

Anarchism in North China, 1910-1934

Some personal recollections of the anarchist movement in Northern China.

In the village where I was born there is a monument in a square erected by the trades unions where fifteen Anarchists were executed as common criminals engaged in a conspiracy against the Empress in her last terror-stricken days. They were buried in a common grave which became a place of honour to the common people, who preserved it carefully. Our May Day marches used to culminate in this spot, where we sang, "Those who fought against injustice our victory will honour!"

I was banished from the village by the police and later I had to change my identity and could not return. I came back after an absence of thirty-five years on a visit.

As it was May the First, the first place I visited was "our square" - both for sentimental reasons and because I knew if any of our old friends were alive that is where they would be. Some old people still put flowers on the monument. But of all our friends I met only one old lady, who had been the beautiful girl who ran the "Anarchist Newspaper of the North" from 1910 to 1930. Despite all her many cares and the fact of marriage to a man who did not share her ideals or her courage, she was still with us, but, she told me "all the comrades are dead". These are words one often hears in Northern China, from the lips of old people. There, in that town where once a thousand youngsters marched behind our banner, only two or three elderly people remained to testify of our past. They met occasionally in company and backed each other up in talk like old gossips; or they met privately in tea sessions to talk of the old days. Red China had passed them by.

Is this really all that remains of that great movement of Anarchism in North China which still gives the bureaucrats of Peking devil-induced jerkings awake from their slumbers? So I asked myself. But the poor bureaucrats are not entirely fools. For there is the disturbing fact that after a propaganda drive by the State unequalled in history, when private thoughts are high treason they have not managed to obliterate from memory the martyrs up in the square. The municipality no longer cleans it, but somebody does, voluntarily. None of my friends knew whom, "Some of the workers do it" they said vaguely. Now and again a Red student, full of his importance as a cadet officer, will stop an old peasant and angrily reproach him for putting a bunch of flowers there. It is "transferred ancestor worship," he tells him sternly. He is greeted with the usual maddening shrug of the shoulders and assumed stupidity of the countryman. "They were very bad days" says the old man (using the very phrase in vogue with the Red students when admonishing unprogressive working men). And sometimes when there has been quite a lot of marching and speechmaking and great patriotic demagogy, and the workers and peasants have been thoroughly denounced for not working as hard as The Chairman, somebody will whistle, "Victory will honour" - it is our "ca ira" there in the countryside - or perhaps somebody will murmur what is not a cant, and most impertinent phrase "What would they make of it up at the square?"

If victory has not honoured, defeat has not forgotten. Remember that. For in the countryside around, there are dozens of townships where once free communes were set up, where a handful of Anarchist militants leading fugitive lives had come to the town square and called for an insurrection, and where the whole population had rallied round and refused to pay taxes or rents, and had lived independent and free while the national armies fought each other and were unable to impose the tribute of the State. The Peking bureaucrats do not forget. Neither do the people.

When I came to the capital of our province as it now is, that was large in 1934 and is now swollen beyond belief, I contacted the local group whom were known to me for their scarcity of numbers, "In this town, where once we had a hundred groups, we have now ten individuals", said my contact sadly. But he knew nothing of those in the villages. Another comrade was however more optimistic. "Don't mistake what we are with what we could be. If you had now come from the city to tell us - as they used to in the old days - that the army was in retreat and the government powerless I would need only to run up a pair of black

knickers on a pole and shout 'Long Live Anarchy' and ten, twenty, thirty thousand men and women would rally and many would bring their rifles with them."

Well, which was true? Let me tell you one more story. As I left to go to the railway station I looked around and saw the same glorification of the Leader, the same uniformity of slogans, the same picture of the Nation State marching in goosestep that one sees all over China but, emboldened by my friend's assertions when the railway clerk asked me my destination, I was foolish enough to hum the old words indelibly associated with our movement: "Freedom is my destination don't ask me for a place-name". The clerk shouted angrily "Don't be flippant." "We have a serious job to do!" I felt a little humiliated in front of the crowd. I meekly told him my home town. Then another railwayman came forward to take my ticket and my luggage. He put me on the train without a word. To my surprise the clerk came out too to see me on board and when I said I had not paid they both smiled, "Go on good luck" they said. Later, a little girl brought me a basket of fruit with the anonymous message, "Your journey may be very long and this may be useful." How should I interpret this?

One more incident. An elderly lady sitting opposite me observed the incident of the little girl. There were in the carriage many important looking Party functionaries and people in evident good standing. She said nothing to them but later remarked to me apparently in regard to nothing, "I am for everybody and everything but my two sons work on the railway and I am against blowing up civilian trains in time of peace". (The expression "trainwreckers" is often used, maliciously, to describe rebels - it has become a synonym in officialese, like 'anarchy' and 'chaos'). I replied with a literary quotation, "The trainwreckers do not wreck trains and the officers of the law do not bring justice". She smiled knowing exactly what I meant. When I added, "It is a great crime in 'War-time too" she threw a frightened and imploring look. When she got off the train she slipped some money in my hat. All over North China the people believe that all the Anarchists need is money. They do not understand our situation south, where comrades are in good jobs and think we must still be fugitives. It is an insult to refuse money, yet like our foreign comrades they do not see that money cannot buy us printing presses or guns to defend them. (In fascist countries a group with money may buy a duplicator under cover of a legitimate business. Here all is state controlled.)

These stories may illustrate why the bureaucrats are still frightened of us. There are too many who remember when the working-class movement fought for freedom and was not a tool of the Nation State. With the young people I seldom mixed. Our working-class youth is (rightly) suspicious of its elders; our students, unlike those abroad are dogmatic supporters of the existing power. Only to those in our groups did I have the chance to speak. Is it true that a young generation is rising that is given "the chance to speak" and that takes "great provocations"? Yes, it is true. In many big cities, on May Day our young friends decided to carry out an order of the Young- Communists to "denounce anarchism". Many skilful young artists who had read of the "overcheer" anarchists in the U.S.A., prepared some beautifully-executed signs:-

"Those lying devils the anarchists said state socialism would bring about a new tyranny. Either they are mad or we are!"

"What a wicked scoundrel was the Anarchist Shih Fu who said the workers could manage their own affairs without a party banner!"

"When Peter Kropotkin said the the peasants could be free to till the land without State intervention, all Marxists recognised in him the paid-agent of the Russian Czar!"

Even more daring was: "The bourgeois Anarchists maintained that libertarian socialism would come since all men were born free, and were naturally good. Mao Tse Tung has proved them wrong!"

Many did not know how these slogans should be taken, since they are neither more nor less than current Party slogans, but nobody dared protest in case they were not sarcastic but officially inspired. These banners were carried in the open air before thousands of people, including police and army officers, Party officials, foreign observers and the ironic cheering of many ordinary people showed that some understood the message.

How then am I expected to report the state of the movement in North China? Our friends abroad ask me to tell them "have we a movement in China? If so, what does it consist of?" I cannot tell them any more than I can write here. Do I write that in North China all the comrades are dead or that everywhere the peasants sympathise with us; that we have ten members in such-and-such a town or thirty thousand; that the railway workers are with us or that some people were kind to me; that our banners wave at the head of the May Day processions? Which is true, which is a lie? Are we many are we few? Should the bureaucrats worry about us no longer, should they bring back beheading for our views? Sleep easy gentle people, the revolution is not yet upon you. But in the moments when you are awake be careful not to demand too many sacrifices of your people or engage your army in too many directions!

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