THE BIRTH OF CAPITALISM IN CHINA

BY
E. BALAZS
(Paris)

During his first campaign for correction of unorthodox tendencies in the Communist Party, in a famous speech pronounced on February 1st 1942, Mao Tzu-tung made the following statement: "One hundred years have elapsed since the Opium War, yet in regard to the development of Chinese capitalism, no theoretical work which is truly scientific and in accord with the realities of Chinese economic development has been produced." 2) Since then not much has been done. Why? Before answering that question let us first state the problem.

Today everybody speaks about the under-developed countries. This fact is in itself remarkable. It means that the world is divided between a small minority of highly developed industrial societies in the West and the majority of countries in different stages of advance, none of which has yet attained a living standard comparable with that of the old industrial countries of Europe and the United States. The bulk of these pre-industrial societies live in Asia, Africa and South America. Our western industrial countries, which in contrast could be called over-developed, owe what they are to the revolutionary pace and driving power of capitalism. The under-developed countries, all of them an object of exploitation, in other words colonies providing raw-materials and man-power for the smooth working of this system, have however very different economic and cultural levels. It is not necessary to insist on differences in time and space, between say, primitive African chieftain-groups and the Ottoman empire or the very well organized and powerful Chinese state of the past.

The first serious question to ask on behalf of these representatives of high civilization is obviously: why didn’t they, why couldn’t they

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1) Lecture given at the University of Oxford 1.3.60 and Cambridge, 4.3.60.
develop by their own means a capitalism or a kind of capitalism comparable to the Western capitalism—or did they? Of course, we are not speaking of the ready-made capitalist elements introduced into these countries from the outside, or established there in imitating the western pattern. By the way, in both cases, the extraneous, alien elements, fermenting long enough will dislocate and eventually destroy the receptant civilization.

Now, oddly enough, the only man who asked seriously our question in the case of China, was the German sociologist Max Weber. Perhaps even he did not measure the enormous dimension of the problem. Because, whatever the answer may be, the absence of an autonomous, autochthonous capitalism in all parts of the world with the only exception of western Europe, called by Paul Valéry the tiny “promontory of Asia”, makes us suddenly realize the miracle of our own fate. The possibility of using the pre-industrial societies, whether civilized or not, as a mirror, as a corrective, for seeing our own development is, I think, one of the major profits of studying them.

Coming back to China, our question can be formulated in the following way: in spite of very favourable conditions—China was technically and scientifically ahead of the West till the Renaissance—the Chinese civilization did not or could not engender capitalism. Were there capitalistic elements, an embryonic capitalism strangled in the womb? Or did such beginnings never exist? If they existed, what hampered them? What are the main reasons of the impediment? Why did the buds never come to a blossom? I will later try to give a few tentative answers.

But let us first state the difficulties of an approach. No need to speak of western sinology. Fully occupied with philological hairsplitting, the sinologists never found the interest, the time and the brains, necessary for such frivolous things as the economic foundations and the social structure of a great society.

What did the Chinese themselves do in this field? We heard the finding of Mao. And what has been the response of his fellow-countrymen to his appeal to study Chinese capitalism? And what has been his own reaction?