived from its relative success in modernizing Taiwan. But the two cases are hardly comparable. No serious practitioner of comparative methodology in any academic discipline would contemplate such a comparison. If only on demographic grounds alone, one cannot usefully compare a country of over one billion people (and all the socio-economic problems that this fact itself entails) with an island inhabited by less than 20 million - not to speak of all the geographical, economic, and historical differences that would make such a comparison meaningless. But there are also concrete social and political reasons why the Guomintang failed on the mainland - and why it would probably have continued to fail after 1949. Take, for example, the crucial issue of agrarian reform. In Taiwan, the Guomintang carried out a successful land reform during the 1950s and 1960s that was the essential prerequisite for Taiwan's rapid industrialization in the 1970s and 1980s. However, when it ruled the mainland, the

Guomindang made no serious attempt to reform the countryside - and indeed could not necessarily have done so even if its leaders had had the insight and determination to pursue agrarian change.

Why was this so? Beyond vast differences in size, population, and levels of economic development that made the task of land reform far more difficult on the mainland than on Taiwan, there are two critical factors that should be mentioned. First, on the mainland, the Nationalist regime never really controlled the vast countryside; its bureaucracy was oppressive and overbearing but superficial and it largely left the villages where they were - in the hands of local gentry-landlord elites. The Guomindang was an urban-based regime

that simply removed itself from the countryside and all of its problems. Even had it been eager to undertake

land reform, it did not have the administrative control to effectively do so. Secondly, there were social reasons that precluded land reform in Nationalist China. Guomindang leaders had no desire to alienate the

officer corps of the Nationalist Army, most of whom came from gentry-landlord families; nor did they wish to challenge Guomindang-aligned urban monied elites who had investments in landlordism and rural money-lending.

These political and social constraints did not obtain in Taiwan when the Guomindang fled to the island after it was defeated in the civil war on the mainland. Politically, the 2,000,000 mainlanders (mostly soldiers and bureaucrats) had little difficulty exercising firm control over the 8-10 million Taiwanese who had lived under a Japanese colonial regime for fifty years (1895-1945). Furthermore, there were no social class inhibitions. The Taiwanese landlords, who were viewed as Japanese collaborators by Guomindang leaders, had their assets expropriated with few qualms on the part of the new Nationalist rulers in a successful land reform, from which there followed successful industrialization.

The point here is a simple one. It is that one cannot take Guomindang Taiwan and project it realized back to the time the Guomindang ruled the mainland. The two historical situations are just not comparable. A more meaningful comparison might be made between China and India, countries of similar size and population, roughly at the same economic level in the late 1940s, and both among the poorest countries in the world at the time. Amartya Sen has done extensive comparative research on China and India and sets forth contrasts such as the following. As of the early 1990s, China's per capita GNP (as measured by "purchasing power parity") was approximately twice that of India's; average life expectancy in China was

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69 years whereas it was 59 years in India; infant mortality was two and a-half times as high in India (79 per 1000 live births as compared with 31 per 1000 in China). In addition, the proportion of low birth weight babies was three and a-half times as high in India (33%) as in China; and literacy rates were significantly higher in China, especially in younger age groups).<sup>6</sup>

I do not know how these differences can be explained without taking into account the fact that China experienced a social revolution in 1949 and India did not. India has, therefore, continued to suffer from parasitic landlordism after independence in 1947.

How then should one reply to Professor Cumings' query about whether the Chinese Communists had accomplished anything positive that would not have been achieved without them. My response is that the Revolution of 1949 was probably necessary in Chinese historical circumstances in order to achieve the

political and social preconditions (especially land reform) that were essential for the very considerable economic and industrial progress that has been made. The impact of that economic progress is reflected in the striking differences between China and India in quality of human life reflected in the comparisons Professor Sen has brought to our attention.

To be sure, the human costs of the Chinese Revolution have been considerable - not only the many millions who perished in the long revolutionary struggle but in the many more millions who were persecuted politically after the revolutionaries came to power, not to speak of the tens of millions who perished as a result of the political misadventures of the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution. How one should weigh the heavy costs of the Revolution against its undeniable benefits is a terrible and agonizing dilemma which reasonable people might resolve in different ways.

To put the matter in somewhat different terms, serious students of China (among others) are, I think, morally obligated to weigh the costs of revolution against the costs of going without revolution. This is rarely done. Barrington Moore did so three decades ago in his classic study *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy*, especially in his lengthy chapter on India, where he demonstrates with terrifying effect the enormous human costs India has suffered because it did not experience a social revolution; little in the way of land reform and, consequently, a weak base for industrialization and modern economic development in general. Moore's chapter better enables me to understand why an Indian friend and

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<sup>6</sup> Sen, *India: Economic Development and Social Opportunity*, pp. 59-73.

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colleague refers to India as a country where almost half the population (400,000,000 people) are "slowly starving to death," that is to say, 400 million people are chronically malnourished and will die prematurely.

Revolutions assume different social shapes and meanings when one is removed from them at different times. From the perspectives of the present, the Chinese Communist Revolution would have to be called a bourgeois revolution, one that opened the way not for a socialist society but rather for the development of capitalism. Some observers, and I among them, would have preferred a socialist outcome -- but socialism (to paraphrase Sir Thomas More on Utopia) is something I have hoped more than expected to see. That said, I remain sufficiently influenced by original Marxist ideas to believe that capitalism is probably a necessary and perhaps progressive phase in historical development, despite its social ravages.

And insofar as that process of capitalist economic development in China, as crude and distasteful as it is in many respects, has improved the material and intellectual lives of hundreds of millions of people and enabled

them to enjoy a better standard of living, it has an enormous moral significance. It also fulfils one of the key demands of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, promulgated in 1948, one year before the victory of the Chinese Revolution, which proclaimed that all people were entitled to enjoy a decent standard of living, have access to adequate medical care, and have the opportunity for a proper education. In that sense, in the sense that it has saved, prolonged, and bettered the lives of more people than any other single political event in world history, the Chinese Revolution of 1949 must be seen as one of the greatest achievements of the 20th Century .