

Opinion

Chen's rural economics helped transform China

by Xue Muqiao

(Editor's note: 200 scholars recently gathered in Beijing to congratulate Chinese economist Chen Hansheng on the sixtieth anniversary of his starting academic research.)

Today a contributor's article explains why Chen enjoys high prestige in academic circles. The writer is also a noted economist.)

Dr Chen Hansheng, born in 1897, ranks high among China's early Marxist rural economists. He pioneered the use of Marxism in rural-economics investigation and research. And his influence is still recognized.

In 1915, he went to the United States to study. In 1924, he received his doctorate in Germany.

The same year he returned home to become a professor at Beijing University, where he accepted Marxist ideology and was admitted into the Communist International.

At the end of 1925, Chen assumed the leadership of the Research Institute of Social Sciences of the Academia Sinica (Chinese Academy). He led a group of progressive young people in research on the rural economy.

After an investigation in the northeast, they wrote several reports on peasants, landlords and refugees.

They went on to study Wuxi, Jiangsu Province, Baoding, Hebei Province and Fanyu, Guangdong Province.

They gathered data on land distribution, and feudal exploitation. This laid the groundwork for future study.

In 1932 and 1933, in the name of a government organization, they conducted large-scale investigations into the economies of Shaanxi, Jiangsu, Henan and Zhejiang provinces.

Also in 1933, Chen studied tobacco-producing areas in Henan, Shandong and Anhui provinces, exposing the imperialist exploitation of Chinese peasants.

Chen conducted these studies not just for academic purposes. His investigations were closely coordinated with the Chinese revolutionary movement.

In 1927, the revolution, begun in



Dr Chen Hansheng

1924, was quelled by the Kuomintang. A 10-year civil war began.

In 1928, the Chinese Communist Party held its Sixth National Congress, which affirmed that China was a semi-colonial and semi-feudal society and that the Chinese revolution at that stage was bourgeois-democratic in nature.

Land problem

Comprador scholars tried to prettify imperialist economic aggression. They claimed that such aggression was boosting China's capitalist economy. Participants in the rural reformist movement denied feudal exploitation in China. They regarded the agrarian revolution, led by the Chinese Communist Party to solve the land problem, as merely peasant riots.

Trotskyists in China claimed that since the bourgeoisie had taken over the political power after the 1924 revolution, China had become a capitalist society. So, they said, the bourgeois-democratic revolution should be liquidated.

All these ideological trends were against the programme of the Communist Party for democratic revolution. The Party refuted these ideas in its underground publications. Nevertheless, as these publications had a very limited circulation and at that time not many factual data were available, the results were not satisfactory.

Under these circumstances, it was of great political significance

that Chen Hansheng produced proof that Chinese society was semi-feudal and semi-colonial in nature and that solving the land problem was the key to saving the countryside from bankruptcy.

Early in the 1930s, the Kuomintang government frequently sent troops to encircle the revolutionary base areas, in an attempt to suppress the Communist Party's revolutionary political power. In 1934, the Red Army broke through the encirclement and started the Long March to the north.

During these hard days, Chen Hansheng wrote, in English, an article entitled *The Land Problem in Modern China*. He used all available data to argue against the Kuomintang's justification of the blockade and suppression of the Agrarian Revolution.

Chen's article was then printed and distributed by the Institute of Pacific Relations. At a symposium in Canada Chen described the situation in China's rural areas to scholars from many nations. It established his reputation as an authority on China's rural economy.

Many bourgeois scholars at that time also conducted investigations in the rural areas, but they usually neglected to study production relations. They classified peasants in a superficial way: land-holding peasants, partial land-owners and tenant peasants.

In contrast, Lenin's way of classifying peasants was applied in rural investigation led by Chen Hansheng. Class exploitation was used as a yardstick to classify rich peasants, middle peasants, poor peasants and farm hands. The correct methods plus examples enabled Chen's investigations to vividly illustrate the complicated nature of China's rural economy.

In 1933, Chen was forced to resign his job at the Research Institute of Social Sciences. The next year, in Shanghai, he established a Chinese Society for Studying Rural Economy.

In October, the society's publication *Rural China* was launched. This journal exerted wide influence on those engaged in rural work.

In 1939, Chen, then in the United States, wrote and published his book, *Industrial Capital and Chinese Peasants*. The book was

reprinted in the United States in 1980.

Chen's rural-economics investigation in Guangdong Province also had a great impact in the United States. His work convinced many progressive readers that it was unwise for the US Government to continue to support China's feudalistic forces.

Through Chen's hard work, many influential Chinese books, especially those on land questions, and articles in the journal *Rural China* were published abroad. In this way, American readers came to know the situation in China through the introduction of Chinese progressive scholars.

In 1950, shortly after the Liberation of China's mainland, Chen returned to Beijing to become an adviser to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and vice-president of the Chinese People's Institute of Foreign Affairs.

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