**The Chinese Revolution and a Voluntarist Explanation for its Success**

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It can be argued that social revolutions occur due to the structural and historical circumstances surrounding a country, and not because of specific leaders that present themselves at opportune times. On the contrary, this paper argues that the Chinese Revolution, and the Chinese Communists Party’s (CCP) distinct success, was a direct result of the revolutionary leadership of Mao Tse Tung, and as such, can be attributed to voluntarist arguments**.** It will prove this by outlining the flaws regarding the peasantry centred structural argument and by discussing the unique effect that Mao‘s tactics had upon the rural population, the Kuomintang (GMD), and the invading Japanese.

The unsavory livelihood of the Chinese peasantry at the beginning of the twentieth century is a distinctly structural argument as to why the peasantry was willing to revolt. One factor that contributed to their hardships include the unprecedented growth in population that China experienced between the seventeenth and nineteenth century.

It is estimated that the population tripled between 1651 and 1851.[[1]](#footnote-1) As a result, there was an immense strain on the land. Even the land owners, the rich among the peasantry, had very little property[[2]](#footnote-2) and as the twentieth century began, the peasantry’s condition was deteriorating.[[3]](#footnote-3) This deteriorating condition was optimal for a peasantry revolt. The revolt, however, did not come in a similar manner to past mass peasantry revolts in Russia and France. Instead, it bore the form of unorganized rural violence, migration during economic downturns, and banditry, especially near national and provincial border regions.[[4]](#footnote-4) What was left of the communist party in 1927, much like the poor peasantry, was migrating, but it had nothing to do with the state of the economy. Instead, they were retreating from the threat of the GMD and the purge of communists in Shanghai. This gradual retreat resulted in the communists resorting to banditry as well; this was a sort of shared identity with the disgruntled peasantry.[[5]](#footnote-5) In this way, it seems as though shared suboptimal conditions of both the peasantry and the CCP was the reason for the party’s the growing support among the peasantry. In other words, communism as an ideology had nothing to do with the peasantry’s support of the CCP.[[6]](#footnote-6)

There are, however, flaws in this argument. It does nothing to credit Mao and the shift that he initiated regarding a peasantry based revolution rather than a proletariat based one. This preference was based on his knowledge of the Taiping rebellion[[7]](#footnote-7) and his findings in the Hunan report.[[8]](#footnote-8) For all of the faults that would present themselves throughout his reign, Mao was correctly convinced that sweeping social change would only be successful if the growing frustration of the country’s peasantry could be fused with a genuinely revolutionary ideology.[[9]](#footnote-9) Furthermore, the argument attributes the communists turning to a more agrarian lifestyle as merely a product of circumstance, and fails to credit the communist’s strategic initiative to tune themselves into the peasant’s lifestyle in order to win them over.[[10]](#footnote-10) After stoking revolution among the workers in cities such as Canton while associated with the GMD, it is quite clear that Mao and the communist party intentionally shifted their focus. They were now concerned with the half a billion peasants[[11]](#footnote-11) who lacked the organization but possessed the characteristics of a revolutionary body capable of initiating vast social change.

It is clear that the peasantry was a decisive factor in the success of the communist revolution. However, without the leadership of Mao and the communists, the peasantry would never have been able to commit or organize such a massive uprising. Furthermore, the experimentation and eventual implementation of guerilla warfare was the deciding factor in the defeat of the powerful Japanese army. Both of these arguments are centered around strictly voluntarist causes.

If a chronological path were to be followed, one would see that while the CCP was associated with the GMD, they were responsible for the successful mobilization of the masses in strikes and rebellions in large cities such as Canton.[[12]](#footnote-12) Following the purge of the communists in Shanghai and their subsequent retreat, they began to focus their revolutionary efforts upon the peasantry. As Mao gained reputation and became renowned for his revolutionary efforts, it became clear that the CCP and its leaders were highly responsible for the infusion of a revolutionary mindset among the peasantry. One specific example of Mao’s ability to unite the peasantry came in Anyuan, Jiangxi province. Upon hearing of the urge that the illiterate mine workers in this area had to become educated, Mao set about opening a night school.[[13]](#footnote-13) This school and the education that it provided was a sort of springboard for a successful non-violent strike, and it was clearly a revolutionary success for the communists despite its concealed importance.[[14]](#footnote-14) After their arrival in Yan’an following the Long March from Jiangxi, Mao altered his methods regarding the distribution of land in such a way that the landowners were allowed to keep more of their land but they were not allowed to exploit the poor peasantry.[[15]](#footnote-15) This appeased the different classes of the peasantry and resulted in the furthering of their support for the communist revolutionary movement.

As the communists retreated from Shanghai and made their way to Yan’an, they were provided with a unique opportunity to experiment with guerilla warfare while fending off GMD forces. Mao was a proponent of guerilla warfare and a master of its implementation. He became known as a fearless leader, and his successes, coupled with some almost deadly mistakes, helped to see him instilled as chairman of the CCP.[[16]](#footnote-16) Over time, the communists forces became so strong that the GMD focused the entirety of their forces upon them and left the Japanese to be dealt with by post World War II international powers. This resulted in the peasantry sympathizing even more so with the nationalistic communists, as they were alone in fighting the invading Japanese while the GMD came across as anti-nationalist and weak.[[17]](#footnote-17) Because it was safer for the peasantry to fight with a weapon for the communists than it was to stay neutral and face the Japanese unarmed, many peasants not only sympathized and supported the communists, but also joined their military forces. To conclude, guerilla warfare both effectively deal with the GMD and was an excellent counter to an army as large and immobile as the Japanese were.

In 1949, Mao and the CCP declared the People’s Republic of China having successfully defeated both the Japanese and the GMD. This success can be primarily attributed to the tactics of the CCP, including guerilla warfare, and the leadership of Mao Tse Tung, both of which are distinctly voluntarist explanations.

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1. Lucien Bianco, *Origins of the Chinese Revolution,* (Stanford University Press, 1971), 91. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Bianco, *Origins,* 95. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Bianco, *Origins,* 104. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Theda Skocpol, “France, Russia, and China: A Structural Analysis of Social Revolutions,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 18, no. 2 (1976): 199. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Skocpol, “A Structural Analysis of Social Revolutions,” 200. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Skocpol, “A Structural Analysis of Social Revolutions,” 200-201. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. James DeFronzo, *Revolutions and Revolutionary Movements*, (Westview Press, 1991), 95. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Bianco, *Origins,* 62. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. DeFronzo, “Revolutionary Movements,” 95. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Bianco, *Origins,* 64. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Bianco, *Origins,* 87. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Bianco, *Origins,* 56. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Elizabeth J. Perry, “Reclaiming the Chinese Revolution,” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 67, no. 4 (2008): 1151. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Perry, “Reclaiming,” 1152. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. DeFronzo, “Revolutionary Movements,” 97. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Bianco, *Origins,* 64, 68. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. DeFronzo, “Revolutionary Movements,” 98. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)