DOCUMENT 1

Life in China Before the Communist Revolution (1949)

Quotation #1: A conversation with a poor peasant (1921)

When I asked him how things were with him, he just shook his head. “In a very bad way. Even my sixth [child] can do a little work, but still we haven’t enough to eat . . . and then there is no security . . . all sorts of people want money, there is no fixed rule . . . and the harvests are bad. You grow things, and when you take them to sell you always have to pay several taxes and lose money, while if you don’t try to sell, the things might go bad . . .”

Quotation #2: Description of life in a section of Shanghai where wealthy Chinese landowners, officials, and business owners lived (1920)

Both sides of the road are filled with handsome cars, quietly waiting for their masters’ bidding after playing tennis or when leaving supper clubs. . . . The electric lights come on. . . . Evening meals begin. In the kitchens, the sounds of basins, pots, bowls, bells, dining rooms with the sound of music, wine glasses being clinked.

Quotation #3: An excerpt from the memoir of the son of a wealthy government official

I was born in 1940. Until I was five, I lived in Father’s giant mansion in Nanjing . . . . Behind the mansion were two separate buildings that housed an enormous kitchen and the living quarters for more than a dozen servants. . . . It was customary in those days for wealthy Chinese children to be given to the care of wet nurses. . . . The living quarters I shared with my nanny were located in one wing of the mansion. We had two rooms with our own bedroom, plus the balcony where I spent so much time. “Nai-ma” [milk mother] was not my nanny’s actual name—it was a literal title for what she did. I never knew her real name. . . . Many years later, I learned that when she took on the job of being my milk mother a month after my birth, she had just given birth to her own child. In order to take the job to earn an income for her family, she left the baby behind in the village. It had to be heart wrenching for her.

Quotation #4: Description of peasant life in China (1922)

The inside of all thatched-roof farm homes were the same: black rafters, gray walls, a dirt floor, a kitchen table, a bench, farm implements, and amulets from the local temple. There was generally nothing on the walls, rather more well-off families might have several advertisements . . . stuck on the wall. The floors were covered with chicken [feces], and people walked through it with their bare feet. Amid such conditions, the popular saying in the area: “Nothing to eat, nothing to wear—those things still go to the little king [the name farmers in the area gave to landlords].”
Quotation #5: Description of an attempt to form peasant unions (1921–1923)

I found myself back at the village where I had visited the day before. This time, I encountered a peasant of forty, who asked me, “Sir, are you here to collect land rent?”

“No, no, I am here to help you collect your due. Someone owes you money, and you’ve forgotten it. I’m here to remind you.”

“What!” the man exclaimed. “I’ll be lucky not to owe others money. Who’d owe anything to me?”

“Don’t you know?” I told him. “The landlords owe you a lot. Year in and year out, they sit at home and do nothing, and you work in the fields until you drop dead. In the end they are the ones who get the yields as rent. The piece of land worth at most one hundred dollars has been tilled by you for a hundred, a thousand years—and how much grain have you submitted to the landlords? We think it’s really unfair. That’s why I’m here to talk with you, to find out a way to get even with the landlords.”

The man smiled and said, “That’ll be great indeed! But we will be locked up and beaten up if we only owe them a pint or a tenth of a pint. Such is fate—those who collect rent always collect rent, and those who till the fields always till the fields. Good day, sir. I’ve got to go to town.”

Quotation #6: Description of the typical diet of a peasant, taken from a study of a Chinese village published in 1945

Among the poor, sweet potatoes are eaten at every meal every day throughout the year. From harvest time until the spring of the following year, they eat fresh sweet potatoes; when these are gone, they eat the stored dry slices. . . . Supplementing the potatoes are, first, a kind of gruel made of barley flour and peanut powder; second, a kind of hash made of chopped turnips and soybean juice; and third, one or two kinds of pickles. Occasionally, some kind of bread is served.

Quotation #7: The daughter of a wealthy businessman describes her home in Shanghai

Father’s Shanghai house was on Avenue Joffre . . . Father led us into a charming garden, with a small lane lined by cropped camellia bushes, a magnolia tree, wonderfully fragrant blooms, and a wishing well. . . . “Here we are!” Father said, looking around proudly as we gawked in open-mouthed wonder at the burgundy velvet couches, matching velvet curtains, and thin woolen carpet partially covering a
teak parquet floor. The wallpaper had strips of raised velvet napping that matched the curtains. . .

Niang entered, holding Fourth Brother’s hand. . . . Like the room, our stepmother was also stylish and flawless, with large, piercing eyes, long shapely nails painted bright red, and enormous flashing diamonds at her throat, wrist, and ears. . . . “We have enrolled you at very expensive private missionary schools. School starts next Monday. Now go with the maids to your rooms and wash yourselves. In half an hour, Cook will ring the dinner bell.”

GLOSSARY

amulets: objects or charms believed to have magical powers to protect the person who wears them

implements: tools

napping: decoration created by a raised surface of yarn or fabric

supplementing: in addition to

teak parquet: a floor made from teak wood, considered very elegant and expensive

4 Ibid., 67.
The Chinese Communist Party wanted to know more about how rural society was structured, so that it could plan its land reform policy. This chart represents the results of a survey conducted between 1920 and 1930.

Note: landlords are defined as those who own land that is farmed by peasants. Typically, landlords collected food as payment for the use of this land. Wealthy landlords might have collected more than 30 tons of rice per year, while minor landlords might have collected less than 10 tons of rice per year.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>GROUP</th>
<th>PERCENT OF COUNTY POPULATION</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Wealthy landlords</td>
<td>0.045%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle-class landlords</td>
<td>0.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minor landlords</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rich peasants (defined as those who have some surplus food)</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle peasants (defined as those who have just enough food for their families)</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor peasants (defined as those who do not have sufficient food to feed their families and typically have taken out loans)</td>
<td>70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manual workers and craftsman (i.e., tailors, porters)</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loafers (defined as those who have no land and no work)</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
GLOSSARY

rural: the country; not the people or cultures near a city
sufficient: an amount that is just enough for survival; not too much or too little
surplus: an amount that is more than needed for survival

1 Schoppa, Twentieth Century China: A History in Documents (Routledge, 2002), 95.
Policies Supported by the Chinese Communist Party

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) was founded in 1921. One of the CCP’s guiding principles was that the peasants and working class, who made up the vast majority of the Chinese population, were being exploited by landowners, government officials, military officers, and other members of the “upper class.” The CCP believed that if resources were more equally distributed, China would be more prosperous. Two important policies the party introduced concerned land reform and marriage. Both of these policies fundamentally changed Chinese society by giving more power to traditionally powerless groups: women, peasants, and the working class.

Excerpt of Land Reform Law Proposed by the Communist Party (1932)

Laws that pertain to what land should be confiscated:

1. Land (including land rented to tenants), houses, and all other forms of property, including household items, that belong to members of the gentry and landlords are to be confiscated.

2. Land, houses, and all other forms of property, including household items that belong to the family shrines, Buddhist or Daoist temples, [or] clan or social organizations are to be confiscated.

3. Land owned by rich peasants should be confiscated.

Laws that pertain to who should receive land:

1. The amount of land to be distributed is the same for all tenant farmers and poor peasants. . . .

2. The relatives of a farm laborer shall receive land. . . .

3. Independent artisans, . . . physicians, and teachers are to receive land if they have been unemployed for six months or longer.

4. Shop owners and their relatives shall not receive any land.

5. Rich peasants will receive poor land. . . .

6. . . . Members of the gentry, landlords, and members of counter-revolutionary organizations will not be entitled to land distribution. . . .

14. A woman can dispose of her land the way she wishes when she is married.
The Marriage Law of 1950\(^2\)

Article I: The **feudal** marriage system, which is based on **arbitrary** and **compulsory** arrangement, and the superiority of man over woman, and ignores the children’s interests, shall be abolished.

The New Democratic marriage system, which is based on the free choice of partners, on **monogamy**, on equal rights for both sexes, and on the protection of the lawful interests of women and children, shall be put into effect.

**GLOSSARY**

- **arbitrary**: random or illogical
- **artisans**: craftsman, such as tailors or shoe makers
- **compulsory**: required, often by law
- **dispose**: to get rid of
- **exploited**: to have been used or treated unfairly for the benefit of another person
- **feudal**: a system where power and wealth are controlled by a few “elite” people, who then have control of the lives of the poor majority
- **gentry**: the elite or upper class
- **monogamy**: the practice of marrying only one person
- **shrines**: sacred places for the worship of a god or an ancestor
- **tenant farmers**: farmers who rent land and pay the landowner with a portion of their crops

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2 Ibid., 96–98.