

CHAPTER VI

"STATES' RIGHTS" IN CHINA

To most Americans and, it must be added, to a surprisingly large proportion of the foreigners resident in China, the politics of that country appear as a vicious and incomprehensible muddle. Vicious they often are; incomprehensible they need not be. That confusion arises is partially due to our shallow custom of identifying contemporary movements with the men who seem to exemplify them. Ordinarily, this is easier than the more logical course of studying the forces underlying great popular eruptions, letting the so-called "leaders" fall into their places afterwards. When such unfamiliar appellations as Wu Pei-fu, Chang Tso-lin, Sun Chuan-fang and Feng Yu-hsiang are to be memorized, the personality method becomes a boomerang for those who would learn speedily.

We can see the fallacy of undue personification in our own history. Nobody contends today that Jefferson Davis was more than a by-product of the Civil War, and even in the case of George Washington, where idealization has been concentrated for generations, we know that the man was made by the upheaval, not the other way around. In China, where the individual counts for much less than in the Occident, we should be equally realistic. In present-day China, moreover, it is not merely that the names of outstanding personalities are hard to remember. The causes of unrest are also difficult to analyze in a way flattering to white pride of race.

These factors combine with the scarcity of impartial news, the remoteness of the country, and other causes to make it easy to disregard what is happening across the Pacific. Apathy, however, is patently inconsistent with our increasing political, financial, and spiritual implications in China, a nation whose invaluable contributions to civilization richly merit American appreciation even without the more prosaic arguments for better understanding.

In considering the problems of China in terms of movements rather than men, it is of prime importance to visualize the continental nature of the country. Considerably larger in area than the United States and all its possessions, China has only about six thousand miles of railroads, approximately the same mileage as the Baltimore and Ohio system alone. The difficulties of communication must be understood, for they are basic obstacles to every phase of national regeneration. It is well to remember, for instance, that even in normal times it takes as long to travel overland from Peking to Canton as to go from New York to Moscow.

Again, the Chinese, even disregarding outlying districts of the unwieldy republic, are not a homogeneous race. Without considering the many ethnical elements brought together by distant wars of conquest and migrations, we can readily see geographical causes for heterogeneity. Superimpose the map of China to scale upon that of North America and it will not merely exceed the breadth of the United States at its widest part, but will extend from the latitude of southern Alaska to that of Guatemala. Within this vast territory dwell some four hundred million people,¹ about one-quarter of mankind as a whole, who are divided into at least five distinct physical groups. These groups, differing from one another

¹The Chinese Post Office estimate for 1923, generally regarded as somewhat high, gives a total population of 436,094,953.

as much as the Nordic, Alpine, and Mediterranean races in Europe, are symbolized by the five-bar flag of the Chinese Republic. In that flag the red stripe represents the Chinese proper, the yellow the Manchus, the blue the Mongols, the white the Tibetans, and the black the fifteen to twenty million Mohammedan members of the huge Chinese family.

Stretching from the fifty-third degree of north latitude, where Manchuria and Mongolia indent Siberia at widely separate points, to the eighteenth degree, where the great island of Hainan lies on a level with Bombay, it is natural that there should be physical differences between the Chinese of the north and the south. The average Cantonese is between three and four inches shorter and far slighter than his compatriot from Peking, a spread in stature which, since the majority of Chinese in this country are from Kwangtung Province, has given rise to the false conception that the nation is undersized by our standards. Mental differences are as pronounced, the southern Chinese being as a rule more aggressive, nervous, fiery, and mentally alert than those of the north. Whatever government may be in power in Peking, it is a commonplace that most of the administrators there are likely to be from south of the Yangtze, the great river which divides China proper into two nearly equal segments. As is well known, moreover, the spoken language differs so that highly educated Chinese from Canton and from Peking will often find it easiest to converse with one another in English. Food, clothing, architecture, and many other details of living all differ from north to south in China as much as the appearance of the countryside, ever verdant in the semi-tropical south, but brown, desolate, and arid during the northern winter months.

Yet, under these superficial differences, all the essential conditions of national unity are present, as

those who would split China into spheres of foreign influence have experienced to their cost. The spoken language, where the Mandarin is not used, may vary so much as to make the people of different provinces unintelligible to one another; but the written language is everywhere identical. Railroads traverse only a fraction of the country, and run precariously at that; but the government postal system, the telegraph, and now even the wireless as well, bind the country together intellectually, if not physically. In ethical ideas, cultural background, and social arrangements there is pronounced uniformity throughout the republic, the cleavage being between indigenous and foreign systems rather than geographical.

Historically, no other existing nation can claim anything like the political continuity that China shows, with her recorded story of four thousand years of national existence. When Cæsar was invading Britain, the boundaries of China had been laid down much as they exist today. Before that, when ancient Greece was establishing a pocket of civilization on the fringe of barbarian Europe, the Chinese had spread a culture, quite as interesting and in many ways fully as worthy of modern respect as that of Greece, over an area greater and a people far more numerous than those of pre-Christian Europe. It is a small wonder that the Chinese for centuries regarded the white race as crude and uncivilized. Nor is it surprising that their tradition of greatness in the past unifies the teeming millions from Manchuria to Kwangsi, from Szechwan to Chekiang, in a way which cuts deeper than surface disorders and transient civil warfare. The proof of this, in terms which the west can understand, was given when anti-imperialist risings flamed out all over China following the shooting of demonstrators by British police in Shanghai on May 30, 1925.

No reasonable observer claims that Russian influence caused these widespread protests, however much Soviet propagandists may have abetted them. They were essentially the reflection of an outraged national unity, no less deep than our own unity because moulded along less assertive and more mellow lines.

Fundamentally, we must agree, China possesses all the conditions requisite for development as a national entity in the modern sense of the phrase; but this development must follow lines natural to the conditions and traditions of the country rather than systems imposed by or blindly copied from Occidental states. Japan could imitate where China cannot, partly because of the enormous geographical differences between the two countries, partly because the Chinese character has always resisted imitation, even where materially profitable, as much as the Japanese has leaned toward it. Worth remembering is the fact that before Japan began to westernize herself, Chinese literature, philosophy, and social codes were models for the island empire. One reason why the Japanese worry so much about "Bolshevism," while most Chinese regard communist propaganda almost with indifference, is the relative immunity of the latter country to external influence, as opposed to the marked susceptibility of Japan. Certainly, it is a tribute to China's inherent strength that she remains the only non-white nation which has not succumbed, whether by conquest or by imitation, to the spirit of aggrandizement which has brought all the rest of the world to the adoption of Occidental methods.

Politically, China has for centuries been the loosest imaginable form of federal union, with each of the provinces preserving complete autonomy over its domestic affairs, and such outlying districts as Tibet, Turkestan, and Mongolia quasi-independent in character. The alien Manchu dynasty, which ruled in Peking from 1644

to the abdication of the last Emperor in 1912, was during its early period of power too wise to stir hostility by gratuitous interference in local affairs. The provinces, which are delimited much as they stand today in the oldest maps of China which have any pretense of accuracy, saw an increase rather than a limitation of their "States' Rights" in the two centuries from 1650 to 1850. The Imperial representatives appointed by Peking collected such relatively small taxes as the central government demanded, of course adding a percentage for personal "squeeze," which is as much an accepted custom in China as the taking of ground rents or mineral royalties is in Anglo-Saxon countries. This small financial levy, coupled with an occasional foray by Manchu troops, if necessary to preserve civil peace, was about the extent of federal authority until foreign penetration combined with a succession of feeble rulers to force the cumulative changes which underlie the present chaos in China.

It frequently has been pointed out that it was not territorial aggression, but insistence on the right to engage in commerce which was the objective of the Chinese policy of the foreign powers during the early years of the nineteenth century. Even so the destructive effect on the Chinese form of government was pronounced. The preliminary aim of the powers was to force the recognition and acceptance of their envoys by Peking, long resisted by the Manchu court not entirely, it is legitimate to surmise, out of "cussedness," but from the same close reasoning based on observation which caused Herbert Spencer, years later, to advise the Japanese to "keep other races at arm's length as much as possible."¹ Distrust was not misplaced. No sooner were foreign diplomats securely established in Peking than they began to demand that the central government insure pro-

¹See pp. 30-32.

tection to their uninvited nationals in every part of China. The pressure had begun to break down that local self-government based on family and guild organization which was so natural and basic to the Chinese system.

Some of the worst injuries the white race has brought to China have been implicit rather than overt. Tang Shao-yi, the first Prime Minister of the Chinese Republic, told me that when he was a boy in Kwangtung he never saw a policeman, and that the absence of the disciplinary side of government was taken for granted by people accustomed to regulate their actions by ethical standards rather than by laws. Nothing, of course, is easier than to picture the past as idyllic, regardless of the fact that such bloody interludes as the Taiping Rebellion can be found in every "golden age" of Chinese history. But evidence is irrefutable of the ability of the Chinese to order their lives industriously and happily with a minimum of the evil of government. The student need only refer to the maxims of Confucius to realize the emphasis which his countrymen lay on the avoidance rather than the forceful suppression of controversy. The difference between Confucianism and Christianity in this respect is that the former has written its ethics much more deeply in the daily life of its followers.

A good illustration of what is meant by an implicit injury to China is found in the effect of the Boxer indemnity in plunging the country into political chaos. There is no question that the Boxer rebellion was an insane and terrible outbreak, though no impartial historian can deny that there was great provocation for the rising in the progressive encroachments of foreign powers on Chinese sovereignty. With polemics on this issue, however, we are not here concerned. The insufficiently realized point is that the indemnity of over \$300,000,000 imposed on China led by direct and per-

ceptible stages to the revolution of 1911 and the establishment of a nominal Republic for which the country was in no way fitted or prepared. To raise the first installments of this huge indemnity, a central government which had shown itself helpless to check shameless foreign aggression was forced to increase tax levies and otherwise interfere in local affairs at the very moment when the inherent Chinese dislike for the Manchus was beginning to harden.

Whether or not the reform movement to which the Manchu dynasty gave belated support might have modernized the Chinese government with as little disorder as occurred in Japan is now an academic speculation. A careful plan was promulgated in 1908, designed to alter the existing autocracy to a constitutional monarchy with a bicameral elected Parliament after nine years of progressive preparation. The alien character of this program and the enormous extent of illiteracy in China might alone have defeated the end sought. But beyond this the reforms were so planned as to continue and amplify the centralization policies to which the Manchus had become committed. In any event the time was past for saving a monarchy which had become identified with a progressive surrender of territory and sovereign rights to foreign aggression.

Tzu-hsi, the formidable old Empress Dowager, might have been able to postpone the revolution by her personal ability and prestige, but she died in November, 1908, only a few months after the initiation of the reform program. The same week died also her nephew, Kuang-hsu, the nominal emperor, who for ten years had been kept a virtual prisoner by the Empress Dowager because of his eagerness to revise the Chinese system of government along western lines. The new occupant of the Dragon Throne was four-year-old Prince P'u-yi, whose reactionary guardians quickly proceeded to make the

pending revolt inevitable. In Peking, early in 1926, I met the younger brother of this last of the Manchu emperors. The weakness of his face and the delicacy of his physique did much to illustrate how the warrior Manchu dynasty had been played out by three centuries of court life. Yet, even this overrefined lad, living in seclusion and in danger of injury at the hands of his countrymen, was so imbued with the prevalent national feeling that he had abandoned the study of English as a protest against the overbearing attitude of British subjects in China.

The weakness of the dynasty, the incredible stupidity of its advisers, the impatience of Chinese who had studied abroad with the backwardness and helplessness of their country by western standards, all contributed to spread revolutionary sentiment in provinces already honeycombed with discontent. But for those who would look toward the future, as well as the past, in China there is deepest significance in the fact that rebellion actually broke out over the issue of centralization *versus* provincial rights. Acting under foreign advice the Manchu government in 1911 floated the Hukuang railroad loan, designed to complete trunk railroads in South China and to bring them under the government-owned-and-operated system. Agitation against this interference with local self-government, coupled with the fear that foreign interests would secure an economic strangle hold through the agency of Peking, led to the first bloodshed of the rebellion. On October 9, 1911, an accidental bomb explosion in a secret revolutionary arsenal at Hankow forced the government to take repressive measures and the leaders in the conspiracy to call a nation-wide rising. Within a month fourteen provinces had declared independence of Peking and the moribund central government crumbled like a house of cards.

It would be exaggeration to say that any carefully

formulated, philosophic theory of "States' Rights" was behind the rebellion. It can legitimately be argued that in the railroad issue the policy of Peking was justified because the provincial companies then engaged in construction in the south had shown themselves wasteful and inefficient when judged either by foreign or Chinese standards. It is doubtless true that one reason for provincial opposition to the national scheme was fear that local perquisites of graft would be ended while taxation to pay interest charges to foreign investors would take their place. Nevertheless, the facts remain that the average Chinese is strongly local rather than national in his loyalties; that the progressive decadence of Manchu rule had at the time of the revolution greatly forwarded the spirit of local autonomy and the mistrust of centralized bureaucracy; and that the helpless subservience of Peking to foreign influence had rendered the capital suspect throughout all China. The implicit connection between foreign encroachments and the Chinese Revolution is not imaginary but very real. The natural tendency toward local self-government in China has been greatly strengthened by the accumulating evidence that relinquishment of sovereignty to Peking is a long step on the road of relinquishment of sovereignty to foreigners.

While the "States' Rights" issue, if one may force the parallel for sake of charity, is quite intelligible to Americans, it remains perfectly incomprehensible to most Englishmen in China. These last, viewing their politics from an imperial viewpoint and inclined to be scornful of governmental methods not modelled on their own, for this reason are generally prejudiced critics of the turmoil in China at the present time. They can see nothing in the suggestion that there may be a rough political parallelism between the distrust of central control in China and that exhibited toward our federal government

by the sovereign states in the anarchic period following the achievement of American independence. In spite of its basic importance in the problems of China, the whole idea of federal union as a desirable form of government is ignored or misunderstood by most of the English in China. "Old China hands," as the veteran Treaty Port residents like to call themselves, have characterized the British Empire to me as such a union, which is extremely inexact. Canada, Australia, and South Africa taken separately have federal forms of government; but the Empire as a whole has nothing to do with federalism, having evolved from a collection of subject colonies to something which, so far as the great Dominions go, is best defined as a close-knit League of Nations.

It follows that the English in China, almost to a man, regard the collapse of central government there as the most significant factor in the situation. To many Americans there is more meaning in the continuance of orderly local life, in all districts where war or banditry is not actually raging, in spite of the complete inability of central authority to enforce security. While one side points to war-torn areas or bandit seizures, the other will prefer to dwell on the interesting and capable government of Kwangtung Province, or to refer to the "model province" of Shansi. The experiment in Kwangtung will be discussed in some detail in Chapter VIII. In Shansi, it may be noted here, Governor Yen Hsi-shan has steadily built good roads, established schools, forwarded the mining of coal and small-scale industries, and stopped the production of opium—all without any desire or expectation of federal aid. On the contrary, his chief anxiety while I was in Peking was to repel from the district under his control disorderly soldiery masquerading as units of the "national army."

The extent of a literal anarchy in China, as opposed

to the philosophic type disposed to dispense with government as far as possible, is nevertheless not to be minimized. In the following chapter will be given a summary of the main political trends since the revolution, designed to provide that background without which understanding of contemporary policies and disorders in China is impossible.