

Letters from China

Anna Louise Strong

These are the letters written by Anna Louise Strong in answer to friends seeking information about China. At first she only corresponded with a few friends using carbon copies to save time in writing. Friends passed their letters on and her correspondents increased in number so she mimeographed her letters, sending out sixty copies. Letters of inquiry about China continued to grow in number. Anna Louise then decided that the only way to deal with her voluminous correspondence was by seeking the aid of the printer, who produced a thousand copies of each letter. Information now available shows that many of these letters have been quoted in newspapers and journals in Australia, New Zealand, Canada, Britain, Indonesia and Ghana. The letters have also been translated into Spanish, Portuguese and French and passed on by Latin American and African friends.

This pamphlet is a collection of the ten letters she wrote between September 1962 and July 1963. They cover a wide range of issues which were topical during that period. The most revealing and enlightening of these letters deal with the Sino-Indian border conflict, the Cuban crisis, the Communist debate, China's conquest of difficulties and the better living standards of her people, and the author's own relations with China, especially the 17 years since she went to Yen-an as a journalist. These subjects are still of as much significance as they were at the time of writing.

An experienced writer of 79, Anna Louise Strong writes in a lively, intimate and sincere style. Her penetrating enlightenment on factual matters and convincing answers to questions of vital interest to all mankind, appeal not only to the mind but also to the heart.

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THE RISE
OF THE CHINESE
PEOPLE'S COMMUNES
—AND SIX YEARS AFTER

Anna Louise Strong

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ANNA LOUISE STRONG

*There's no Jade Emperor in heaven,
No Dragon King on earth.
I am the Jade Emperor,
I am the Dragon King.
I order the three mountains and five peaks:
"Make way! Here I come!"*

(Popular song in 1958)

Weights, measures and money are given in the Chinese form. Sometimes, but not always, the English equivalent is also given in the text. For reference, the approximate equivalents are given here.

1 catty = 1.1 pounds or $1/2$ kilo; 2,000 catties = 1 metric ton.

1 *mou* = $1/6$ acre or $1/15$ of a hectare.

1 yuan roughly = 40 cents U.S.A. or 2.8 shillings; 1 fen = $2/5$ cent.

FOREWORD

This book incorporates my previous "The Rise of the Chinese People's Communes" plus new material of more than the original length. It now contains three parts, each covering a different period of history. The title is altered to indicate that the communes have now existed six years.

As published in early 1959, the first book told of the rise of the people's communes in 1958. I have thought it best to preserve that text practically unchanged, including even some grossly exaggerated statistics and the over-enthusiasms on which they were based. The period was historic, the extravagances were part of the exuberant mood of creation in which hundreds of millions of people became conscious of collective power. That edition in substance, makes up Part I of the present book, with a few footnotes added.

That story ended with the New Year celebration of 1959, when six thousand delegates from the new communes came from all parts of China and met in Peking to plan their future. The reader naturally asks: What happened next? In the next three years the people's communes, whose rise expressed the theme of man's conquering power over nature, were challenged by natural disasters of drought, typhoons, flood and pests unprecedented in the century. The struggle of those years appears in Part II. "The Three Hard Years," based on articles I wrote in 1959-62. Each chapter in this part is dated, to show the period it covers. Its last three chapters appeared in a small pamphlet "China's Fight for Grain," in early 1963.

It seemed important to conclude with a picture of the communes as they are today in 1964. Most of the material in Part III was collected especially for this book, to show "Communes in 1964" on the scale of a province, of some regions within the province, some individual communes and their constituent brigades and teams and

the relation of the nation's industry to the communes. Two of the chapters had preliminary publication in my "Letter from China"; three of the communes described were seen in 1962 but brought up to date in 1964.

The present edition thus covers the rise of the people's communes in Part I, their fight against natural disasters in Part II, and their present form and condition in 1964 in Part III. It does not attempt to be a full or a balanced history. It is rather a predominantly eyewitness record of repeated observations over a period of six years.

I did not spend all of my time in those years observing communes. In 1959 I went to Tibet, the only American woman who ever saw Lhasa, and recorded the freeing of the serfs in that darkest of earth's serfdoms and the beginnings of land reform in two books: "Tibetan Interviews" and "When Serfs Stood Up in Tibet." In 1961 I went to Indo-China and wrote "Cash and Violence in Laos." In September 1962 I began sending a news-letter to friends; this expanded so that it now appears in four languages and takes nearly all of my time.

From all these excursions into what might seem to some wider fields, I returned to China's internal growth in which the people's communes play important, even decisive part. A nation's greatness shows itself to the world in many ways but always the foundations lie in its internal life. The people's communes are the form of China's rural life today, a base of her internal strength.

Thanks are due to several friends who helped me to gather and arrange the reports I wrote over a long period, and to do such editing and elimination of repetitions as occur when separate writings are combined in book form.

Peking, July 1964

Anna Louise Strong

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PART I

**THE RISE OF THE CHINESE
PEOPLE'S COMMUNES
(1958-59)**

1. SOME MISCONCEPTIONS

People's communes swept all China at the end of last summer, the summer of 1958. By December they contained over 120,000,000 households, ninety-nine per cent of the peasant population. They became the base on which rests China's immediate future, and the units from which the more distant future is expected to grow. They are discussed abroad by everyone from Secretary Dulles to Marshal Tito, neither of whom has any idea how the people's communes work.

I have therefore made preliminary collection of facts from four personal visits to widely scattered communes — in Honan, Kiangsu, Kwangtung and near Peking — and from interviews separately held with some fifty men and women members of communes from all parts of the country, and from nine months' perusal of commune news. The facts suggest that we have here a new form of social organization which is widely misrepresented but which has great significance for China and the world.

I leave to theoreticians the relation of communes to Marx. The term "commune" has historically been used with various meanings, the early French use to designate merely a community, the revolutionary use in the "Paris Commune," the many idealistic communal settlements in early America, of which Llano Colony and others were as late as the period after the First World War, and the communes in the U.S.S.R.'s first period of collectivization,* which were dropped in the thirties as premature.

The people's communes in China differ from all of these; we must define them not by preconceptions but by the Chinese facts.

* To which they were compared by Nikita Khrushchov in his November 17, 1958 conversation with U.S. Senator Hubert Humphrey, as reported by the latter. Khrushchov also spoke in this vein to the late Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt and therefore may be regarded as one of the first anti-commune propagandists.

They are large mergers of agricultural co-operatives, which at once assume new, wider functions. They handle not only farming but industry, commerce, education and home defense on their territory, which is commonly that of a township or larger. They run the local schools, and some of the local branches of the state bank and state trade. They thus differ from past communes in other parts of the world by the wideness of their powers, which include state power and military affairs.

It is not strange that many peasants, in their first enthusiasm over these wide powers, declared that they were "entering communism," with "each according to his needs" and even "absorbing the state." The Chinese Communist Party promptly corrected these enthusiasts, and made it clear that communism demands a much higher stage of production than can exist in China for many years. The people's communes, it stated, should at present pay according to work rather than according to needs. It may thus be seen as the introduction of the "wage system" to a peasantry that has hitherto lived by subsistence farming. However, even at the beginning, this wage system is modified by a certain amount of "free supply," depending on local decision. Most spectacular of these was the rapid and wide introduction of "free food," which came as the result of the bumper crop. Other free items, maternity care, free schools and kindergartens and old people's homes, are less revolutionary, since they exist also in capitalist lands, either as free education or as community relief.

In China, however, these free items are based on a new concept. The local people of the township — or of the county — directly own and develop to the limit of their abilities all the resources of the area, whether land, water-power, timber or mineral ores, and from this development look after their community livelihood from cradle to grave. This is not alien to the old Chinese concept of county and village but is a far greater decentralization of economic and political power than is common today. It is expected to promote the rapid growth of production and prosperity in socialist forms under local initiative, and eventually to facilitate the transition to a communist society, in which the people's communes will remain as basic units.

The Chinese people's communes thus differ, economically and politically, from past organizations called communes. As I write, in March 1959, they have been in existence for half a year, the first constitution of a commune having been adopted on August 7, 1958. Each of the 26,000 communes differs from every other, each being tailored to its community. All of them change and develop week by week. It is far too soon to pass final judgment on their future.

Why then should one write at all about this phenomenon? The answer is that serious misconceptions have appeared abroad about the communes, and are being spread for the purpose of attacking China, and even for the purpose of portraying the Chinese people as lawless and sub-human creatures who might with clear conscience be atom-bombed from the world in the next Taiwan Straits war. Since there are plenty of facts to prove such attacks baseless, they should be answered at once. The best reply is a description of the communes as they are of present date.

One may note, in a preliminary way, the chief charges. These are that communes enslave the individual, break down the family, and militarize the people under the militia, spoken of as "Peking's cops." Even on present facts, one can show that these charges are ridiculous. The process of industrialization does indeed change the individual's relation to society and to the family; this has happened in every land thus far industrialized. But the changes made thus far by the Chinese communes seem less of a strain on either the individual or the family than by any industrialization in history.

The much-advertised "destruction of the patriarchal family" which the people's communes proclaim, has not yet, in the communes I have seen, removed the grandparents or the children from the homes of the married couples. Long ago this "destruction" happened in America, where the young couple usually abandon both parental homes on the day of their marriage. In China the "big family" still lives together, not only in the ancient village houses, but also according to the new blue-prints for housing thus far approved by people's communes, all of which include rooms for grandparents as well as minor children. The "Homes of Respect for the Aged"

are for those who have neither sons nor daughters to care for them; they do not thus far cater to the aged who have sons.

Two changes have been made by the communes which destroy the patriarchal rule. The first is that wages for work are paid to the actual man or woman worker, and not, as heretofore, to the head of the household. The Old Man, who ruled the home by collecting his son's and daughter-in-law's wages, loses this power. The second change is the establishment of a wide net of public dining-rooms, nurseries and kindergartens, which "liberate" the able-bodied young housewife from domestic labor and enable her to earn wages on an equality with her man. For women who formerly did both field work and household chores, including the grinding of the grain daily, this is a very welcome liberation. In any case the parents themselves decide whether they wish to use the local nursery or kindergarten. Thus far I have not yet found in China even that form of coercion which every small town in America uses ruthlessly, the truant officer compelling attendance at the primary school. What the West calls compulsory school attendance, enforced regardless of the will of parents, may later develop also in China: but as of early 1959, even in matters of primary schools, the parents still decide.

As for the "slavery of the individual" through industrial routine, let us recall how the westward drive of the United States was bought by two generations of migratory workers, "bindle-stiffs" deprived of all normal home life. Let us recall the rug factories of Peking a generation ago, or the textile factories in Japan — not to mention early Britain — where men or women workers slept in long rows on floors, deprived by years of contract labor of any home. That, if you like, was slavery, degrading the individual. In China the people's communes avoid all this. People stay in their village homes, or build better homes in more convenient places in the same township. Meantime they make arrangements whereby able-bodied men and women cultivate the fields, develop local industry and trade, while the strongest go on temporary assignment to build roads or irrigation projects for their own community use. What slavery is here?

As for "militarization" through the "militia," here I note only that most peasants I have met welcome the bugle or bell that enables field gangs to assemble on time, in communities which still have few clocks, and like to plant flags in the fields to mark gains in production. Most peasants also are proud that their democratically-elected people's commune has its own "home guards," directly responsible to the commune and not thus far under any Ministry of Defence in Peking. The need of such home guards was recently emphasized by the flare-up of war in the Taiwan Straits, and is kept in mind by the occasional capture of agents of Chiang Kai-shek,* sometimes in the act of planting bombs in schools or theaters. The political significance is hardly that of "militarization by Peking," but rather that of the rather amazing trust placed by the central government — in a China so short a time removed from the warlord period — in locally-chosen and locally-responsible home guards.

The basic fact that needs from the start to be stressed is the extent of the Chinese people's own initiative in the organizing of the people's communes. As Dr. Joseph Needham, the eminent authority on China and Chinese science, stated in the *New Statesman and Nation*, on December 20, 1958, "the West cherishes the idea that the population is dragooned to perform its tasks. On the contrary, everywhere one sees spontaneity, often out-running government planning . . . a new type of social engineering, the product of leadership from within, not from above." Those words should be read often; they are a clear, incisive description of the forces operating in today's China. To illustrate them will take the entire book.

Let us here note, however, that the people's communes arose in China as a mass movement in the rural areas, in which local conditions and organization by local Communists played a part, that they existed in slightly differing forms in wide areas before Peking

* To cite later instances, in the second half of 1963, people's commune militia, acting on their own or with regular border defense units, were cited as participating in destroying or capturing 18 groups of heavily armed Chiang Kai-shek infiltrators, totalling 280 men, who attempted coastal or parachute landings along China's seaboard, particularly in Kwangtung Province.

officially took notice, that they acquired their name and clearer formulation during the discussions of Mao Tse-tung and other leaders with local peasants in the fields, and that the first official resolution by the Central Committee of the Communist Party about the communes was published on August 29, 1958, at a time when thirty per cent of all China's peasants had already joined, while the more complete formulation by the Communist Party came only on December 10,* when ninety-nine per cent of the peasants were already members of communes. The peasants, moreover, encouraged by a bumper crop and the belief that hunger was conquered forever, had already widely voted "free food for all members and their families," a step which no Party resolution had foreseen. Nothing in this history indicates "dictation from Peking." The facts do, however, indicate a remarkable technique of leadership, which should be studied and understood.

To me, as a western American, what is most impressive is that the people's communes have given China an economic mechanism that incites every township and county to get irrigation, roads, water-power, steel and modern industry by local initiative, as fast as the local people can do the work. At the same time it enables China as a whole to get highways, irrigation systems and a vast network of industry, in an incredibly short time by local energy without building a vast central bureaucracy and without strain on the nation's taxing power. In these respects it seems to combine the local initiative that built the American westward drive with the social planning that built the U.S.S.R.

No final word can yet be said on the people's communes. So far the most authoritative word is the resolution of the Chinese Communist Party, passed on December 10, 1958 by its Central Committee. No government decree yet exists: one may be passed by the National Assembly when it meets in April 1959. The final decision will not be made by the Chinese Communist Party or even

* These two resolutions of the Central Committee in 1958, the first adopted at Peitaiho, the next at Wuhan, are the basic documents on the communes of which any serious student must take note. They may be found in *Peking Review* for September 16, 1958 and December 23, 1958 respectively.