

## THE CHINESE PEASANT—HIS PLACE IN THE REVOLUTION

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(Appearing in the *Manchester Guardian*, 23rd May)

Much is heard about labour unrest in China, because the formation of trade unions and demands for increases in wages affect the foreigner who employs Chinese labour. We hear less about relations between the revolution and the peasants, because the foreigner is not seriously interested in Chinese agriculture and does not invest his money in it. When we do hear anything about the peasants it is usually an inaccurate statement either that Chinese peasants hold their land on a communal system or that they are all smallholders vitally interested in the avoidance of any kind of change.

Actually in China money is not as a rule profitably invested in land. While landowners tend to multiply the size of their holdings tends to grow smaller, largely on account of the law of inheritance, which makes all a man's male relatives his heirs. A holding of eight to eighty acres by a family of five or six persons is

counted wealth. By altering the law of inheritance the Kuomintang show a decidedly non-Communist inclination to arrest the subdivision of holdings and to bring about the growth of a yeoman class. But it appears from investigations by the Peking Ministry of Trade and Agriculture that about half the Chinese peasantry have insufficient land to support life. A great many families have holdings of less than two acres, on which they cannot grow enough to feed themselves. Thus about half the peasantry have to rent the land on which they work. In Kwantung province, according to Kuomintang writers, 80 per cent of the peasants have to rent their land. Rent is paid in money and in kind, and is said to be seldom less than half the crop. There is also in use an extremely bad system whereby a company rents land wholesale and sublets to the small farmer, who has to pay a rent very considerably larger than that received by the actual owner of the land. On the basis of some such summary of the position the Kuomintang developed its agrarian programme, which is a modest affair in comparison with the general expropriation of landlords carried out in other revolutions, but illustrates very well the unwillingness of Chinese revolutionaries to tamper with property rights, no matter how severely they may lay property-owners under contribution when they need money to finance a campaign.

The chief article of that programme is a reduction of rent on agricultural land by 25 per cent. Rent is not to be collected in advance, and is not to be paid in time of famine, the effects of which are to be shared between landowners and farmer instead of being borne exclusively by the latter. There is to be a uniform system of land taxation. Taxes are not to be collected in advance. Provincial public lands shall be made a

land fund for farmers' banks which are to be established to lend money to farmers at 5 per cent. The maximum rate of interest shall not exceed 20 per cent (a provision which throws some light on the present relations of peasants and moneylenders). Undeveloped lands belonging to the provincial Governments are to be distributed among the poorer peasants. The tenant contract system referred to above is to be prohibited. These are the main provisions of the Kuomintang agrarian programme. They are enough to arouse the half-incredulous support of the peasants, who are in any case ready enough to follow the suggestions of Clause 84 of the programme, "Peasants shall have the right to form peasant unions," and of Clause 86, "Peasant unions have the right to form volunteer corps for self-defence." By the forming of these unions and these defence corps, the peasants are brought into active support of the Kuomintang and come to be of scarcely less importance than the regular troops in the campaign of the Kuomintang against the relics of the old régime, represented by the Northern militarists.

The first peasant union was organized in Haifong, in the province of Kwangtung, in January, 1923, when Sun Yat-sen had but an uncertain hold on Canton. It could soon count as many as 100,000 members. I was informed at Hankow that there are now in Kwangtung 800,000, in Hunan 2,000,000, and in Hupeh 500,000 organised peasants, these being the provinces in which the rule of the Kuomintang is most assured. My informants considered that as each member of the peasant union probably represented a family of five, they could therefore hold that the peasant unions of these provinces represented seventeen and a half million peasants. This is probably not much more inaccurate than most estimates of the Chinese population, which are obtained in much the same way. There are also

peasant unions in the provinces held by the militarists, which, if the present schism in the Kuomintang does not make it incapable of further advance, will presently be very useful to the Nationalists.

It is extremely difficult to accompany these bare statistics and programmes with any clear picture of what the formation of peasant unions actually means. In the hope of doing this, at least for myself, I have gone carefully through two large volumes of resolutions and reports concerned with the peasant movement during the long struggle of the Kuomintang to make its position secure in Kwangtung. The first impression such a reading produces is of a horrible mêlée, so involved that it is almost impossible to distinguish the fighters and to decide who is on either side. The formation, even the suggestion of the formation of peasant unions, stirred to activity everybody who considered that such unions might be a threat to his own interests. Landowners, small though they might be, combined at once in face of the danger of their tenants getting out of hand. Bandits, who foresaw the end of their world if the villages should

begin to combine against them, made common cause with the landowners, who in terror of ills they scarcely knew made terms eagerly with those with which they were familiar. Even the militia, a sort of police, conceived quite rightly that development of the peasant unions would make much more difficult those kinds of extortion on which they depended for their luxuries and probably in many cases for the necessaries of life. In the course of these reports it frequently appears that the peasant unions were engaged in desperate struggle with bandits, militia, and soldiers, allied together and financed by "landlords and depraved gentry," while the Kuomintang headquarters were being bombarded with applications for assistance against the peasants from the militia and against the militia from the peasants. . . .

Driven by nothing less than desperation, the peasants in many parts of the country had themselves formed bodies of "Red Spears," "Heavenly Doormen," "Stiff Stomachs," etc., with the object of defending the countryside against soldiers and bandits alike. These movements are as spontaneous as those of the Middle Ages.