

# On Contradiction: Mao's Party-Substitutionist Revolution in Theory and Practice - Part 2

June 14, 2022



"The Reddest Reddest Red Sun in Our Heart, Chairman Mao"  
(Women xinzhong zuihong zuihongde hong taiyang Mao zhuxi he women xin lianxin)

**This is the second part of a four-part article. The other parts can be found here:**

**Part 1**

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#### **IV. THE YOUNG MAO**

##### **Infatuation with tyrants, peasant revolutions, and heroic saviors**

Of all the early founders of the Communist Party, Mao was perhaps the most nationalist and least attracted to Marxism. Born into a middling prosperous rich-peasant-cum-merchant-landlord Hunanese family, Mao was schooled in both traditional Confucian classics of history and literature and then also in the new Western education. His learning was highly eclectic and intensely self-driven. In primary school, as he told Edgar Snow in 1936, "I knew the Classics, but disliked them. What I enjoyed were the romances of Old China, and especially stories of the rebellions. I read ... *The Water Margin*, *Revolt Against the Tang*, *The Three Kingdoms*, and *Travels in the West*.... I was much influenced by such books, read at an impressionable age." [22]

For a future self-proclaimed socialist, the young Mao also displayed an inordinate attraction to despots, tyrants, and mass murderers. His boyhood hero was Zeng Guofan, a conservative Confucian viceroy who rescued the Qing dynasty and the gentry-landlord ruling class by bloodily suppressing the massive Taiping rebellion of the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. He admired "law and order" authoritarians like Shang Yang, the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC founder of the Legalist school of statecraft whose anti-feudal reforms underpinned the centralizing and social-leveling state of Qin. Shang Yang is said to have abolished feudalism, replacing primogeniture and feudal land tenure with individual property and a rigid bureaucratic organization into districts. He replaced the Confucian governance of "wise and virtuous ministers" with a system of absolute "rule of law" that imposed draconian punishments. The population was divided into so-called "self-responsibility" groups of 5 and 10. He ordered his ministers to spy on and inform on one another. He instituted the system of mutual responsibility in which whole families were punished for any crime committed by one member. Peasants were barred from any work except farming, women were assigned to sewing. "Let the people be yoked to the land ... and their life away from their homes be made dangerous for them. They should not be allowed to migrate." Merchants "should be hampered as much as possible by heavy tolls ... made to live simply, heavy taxes should be fixed for luxuries...." Slavery was widespread. Poverty was universal among the lower classes. "Punish severely the light crimes ... and thus people will commit no crimes and disorder will not arise." Punishments included "branding on the top of the head, extracting of ribs and, for persistent miscreants, boiling in a cauldron." [23]

In a school essay written in 1912 when he was 19, Mao wrote:

Shang Yang's laws were good laws. If you have a look today ... at the great political leaders who have pursued the welfare of the country and the happiness of the people, is not Shang Yang one of the very first on the list? During the reign of Duke Xiao, the Central Plain was in turmoil, with wars being constantly waged and the entire country exhausted beyond description. Shang Yang ... unified the Central Plain ... then he published his ... laws to punish the wicked and rebellious ... he stressed agriculture and weaving, in order to increase the wealth of the people ... He made slaves of the indigent and idle, in order to put an end to waste. This amounted to a great policy such as our country had never had before. [24]

The eminent Mao scholar Stuart Schram remarks that “It would be reading too much into a single document to conclude from this class essay that Mao was ... a ‘Legalist’ from the beginning. It is nonetheless striking that the corpus of his writings should begin with a celebration of one of the principal founders of this authoritarian school of thought, with its emphasis on harsh punishments and strict state control of all social activity” “The themes enunciated here are so plainly and forcefully stated as scarcely to require comment. In Mao’s view, there must be a strong state, and there must be unquestioning acceptance of its authority. It was the vocation of such a state to ensure the wealth of its people, as well as its own military power.”[25]

In my own reading the *Book of Lord Shang* I was astonished at how certain key features — centralized despotic rule, social leveling of classes, farmers tied to the land (by serfdom in his day and by the *hukou* resident permit system established by Mao’s government from 1949), state assignment of occupations, mutual spying and denunciation, and group punishment of families for the crimes of one individual — were all reproduced de novo in Mao’s barracks communism. Many remain in effect down to this day.

Among contemporary political figures, Mao applauded the brutal military governor of Hunan province (1913-16) Tang Xiangming aka “Tang the Butcher” (1886-1975) who slaughtered followers of Sun Yat-sen, and even warlord Yuan Shikai (1859-1916) who drove Sun Yat-sen into exile, installed himself as “President” of the Republic, proclaimed Confucianism a state religion, and tried to reestablish the monarchy with himself as first emperor of the Xin (New) Dynasty.[26] In short, “Mao’s esteem for Confucianism was accompanied by an authoritarian preference for ‘law and order.’”[27]

### **Confucian schooling inculcates the authority of “superior men” to lift up the “little people”**

Mao read widely in the translated Western texts that influenced the Chinese nationalist modernizers of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.[28] But whereas more radical May Fourth intellectuals like Lu Xun, Ding Ling, and Chen Duxiu called for a wholesale rejection of Confucian feudal culture in favor of Western values, Mao felt that traditional Confucianism still had much to recommend it and sought a synthesis of East and West.[29] He bitterly condemned the condition of students and traditional Confucian schools with their pretentious professors who “treat us like criminals, humiliate us like slaves, lock us up like prisoners” in their poorly equipped schools devoid of modern books or laboratories and “forcibly impregnate our minds with a lot of stinking corpse-like dead writings full of classical allusions.”[30]

Borrowing from the Western Enlightenment Mao praised Rousseau’s method of “self-instruction”[31] and, indeed, he dropped out of his First Middle School because of its limited curriculum to pursue a systematic program of self-directed study at the Hunan Provincial Library, about which he told Snow:

I was very regular and conscientious about it, and the half-year I spent in this way I consider to have been extremely valuable to me.... I read many books, studied world geography and world history. There for the first time I saw and studied with great interest a map of the world. I read Adam Smith’s *The Wealth of Nations*, and Darwin’s *Origin of Species*, and a boon on ethics by John Stuart Mill. I read the works of Rousseau, Spencer’s *Logic*, and a book on law on law by Montesquieu. I mixed poetry and romances, and the tales of ancient Greece, with serious study of history and geography of Russia, America, England, France, and other countries.[32]

He also adopted scientific methodology in evidence-based sociological research into rural class structure, which he modeled with his own investigations of rural village class structure in 1926 and would encourage party members to employ to build rural support in the Yan'an years. He likewise condemned the condition of Chinese women locked up in "their various dens, not even allowed to go outside the front gate ... [abused by] shameless men who make us their playthings." "We are also human beings, so why won't they let us participate in politics [and society]" he wrote, and called for the emancipation of women.[33] After all, as he famously put it "women hold up half the sky."

But he cared nothing for "Mr. Democracy" and indeed would later categorically express his hostility to democracy both within the Party and in society in general (see below). His enthusiasm for "Mr. Science" also had sharp limits as from the 1940s, by which time Mao had become a full Stalinist as well, he initiated serial persecutions of intellectuals from the Rectification movement of the 1940s to the Anti-Rightist campaign in 1957 and culminating in his murderous attacks on independent thinkers in every field in the Cultural Revolution. And, remarkably, even though he had waged a decade-long struggle to free himself from his domineering father in order to shape his own career, Mao never fully embraced Western individualism against the crushing conformity of Confucian patriarchy. Instead, as we'll see, he repurposed Confucian authoritarianism, subordination to the family, sexism and social conformity to serve his own purposes in forging a "substitute proletariat." Mao's radicalism was evolving in a different, more authoritarian, direction.

In 1913 at age 20 he enrolled in First Provincial Normal School, a teacher training college from which he graduated in 1918. His favorite teacher, the Neo-Confucianist Yang Changji, a returned student from England, taught moral cultivation and ethics with a modernist bent. Mao said of him: "He was an idealist, and a man of high moral character. He believed in his ethics very strongly and tried to imbue his students with a desire to become just, moral, virtuous, and useful to society." [34] Mao spent five years in systematic study of Neo-Confucianism under Yang, particularly its radical, modernized wing, which had fused with nationalism.[35] Yang lamented China's plight and its weakness in the face of stronger foreign powers. Yang taught that a nation cannot be strong "if many are frail." People must have "vigor" and "struggle" to obtain its goals. Thus he said, "it's urgent for us to temper our bodies." Yang advised his students to engage in "self-cultivation" (*xiushen*) of both the mind and body as the means to strengthen the nation.[36] Yang's admonitions were reflected in Mao's first published essay written in 1917 when he was 23. In "A study of physical education" Mao writes "Physical education complements education in virtue and knowledge.... Among the civilized nations of today, it is in Germany that [physical education] most flourishes ... Japan, for its part has *bushido*. Physical education ... also strengthens the will. The principal aim of physical education is military heroism. Such objects of military heroism as courage, dauntlessness, audacity, and perseverance." [37]

To this end, while in college Mao organized a political study group with his Hunanese activist friends, the "New People's Study Society" to study progressive ideas. In his words this was "a serious-minded little group of men [who] had no time for trivialities." Such groups were popular among New Culture Movement students across China at the time, and Mao's group was to produce many future leaders of the Chinese Communist Party. Later, Mao told Edgar Snow that

We also became ardent physical culturists. In the winter holidays we tramped through the fields, up and down mountains, along city walls, and across the streams and rivers. If it rained we took off our shirts and called it a rain bath.... We slept in the open when frost was already falling and even in November swam in the cold rivers.... Perhaps it helped much to build the physique which I was to need so badly later on in my many marches back and forth across South China, and on the Long March from Kiangsi to the Northwest.[38]

Steeped in neo-Confucianism in the years before the Bolshevik revolution and the May Fourth movement presented other plausible revolutionary agencies, Mao still looked to “sages” and “superior men” to rescue China through their mental and physical heroism. In a letter of August 1917 to Li Jinxi, his former teacher, Mao wrote that China’s people had “accumulated too many undesirable customs” and their mentality was “too antiquated.” The state could become “rich, powerful, and happy” only if there was an elite of “superior men” imbued with “ultimate principles” to “change fundamentally the thinking of the whole country”:

When little people burden superior men, the gentlemen should be benevolent and seek to save these little people ... Superior men already possess lofty wisdom and morality; if there were only superior men in the world, then politics, law, rites, systems, as well as superfluous agriculture, industry, and commerce could all be abolished, and would be of no use. It is different when there are too many little people. The world’s management follows the criterion of the majority, at the expense of the part made up of superior men; that is how little people burden superior men. But the little people are pitiable. If the superior men care only for themselves, they may leave the crowd and live like hermits... If they have compassionate hearts, then they [recognize] the little people as fellow countrymen and a part of the same universe. If we go off by ourselves, they will sink lower and lower. It is better for us to lend a helping hand, so that their minds may be opened up and their virtue be increased, so that we may share the realm of the sages with them.... The great harmony is our goal. Those who are virtuous, meritorious, and eloquent do their best to serve the world. We have compassion within our hearts, which makes us strive to save the little people.[39]

And in marginal comments written in 1917-18, Mao wrote that

The truly great person develops the original nature with which nature endowed him, and expands upon the best, the greatest of the capacities of his original nature. This is what makes him great. Everything that comes from outside his original nature, such as restraints and restrictions, is cast aside.... The great actions of the hero ... are the expression of his motive power, lofty and cleansing, relying on no precedent. His force is like that of a powerful wind arising from a deep gorge, like the irresistible sexual drive for one’s lover, a force that will not stop, that cannot be stopped. All obstacles dissolve before him.[40]

Stuart Schram observes that “for all the changes Mao’s ideas underwent during the decade after 1912, his personality (cast of mind) remained strikingly consistent. In particular, the focus on the individual will or consciousness, and on the role of the hero, stands out in all of Mao’s early writings, and indeed throughout his entire life. The emphasis on military heroism, and the martial ethos, is also a recurrent trait, long antedating the beginning of his experience of guerrilla warfare in the countryside in 1927.[41]

Not only that but even after he converted to Marxism and joined the Communist Party in 1921 Mao still retained his elitist and patronizing Confucianist ethos in which only a self-selected elite of “superior men” (the communist mandarin he would construct, led by one particular “truly great person”) with mastery of their own “ultimate principles” (Mao Zedong Thought) could lead the national revolution and make China “rich and powerful and happy.”

## **The impact of the May Fourth Movement**

After graduation from Normal School in Changsha in 1918, Mao found employment as an assistant librarian at Beijing University under head and professor of politics, history, and economics, Li Dazhao. Li was the first Chinese intellectual to embrace the Bolshevik revolution, although like most neophyte communists of the era, he was more of a nationalist and anarchist than a Marxist. Mao told Snow that Li introduced him to Marxism in 1919. But historian Maurice Meisner writes that "If so, Marxism made little impression on him at the time. What clearly did influence him was anarchism." Mao was impressed by Kropotkin's theory of "mutual aid" and combining mental and manual labor, which he would retool as "being one with the masses" and "red and expert." He was even more deeply impressed by the Russian populist Alexander Herzen's theory of the "advantages of backwardness." According to Herzen, the supposed moral and social virtues inherent in its backwardness would enable Russia to "bypass capitalism" and achieve socialism. Li Dazhao embraced this vision and extended it to China with his thesis that China was a "proletarian nation." [42] The embryo of this idea of "leaping over stages" appears in the final paragraph of Mao's 1919 populist tract "The Great Union of the Popular Masses":

Our Chinese people possess great inherent capacities! The more profound the oppression, the more powerful the reaction, and since this has been accumulating for a long time, it will surely burst forth quickly ... the reform of the Chinese people will be more profound than that of any other people ... We must all advance with the utmost strength! Our golden age, our age of glory and splendor, lies before us! [43]

Up to 1919 Mao was still looking to a cadre of "superior men" to enlighten China's masses and transform society but neither he nor the other May Fourth intellectuals had any idea how they might actually transform society. As intellectuals they were few and weak with no real power in society. After the May Fourth Movement protests broke out, Mao says "he took a more direct role in politics." He founded the *Hsiang River Review*, an influential student newspaper and was active in student anti-militarist organizing in Hunan calling for equal rights for men and women and bourgeois democracy. But the students were easily repressed and Mao drew the conclusion that "only mass political power ... could guarantee the realization of dynamic reforms." [44]

The 1917 Russian Revolution and the revolutionary upsurges that followed across Europe, and the May Fourth 1919 outbreak of student protests in Beijing, worker strikes in Shanghai and other cities, and the spontaneous self-organization of trade unions, peasants associations and so on opened the prospect of new agents of social change beyond students and intellectuals. Mao hailed the Russian and European revolutions and championed the emergence of Chinese labor unions. He called for them to federate, form alliances, and ultimately to coalesce into one big union — a "Great Union of the Popular Masses" — sort of a Chinese IWW though at his writing in 1919 still without a program. Moreover, the class nature of this one big union was as yet undefined. "In my opinion," Mao wrote, "the motive force for the great union of the popular masses of China is to be found precisely [in the] "purely great unions of the popular masses who have risen up to resist the oppressors within and without the country." But he had to concede that "[a]ll such societies, clubs, general associations, unions must inevitably include a considerable number of gentry (*shenshi*) and 'politicians' who do not belong to the popular masses...." [45] Mao's conception of an inclusive "great union" foreshadowed the Communist's multi-class "New Democracy" program of the 1940s.

### **Conversion to Marxism and communism**

"In the winter of 1920," Mao told Snow, "I organized workers politically for the first time, and began to be guided by the influence of Marxist theory and the Russian revolution." During his second visit to Beijing he met with Chen Duxiu who greatly influenced his thinking and while there he read

intensively about the Russian revolution sought out what little Communist literature was then available in Chinese. Three books especially impressed him and convinced him that Marxism offered the correct interpretation of history: the *Communist Manifesto*, Kautsky's *Class Struggle*, and *A History of Socialism* by Kirkup. "By the summer of 1920 I had become, in theory and to some extent in action, a Marxist, and from this time on I considered myself a Marxist." [46]

In May 1921 Mao attended the founding meeting of the Communist Party in Shanghai as its Hunan delegate. He was one of just 12 delegates. Yet even with only 59 members in 1921 and barely 300 a year later, the fledgling party set about organizing urban students and workers. Mao threw himself into this work in 1922-23. By May 1922 the Hunan branch of the Party, of which he was secretary, had organized more than twenty trade unions among miners, railway workers, municipal employees, printers, and workers in the government mint. The communists (and anarchists) led many strikes for better wages, better treatment, and recognition of the unions. On May 1<sup>st</sup>, they organized a general strike. This, Mao recalled, "marked the achievement of unprecedented strength in the labor movement in China." [47] In the early twenties China's proletariat numbered around three million but most of those were handicrafts workers and only around 50,000 worked in what was then modern industry. They were neophyte trade unionist and as yet unsophisticated politically but militant fighters and fast learners. However, their gains were short lived. On February 7, 1923 Wu Peifu, the dominant warlord of North China, slaughtered the striking railroad workers in central China. In one blow the "February 7<sup>th</sup> Massacre" destroyed the most powerful and militant workers' movement in China, shattered the Party's proletarian base, precipitated the suppression of radical and labor organizations throughout China, and ended Mao's brief career as a labor organizer. [48]

The suppression of the radical working class movement in central and north China made the Communists more receptive to the Comintern policy of seeking alliance with Sun Yat-sen's nationalist party, the Guomindang (GMD). The failure of proletarian revolutions in Europe left Russia isolated in a hostile capitalist world. With the prospects of world revolution waning, survival dictated that Russia seek alliances with anti-imperialist "bourgeois nationalist" forces in colonial and semi-colonial lands that could offer some political and military support (or at least that was their hope). That in turn required putting the brakes on the embryonic communist movements in those countries. Thus in 1922, the Comintern told the Chinese that the socialist revolution would have to be postponed, that China was still in the stage of "bourgeois-democratic revolution," and it instructed the tiny CCP (which was still dependent upon the Soviets for funds, training, etc.) to cooperate with the larger GMD (with some 50,000 members) in a common front against foreign imperialism and domestic feudalism. Engaging with the GMD in a United Front would have enabled the CCP to maintain its independence, recruit and build its party, and openly criticize and refuse co-operation when it perceived that the GMD was backsliding on its commitments to the bourgeois-democratic revolution. But the Sun Yat-sen insisted, and the Comintern concurred, that CCP members join as individuals rather than in a United Front, that they subordinate their work to building the GMD, and that they obey the dictates of the GMD without question — a fateful decision that would leave the Communists and the labor unions defenseless when the GMD, under Chiang Kai-shek from 1925, turned on the Communists and massacred the urban party and labor militants killing tens of thousands in 1926-27 and hundreds of thousands in the White Terror that followed.

### **Mao's developing political and strategic vision: a new peasant revolution, this time led by the Communist Party**

By 1923 Mao had abandoned hope that the urban working class could be the agent of revolution in China and he became one of the most ardent supporters of the Comintern-imposed GMD-CCP alliance. [49] Two events seemed to have confirmed his rejection of working class agency: First, the ease with which the warlords could destroy the militant but unarmed workers and their unions in the

February Seventh Massacre of 1923. Second, the spontaneous formation of peasant unions in his native Hunan province in the winter-spring of 1925, inspired by peasant uprisings in neighboring Guangdong where the first peasant soviet would be founded that year. Mao told Snow that “Formerly I had not fully realized the degree of class struggle among the peasantry, but after the May 30<sup>th</sup> Incident [1925], and during the great wave of political activity which followed it, the Hunanese peasantry became very militant. I left my home, where I had been resting, and began a rural organizational campaign. In a few months we had formed more than twenty peasant unions, and had aroused the wrath of the landlords....”[50] Mao was an enthusiastic and the most visible Communist member of the GMD. He rose quickly through the Nationalist Party, was put in charge of training organizers of the peasant movement at the Peasant Movement Training Institute, and was elected an alternate of the GMD Central Executive Committee.[51] His reorientation to the peasantry invited criticism from his comrades in the CCP including Chen Duxiu.

In January 1927, Mao published his iconoclastic “Report on an investigation of the peasant movement in Hunan.” He wrote this in reply, he said, “to the carping criticisms both inside and outside the Party then being leveled at the peasants’ revolutionary struggle.” In this extraordinary document, one that could have been authored by a Russian Narodnik, he intimated his rejection of Marxist-Leninist orthodoxy and embraced the spontaneity and revolutionary power of the peasantry, declaring that the peasants were the vanguards of the Chinese revolution:

In a very short time, several hundred million peasants will rise like a mighty storm.... They will smash all the trammels that bind them and rush forward along the road to liberation. They will sweep all the imperialists, warlords, corrupt officials, local tyrants and evil gentry into their graves. Every revolutionary party and every revolutionary comrade will be put to the test.... There are three alternatives. To march at their head and lead them? To trail behind them, gesticulating and criticizing? Or to stand in their way and oppose them? Every Chinese is free to choose, but events will force you to make the choice quickly.[52]

Impatient like all Chinese nationalists with the Marxist axiom that the socialist revolution must await capitalist development, disillusioned with urban proletarian-led revolution, inspired by romantic visions of China’s historical peasant uprisings, and attracted to idealist narodnik visions of “skipping stages,” by 1927 Mao’s break with Marxist-Leninist doctrine was more or less complete. With the failure of the bourgeois-democratic revolution of 1911-12 and the suppression of the workers’ proletarian-socialist revolution of 1925-27, Mao concluded that in China’s case, only another massive peasant revolution — this time with its own Red Army and led by the Communist Party, stood a chance of overturning the old order. As he famously put it in the summer of 1927: “Political power grows out of the barrel of a gun.”

The defeat of the worker-led revolution of 1927 ended the only potential socialist revolution China ever knew. It fell to the communist survivors of the 1927 massacres to either try to rebuild the urban-based party underground — which Chen Duxiu and a few hundred Trotskyist oppositionists attempted to do, though their efforts were effectively doomed by the Communist Party’s abandonment of the workers, retreat from the cities, and by the Comintern’s insistence even *after* Chiang Kai-shek’s coup that the CCP must still subordinate itself to the Guomindang (GMD) and help it win the national revolution and the resistance war against Japan[53] — or flee to the countryside to regroup and devise a new strategy. The defeat of the workers’ revolution set the stage for the eventual success of an entirely different kind of revolution, the first peasant-based revolution led by a substitutionist vanguard party.



The historic saga of Mao's revolution is well known. It began as communists fled the cities in the late twenties and regrouped themselves into small guerilla military units that evolved into the first Red armies and established the first rural "soviets" in the hinterlands around Canton. Mao led his own Kiangsi mini state-within-the-state containing around three million people with some success from 1931-34, fending off three successive GMD encirclement campaigns. But the fourth campaign cost the Red Army heavy losses and as the fifth campaign loomed, Mao's main forces broke out of Chiang's traps in 1934 and embarked on the harrowing 6,000 mile "Long March" to the far northwest of China. In October 1935, the 8,000 or so survivors reached the remote northwest Shanxi-Gansu-Ningxia Border Region where the exhausted Communists established their capital at Yan'an city, Shanxi, and began to reconstruct their party to re-launch the revolution on a peasant base.

### **Workers vs. peasants and socialist revolution**

Yet in re-launching the revolution from a rural base the Communists faced a major dilemma. In an economically backward, impoverished and mostly illiterate rural peasant milieu, who could replace the proletariat as the social agency of socialist revolution?

For Marx and Engels, what distinguished their materialist "scientific" socialism from utopian socialism was their thesis that the industrial working class, and only the working class, could lead the socialist revolution, and that in so doing, the proletariat would become the "universal class," the universal emancipator of humanity. Why the proletariat and not the bourgeoisie or the peasantry? Because the bourgeoisie and the peasantry could only represent partial interests, not the common interests of humanity. On the other hand, the industrial proletariat worked co-operatively together in specialized and interdependent modern industries, with modern technology and inputs often sourced from abroad and producing for a world market. Thrown together in common experience and struggle, their consciousness was constantly revolutionized:

When [French] communist artisans assemble [Marx wrote in the *Paris Manuscripts of 1844*], educationals, propaganda, etc. are above all their end. But at the same time they thereby acquire a new need, the need for fellowship, and what appears as a means has become an end.... [T]he brotherhood of man is not an empty phrase with them but a reality, and the nobility of man shines out to us from their work-hardened figures.... The English proletarian is also making gigantic progress.... But in any case it is among these "barbarians" of our civilized society that history is making ready the practical element for the emancipation of man.

One must be acquainted [he wrote in *The Holy family*] with the studiousness, the craving for knowledge, the moral energy and the unceasing urge for development of the French and English *ouvriers* to be able to form an idea of the human nobility of that movement.

And their potential: Neither Marx nor Engels invented the concept of *self-emancipation*. That idea incubated in French artisan circles, and their vision went beyond the factory system to challenge the whole property system that made it possible: "Recall the *Song of the Weavers*," Marx wrote in an 1844 commentary, "that bold call to struggle, in which there is not even mention of hearth and home, factory or district, but in which the proletariat at once, and in unrestrained and powerful manner, proclaims its opposition to the society of private property.... Not only machines, these rivals of the workers, are destroyed, but also ledgers, the titles to property." [54] Only in the abolition of the capitalist property system could they throw off their chains. And only by overthrowing the entire existing social order and replacing it with a workers' democracy, could they liberate themselves and

in the process the whole of humanity.[55]

**The Paris Commune, spontaneously invented by the Parisian workers, was the first example of a workers' government.**

For Marx, the heroic if brief Paris Commune of 1871 was the world's first historical example of working class self-rule. As he wrote in *The Civil War in France*:

The Commune was formed of the municipal councillors, chosen by universal suffrage in the various wards of the town, responsible and revocable at short terms. The majority of its members were naturally working men, or acknowledged representatives of the working class. The Commune was to be a working, not a parliamentary body, executive and legislative at the same time. . . the police was at once stripped of its political attributes, and turned into the responsible, and at all times revocable, agent of the Commune. So were the officials of all other branches of the administration. From the members of the Commune downwards, the public service had to be done at *workman's wage*.... [56]

The next example was in Russia. The Czarist government was overthrown in February 1917 not by Lenin's Bolsheviks (he was exiled in Switzerland at the time) but by a spontaneous revolt of industrial workers and mutinous soldiers and sailors. As historian E.H. Carr wrote:

The February Revolution of 1917...was the spontaneous outbreak of a multitude exasperated by the privations of the war.... The revolutionary parties played no direct part in the making of the revolution. They did not expect it, and were at first somewhat nonplussed by it. The creation at the moment of the revolution of a Petrograd Soviet of Workers' Deputies was a spontaneous act of groups of workers without central direction.[57]

In 1917, the Petrograd proletariat turned it into "a true workers' parliament acting and taking positions on a great number and variety of questions." [58] In the first years of the soviets, multiple parties contended in the soviets including Socialist Revolutionaries (SRs), Mensheviks, Bolsheviks, Anarchists, and several other socialist groups. As in the Paris Commune, delegates were elected and subject to recall by their various constituencies. The Czar abdicated in early March and appointed a provisional government. But the government had little support beyond the bourgeoisie and landed classes while the soviets multiplied across the country and enjoyed the support of most workers and peasants. From February to October the soviets ruled in dual power with the provisional government.[59]

**Mao on the limitations of the peasantry**

None of this initiative, collective organization, technological skill, or political vision could be expected from peasants. As both the Russian and Chinese experiences had shown, an aroused peasantry could be a mighty force for revolution, a battering ram. But it was not a force for socialist revolution and could not even lead the national liberation struggle. Physically isolated and atomized in predominantly self-sufficient patriarchal family units of production, shackled by a primitive technology and grinding poverty, limited by a conservative culture, the peasants' conception of emancipation reflected their existence. Above all this was an essentially *negative* conception: they sought mainly to get rid of their exploiters, the landlords and tax collectors, to be left alone to enjoy

the untrammled security of their small properties. Their driving interests were not towards socialism, collectivization, industrialization, but toward equal division of the land, toward small property. Their whole perspective was petty bourgeois, localist, and particularist. It was this elemental struggle for the land, born of misery, and desperation that had powered countless peasant revolts in China's past—each time with the same result: the restoration of gentry rule.

As Mao himself reported to the Central Committee in Shanghai in February 1929: "It is difficult for them [the peasants] to understand that the Communist Party does not distinguish between national and provincial borders; they even have problems understanding that it does not distinguish between counties, regions, and villages ... mechanized industry is beyond their wildest dreams, and they have no conception of imperialism." [60] The peasantry was incapable of breaking out of this ancient cycle on its own. Without the proletariat, who then could do so?

[continued in part 3]

## Notes

[22] Edgar Snow, *Red Star Over China* (New York: Grove, 1938).

[23] J. J.-L. Duyvendak, *The Book of Lord Shang* (San Francisco: Chinese Materials Center, 1974).

[24] Stuart R. Schram, ed. *Mao's Road to Power*, Vol. 1 (New York: M E. Sharpe, 1992), 6.

[25] Schram, *Mao's Road*, Vol. 1, xxii.

[26] Meisner, *Mao*, 5-8.

[27] *Ibid.*, 7.

[28] Snow, *Red Star*, 144.

[29] Schram, *Mao's Road*, Vol. 1, xvi.

[30] *Ibid.*, 382.

[31] *Ibid.*, 382.

[32] Snow, *Red Star*, 144.

[33] See also Mao's "The women's revolutionary army" (July 14, 1919), and "Do you mean to say that walking is only for men?" (July 14, 1919), both translated in Schram, *Mao's Road* Vol. 1, 353 and 351.

[34] Wang Fanxi, *Mao Zedong Thought* (Chicago: Haymarket, 2021), 69.

[35] *Ibid.*, 71.

[36] As recorded in Maos's class notes from Yang's lectures. Schram, *Mao's Road*, xxvii

[37] Schram, *Mao's Road*, Vol. 1, 113-127.

[38] Snow, *Red Star*, 147.

- [39] Schram, Letter to Li Jinxi, *Mao's Road*, Vol. 1, 130-36.
- [40] Mao Zedong, "Marginal Notes to: Friedrich Paulsen, A System of Ethics," (1917-1918), Schram, *Mao's Road*, 263-64.
- [41] Schram, *Mao's Road*, Vol. 1, xxii.
- [42] Meisner, *Mao*, 16, 19-20.
- [43] Schram, *Mao's Road*, Vol. 1, 389.
- [44] Snow, *Red Star*, 154.
- [45] Schram, *Mao's Road*, Vol. 1, 381-388.
- [46] Snow, *Red Star*, 154-55.
- [47] Ibid. 158.
- [48] Meisner, *Mao*, 35.
- [49] Ibid. 36-37
- [50] Snow, *Red Star*, 159. The May Thirtieth Incident (1925), in China, was a nationwide series of strikes and demonstrations precipitated by the killing of 13 labor demonstrators by British police in Shanghai. This was the largest anti-foreign demonstration China had yet experienced and it encompassed people of all classes from all parts of the country.
- [51] Snow, *Red Star*, 159-60.
- [52] "Report on an Investigation of the Peasant Movement in Hunan" (March 1927).
- [53] Gregor Benton, *Prophets Unarmed* (New York: Haymarket Press, 2015), p. 5 and passim.
- [54] Marx, "Critical marginal notes on the article "The King of Prussia and social reform by a Prussian" in Marx and Engels, *Collected Works (CW)*, 3, 201, quoted in Mike Davis, 13.
- [55] Marx, "The Paris Manuscripts of 1844," "The critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right," "Theses on Feuerbach," *The Civil War in France*. Marx and Engels, the *Communist Manifesto* 1848. See the exegesis by Hal Draper, *Karl Marx's Theory of Revolution*, Part 1, chapters 6&7 (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1977), 136-37. Also Mike Davis, *Old Gods New Enigmas: Marx's Lost Theory* (London: Verso, 2018) chapter 1.
- [56] Marx, *The Civil War in France, Third Address* (May, 1871).
- [57] E.H. Carr, *The Bolshevik Revolution 1917-1923* (New York: Macmillan, 1951), v1, 70.
- [58] Sam Farber, *Before Stalinism* (London: Polity Press, 1990), 19.
- [59] Farber, *Before*, 19-20.
- [60] Gao Hua, *How the Red Sun Rose* (Hong Kong: Chinese University, 2018.), 4.