

Document 10.12: Excerpts from “Agrarian Problems in China,” in *Peasant Life in China*, by Fei Xiaotong, 1946

Fei Xiaotong spent July and August of 1936 studying Kaixiangong, a village set on the lower course of the Yangzi River about 80 miles west of Shanghai, in Jiangsu Province. The region and village have many navigable waterways, including canals. The growing season is long: 300 days of the year. At the time, the village had a small public school and a silk factory. The census in 1935 counted 771 men and 684 women.

The above account of the economic life of a Chinese village is the result of a microscopic examination of a specimen...[which has] wider significance because this village shares a common process with most other Chinese villages....

The essential problem in Chinese villages, putting it in the simplest terms, is that the income of the villagers has been reduced to such an extent that it is not sufficient even to meet the expenditure in securing the minimum requirements of livelihood. It is the hunger of the people that is the real issue in China.

In this village, the immediate cause of the present economic depression is the decline of domestic industry.... The cause of [economic] depression lies in the relation between the village industry [silk] and the world market.... A successful reorganization of rural industry depends ultimately on the prospects of industrial development in China....

If there is no immediate recovery of rural industry, the peasants will be forced to adopt the second alternative. They will in despair give up their traditional source of income, as has already happened in the weaving industry.... As their income is diminishing and as there is no hope of immediate recovery, the peasants can naturally only resort to a corresponding reduction of expenditure. In expenditure, as the Chinese peasants are concerned, there are four categories: necessary daily account, periodical ceremonial expenses, capital for production, and interest, rent, and tax. As we have seen [in earlier chapters], the villagers have already suspended ceremonies as far as possible, and even

sold their rice reserve when necessary. It appears that the most rigid category is the last one. If the people are not able to pay their ever-increasing interest, rent, and tax they will be threatened by brutal treatment from the usurers, and rent and tax collectors, and by legal enforcement through imprisonment. But when hunger is stronger than the fear of being shot, peasant revolts take place.... If the author of *Red Star Over China*¹ is right, the main force that drove millions of peasants in the heroic long march was nothing but hunger and its derived hatred of landowners and tax collectors.

In the present study, I have tried to show that it is incorrect to condemn landowners and even usurers as wicked persons. When the village needs money from outside to finance their production, unless there is a better system to extend credit to the peasants, absentee landlordism and usury are the natural products. Without them, the situation might be still worse....

There was another dilemma in the Chinese land problem. The national government² with all its promises and policies on paper was not able to carry out any practical measures owing to the fact that most of the revenue was spent on its anti-communist campaign, while, as I have pointed out, the real nature of the communist movement was a peasant revolt due to their dissatisfaction with the land system. Despite all kinds of justification on either side, one thing is clear: that the conditions of the peasants are getting worse and worse. So far no permanent land reform has been accomplished in any part of China since the recovery of the Red Area³ by the government.

It must be realized that a mere land reform in the form of reduction of rent and equalization of ownership does not promise a final solution of agrarian problems in China. Such a reform, however, is necessary and urgent because it is an indispensable step in relieving the peasants. It will give a breathing space for the peasants and, by

¹ Edgar Snow; see Chapter 11.

² Guomindang Nationalist government

³ Jiangxi Soviet

removing the cause leading to “revolt,” will unite all forces in finding the way to industrial recovery.

A final solution of agrarian problems in China lies not so much in reduction of expenditure of the peasants but in increasing their income. Therefore, industrial recovery, let me repeat once more, is essential....

But one point connected with the future industrial development in China must be stressed here. Being a latecomer in the modern industrial world, China is in a position to avoid those errors which have been committed by her predecessors. In the village, we have seen how an experiment has been made in developing a small-scale factory on the principle of cooperation. It is designed to prevent the concentration of ownership of means of production in contrast with the capitalist industrial development in the West. In spite of all difficulties and even failures, such an experiment is of great significance in the problem of the future development of rural industry in China....

It is true that thousands of villages have already, like Kaixiangong, been destroyed by [Japanese] invaders, but in their ruin our internal conflicts and follies should find their last resting-place. From the ruin, a new China will emerge. The coming generation will, I sincerely hope, credit us with facing the problems of our age in a spirit of understanding and sympathy; our sacrifices and the hardship we are undergoing shall stand vindicated only if we look forward to the future with oneness of purpose and clarity of vision.

Source: Fei Xiaotong. *Peasant Life in China: A Field Study of Country Life in the Yangtze Valley*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1946, pp. 282–286.

For more information about Fei Xiaotong, see “A Closer Look” at the end of Chapter 10 and read his obituary in the People’s Daily Online:

http://english.people.com.cn/200504/27/eng20050427_182925.html