

Beginning of the Chinese Revolutions

Setting the Stage

Today we will visualize and internalize the extreme level of poverty in which China's peasant masses—as much as 80 percent of the population— attempted to eke out a meager existence. What is important here is an understanding of the vast discrepancy between the standard of living of an emergent merchant middle class in China's larger cities (such as Shanghai) and the abject conditions of China's rural populace.

PART ONE: Rural China

In the first half of the twentieth century, most Chinese people lived as peasants, farming small patches of land in tiny rural villages. Can you imagine what their life was like? Here is a firsthand description of a rural Chinese village in the early 1950s, from Yuang-tsun Chen's *The Dragon's Village*:

*Here in the **Gansu** countryside, everything—land, sky, cottages, even the people in the distance—was yellow-gray in the fading autumn light, **dun-colored**, cold. I could not see a single green leaf or blade of grass.*

1. *Would you enjoy living here? Why/Why not?* _____

Notice that the climate and quality of soil make the two regions inhospitable to farming. Although much of China relies on wet-rice cultivation, which flourishes in the South, much of the nation's northern and western terrain is dry, mountainous, and rocky, making agriculture quite difficult.



IMAGE 1: Chinese Peasants in Yanan, 1917

2. *Do you think it was easy to farm here? Why or why not?* _____

Here is another passage from Chen's book, *The Dragon's Village*:

3. *Based on Chen's description above, what do you think the peasants of Longxiang ate?* _____

*Since coming to **Longxiang** I had never seen a peasant eat meat or fish, fresh vegetables, or rice or flour.*

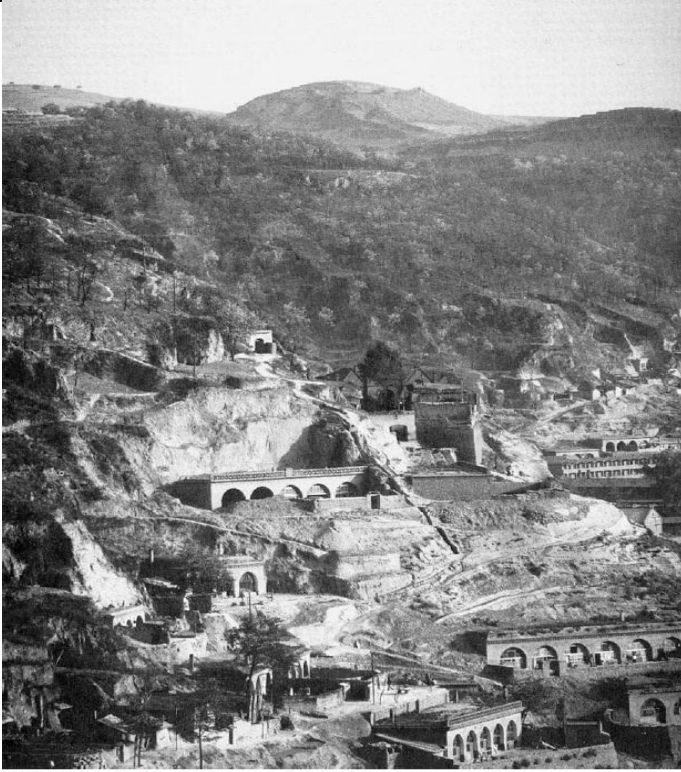


IMAGE 2: Cave dwellings in the mountains of China

4. Based on the Picture to the left, How modernized was China in the 1920's?

5. Where did the people in this village have to get their food from? _____

6. Using Russia as a reminder, would the people in this village be ready for a revolution? _____

7. If life was so difficult here for the people, should the government help? Why/why not? _____

Here is Chen's description of **pian-er gruel**, the typical meal for a Gansu peasant:

8. What was the most disgusting thing you've ever had to eat? Why did you eat it? _____

Sometimes it had a bit of flour in it and sometimes corn with generous additions of husk. An unappetizing grayish-yellow color, thick as paste and spiced with rough-ground salt and dried peppers, it was as gritty as sand.



IMAGE 3: Mao Zedong (on the left) as a Communist Revolutionary in the 1930s

Here is one of Mao's proudest childhood memories, which he recounted to Edgar Snow in a 1937 interview:

*"When I was about thirteen my father invited many guests to his home, and while they were present a dispute arose between the two of us. My father denounced me as lazy and useless. This **infuriated** me. I cursed him and left the house. I learned that when I defended my rights by open rebellion my father **relented**, but when I remained **meek** and submissive he only cursed and beat me the more.*

9. Why was Mao angry with his father? _____

10. What did Mao learn from his experience? _____

11. What is the moral of Mao's story? Do you agree with Mao? Why/Why not?

12. Do you ever fight with your parents? When? How does the fight usually end?
