CHINA -- BURNOUT OF A REVOLUTION

Theodore H. White

Nearly 45 years ago just out of Harvard and still trying to master the intricacies of Mandarin. Theodore H. White made his way to China and found a land in turmoil. Settling in Chiang Kai-shek's wartime capital of Chongqing (Chungking), then a drowsy Yangtze River port with a population of 250,000 he soon began reporting from there for TIME. One book *Thunder Out of China* , 1946 , two wars (China against Japan, China against itself) and six eventful years later, he departed, in sharp disagreement with TIME's Editor-in-chief, Henry R. Luce, about China's future. In the decades since, he has chronicled some of the major events of our time, from Europe's postwar recovery (*Fire in the Ashes*, 1953) to America's shifting politics (*The Making of the President* series, 1960 to 1980). This spring, Pulitzer, Prinzewinner White returned to China for his first extended visit since the mid–1940s (in 1972 he covered Richard Nixon's brief trip). For nearly two months he crisscrossed China, revisiting Chongqing, now a bursting-at-the-seams metropolitan area of 14 million, exploring the crowded alleys and broad boulevards of Peking and interviewing scores of Chinese, from Peasants to Politburo members. Once again he found a land in turmoil; this time, however, it was the turmoil not for war but of change. We reproduce from his report, with due acknowledgement to TIME, the section on White's impressions of China's new "responsibility system".

Let another old – guard Communist tell what he found when he was restored to power. Liao Zhili, 68 now deputy director of the State Commission for Restructuring the Economic System, was sent down from 1968 to 1978. Liao grew animated as he told of China as left by the Cultural Revolution.

"It was", he says,"madness. They believed in public ownership of everything. They wanted to eliminate all private workers. In all China there were only 150,000 private workers. They wanted the barber shops, the bathhouses, the shoemaking shops all to be state enterprises. The poorer the people, was their theory, the more 'revolutionary' they would become. We found we had 26 million people unemployed – and the state was supposed to find jobs for all of them"

"They had two systems for the economy – 'line authority' and 'bloc authority'. Line authority ran from the central-government ministries down to the smallest factories and mines in China, north or south. "We found one factory with 4,000 workers but only one toilet. The workers would line up for hours to get to the toilet. But any building of more than 200 sq. ft. had to be approved by line authority at the top, the State Planning Commission in Peking. Should such a committee have to decide about toilets ? We had a factory in Hubei that produced good worsteds that people wanted for suits. But the plan called for the mill to produce coarse woolens." So the mill met its quotas in coarse woolens, and they piled up in the

warehouses. All over China, Peking set quotas and ignored what the people, the market, demanded.

"Take bloc authority"' Liao went on. "That meant the provincial governments did the trading and marketing. Villages in north Jiangsu, for example, raise tomatoes, so they need bamboo staves to make the wicker tepees that hold tomatoes up. Anhui just across the boarder had surplus bamboo. But tomato farmers in Jiangsu couldn't get any bamboo from Anhui because that crossed a provincial border. That's bloc authority."

On he went with wry amusement as he told how the new regime was untangling "egalitarianism". It would be years before it was all untangled. But much had already been accomplished, particularly where the peasants had been invited into the "responsibility" system and has restored the market system. It was the countryside where I would see reforms working best.

Removing the Handcuffs

The countryside means almost anywhere, for 80 percent of China's people still work in the fields. Start with Sichuan, my home base for six years. The province is so fertile that the old phrase ran, "Anything that grows in China, grows better in Sichuan, "Sichuan used to feed itself. But then, from the czars of the Cultural Revolution, came the order that two rice crops be grown a year. Rice, however, is a tricky crop. Sichuan had evolved its own two-crop culture rice in summer and wheat or rapeseed in winter. But Peking had ordered two rice crops a year. So Sichuan tried to meet its quotas. When the climate made that impossible, the government had to send grain into this onetime surplus province, and the peasants hungered.

I found Sichuan enjoying change, as a man does when handcuffs and leg irons are removed. The new reforms were quite simple; the peasants could now decide what to plant and when, and whether to sell any surplus to state markets or free markets. If they met their quotas to the state, the surplus was theirs to eat or to sell. The margin is still precariously thin -just enough for peasants to keep their chins above water Five years ago, only their nostrils were visible.

A quick six-day tour of the province, for an old timer, is a delight. The small towns throb again, their booths full of sweets, cookies, housewares, clothes, textiles, flower pots and flowers. In big cities like Chengdu and Chongqing, the huge food markets overwhelm the eye with food that can be bought without coupons. Hogs come squealing to market in wheelbarrows, on tractors, even lashed to the backs of bicycles, then reappear in the markets as huge slabs of pink-and-white pork. Peasants bring in their wives' squawking chickens, eight to a basket. Down the market lanes peasants sell geese and ducks; eels from the canal ditches; fish from their ponds; fruit; fresh vegetables; herbs; spices, ginger root; delicacies. Canaries are for sale again, along with other caged birds, and cricket boxes. Shoemakers ply their trade; itinerant dentists, with their foot-paddle drills, have reappeared.

The markets are real. So is the astonishing good health, the ruddy vitality of the people, so different from the scrawny peasants I remember 40 years ago. The gurgling babies pleasure the eye-no trachoma, no scabies, no rickety limbs, no potbellies of famine.

But the eye can deceive. This has been a great year in China: a prospective record harvest, record incomes. Yet peasant prosperity is fragile. Here was Sichuan in green spring, the wheat turning yellow, soon to be golden. But if the rains fell at the wrong time, the wheat would be beaten to the ground and lost, and there would be a slim rice crop in the fall. This huge province lives on the margin of hunger.

The "responsibility system" in Sichuan has demonstrated that peasants work best when they tend their own fields. For Westerners this recognition seems equivalent to the rediscovery of the wheel. But with a crucial difference. The state, via the commune, has replaced the old landlord. It owns the fields, the peasant rents an allotted share of land; if he meets the state's quota (once called the landlord's rent), he keeps the rest. This is progress. It is harsh; yet the Great Cultural Revolution was far more cruel.

Days later I visited "a big brigade" in the province of Hubei that was beginning to refer to itself, not as a brigade but, again, as a cun, a village. The brigade chief, a bald-headed veteran Communist, explained once more that peasants could now decide on their own crops and routines. "Responsibility" made them care about the harvest. Then, as an afterthought, he added "It is not only the attention of the farmer that helps. He now uses his own organic material, also the organic material of the chickens and buffaloes to enrich his fields. " I read very precisely what he meant. Now that a peasant is responsible for the land allotted to him, he cultivates it like a garden. His excrement, pig excrement, chicken droppings are all sumped together with urine, then ladled into buckets. The peasant then pours the mixture onto each stalk. Ladling the slime onto the seedings is smelly, unpleasant duty. But the slime works, production had been rising for three years, and the peasants ate well.

Finally we came to the population problem. Since collectivization in 1958, the brigade's population had risen from 1,300 people to 2,720. So on the reform share-out of 1980, the largest plot was four mu (two-thirds of an acre). Too many people, too little land.

The net impression, after weeks in the countryside: China's farms are on the mend; peasants are eating again; a few are even getting rich with rows of chicken coops, private stalls and little carpenter shops.

(Courtesy: TIME)