
Miriam E. Wells

Mark Selden, in *The Yenan Way*, explains the success of radicals and communists in a critical rural area of China between the 1920s and the 1940s. Selden first gives a history of the Shensi province, documenting its transformation from the “cradle of a dynamic civilization” to its characterization in the 1930s as a “dying beggar.” Shensi is portrayed as a unique location that had several natural advantages for fostering growth of the communist party. One of those advantages was its physical location, buffered from the wartime threat of the Japanese, and far enough from centers of Kuomintang government to effectively cultivate the communist party. The area was also very poor, subject to famine, and a prime candidate for land reform. Early radicals in the area made use of the existing uprisings such as the Red Spear Society, and defectors from the Kuomintang army to bolster the military security of the area. The book follows the transformation of radicals like Liu Chih-tan from Robin Hood style bandits to leaders of organized, armed peasant movements. The intent is to show that poverty and discontent over land speculation and taxation by the Kuomintang fueled radical movements—not simply the presence of nationalist, anti-Japanese sentiment. The rural agricultural reforms, administrative reorganization, and models for economic development, were key in making this manifestation of the communist party, led by Mao Tse-tung, the dominant one in years to come. Selden’s main contribution is his outline of the concrete party methods for instituting economic, social, and educational campaigns, and he makes it clear\(^1\) that he envisions these methods as a possible answer to the problems of countries emerging from colonial domination.

\(^1\) As of 1970.