

The Republic of China and a new opportunity

The revolution through non-violence by Mahatma Gandhi¹

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The history of how the nonviolent proposal of Mahatma Gandhi resonates with Chinese intellectuals is a history of variability. In the late Forties, it seems appealing to some Chinese politicians who actually apply non-cooperative means, whereas during the Twenties, even if it was not at all a dominant idea, it resonates well with some Chinese intellectuals. However, during the Thirties, after Gandhi refused to compromise with Stalin, and while the Marxist proposal disseminated worldwide, the nonviolent leanings were no longer supported in China. In Hu Yuzhi, we find an example of this attitude toward nonviolence: he was a strong supporter during the Twenties, becoming an opponent in the Thirties. Copious are the difficulties in combining other political proposal with Gandhism, which is a comprehensive proposal, not only a political one. Someone perceived Gandhism as a competitor in the supremacy over the masses. Others disagreed about the possibility to use violent means. Another leading theme of objection concerned the industrialization, strongly opposed by Gandhi because of its deadly effects over the Indian population. Generally, an intense opposition came from the misunderstanding of the nonviolent path as a passive one. Moreover, the consideration of Gandhi's experiments changed from a perception of it as a native one because it comes from an Asian country, and in opposition to Marxism coming from Europe, to a perception of it as an external one when Marxism was "sinicised." Anyway, the main reason of the difficulty in implementing Gandhism is that it does not aim to triumph over the opponents; it is a way to individuate and assert the Truth (*satyagraha*), with both sides winning. When this intent is absent, it is impossible to realize it.

During the civil war between the Communists and the Nationalists in the Forties, the Chinese press is characterized not only by articles stating the necessity for an armed revolution to fight for the political unity and the control of the Country after having freed it from foreign interferences, but also by articles calling for a truce between the opponents. Among these late pieces, we find some cases of Chinese people proposing and following the peaceful path of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (1896-1948). This inspiration is explicitly stated in some reviews, as for instance in 新聞天地 (*Xinwen tiandi, Newsdom*; 1948: 38) or in 正報 (*Zhengbao, The Righteous*; 1948: 4137).

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In the Forties, the tone of the articles against Gandhi was generally quite harsh, biting, even sour. It started to be this way mainly since the Thirties, when the internal situation of China became increasingly complicated. Intellectuals and politicians were unable to find a solution to the national problems; meanwhile the political opposition among Nationalists and Communists was ever sharper, after its manifestation in the break of the First United Front in 1927. In the Twenties, instead, we may find the roots of the appreciation for the Mahatma that crossed the Thirties and led to have some representatives of the 1948 Parliament called 中國甘地 (*Zhongguo Gandi, Gandhi of China*). At that time, the appreciation for Gandhi was clearly expressed by the Chinese press, expounding on him as an example to get rid of external influences because of his leading figure in the Indian movement of independence from the British rule. The following pages will try to follow the path already traced by Brian Tsui (Tsui 2015), considering the point of view of some Chinese intellectuals that used *Dongfang zazhi* as their tool to participate in the political debate. The main protagonists are the philosopher Zhang Dongsun (張東蓀, 1886-1873),² Hu Yuzhi (胡愈之, 1896-1986),³ and Fan Zhongyun (樊仲云, 1899-?).⁴

During the Twenties, while looking for a universal model of “decolonization” to apply locally, Chinese intellectuals sometimes portrayed Gandhi as an example to imitate, at other times as an example to avoid. One of the main reasons to distance oneself from Mohandas Gandhi was a divergent position on the use of violence as an instrument in political fights. Refusal of violence as a political mean was a source of strong opposition also between Gandhi and the Indian revolutionaries. The letters that some of them, quite likely Sachindranath Sanyal and Manmathnath Gupta,⁵ exchanged with Gandhi through *Young India*⁶ in 1925 are a clear example of this separation. These letters came after the appreciation by Communists for Gandhi had undergone some substantial changes. In 1921, the Communist International praised “Gandhi for leading the Indian masses toward the national independence of India” (Ray 1969: 88). But in February 1922, after the Chauri Chaura incident, Gandhi and the Indian National Congress halted the Non-cooperation movement,

² Zhang Dongsun is a leading intellectual of the Republican period that had undeservedly attracted a quite limited attention by Chinese scholars from WW II to the Nineties, and even less attention by Western scholars almost diverted by the struggle between the Chinese Communist Party and the Chinese National Party. See, i.e., Fung (2002), Lin (2012), and Gao (2018).

³ Hu Yuzhi is known for his skillful translations, for his support to Esperanto, and for his political activism outside the CCP, as journalist, publisher, and editor, as well as member for many years of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference and of the National People’s Congress. See, i.e., Zhu (2013) and Tsui (2013).

⁴ Fan Zhongyun is mainly known thanks to his translations (Chen 2018: 130-131, 141; Hockx 1998: 80), signed as Congyu 從予.

⁵ To find the transcript of the letters, see Gupta (1969). This essay is strongly intertwined with the political climate of its time, that is the Cultural Revolution, and with the resulting difficulties to be objective in writing history. Anyway, the letters have been copied by the curator from *Young India*, the magazine where Gandhi was editor.

⁶ A weekly paper or journal in English, published by Gandhi from 1919 to 1931.

considering the need for further education and training to the principles and guiding line of it.⁷ Manabendra Nath Roy,⁸ a leader of the Indian Communists, considered this choice a “betrayal of the revolutionary rank and file by the nonrevolutionary and reactionary leadership” (Ray 1969: 89), and in the following years he went on fighting against the Mahatma. This antagonism is not surprising, since it was a fight to prevail in the leadership of the Indian masses, as it was expressed also in the article signed “W,” and entitled 《印度之勞動狀況》 (“Yindu zhi laodong zhuangkuang. The state of workers in India”), published in 東方雜誌 (*Dongfang zazhi, The Eastern Miscellany*) in 1922 (19/3: 78-79).⁹ The author presents the fact that the workers’ trade unions in India owe a lot for their organisation to the British Union, and the Second Comintern in that colony is too connected with imperialists, while the non-cooperation movement is unwilling to unite with foreign organizations. The use of weapons for political purposes was not totally opposed by some Chinese intellectuals, despite their apparent appreciation of Gandhi’s pacifism, as, for instance, Hualu 化魯 (Hu Yuzhi 胡愈之, 1896-1986) clearly stated in the article 《民衆運動的方式及要素》 (“Minqun yundong de fangshi ji yaosu. Key elements and patterns of mass movements”), published in 東方雜誌 (*Dongfang zazhi, The Eastern Miscellany*) in 1923 (20/13: 23-32). In his writing, after a description of the catastrophic situation of the Chinese Republic 12 years since its establishment and after having stated that in China, at present, none of the most renowned political personalities of the time has the capacity to unify the Country - not Cao Kun (曹錕, 1862-1938), neither Sun Zhongshan (孫中山, 1866-1925), nor Wu Peifu (吳佩孚, 1874-1939) - Hu Yuzhi tried to find the right way to drive China out of the chaos. He appreciates the Italian Fascist Movement (*panghe yundong* 棒喝運動), revealing that he did not know its deep implications for the people living under that regime. Hu mostly admired the celerity of the Movement in achieving the desired result: national unity, in a situation that he compares to the Chinese one. Thus, he was convinced that the Fascist Movement could be the example to follow for an effective mass movement in China, provided that this last one would distance itself from the Fascist’s reactionary leanings. However, a broader thinking may lead us to different considerations, as Mark Shepard (2011: 38-39) wrote: “Somehow people have developed the myth that nonviolent action is slow, while violence is quick [...] [b]ut we can still rid ourselves of the idea that violence is necessarily quick. If we look at the Chinese Revolution, for instance, we find that Mao Tse-Tung and his Communist forces were engaged in combat over a period of 22 years. [...]”

⁷ The “Chauri Chaura incident” happened in Gorakhpur District (Uttar Pradesh). Some participants at the non-cooperation movement clashed with police officers, who opened fire and killed 3 people. Following this, the protesters became a mob that burned a police station, killing more than 20 police officers.

For a resumé by Gandhi himself, see M. K. Gandhi 1999: 146-148, n. 66 “Gorakhpur’s crime”, originally published in *Navajivan* 12/02/1922.

⁸ Manabendra Nath Roy, original name Narendranath Bhattacharya (1887–1954). In 1916 he moved to San Francisco, Calif., where he changed his name to Manabendra Nath Roy. Leader of the Comintern until 1929, when he left in disagreement with Stalin. Later on he was a member of the Indian National Congress.

⁹ “W” is likely a penname of Wang Senran (王森然, 1895-1984) (Zhu 1989: 743).

Where does the idea come from, then, that violence is quick and nonviolence is slow? Well, violence feels quicker, because time passes rapidly when you're dodging bullets. Nonviolent action, on the other hand, requires more patience because the action is less thrilling."

Nevertheless, Hu Yuzhi is aware of the results obtained in regard to the British government by "the Indian noncooperative movement" (*Yindu de buhezuo yundong* 印度的不合作運動), that is considered as "having specific active means" (*you juti de jiji de banfa* 有具體的積極的辦法), in opposition to those who are convinced that it has "a passive approach" (*xiaoji taidu* 消極態度). Likely, this last statement is an answer to the article 《誰能救中國》 (*Shei neng jiu Zhongguo* "Who can save China?") by Zhang Dongsun published in the previous (1923) number of 東方雜誌 (*Dongfang zazhi*, *The Eastern Miscellany* 20/12: 23-25). Zhang considers the Indian non-cooperation movement a passive and ineffective one for a dying country as China, giving the impression he had only a vague understanding of what was going on in India. He was supported in his opinion also by "S" (penname) in the article 《印度民族獨立運動與英國政治方針》 ("Yindu minzu duli yundong yu Yingguo zhengzhi fangzhen, The movement for the Indian national independence and the British policy"),¹⁰ where the Gandhian "movement of noncooperation" (*feixietong yundong* 非協同運動) is considered as "absolutely passive, lacking of the essential building factors and even if it would succeed, the results would not last in the long term" (*jie wei xiaoji de, quefa jianshe zhi yaosu, you yishi sui ke chengong, shiwu hedeng yong xu zhi xiaoguo* 皆為消極的，缺乏建設之要素，又一時雖可成功，實無何等永續之效果). On the contrary, Hu Yuzhi does not seem to share this negative opinion of Gandhi's movement and he is quite accurate in his knowledge of the Indian features, also in detailing the specific measures of this mass movement in India (Hu 1923 20/13: 29): 1. Refusal to pay taxes and levies; 2. Refusal to hold office in the British government; 3. Refusal to attend any meeting with official organisations of the British government; 4. Refusal to be hired as servant by British people; 5. Refusal to get educated in a British school; 6. Refusal of any social intercourse with British people; 7. Boycott of any British product; 8. Refusal to trade with British people; 9. Refusal to present any lawsuit to a British court. Thence, Hu Yuzhi is well aware that, if applied on a national scale, these would be very effective measures. Much more effective than using a strong army. This is what India was testing. But still, for China, he recommends the creation of a mass movement endowed with a militarily disciplined organisation, and states "if we want to make a revolution, of course it's impossible without an army" (*women ru yao geming, guran fei you jundui bu ke* 我們如要革命，固然非有軍隊不可). Accordingly, he shares this point of view with Sun Zhongshan, whose idea of the meaning of "peace" is very diverging from Gandhi's: "peace is always the purpose of politics, and war is only one of the instruments to reach this goal" (*heping shi zhengzhi de yongheng mubiao, er zhanzheng jinjin shi dadao zhege mubiao de shouduan* 和平是政治的永恒目标，而战争仅仅是达到这个目标的手段) (Zhao 2005 1: 18), while for Gandhi only peaceful means can be used to reach peace. This is one of the main point of divergence between the "father of the Republic of China" and Gandhi the "father of India." Doubtful

¹⁰ "S" 1922 19/10: 69-70.

on the possibilities to apply the nonviolent method at the Chinese world, the last position was very clear to Hu Yuzhi, who insisted to explain it in the above-mentioned article. Anyway, we find the echo of the description written by Hu Yuzhi of the actions needed to reach the target with a non-cooperation movement in the fifth lecture on “Nationalism” that Sun Zhongshan held in Guangzhou on the 24th of February, 1924. Like Hu Yuzhi, he cited the Mahatma Gandhi and the success of his non-cooperation movement as a possible example to follow in order to save China, because the Country “was not conquered yet” (*hai mei you wang 还没有亡*) (Sun 1957: 646-7). It is similar also to Zhang Dongsun’s vision of a China “dying in mourning clothes” (*chuisi jiang shuai 垂死將衰*), previously cited, but diverging on the possible solution for its critical situation because of his misunderstanding on non-violent path and passivity.

Another intellectual with worldwide interests, Fan Zhongyun, publishes in *東方雜誌* (*Dongfang zazhi, The Eastern Miscellany*) the article 《革命果能避免麼》 (“Geming guoneng bimian ma, Will indeed be possible to avert the revolution?;” Fan 1923 20/24: 41-46). He states that to change the country, the Chinese people must choose between an armed revolution, as that led by Lenin in Russia, and “a passive revolution, like that of Gandhi in India” (*xiaoji de geming, ru Yindu de Gandhi 消極的革命, 如印度的甘地*) (Fan 1923: 41). Nevertheless, Fan’s article had a specific purpose: that is to criticise Woodrow Wilson’s “The road away from revolution” and his written reproach by G. O. P. Bland. However, in this article his words about the use of nonviolent means are not particularly accurate. At the contrary, two years later Fan Zhongyun would publish the book *Mahatma Gandhi* (*聖雄甘地 Shengxiong Gandhi*), stating from its introduction that “the so-called nonviolent person is not as meek as a lamb” (*suowei feibaolizhe fei ruo shun ru yang 所謂非暴力者, 非柔順如羊*) (Fan 1926:1), and that a non-violent person instead uses bright means to resist violence. In the book, Fan goes on explaining his opinion on Gandhi and his life, and writes toward the end of the book that “the nonviolent belief is the most active fight” (*feibaoli de xinyang bianshi zui jiji de zhanzheng 非暴力的信仰 便是最積極的戰爭*) (Fan 1926: 93). Fan completed this work on the wave generated by the first short biography on Mohandas Gandhi, written in 1923 by the literature Nobel Prize Romain Rolland (1866-1944) (Rolland 1924), and translated in Chinese in 1925 (Luolan 1925). A translation that came slightly later than the Russian one, by the Soviet State Publishing House in 1924, a work that sounded like an appreciation of Gandhi’s work for the masses, but which did not bound him to Soviet Russia: in the spring of that same year, the Mahatma refused an invitation by Stalin because he did not want to be used “for violent purpose” (Ray 1969: 91).

In this same year, China sees its very first book on Gandhi as a special issue of *東方雜誌* (*Dongfang zazhi, The Eastern Miscellany*), proposing again 7 articles which had already been published in the journal in 1922. The articles were presented as a “gift” for the twentieth anniversary of the foundation of the journal, and this was also a way to feed the general interest raised by this message for the freedom from foreign interferences coming from India (Gao 1924). From the aforementioned “The movement for the Indian national independence and the British policy,” we may drive an important consideration on a reason why Gandhi’s proposal was felt as foreign by some Chinese

intellectuals. The author of the article thought that “the focus of the movement was no longer the intellectual class, moving instead toward the untrained mass of lower level. Gandhi is not strong enough to control a mass organisation of this level” (運動之中心已離去知識階級，而移到無訓練之下級民衆。甘地氏之勢力，竟不能統制此等羣衆團體 *yundong zhi zhongxin yi liqu zhishi jieji, er yidao wu xunlian zhi xiaji minzhong. Gandhi shi zhi shili, jing buneng tongzhi cideng qunzhong tuanti*; “S” 1922: 70).

But “S” was wrong. The Indian movement was close to the peasants and the excluded, not in their stead. Gandhi experimented personally the life he thought would free India from serfdom, without any contempt or disregard for who needed to be educated to his nonviolent way, and never thought that the Indian people could not be trained, or that the need for training was a matter of social class. This helped him to interact with people not just to control the masses, as the spinning wheel movement demonstrates, for instance. The spinning wheel may be considered a symbol of the distance between Gandhi’s proposal and the Chinese intellectuals and politicians, in as much as it was a refusal of the materialistic civilization. With this materialistic civilization, the British invaded India endangering its ancient culture, but in the meanwhile this materialism was increasingly deteriorating also European people (Hualu 1922: 96). Thus, as we may read in Gandhi’s *Indian Home Rule (Hind Swaraj)*,¹¹ the instruments of the invaders must be refused to be freed from foreign rule, also because the Western materialistic culture aims at a modernization without concern for the human being most important part: his soul and the resulting moral behavior. This refusal of the mechanization was part of a project to scatter artisanal industries all over India in order to solve the problem of widespread poverty, a poverty strictly connected with the British exploitation of India, of its manpower and of its material resources (even if indeed not exclusively with the British). It was to actually give back India to the Indians (Kumarappa 1946; Venu 2016).

The Chinese intellectuals argued whether the Gandhian proposal of pacifist noncooperation was suitable for China too. Example of this debate during the Twenties are two articles written by Zhang Dongsun and Hu Yuzhi. The two intellectuals differed also in some considerations on the link between Chinese history and the perspective of non-cooperation movement. Zhang’s point of view is quite clear. In his opinion, an ethical change within the intellectual class is needed to take China out of its decadence. However, he appears to ignore the ethical basis of Gandhi’s path, thus he thinks that the non-cooperation movement does not fit in with the Chinese actual and present situation (Zhang 1923: 94). Instead, in his article “Our two roads,” Hu argues that in the Chinese history it is possible to identify the roots of the tendencies typical of the Chinese people toward noncooperation, so similar to the Gandhian way, while revolutionaries that oppose Gandhi’s ideas instead plagiarize the West (Hu 1923 20/22). Nevertheless, Hu will change his mind after a period of study at the Sorbonne (1928-1931) and a short stop in Moscow on his way back to China (Tsui 2015: 66, 78). As we may read in his “The Indian revolution” (Hu 1931), he no longer deemed Gandhi’s position adapted to the Chinese situation. This opinion is shared by many intellectuals, as, for instance, A Qiong 阿穹 shows in his

¹¹ It was originally written by M. K. Gandhi in 1908 in Gujarati. The English translation is by Gandhi himself.

short article “Gandhi and China” (A 1931). There he explains his thought that Gandhi’s idea was not suitable for the Chinese situation because the history of the Chinese country does not allow to adopt an external solution. Moreover, Chinese intellectuals are not the only one that in the Thirties have a different opinion of the Mahatma and of his path to freedom after having shared it for a time. After a few days of dense and deep dialogue with Gandhi, who was on his way back to India following an official visit to the United Kingdom in 1931, one of his greatest supporter, Romain Rolland himself, “in face of the need to fight against Fascism with all available means, felt he could not be bound by Gandhi’s principle of non-violence” (Francis 1975: 291). However, the point is that “*Satyagraha* – Gandhi’s nonviolent action – was not a way for one group to seize what it wanted from another. It was not a weapon of class struggle, or of any other kind of division. *Satyagraha* was instead an instrument of unity. It was a way to remove injustice and restore social harmony, to the benefit of both sides. *Satyagraha*, strange as it seems, was for the opponent’s sake as well. When *Satyagraha* worked, both sides won” (Shepard 2011: 45). Maybe it is very difficult to apply it to a specific historical situation because, more or less unconsciously, we, human beings, hardly accept not to prevail over our opponents. This rests on us.

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