

# 1

---

## Introduction

Rural China and the Chinese peasantry in the first half of the twentieth century have attracted much academic attention since the Communist takeover of Mainland China in 1949. There have been heated debates on such issues as the living standards of the peasantry, the performance of the rural economy, the influence of imperialism and capitalism on the rural economy, social stratification of the rural population, the relationship between the revolutionary intellectuals and the peasantry, and so on. In the process of such debates, various theories have been created or tested.

These are not the earliest debates about rural China and the Chinese peasantry of the revolutionary era. The earliest ones were conducted during the revolutionary years among the Chinese intellectuals themselves. One crucial difference between the theories offered by contemporary scholars and those created by the Chinese intellectuals during the revolutionary years is that the latter were much more politically motivated and politically oriented. The intellectuals' theoretical works formed an important part of their political agenda aimed at solving China's then acute national crisis. To the Chinese intellectuals of the revolutionary era, purely academic interests, if there were any, were subordinate to political needs. As leaders and direct participants of the peasant movements, the Chinese intellectuals in the revolutionary period were deeply concerned about rural China and the Chinese peasantry because they believed that villages and peasants were at the heart of their political programs for changing both rural China and China as a whole. In other words, if academic works on rural China and the Chinese peasantry created by outsiders were for understanding the ideas and actions of the peasants and intellectuals of the revolutionary era, the writings of Chinese

intellectuals during the revolutionary period were produced to justify their own plans and actions.

This study intends to reveal Chinese intellectuals' perceptions of rural China, of the Chinese peasantry, and of the intellectuals' relationship with the peasantry during the first half of the twentieth century, as well as how such perceptions were politicized. It intends to be a history of theories rather than a theory of history or a history of movements. It covers not only the works of Communist intellectuals, but also those of the non-Communist and anti-Communist intellectuals. While both Communist and non-Communist intellectuals seemed to agree on one basic point—that is, in order to save and rebuild the Chinese nation, the peasants needed to be utilized and transformed—beyond that they had little in common, maintaining widely differing views about how to utilize and transform the peasants.

Analysis will begin with the encounters between the intellectuals and the peasants in modern China, which were made possible by the birth and growth of the Chinese intelligentsia and the rise and expansion of the Chinese national movement in the first few decades of the twentieth century. These encounters were inevitable, predetermined by the logic of a national movement. One outcome of such encounters was the images of the peasant created by the intellectuals. Ignorance, innocence, poverty, and powerfulness were the four characteristics of the peasantry that figured prominently in the works of all groups of intellectuals, yet different groups of intellectuals attached different importance to these characteristics and offered different interpretations of them, in order to suit and justify their own political programs. However, even though the images of the peasant created by the various intellectual groups differed, the general tendency was to transform the peasant from someone seen as useless, despicable, and negative to someone considered useful, admirable, and positive.

In addition to developing images of the peasant, the intellectuals also endeavored to discover and define the nature of Chinese rural society. This concern caused a protracted debate among different groups of intellectuals about the nature of Chinese society in general and Chinese rural society in particular. The debate formed part of their effort to justify their respective political strategies. The first stage of the debate, which occurred in the early 1920s between the early Chinese Marxists and the reform-minded intellectuals, was centered on whether China had already become a capitalist country and whether revolutionary socialism was applicable to China. The second stage of the debate took place in the Soviet Union during the First United Front of 1924 to 1927. The participants of the debate included Stalinists, Trotskyites, and supporters of the theory of the Asiatic Mode of Production. The debate was about whether China was a capitalist society or a semifeudal

and semicolonial society and, in turn, what kind of revolution China should undergo. After the Northern Expedition, the Chinese intellectuals launched the third phase of the debate, which became more and more focused on rural China and continued until the Japanese invasion and after.

Their encounter with the peasant finally made the intellectuals ponder their relations with the peasant. Though the majority of intellectuals who went to the countryside were originally from rural areas, they found it hard to merge with the peasants after they returned, mainly because of their education and urban experience. As a result, intellectuals felt the need to search for suitable patterns for their relations with the peasants. Different intellectual groups developed different patterns relevant primarily to the specific aims and political programs of those groups. The creation of the peasant's images, the debate on the nature of rural society, and the search for a suitable pattern of intellectual-peasant relations are all related in one way or another to the political strategies of these intellectual groups. There are close connections between the intellectuals' perceptions of the Chinese peasantry and rural China and their perceptions of and plans for the Chinese nation.

The major source materials for this research are the works of the leading intellectuals who were involved in the various peasant movements of the revolutionary era. Since the early 1980s, the writings of many of these leading figures have been republished in the form of collected works. Important journals published during the revolutionary period by the various groups of intellectuals involved in the peasant movement have also been useful. A special note should be made about the use of literary and artistic works. John Fitzgerald, in his recent book *Awakening China*, allows that "fiction and fashion, architecture and autobiography, take their places alongside politics and history," and he asks his readers to "move about among writers, artists, philosophers, ethnographers, revolutionaries, and soldiers who have little in common apart from their appearance in the book itself."<sup>1</sup> The readers of this book are asked, on occasion, to do the same. The use of literary and artistic works in this research is justifiable for two main reasons. First, Chinese writers and artists of the revolutionary era belonged to different political groups; they were not just writers and artists as such, but were writers and artists with political affiliations and positions. Many writers and artists were direct participants in the peasant movements and their works were very much politicized. They endeavored to provide justifications for their political course through fiction or paintings, as the political leaders, theoreticians, and scholars at the time tried to do through their political and academic essays. The literary and artistic works I consulted can all be classified as social, or social science, novels and paintings. As Lee Ou-fan observes, this type of novel formed the major literary genre of the 1920s and 1930s, especially the 1930s.

Lee attributed the rise of this genre to China's national crises, which urged the writers to shift from the personal to the societal and to write about the cities and villages.<sup>2</sup>

The second justification for using literary and artistic works is that those I consulted are not used to reconstruct the social realities of revolutionary China, but to demonstrate what the writers and artists of that period believed the social reality to be like. In commenting on the writings about peasants in twentieth-century Chinese literature, Helen Siu remarks that "Most of these images of peasants should not be treated as 'real' . . . but they do reveal the author's sense of outrage toward an entire social order. The works illumine how the underlying political assumptions of these writers guided their efforts to participate in a new political culture, a significant historical narrative in its own right."<sup>3</sup> It is these underlying political assumptions rather than the social-economic reality that form the focus of this study. After all, this is a study of social-intellectual history rather than social-economic history.

The term "peasant" itself has caused much debate among Chinese intellectuals in revolutionary China as well as among contemporary scholars. The problem has been whether to translate the Chinese word *nongmin* into the English word peasant or farmer. The issue is keenly germane to the debate about the nature of Chinese rural society during the revolutionary era and the evaluation of the modernization process of China. Generally speaking, those intellectuals who believed that rural China had already entered the capitalist stage in the first half of the twentieth century would use the word farmer, while those who argued that rural China was still a feudal or semifeudal society in the revolutionary period preferred the word peasant. As Kathleen Hartford remarks, "The problem is that there is no term for cultivators enmeshed in the Chinese rural economy that does not imply some assumptions about their relationship with the economy; 'farmer' casts a vote for the maximizer-marketeers as much as 'peasant' does for the Chayanovians or others."<sup>4</sup> Scholars are still debating the issue today, and some have argued that the word "peasant" was invented by Chinese intellectuals for political purpose.<sup>5</sup> This book will use the word "peasant" to mean those freeholders, part-owners, tenants, and hired laborers who worked on the land for a living. This definition is neutral and close to the meaning of the Chinese word *nongmin*. It has a wider meaning than that provided by Eric Wolf, who viewed the peasant as someone standing midway between the primitive tribe and industrial society.<sup>6</sup> Wolf's definition is based on the assumption that the peasants lived and operated in a unique system of economy, which is defined by Karl Polanyi as the distributional mode of trade and elaborated by A. V. Chayanov as a system that aims at providing subsistence rather than maximizing profit.<sup>7</sup>

Determining which year the modern Chinese intelligentsia was born and which year they began to write about the peasantry is difficult. I have chosen the year 1900 as a starting point, not entirely arbitrarily, but because it was that year's Boxer Rebellion that first drew the attention of a number of modern Chinese intellectuals to the peasant rebels, which led to some initial writings about the Chinese peasantry. The intellectuals' interest in the peasantry continued to grow after the Boxer Rebellion. In 1902, the Mi family in Dingxian County of Hebei started their reform program aimed at modernizing traditional village life. Five years after the Boxer Rebellion, Dr. Sun Yat-sen proposed the equalizing of land ownership as one of the four cardinal objectives of his revolution. He also began to exploit the power of the secret societies, which were mainly composed of peasants. At the same time, the Chinese anarchist group in Tokyo led by Liu Shipai began to write about the peasantry. In the late 1910s, Yan Xishan began to implement his rural program in Shanxi, and Chen Jiongming started to reform rural education in Guangdong. Meanwhile, in Beijing, Professor Li Dazhao made the first call to students to go to the village. The early 1920s saw the emergence of the first modern peasant movements led by Shen Dingyi and Peng Pai. During the Northern Expedition of 1925 to 1927, more and more intellectuals returned or relocated to the village. After the end of the Northern Expedition in 1927, all kinds of peasant movements began to thrive in rural China. Though the focus of this study is on the 1920s and after, its coverage includes the first two decades of the twentieth century because encounters between intellectuals and peasants were already under way during that period.