
Peasant Nationalism and the CCP's Rise to Power in 1949: Revisiting the Debate

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Abstract:

This essay has revisited the view of Chalmers Johnson that peasant nationalism was the key to the CCP's rise to power in 1949. In doing so, reference has been made to other important factors as well in order to assess and compare their respective contributions to the party's success against that of peasant nationalism. This essay argues that nationalism, induced by the Japanese invasion, was one of the factors that brought peasants closer to the CCP, but was neither the only one nor the key. There were other important factors too that directly or indirectly contributed to the CCP's rise to power in 1949.

Keywords: CCP, KMT, Peasant Nationalism, Rise to Power, 1949

1. INTRODUCTION

Despite their all-out efforts, the communists in China could not gain popular support before the Japanese invasion in 1937 (Johnson, C. A. 1962: 1). During the Sino-Japanese war from 1937-1945, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) started gaining ground in China, and, at one point, positioned itself in the forefront of Chinese politics, overtaking the Kuomintang (KMT). After World War II, civil war broke out in China and the CCP won a decisive victory against the KMT. Following 28 years of ups and downs, it finally ascended to power under the leadership of Mao Zedong in October 1949. Contrarily, the KMT generalissimo Chiang Kai Shek, along with his 2 million nationalist followers, fled to the island of Taiwan (New York Times, 1975). How did the CCP, once considered the underdog, manage to ascend to power in 1949? What factors helped them to win the civil war against the KMT?

This essay will critically examine the merit of the argument that peasant nationalism brought the CCP to power in 1949. In doing so, it will initially try to examine the concept of nationalism in the Chinese context. Secondly, an overview of the history of the CCP will be presented by dividing it into three distinct periods – a) the initial years from 1921 to 1936, b) the years of resistance against the Japanese invasion from 1937 to 1945, and c) the years of civil war from 1946 to 1949. Thirdly, the main section of the essay will critically analyze the contribution of peasant nationalism towards the CCP's rise to power in 1949. This section will frequently refer to other important factors as well in order to assess and compare their respective contributions to the party's success against that of peasant nationalism. Finally, the main arguments will be summarized in order to reach a conclusion.

2. NATIONALISM IN THE CHINESE CONTEXT:

The concept of Chinese nationalism has been a relatively new phenomenon and had emerged during the period of shame and humiliation in the 19th century under colonial occupation (Zhao, S. 2000: 3-4). It was further 'sparked off' in 1895 when China was defeated by Japan (Yahuda, M. 2000: 26). According to Joseph R. Levenson, China had moved 'from culturalism to nationalism' as part of its transition to modernity (Levenson, J. R. 1971). The May 4th movement of 1919, largely participated by students and intellectuals, had been viewed by many as the beginning of a modern nationalist movement for China (Snow, E. 1968, c1938: 21). Finally, Japan's invasion in the 1930s played a major role in reinvigorating 'China's new nationalism' (Fairbank, J. K. and Goldman, M. 2006, c1992: 312).

In China, nationalism has been literally expressed as 'minzu zhuyi' which generally refers to various ethnic nationalities. The term minzu (nation) was first introduced in the Chinese 'political lexicon' in 1899 and the concept of minzu zhuyi (nationalism) was first used in 1901 (Yahuda, M. 2000: 27). Sun Yat-sen first used the concept in 1904 and referred, in fact, to the idea of Han nationalism (ibid., p. 27). However, he revised his position after the 1911 revolution and stressed on creating a 'national people' (Zhao, S. 2000: 25). In a similar fashion,

Mao Zedong triumphantly announced on 1 October 1949 – ‘The Chinese people have stood up’ (Yahuda, M. 2000: 29). Here, Mao was referring to a unified Chinese nationalism – the official position of the CCP until today.

3. OVERVIEW OF THE CCP’S HISTORY FROM 1921 TO 1949:

3.1. The Initial Years from 1921 to 1936:

In 1921, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) was founded in Shanghai (Snow, E. 1968, c1938: 21). Initially, the CCP’s focus was to organize the factory workers in urban China. In parallel, the party also established a strategic relationship with the KMT (Fairbank, J. K. and Goldman, M. 2006, c1992: 281-282). In the early 1920s, Sun Yat-sen agreed to accept soviet aid and allow the communists to hold joint membership in the KMT (Snow, E. 1968, c1938: 22). In 1924, both the parties formally launched the ‘First United Front’ to fight imperialism (Tomba, L. 2010: 156). After the death of Sun Yat-sen in 1925, the alliance grew weak and in 1927, when the KMT launched an ‘anti-communist coup’, it fell apart (Snow, E. 1968, c1938: 22). The CCP hitherto was still at ‘its infancy’ having a little more than 300 members in 1922 and around 1500 members in 1925 (Fairbank, J. K. and Goldman, M. 2006, c1992: 282). After being purged by the KMT in 1927, Mao adopted a completely different mass-line strategy targeted towards rural China and in 1928, the first ‘Red Army’ was formed (Snow, E. 1968, c1938: 23). The following years saw the CCP establish a few ‘small enclaves’ in rural China where the communists applied various ‘ideological, economic, and military’ experimentations (Johnson, C. A. 1962: 1). This rural strategy eventually resulted in the creation of the first ‘Chinese Soviet Republic’ in 1931 in the mountainous areas of Hunan and Jianxi provinces (Tomba, L. 2010: 157). The KMT was not willing to silently witness the expansion of the CCP, and, therefore, tried to militarily suppress further growth of the party. Due to the KMT onslaught, the CCP had to launch, in 1934, a mass retreat campaign known as the ‘Long March’. The party lost most of its cadres, resources, and territories during this catastrophic event (Esherick, J. W. 1995: 59). But it helped Mao Zedong to win over his ideological rivals and emerge as the supreme leader of the party by 1935 (Tomba, L. 2010: 157).

3.2. The Years of Resistance against the Japanese Invasion from 1937 to 1945:

Japan invaded China massively in July, 1937 (Snow, E. 1968, c1938: 24). The 2nd United Front was formed between the KMT and the CCP, and, as part of the agreement, the Red Army was absorbed in the Eighth Route and New Fourth armies under Chinag Kai Shek’s command (ibid., p. 24). In 1938, the Japanese forces took control of north China forcing the KMT government to retreat to the west (ibid., p. 25). At the time, the CCP was busy organizing the peasants in north China behind the Japanese lines resulting in rapid expansion of communist cadres and military forces (Ven, H. J. 2003: 241). In fact, the 2nd United Front agreement was not very effective due to ‘mutual distrust’ (Franke, W, 1970: 171). As a result, infighting between the two parties erupted from as early as 1939. Both the KMT and the CCP forces were fighting two

wars simultaneously – a) against the Japanese invaders and b) against each other (Fairbank, J. K. and Goldman, M. 2006, c1992: 316). The CCP, in the territories under its control, undertook various experimentations such as land reforms, mass mobilization, guerilla warfare, and so forth (Tomba, L. 2010: 157). The results were overwhelming. The communists gained major strength during the period of Japanese invasion. By 1943, the CCP achieved the marks of 800,000 party members, 500,000 armed forces, and a liberated area with over a 100 million population (Snow, E. 1968, c1938: 25). The numbers continued to grow, and, by 1945, reached to 1,200,000 party members and 910,000 armed forces (Fairbank, J. K. and Goldman, M. 2006, c1992: 316).

3.3. The Years of Civil War from 1946 to 1949:

Upon Japan's surrender in 1945, the KMT and the CCP were in discussion to form a coalition government, while concurrently preparing to engage in a civil war (Fairbank, J. K. and Goldman, M. 2006, c1992: 328). Mao Zedong even flew to Chongqing to meet Chiang Kai Shek (Snow, E. 1968, c1938: 25) and agreed upon the terms of coalition (Bianco, L. 1971: 171). But fighting erupted between the fierce competitors to take control of the key territories. The communist forces tried to compel the nearby Japanese garrisons to surrender to them (Franke, W. 1970: 183). Around 50,000 US troops were deployed to protect Beijing and Tianjin, and nationalist troops were airlifted by US planes to the cities of Manchuria and north China (Fairbank, J. K. and Goldman, M. 2006, c1992: 329). Contrarily, the USSR held on to Manchuria until May 1946 waiting for the communists to take control (ibid., p. 329). The armaments left behind by the Japanese forces in Manchuria came to the hands of the communists and helped them fight the subsequent civil war (Franke, W. 1970: 187).

Up to early 1947, the KMT forces were on a massive offensive capturing many of the territories from the communists and even took control of Yan'an, the iconic headquarters of the communists (Bianco, L. 1971: 175). In response, the CCP forces counterattacked during mid 1947 to regain control over the lost territories (Fairbank, J. K. and Goldman, M. 2006, c1992: 336). Amidst the communist onslaught, the KMT forces in the cities were 'besieged and isolated' and many of them were compelled to either surrender or defect to the communists (ibid., p. 336). By 1948, the CCP forces drove out the KMT forces from the northeast (Lieberthal, K. 2004, c1995: 53). Subsequently, northern China was also taken over by the communists in early 1949 (ibid., p. 53). The same year witnessed Chiang Kai Shek's flight to Taiwan along with his followers. Ironically, the victorious Mao entered Beijing in March 1949 with his troops riding on American-made trucks and tanks that were captured from the nationalists (Fairbank, J. K. and Goldman, M. 2006, c1992: 336).

4. PEASANT NATIONALISM INFLUENCING THE CCP'S RISE TO POWER IN 1949: A CRITIQUE:

According to Chalmers A. Johnson, it was the spirit of nationalism that brought the peasants closer to the CCP during 1937 – 1945 and even further during the civil war from 1946 – 1949

(Johnson, C. A. 1962: 2). However, there have been serious criticism and competing viewpoints in this regard (Gillian, D. G. 1964; Selden, M. 1971; Bianco, L. 1971; Esherick, J. W. 1995; Pepper, S. 2004; Goodman, D. S. G. 2011). Johnson's view suffers from the problems of 'overgeneralization' and 'monocausality' (Goodman, D. S. G. 2011: 4; Pepper, S. 2004: 119). Johnson too admitted, in his conclusion, that he underplayed some of the 'long-range factors that contributed to the mobilization of the Chinese people' (Johnson, C. A. 1962: 185). Looking at peasant nationalism in isolation, separating it from the CCP's agrarian reform policies, would be insufficient to appreciate why the CCP was more successful than the KMT in building an alliance with the rural peasantry (Selden, M. 1995: 19; Gillin, D. G. 1964: 288). This section will, therefore, simultaneously evaluate the roles of a few other important factors, admittedly underplayed by Johnson, in order to overcome the said problems.

The Japanese invasion and the resulting retreat by the KMT government from northern China created a political and administrative vacuum in the rural areas behind the Japanese lines (Johnson, C. A. 1962: 2). Under the circumstances, the CCP came forward to fill this vacuum and formed 'ad-hoc governments' to govern those territories (*ibid.*, p. 3). This gave them the opportunity to build a 'trusted alliance' with the rural peasantry that could hopefully be sustained, at least, up to the CCP's rise to power in 1949. Nationalism perhaps inspired the peasants to initially flock to the communists in the situation of a vacuum. But how far it had played a role in building 'trust' remains a big question mark. The experience of sharing responsibilities in securing the village, feeding the population, providing other basic services to the villagers probably played a much larger role in strengthening the relationship (Bianco, L. 1971: 190). In fact, the Chinese peasantry chose to support the CCP after comparing the benevolence of the communists with that of the KMT.

Some scholars argue that the socio-economic policies of the CCP to address the 'distress of the Chinese peasantry' played a major role in building a trusted relationship between the two (Johnson, C. A. 1962: viii). Those policies of the party were the key contributors to the CCP's success in gaining popular support from the peasants (Gillian, D. G. 1964: 281; Selden, M. 1971: 120; Selden, M. 1995: 20-21; Esherick, J. W. 1995: 62). Lucien Bianco suggested that there were other factors apart from peasant nationalism that helped the CCP to mobilize the peasantry (Bianco, L. 1971: 187-190). The CCP reform programs related to land taxes, land rent, interest rates, and a participatory governance system were attractive enough for the peasants of China to defend the same in their own interest (White, T. and Jacoby, A. 1946: 201-202). Chinese peasants were desperate to ensure the continuation of the 'social and political advances' that they had achieved with the party during the war of resistance against the Japanese and, therefore, continued to stand by the communists until the final victory in 1949 (Bianco, L. 1971: 187; Esherick, J. W. 1995: 68). The Red Army, which became the People's Liberation Army (PLA) in July 1946, gained huge popular support mainly due to their good behavior and the socio-economic policies pursued by the communists (Gillin, D. G. 1964: 281). In Manchuria, where the land redistribution program was, for the first time, implemented in a

thorough manner, the PLA was able to recruit as many as 1.6 million members between June, 1946 and June, 1947 (Bianco, L. 1971: 189). This reflects on the overarching impact of the socio-economic programs in keeping the Chinese peasantry attached to the CCP even during the period of civil war from 1946 to 1949.

Johnson also argued that communist propaganda aroused the nationalist spirit among the Chinese peasantry in the wake of Japanese invasion in 1937 (Johnson, C. A. 1962: 4). Johnson himself suggested that the communists had started their anti-Japanese nationalist propaganda since Japan's invasion of Manchuria in 1931 with very little success to their credit (*ibid.*, p. 4). But why had the same tactic become so effective in 1937? According to Johnson, the Japanese invasion in 1937 was massive compared to the one in 1931, and, moreover, the communists underplayed their agenda of class struggle and land redistribution in their 1937 propaganda (*ibid.*, p. 4). Johnson was probably right, but there were more to it. History suggests that the KMT also ran similar forms of propaganda upholding 'national salvation' in 1937 but kept quiet in 1931. If we accept the fact that the concerted propaganda, run simultaneously by both the CCP and the KMT, created a huge impact in China, then why would the peasants, aroused by nationalism, choose the communists as their ally? If it were only nationalism that played the key role, the nationalist government should have been a more deserving candidate for popular support (Selden, M. 1995: 19). At the time of the Japanese invasion in 1937, the KMT was in power controlling the largest expanse of the country and was also internationally recognized as the legitimate government of China. Contrarily, the communists were hitherto an insignificant force 'barely surviving' in parts of rural China. According to Mark Selden, the KMT was 'well positioned' to take advantage of the war-induced nationalism (*ibid.*, p. 19). It too tried to mobilize rural resistance but failed measurably.

In fact, the failure of the KMT was another major contributor to 'the Communist triumph' (Bianco, L. 1971: 180 & 199). The superior military might of the KMT lost to an inferior force of the CCP due to incompetent leadership, endemic corruption, factionalism, weak morale etc. (*ibid.*, pp. 180-181). Moreover, Chiang Kai Shek's war strategy of primarily protecting the cities at the expense of the critical mass and overextending beyond the regime's capacity made the situation worse. On the other hand, the Red Army or the PLA was free from all the above weaknesses (*ibid.*, p. 184). It had honest and competent generals at the top to command and strategize, and spirited and committed fighters to fight as one team in the battlefield (*ibid.*, p. 184). This probably made the big difference in the overall situation. The KMT also failed to manage the economy well. Since the real incomes of government officials and soldiers went down due to hyperinflation, most of them got involved in corrupt practices (*ibid.*, p. 195). This had led to further worsening of the governance situation undermining the legitimacy of the KMT regime. The failure to come to terms with the communists to bring an end to the war also agitated and alienated the intellectuals and students many of whom were once nationalist sympathizers. As a result, the party's support bases were shrinking gradually. However, it is

very difficult to ignore the large account of failures of the KMT that had contributed, in a big way, to the CCP's success story.

Johnson further argued that the Japanese mop-up operations and frequent reprisals also pushed the Chinese peasants towards the communists after 1937. According to him, peasants willing to join the resistance against the Japanese invaders chose the CCP due to its reputation as 'the most competent organizer of resistance' (Johnson, C. A. 1962: 5). Here also came the consideration of competence, not nationalism. The spirit of nationalism might have played a major role for the peasants in making their decision to join the war of resistance. But at the stage of deciding on whether to join the CCP or the KMT, the peasants must have acted rationally. They rightly chose the CCP on the basis of its competence as had been suggested by Johnson himself. There were definitely some valid reasons that prompted the notion that the communists were the most competent ones. Mao Zedong was prudent enough to assess the uniqueness of the class situation in China. It was not the factory owners in the urban areas, but the 'feudal landowners' in rural China who were the reason for the suffering of the masses (Tomba, L, 2010: 156). Therefore, he persistently pursued the strategy of focusing on the impoverished peasantry for mass mobilization. He also took the timely decisions of temporarily underplaying the agenda of land redistribution and emphasizing on national salvation during the period of the Japanese invasion from 1937-1945. Without a leader like Mao, the course of the Chinese revolution would have most likely been different (Esherick, J. W. 1995: 54).

Moreover, the entire leadership of the CCP under Mao Zedong lived on the ground throughout the period of the communist revolution. This helped them not only to better understand the needs of the common people but also to experiment with various models of reforms in order to address those needs. Important lessons were learnt from these experimentations on a trial and error basis. Positive lessons were reapplied, while negative ones were divested. This on-the-ground presence also allowed the Chinese people to watch the day-to-day affairs of the communist leadership from a closer distance and thereby measure the honesty, sincerity, and capability of the latter. The pro-people attitude of the communists from top to bottom also drew the attention of the common people. Lucien Bianco may be quoted here, 'to millions of peasants, soldiers, and civilians alike, the Red Army brought the immediate promise of a new existence, of liberation from all the evils of the old society' (Bianco, L. 1971: 190). The resultant overall positive impression about the communists together with other relevant factors inspired the Chinese peasantry to choose a side and ultimately unite under the banner of the CCP. The spirit of nationalism seemed to be one of the factors here that was, of course, valid up to Japan's surrender in 1945.

Nationalism might have played a role in forging an alliance between the CCP and the Chinese peasantry during the period of the Japanese invasion from 1937 to 1945, but how far it had played the role to sustain and prolong the alliance through the period of civil war from 1946 to 1949 remains questionable. The KMT, being a native regime, was not viewed by the Chinese masses as an invader (Esherick, J. W. 1995: 68). Immediately after Japan's surrender in 1945,

the 'heightened nationalism' in China was helping the KMT as well (Bianco, L. 1971: 167). This essay does not believe that nationalism, though important, was the key driver of the CCP – peasantry alliance during the period of civil war. Instead, the CCP succeeded in keeping the alliance with the peasantry alive by successfully projecting the KMT as a bunch of 'domestic enemies' (ibid., p. 167). Perhaps, the tainted credentials of the KMT officials on board provided the necessary justification for it.

Finally, it is noteworthy to mention that the CCP was unable to gain support from the peasants outside the territories under its control or the immediate neighborhoods (Bianco, L. 1975: 328). This indicates that the main factor(s) / issue(s) for which peasants supported the party had local level implications only. If it were an issue like nationalism, then the impact of it could have transcended beyond localities. The appeal of nationalism is presumably difficult to contain within a certain locality. This is consistent with the view of the scholars that the Chinese peasants were attracted to the CCP based on their real life experience with the party policies and programs, its leadership and cadres, and the Red Army / PLA (Gillin, D. G. 1964: 281). In this connection, it may also be noted that the people in Japanese occupied areas were initially indifferent to either of the parties and almost everywhere enthusiastically welcomed the KMT forces as 'liberators' upon Japan's surrender in 1945. Unfortunately, the enthusiasts were 'cooled off' after being mistreated by their so-called 'liberators' (Franke, W. 1970: 185). In fact, the real life experience helped the Chinese masses to choose a side, since both parties were claiming to represent the spirit of nationalism.

5. CONCLUSION:

From the above analyses, it is evident that many factors, including peasant nationalism, contributed to the CCP's rise to power in 1949. Chalmers A. Johnson argued that the CCP, by following an almost similar type of strategy, failed to garner popular support up to 1936 but, in contrast, gained overwhelming response during the period of the Japanese invasion from 1937 to 1945 (Johnson, C. A. 1962: 2). According to him, the Japanese invasion aroused the spirit of nationalism among the peasantry which was key to the success of the CCP. This essay holds the view that nationalism, induced by the Japanese invasion, was one of the factors that brought peasants closer to the CCP, but was neither the only one nor the key. There were other important factors too that directly or indirectly contributed to the CCP's rise to power in 1949. In fact, both the CCP and the KMT were riding on the surge of nationalism in China. The Chinese peasantry chose a side on the basis of their real life experience involving many other factors.

This essay recognizes the significance of at least three important factors other than peasant nationalism. Firstly, the peasant-friendly socio-economic policies and programs had played a major role in binding the peasants with the CCP in a long term relationship. Effects of this factor transcended beyond the periods of pre and post Japanese invasion from 1937 to 1945, and continued to serve up to the final victory in 1949. Secondly, none can ignore the important

role of the KMT's failure in making the communists succeed. The utter failure of the KMT helped the communists to emerge in the eyes of the people as the best alternative to lead the country. Thirdly, the role of Mao Zedong and his committed cadres in appropriately assessing the situation, strategizing accordingly, and finally acting on the ground as a team can be cited as one of the pillars of success for the CCP.

This essay also argues that the appeal of nationalism was quite strong in China up to Japan's surrender in 1945 but lost its vigor during the period of civil war. Post 1945, other socio-political factors came to the 'fore' pushing nationalism to the backseat, and led the CCP to power in 1949.

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