A DOCUMENTARY OF REVOLUTION IN A CHINESE VILLAGE

(Primary Source)

Based on the author's personal observations, the description of Long Bow Village in Northern China depicts the impoverished state of Chinese peasants in 1948.

Counting noses among the 200-odd families one could ordinarily tally up about a thousand persons altogether. This meant that on the average there was one acre of land for every man, woman, and child.[2] The crops from this one acre, in a good year, were ample for the support of a single person, considering the very low standard of living that prevailed. But the poor who rented land or worked out as hired laborers got less than half the crops they tilled, while the rich got the surplus from many acres.

. . . The fields were divided into countless narrow strips and plots, each one owned by a different family. Land was so valuable that the peasants found it necessary to build stone walls as high as 15 feet to hold back a few feet of earth and make it level.

Although no level ground roads and paths led out through the fields, no hill fields could be reached with a cart, and farm implements had to be light enough for one man to carry. The plows, harrows, seeders, and other equipment used were all light enough to be picked up with one hand and were made entirely of wood except for the point of the plow itself. All of these implements, although in use for centuries, were still only supplementary to the main tool, the hoe, handed down almost unchanged since prehistoric times. The hoe used in Long Bow was a great iron blade weighing several pounds and fastened to the end of a stick as large as a man's wrist. This tool, which was designed to turn soil and sod, was also used for the delicate work of thinning millet and weeding corn.

The crops grew only on what was put into the soil each year; hence manure was the foundation of the whole economy. The chief source of supply was the family privy, and this became, in a sense, the center of the household.

[2]The acres mentioned here and throughout the text of the unit are English acres, each being equivalent to six Chinese *mu*.

Long Bow privies were built in the form of a deep cistern, topped with timber, or stone, and provided with a single narrow slot at ground level for both deposition and extraction. Here night soil in liquid form accumulated all winter. Legendary in the region were the landlords so stingy that they would not allow their hired men to defecate in the fields but made them walk all the way back to the ancestral home to deposit their precious burden. Other landlords would not hire local people on a long-term basis because local people were wont to use their own privies while a man from outside used that of his employer.

Animal manure, together with any straw, stalks, or other waste matter, was composted in the yard. So highly was it valued that old people and children constantly combed the roads and cart tracks for droppings which they scooped up and carried home in baskets. This need to conserve every kind of waste and return it to the land was responsible for the tidy appearance of the streets and courtyards even though the walls were crumbling and the roofs falling in. Nothing, absolutely nothing, was left lying around. Even the dust of the street was swept up and thrown on the compost heap or into the privy, for village dust was more fertile, by far, than the soil in the fields.

The clothes that people wore and the food that they ate were all products of the village land. Even the gentry, who possessed for festive occasions silks and satins imported from the South, donned for everyday wear the same homespun cottons that served to clothe their servants and their tenants. Though styles did evolve over the centuries, the basic workday clothing changed little. In summer everyone wore thin jackets and pants of natural cotton bleached white or dyed blue or black with indigo. Long Bow women liked to wear white jackets and black pants, but this was by no means universal . . .

In cold weather everyone wore clothes padded with cotton. These made people look twice as big as they really were and provided warmth in two ways, first by the insulation of the thick layer of cotton and second by the lice which made themselves at home in the seams. Since the padded clothes could not be washed without taking the lining out — a major operation — it was almost impossible to get rid of lice from day to day. Their constant biting and the interminable scratching that accompanied it generated a fair amount of heat. On any warm day in winter a large number of people could always be found sitting in various sunlit corners with their padded jackets

across their knees. There they hunted the lice, picked them out, and crushed them expertly between their thumbnails.

Children under five were exposed from below in all weather because their padded clothes were not sewn together at the crotch. The slit, which ran upward from just above the knees to a point a little below the tip of the backbone, was very convenient when nature called but was drafty in winter. It must be said, however, that the children didn't seem to mind at all and ran about in the bitterest weather just as if they were all sewn in like their elders.

. . . Shoes were also made of cotton cloth but, because the soles consisted of many layers sewn through and through with hemp thread, they were as tough as any leather and lasted from four to six months even with hard wear on the mountain roads. Only the women had no need for such heavy shoes. Their feet were bound, the toes bent under, and the bones stunted so that they formed a crushed stump not more than two or three inches in length. Women walked as if on stilts. They could not run at all. Yet widowed women among the poor often had to work in the fields from dawn until dark. Foot binding came to an end almost everywhere in the period between the two world wars but even in 1945 young girls with crippled feet could still be found in the mountain counties of Shansi.

The food eaten in Long Bow was very simple. Since maize was the major crop everyone ate corn dumplings, called keta, in the morning, and corn meal mush, or noodles made of corn at noon. At night they ate millet porridge with a few noodles in it. After the wheat harvest in July everyone ate noodles for several days, but this was considered quite a luxury and only the most fortunate carried the custom on into August. These same families were the only ones who ate three meals a day throughout the year. Most people cut down to two meals, or even one when winter set in. Thus undernourished they moved about as little as possible and tried to conserve their strength until spring.

In addition to the cereal grains people ate salt turnip all year round, cabbage when they had it, and other vegetables such as eggplant, scallions, chives, and wild herbs in season. But these were simply garnishment to the main dish which was always corn, millet, or wheat. The big problem facing

the peasants over the years was not to obtain some variety in their diet, but to find anything to eat at all. They often had to piece out their meager harvest of grain with bran, chaff, wild herbs from the hills or even the leaves from the trees or tree bark as the ch'un huang (spring hunger) set in. Each day that one survived was a day to be thankful for and so, throughout the region, in fat years and in lean, the common greeting came to be not "Hello" or "How are you?" but a simple, heartfelt "Have you eaten?"

The following are only a few incidents culled at random from the life stories of peasants with whom Hinton talked.

- There were three famine years in a row. The whole family went out to beg things to eat. In Chinchang City conditions were very bad. Many mothers threw newborn children into the river. Many children wandered about on the streets and couldn't find their parents. We had to sell our oldest daughter. She was then already 14. Better to move than to die, we thought. We sold what few things we had. We took our patched quilt on a carrying pole and set out for Changchih with the little boy in the basket at the other end. He cried all the way from hunger. We rested before a gate. Because he wept so bitterly a woman came out. We stayed there three days. On the fourth morning the woman said she wanted to buy the boy. We put him on the k'ang. He fell asleep. In the next room we were paid five silver dollars. Then they drove us out. They were afraid when the boy woke up he would cry for his mother. My heart was so bitter. To sell one's own child was such a painful thing. We wept all day on the road.

- I almost starved to death. One day I lay on the street. A cart came along. The driver yelled at me to move. I was too weak. I didn't care if he drove over me or not. He finally had to drive around me.

- During the famine we ate leaves and the remnants from vinegar making. We were so weak and hungry we couldn't walk. I went out to the hills to get leaves and there the people were fighting each other over the leaves on the trees. My little sister starved to death. My brother's wife couldn't bear the hunger and ran away and never came back. My cousin was forced to become a landlord's concubine.

- I and the children worked for others thinning millet. We got only half a quart of grain. For each meal we cooked only a fistful with some weeds in it. The children's stomachs were swollen and every bone in their bodies stuck through their skin. After a while the little boy couldn't get up. He just lay on the k'ang sick with dysentery and many, many worms, a whole basin full of worms crawled out from his behind. Even after he was dead the worms kept coming out. The little girl had no milk from me, for I had nothing to eat myself, so, of course, she died.

People could not speak of the past without weeping. Nor could one listen to their stories dry-eyed. Yet, as the details piled up, horror on horror, one's senses became dulled. The barbarity, the cruelty, the horror of the old life was so overwhelming that in time it ceased to shock. One began to take for granted that worms crawled from dying children, that women and children were bought and sold like cattle, that people were beaten to death, that they fought each other for the leaves on the trees. The impossible took on the aura of the commonplace.

The most terrible thing about the conditions of life in Long Bow in those days was not any single aspect of the all but universal misery; it was that there was no hope of change. The fearful tragedy played and replayed itself without end.

William Hinton, *Fanshen: A Documentary of Revolution in a Chinese Village* (New York: Vintage Books, 1966) by permission of Monthly Review Foundation