

Understanding Present-Day China

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NO one will doubt that China is entering into the most significant period in her national history now that the war is over. To resist the Japanese was easy compared with the task confronting her in the postwar reconstruction.

The task is really tremendous. The population embraces one-quarter of the human race, full of common sense, well educated for living under the old conditions, although still largely illiterate, but ill-prepared for citizenship in the new world in which China has now to play an active part. China is the oldest nation in the world. Her traditions are ingrained in the life of the people. Thorough-going changes are difficult, but some of them are imperative and they must be made in a very short time. To make changes quickly is contrary to the temperament of the people, for they are accustomed to making changes leisurely.

The leaders of China have promised to the world and to their own people that the country will be democratic. In her political ideas and ideals China has been democratic for over two thousand years at least. But the Chinese conception of government is that the best government is the government which governs the least. After the taxes are paid the people would leave the government alone and would expect to be left alone. The result is a local democracy modeled after the family. No political machinery has ever been developed to implement the democratic ideas and ideals for the whole nation. In the past whenever political discontent became widespread there would be a rebellion and rebellion was considered the divine right of the people. Who would not lead an insurrection when the prize was the imperial throne? Periodical rebellion and rapid turnover of political power was a familiar story in Chinese history. Much of China's recent history and many of her contemporary events may find their explanation in this peculiar political temperament of the people.

There is another part of the political picture of China that must have puzzled the observer not familiar with China's general mentality. While the populace as a whole is indifferent to political matters until the situation becomes really intolerable, the students are always politically minded. The traditional scholar is a man trained for a political career. He has to be interested in politics. That is his business. He is expected to carry the political burden for the people.

This mentality, however, must be changed but it cannot be changed in a day. Western political in-

stitutions are not adaptable to China's needs. But the West is impatient with the political experiments of the Chinese. Why do not Chinese put their house in order? The answer is, we need time, because we have been accustomed to taking our time. Since the revolution in 1911 we have had only thirty-four years, during one-quarter of which we had to fight a defensive war. That is a reasonable answer. How many would accept it? Not only friends and foes outside of China would not accept the answer, but those who take it into serious consideration among the Chinese are few and far between.

The Nationalist Movement achieved a nation-wide success only in 1928. After the warlords had made a mess of the country under the cloak of political experimentation, China found herself in a helpless and dismal predicament. The Northern Expedition of the Nationalist Party, known in Chinese as the *Kuomintang*, eliminated practically all the warlords and brought about the political unification of the country. That was only ten years before the war. To be fair to the *Kuomintang* it must be said that during this brief period notable political achievements were made and the nation was started on the road to progress. Then the war came and political development of China was slowed down, though not completely arrested. But the *Kuomintang* has been holding up before the people the lofty ideals of the *San Min Chu I*, which means China's International Autonomy, political democracy, and economic security for the people.

These objectives are not easy to achieve. China emerges from the war with international autonomy practically assured to her, although some minor problems are still awaiting final solution. Political democracy has not developed beyond the initial stage. Economic security for the people is still a thing of the future. The *Kuomintang* idealism has not been realized. In the meanwhile the people have paid a heavy price during these years of political turmoil and international struggle. If the people are not sufficiently educated to participate in the government, and honestly they are not, are not the *Kuomintang* to be blamed, since it has assumed the political tutorage of the nation from the time it took over the reins of the government? This is the criticism of the students discontented with the *Kuomintang*. This argument carries weight. The Chinese Communists, the Chinese Social Democrats, the members of the Youth Party, as well as many not identified with any of these groups, make much of their dis-

content. The Democratic League which made its first appearance on China's political horizon only shortly before the Japanese surrender is only a symptom of this political impatience. They serve a useful purpose when they make articulate the dissatisfaction of many whose political thinking always remains vague. It is not right, however, to take them as representatives of any large sections of the populace. They are the students who take upon themselves the political burden of the people when the people are not sufficiently educated politically to do any thinking on political matters. They may be taken as the *vox populi* only because the people keep their traditional silence, not knowing what activities of the students are all about.

These few politically minded students are those trained to speak and trained to write. Their voice is heard across the oceans, whereas the silence of the many is naturally unheeded. Will the ideas of these noisy groups produce their face value? To say that their political idealism is better than that of the *Kuomintang* is only a matter of political preference. But it is erroneous to compare the achievements of the *Kuomintang* with the aspirations of its opponents.

It is true that until very recently the *Kuomintang* would tolerate no other political party. It is the intolerance of a revolution. When the *Kuomintang* succeeded in overthrowing by force the warlords of China in 1926-28, it took upon itself the political training of the people to prepare them for its own political platform as a part of their revolutionary program. To interfere with this program or any part of it would be a counter-revolution. The Chinese Communists have been attempting such an interference. They should expect no tolerance from the *Kuomintang*. But they have tried to do more than that. They are prepared to interfere with the *Kuomintang* program with armed force. As the *Kuomintang* Government is the recognized government, the Communist armed interference with its political program constitutes nothing less than an armed rebellion, and when it plans not only to keep its own army, but keep it in an integral part of the territory of China with a separate political organization, it becomes an armed secession movement. No government in the world would condone it or compromise with it.

But to avoid open civil war at a critical moment in the history of the nation, the *Kuomintang* is willing to make the compromise and is making it. The Political Consultative Conference of thirty-eight members, with all the parties represented, is a clear indication that the compromise is far gone; an indication of the Chinese genius for compromise when compromise is called for by common sense, though contrary to straight political reasoning.

What is the common sense in this case? During the later years of the war all thinking people in China

and abroad knew well that as soon as the war should come to an end the government would have a final showdown with the Chinese Communists. It was also known that at this showdown the government would have the upper hand, being superior in number and better equipped. But common sense would not permit the sacrifice of China's new international position, won after years of costly struggle, and this sacrifice would be imminent if there should be a protracted open conflict between the government and the Communists. The "friendly" gesture from the United States of America that China should end her internal strife, because a strong, united, democratic China is essential to the world peace, has been seized by all concerned as a "face-saving" opportunity for the long desired compromise.

Would this compromise be going too far? There are many good features in the May 5th Draft Constitution. One may find faults in it. But it suits the actual present-day condition in China as any draft constitution can. The Bill-of-Rights in it ought to meet the demands of the most liberal political thinker. When a coalition government is actuated this Bill-of-Rights can at once be enforced. But why modify the May 5th draft by adopting the bicameral legislature for the national government? It has been in the English and the American governments only as a historical accident and has been found antiquated, at least in England.

A coalition government, except in a national emergency, will lack stability. We hope that the coalition government will be created only to meet the present emergency and the parties will not expect it as a permanent feature of Chinese politics.

A "completely new democratic election machinery" would be a real boon if it could be devised to suit the present conditions in the country. But idealism here must be tempered with a good measure of realism to be practical.

It has been reported that the thirty-five-man Revision Commission embracing all parties to be appointed by the Political Consultative Conference will call for "broad economic and cultural policies." This is a matter of grave importance. The economic policy for the New China will determine the destiny of the nation for at least a whole century. There is the temptation to take the short cut to national wealth and power through a "broad" policy of free economy, but it would bring in its train all the social and cultural problems which no modern nation has been able to solve. It may be narrowly nationalistic and plunge China into an abyss that may affect the world peace for which we hope China will be developed. To compromise is a necessary evil, but there ought to be a limit to it. Let us hope that the present opportunity for all the parties to work together will be used for the best interests of the nation and not for the division of spoils in political power or just for the re-allocation of government positions.