CHINA PHOENIX

The Revolution in China

by

PETER TOWNSEND

With an Introduction by

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Vice-President of India

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INTRODUCTION

It is said that the slowness of evolution is the cause of revolution. Any State must be flexible enough to adapt itself at any given moment to the ever-changing demands of the nation in its continual growth. Any State which stands for the *status quo*, which is the enemy of all progress, cannot survive in modern conditions. What happened in China in the post-war years is an illustration of this truth. When we find a corrupt and inefficient Government with vast economic distress and no hope of improvement, then upheaval becomes inevitable. This book traces the social, economic and political conditions of post-war China and the establishment of the People's Republic. The author says 'conditions in China were such that revolution was preferable to no revolution'.

China has been sustained through difficult times by the strength of her humanity, good sense, tolerance and respect for the individual. She will flourish in the future in proportion to her faith in these qualities. It is these intangibles that give a nation not only its essential character but its vitality as well. Under the pressure of modern life they may seem unimportant or even irrelevant; yet they are the things which endure and give the community its power to survive. China has survived in spite of all that the world did against her and she did against herself because she has preserved some of these qualities.

The leaders of the new China are known for their spirit of service and sacrifice. One of our political theorists, Cānakya, said that the root of Government was the control of our desires.

rājyasa mūlam indriya-nigraha

Governments must govern themselves before they attempt to govern others. Exercise of power is always a trust. If we care for long-term results power should be used with justice and charity.

After much trial and error humanity has come to realize that the most civilized way of effecting changes of Government is by free elections. This method is superior to dynastic successions or violent upheavals and may be adopted in new China.

The author of this book, Mr. Townsend, served with the Friends Ambulance Unit in China and stayed on to work with the Co-opera-

tives. His experience extends over a period of years and his account is based on personal knowledge and reflection. This book which is a vivid, able and sympathetic presentation of the problems and developments of modern China will help to make us understand the recent struggles and achievements of a large section of the human race.

New Delhi,
April 18th, 1955

S. RADHAKRISHNAN

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CHINA PHOENIX

TWILIGHT OF SOME GODS

SINGAPORE was a settlement hewn from jungle, peopled by many nations, ruled by one. Outside the military camp on the edge of this settlement a group of Malay girls with flowers in their hair stood in the doorway of a hut, talking and laughing in the falling evening air, and young bloods strolled back and forth along the sward to show their paces. In one of the camp tents a group of soldiers, fresh from England, drunkenly bawled hymns and love songs, loneliness lending to their voices the pathos of a folk lament.

Six of us, members of a China-bound Quaker ambulance unit, had landed at Singapore to wait for passages to Rangoon. The next day Japanese planes bombed Singapore. The Pacific War had begun. A local paper enthusiastically declared that a Sikh had caught a bomb in his arms and saved a street from destruction, and Chinese villagers beat drums and gongs to ward off evil. In their own way these were better comforts for distress than the confusion of the camp. No steel helmets. No first-aid station. The colonel in charge ordered a gas detector to be set up, but no one quite knew how to set it up. No one had really expected this challenge from an Asian country. The jungle barrier had seemed protection enough.

Eventually we found berths on a little boat that zigzagged across the Indian Ocean, its portholes clamped tight like eyes that shut out fear by shutting out the night. Passages out of Singapore were at a premium. Six others might have had those berths, perhaps six who worked on Death Railway under the Japanese, perhaps six Chinese or Malays, rated second-class beings when it came to evacuation. Our skins for theirs. Some practical joker said we had sighted submarines, and for a whole night I lay awake, fully dressed, cursing myself for never having learnt to swim. Then the mud of the Irrawaddy met us and we steamed between low-lying banks of violent green.

Over Rangoon, also, had fallen the mantle of despair. That same evening the Japanese bombed Rangoon. I remember the night not solely for its flame-lit horror, but because it set me a particular test. We brought some Chinese Red Cross lorries to safety from the docks, where cargoes delayed by the recent closure of the Burma Road to

appease Japan lay piled, and still lay piled when the city fell; for the first time in my life I drove a lorry on my own, through dark, unfamiliar streets, and without headlights. Others remembered it with anguish as the end of home.

From a minaret a hundred yards from where we slept in comfortable beds, protected from mosquitoes by nets and from heat by electric fans, a bell-voiced muezzin called at dawn, a shepherd to his flock; but the flock was fleeing, abandoning cramped quarters and whitewashed huts. All night, and into the day, a river of white-clad people, now and again drawing into its current a saffron-robed Buddhist priest, flowed northwards. 'The blighters won't fight for us', said a British official ruefully, watching the silent cortège. 'They don't love us or trust us.' Nor did they.

Several days later, taking the Red Cross lorries north, we caught up with the advance guard of straggling Indian families walking out to India. Somewhere in the haze-enfolded mountains to the east the Japanese were preparing their descent into Burma, and by a stroke of irony an Asian nation, taught and armed by the West, and setting its course for Empire, was bringing freedom within reach of these subject peoples. Old empires crumbled and fell apart, and in their distress turned not to the native proponents of things-as-they-are (for from this valetudinarian minority, which must lean on someone, came some of Japan's most faithful bailiffs), but to the submerged majority which wanted bread as well as independence. That some of the promises of freedom and equality which made them allies when the West came to partial terms with the Asian revolution have gone unfulfilled is our tragedy as much as theirs.

Where the road branched off to Assam, we lost sight of the refugees and took the road to China. 'To China?' The Englishwoman at a garage where we pulled in for oil quivered with anger. Her Burmese staff had abandoned her, and her hair had not seen brush or comb that morning. 'They ought to have kept the road closed. It's China that's to blame for this war!'

At Lashio, the end of the railway from Rangoon, one was very conscious of China. Lashio itself, with its trim bungalows and gardens, was the seat of the district administration, but into Old Lashio, reached by overcrowded station wagons that passed for buses, each with its conductor hanging perilously from the back bawling, 'Lahio!

Lahio! Lahio!' – a boom town with a crowd of shabby hotels through whose frail partitions you could catch the immemorial conversation of soldiers and their women – came the Burma Road drivers, Chinese, Indians, Burmese, a steel-nerved, gun-carrying, often hair-brained crew who went downhill on their brakes to save a little petrol to sell on the black market and sometimes left their mark on the landscape by running a lorry over a ravine. The Europeans regarded the China trade and the presence of Chinese with some misgiving. The town, however, frankly enjoyed them, and there was a jauntiness about the Chinese drivers which set them apart from the others. 'They're so damned cocky!' Was it that even qualified independence gave good men and villains alike a dash of confidence when they walked among men chained to another nation?

We already had three or four Chinese passengers. One had helped to run a Chinese government Information Office in Rangoon, and sang 'Ah, sweet mystery of life' whenever we stopped for repairs. He was a prototype of the Chinese who threw up their hands at the dirt and struggle of their native land and yearned to live anywhere but at home, a yearning he eminently satisfied. Far more interesting was Lu, who joined us when one of the lorries rolled through the mud wall surrounding the school where he was the headmaster's boy-of-all-work. He came out, surveyed the damage, asked for a lift, explaining, 'China needs people just now', and brought a shirt and comb and half a dozen books. He was Fukienese by birth, from a province of China from which came many oversea Chinese, and had, he said, been sold as a slave by his elder brother. He was teaching himself English by committing a dictionary to memory. 'Money; money-bill; money-maker; money-spider', he would mumble as he dropped to sleep. His almost childlike imagination was prey to curious fears. He had found a newspaper, years old, which reported a man-eating tiger in the vicinity of Lashio; when we went to bed in an empty Lashio class-room the animal haunted him. Not till we agreed that if the tiger came through the door next to me, I would quietly wake Lu and we would tiptoe through the door on Lu's side of the room, and if it came through his door, we would steal out through mine, did he feel easier.

Yet, for all his immaturity, a freshening wind from China had blown into his mind. He knew about Sun Yat-sen. He knew of China's 1926-27 revolution. China's resistance to Japan was in itself a revolution

to him. He did not know that China's revolution was part of the Asian, and the war with Japan a phase in a greater struggle that turned on land as well as independence, argued out since 1927 by two political parties, each with its army. Or that the war was ending British influence in China, and making Russia and America preponderant. I doubt whether he knew the stuff of revolution, in spite of a poor background; poverty, tyranny, corruption, class hatreds, easy to say, hard to visualize in their rich and terrifying detail. To be honest, neither did I.

We drove in stately file towards the Chinese frontier. Behind us, the jungle advanced on Singapore, and the Burma Road was closing. Rangoon, Mandalay, Lashio, were ready to fall like idols at the hands of an iconoclast. Lu grew restless, not because he was scared of the war behind us, but because he was worried in case he did not get to the one in front. Poor Lu! He had felt the extraordinary attraction China exerts over her children, but he went to work with the Chinese Red Cross, and by the time he reached China the Red Cross had succumbed to politics and many of its staff had discovered how much more profitable it was to sell medicines on the black market than to use them to cure disease. At some point he must have felt like a hurt animal. As we approached the border, he was on tenterhooks. Were his papers in order? Did they want him in China? He need not have worried. The Passport officers in neat uniforms, with fans sticking out of their breast pockets, were too preoccupied with making money out of those who could afford to pay heavily for papers to worry a down-and-out prodigal son.

We pulled into Wanting, a long street of thatched huts, where the restaurants, instead of having names like Mandalay Eating House, were called Four Seas Wine Shop, and *dagobas* and whitewashed houses began to give way to grey, curving tiled roofs and pagodas, and Chinese mountain folk with necks disfigured by goitre to displace the bronzed tribespeople of North Burma. The Shan States melted into China, Cathay, the Middle and Flowery Kingdom, which since Marco Polo's day had inflamed the imaginations of Western men, lined the pockets of not a few, and whose six hundred million people, now allies of the West, were plunged in war and revolution.

PART ONE

BETWEEN TWO WORLDS

CHAPTER I

THE PRICE OF REVOLT

REVOLUTION, the Chinese leader Mao Tse-tung has said, is not like doing embroidery.

Revolution is painful and desperate. Father is set against son; mother against daughter. Old, absorbing ties are broken. The boundaries of traditional morality are irrevocably crossed.

When civil war accompanies it, the horror mounts. The battlefield is the country, the town, each village, hamlet and family. The iron enters every heart. Each must give up something to gain something more or preserve what is left.

This pain — in mind and heart and upon the body — is as much a property of revolution as heat is of the sun. Those who support revolution most strongly are wisest when they freely admit it. In any case we are never allowed to forget it. Those who most condemn revolution, particularly revolution from the Left, serve up this violence to us like an appetizer before a meal.

But what of the pain and violence of No Revolution when poverty, cruel, uncompromising, intolerant of human dignity, is as close to every man and woman as dole and soup kitchen are to workers in an industrial depression; when human relations are conditioned more by want than by love and fellow-feeling, and in beggar and prostitute each man and woman glimpses an abhorrent, but perfectly possible future?

This quantity is not easily reckoned, the sum of millions hungered, of countless beings scratching the earth's surface for a pittance, of children prematurely dead, of men and women prematurely aged, and minds acquiescent and fettered by superstition, because of poverty.

Those who are safely above the incessant erosion of this tide of poverty are scarcely aware of its destructive ebb and flow. It is not a story that

sells well. It is, moreover, the seed-bed of revolution, its justification, perhaps, and as repellent as a dungheap to noses sensitive to revolution. We do not readily open our hearts to its bitterness nor our eyes to the violence it brings forth. That the last war against Germany and Japan, with all its sacrifice and destruction, should be fought — that we can accept. That individuals, saint, sinner and moderately good, wrestle with themselves — that, at least, is understood. But revolution, with its violent eruption, the struggle it imposes on the individual — this sticks in the gorge. What spiteful infliction of misery! Our hearts are tutored to contract, our anger to rise.

Yet in China conditions were such that Revolution was preferable to No Revolution.

For myself, when I crossed the China border early in 1942 in the wake of a convoy manned by some of the American mercenaries who flew for Chiang Kai-shek under General Claire Chennault's command and, having medicines to smuggle, effected an easy passage by opening up with submachine guns and scaring the Customs officers into the hills, I was numbed by the conditions which became part of my everyday life.

I went to live in Paochi, a railhead town in the part of North-west China known as the Cradle of Chinese civilization, a sleepy, walled, magistrate's seat which war had hoisted into prominence, packing it with refugees from the Japanese-occupied coastal cities and enlarging it into a busy, three-mile street on the north slope of the Wei River valley. Around it the brown-earthed countryside, sculptured and terraced for millennia, was graven like an old man's face.

In this town, where the only other foreign resident was a missionary out of tune with his work and happiest when he tinkered with a motor bicycle or took his goats to graze on the hills, I had a room in one of the hostels of the Chinese Industrial Co-operatives (C.I.C.), an organization started in 1938 to provide some compensation for the loss of China's industrial centres to Japan by establishing producer co-operatives in the hinterland. The room was five feet by eight, with a desk, three boards and two trestles for a bed, and paper window panes through which inquisitive children thrust their fingers to make peep-holes, and in winter lobbed snowballs. Next door was a primary school, and I attended the infants' class, my studies in Chinese blessed by the clear, sweet enunciation of children five and six years old, and

supplemented by the repertory of T'ang dynasty poetry of a Kuomintang Ministry of Finance intelligence agent who frequently dropped in on me to see what I was up to. My work, as English and publicity secretary to the co-operatives' North-west headquarters, was to travel, investigate co-operatives, and write reports on an old typewriter which had no spring to the carriage, so that the right side had to be propped up with two bricks to make the carriage move at all. This switch from ambulance work, I should add, was largely the result of heated arguments between myself and some lorry engines.

In return for my work, I received my room rent-free, a thin summer uniform and a substantial, cotton-padded winter one, and the equivalent of two pounds a month. At first I was treated with delicacy and ate with the director of the headquarters, an Edinburgh-educated Manchurian who retained some of his student habits, among others that of taking poached eggs for breakfast, by no means easy to eat when your only tools are chopsticks. When I was reckoned acclimatized, however, I went to eat and work with the lower staff, who breakfasted off millet gruel and salted peanuts. My salary was enough to pay for my meals, have my clothes laundered, buy tea and peanuts, and have a monthly haircut and an occasional rub-down at the public baths. This was not a very romantic existence. Neither was it unusually spartan when one considers that other men in the organization were keeping a family on the same pay. Its real reward was to throw me into Chinese society and expose me to the shocks of Chinese life.

I was scarcely prepared for these shocks. My school books had hardly mentioned the millions extinguished by flood and drought. My education had not covered the sight of a soldier at death's door laid out under a mat and being kicked by his captain; or the absurdity of finding dysenteric conscripts penned in a watch-tower with their trousers piled below to prevent their escape. My newspaper reading had not hinted that men and women, students, doctors, or girls without a political theory in their heads, might talk to me in whispers of intercepted mail, prison camps, forbidden books, and ideas of freedom too fearful to express openly; would talk with dull defeat in their eyes of intellectuals so depressed that, 'They aren't even interested in love', or with fierce, splendid indignation: nor that twenty armed men would climb the hostel wall one night and carry off a man to concentration camp for holding 'dangerous thoughts'. As for the peasants, wearied

out by rents and furrowing the tired fields, I had not thought that men could bear such burdens.

Perhaps nothing could have prepared one for such humiliating indignities. The temptation was to retreat, to take consolation in the thought that Orientals willingly accepted life at this level, that the Chinese had endured patiently and would continue to endure with massive fortitude, or that overpopulation found outlets in this penury. Counsellors of this comfort were not wanting, but it did not suffice. If you lived with these people, you did not find them alien to any human desire or satisfied with their lot. One was struck with pity, but pity, too, did not suffice. Pity did not soften conditions, fill stomachs, or clothe backs, and pity was sometimes vulgar. So one accepted change as an inevitable consequence of peace, for no peace could be permanent while hungry minds still dwelt in hungry bodies.

Peace came.

The evening the news of Japan's surrender on August 14th, 1945, reached the West China city of Chengtu, jubilant lantern-bearing processions wound up and down the darkening streets. Half way to the wartime capital of Chungking an excited restaurant keeper renamed his café 'Roosevelt Greatest of Them All' in honour of the Atlantic Charter's promise. Today gleamed like a shining, newly minted Tomorrow. People drew hope from Chiang Kai-shek's promises of democratic assemblies and a constitution, and the meetings between Kuomintang and Communist representatives and American mediators to ensure that change came peacefully.

But change did not come in Kuomintang China.

The inland provinces which had provisioned the wartime armies of Chiang Kai-shek and the warlords incorporated into the Kuomintang still poured out men and rice. The carpet-baggers flocking east by every available plane and river-boat to browse off the rich coastal pastures vacated by Japan drove home the fact that 1945 was of the same base metal as old Yesterdays. And it was still this: runaway conscripts pulped with bamboo poles, ashen faces of starving men, the exactions of landlord-officials.

How then was change to come?

The observers, the missionaries and businessmen, diplomats and journalists, used to talk of 'change of heart' or 'step by step' or 'benevolent dictatorship' or 'foreign capital and supervision', counsels of cau-