1946

Ownership of land has always been an existential issue for Chinese farmers. Although both the Nationalist and Communist parties recognised the need to reorganise agricultural landholdings, during the Republican era, there was considerable reluctance to act. Under Sun Yat-sen, the Nationalists issued a call to give 'land to the tiller', which proved very popular among the people, but after the rise of Chiang Kai-shek, the Nationalist Party increasingly relied on village landlords and rural power-holders who had little interest in agrarian reform. As for the Communists, following the Soviet model, they initially sought to carry out a proper Marxist revolution by organising the urban proletariat. Only after the Communists were purged from the cities in the late 1920s did some Party members—Mao Zedong, in particular—begin to consider rural revolution as the key to Communist survival and victory. Starting with the Jiangxi Soviet of the early 1930s, the Communists experimented with how far they could push land reform. Experiments in this sense started again more cautiously in 1945 as the war against Japan ground to a close and accelerated once the Communists obtained state power, lasting until 1952. This essay explores how these campaigns created dramatic but short-lived changes in the relationships between farmers, land, and labour.

Production in Revolution: Agricultural and Political Labour during Land Reform

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In the late summer of 1946, only a few months after the official launch of land reform (土地改革), the Chinese Communist Party's promotion of the successes of the Bureau Work Team (分局工作组) began in earnest. Organised by the Central China Bureau, the Bureau Work Team boasted leaders with impeccable revolutionary credentials. Team leaders, instructed to experiment with redistributing land from wealthy villagers to their poor neighbours, possessed decades of experience in carrying out rural revolution. One of them, a poor peasant woman hailing from Guangdong Province, had joined Peng Pai's peasant movement in the 1920s (see Day's essay in the present volume) before surviving the Party's famed Long March (1934–35). After carrying out land reform in E'qian village, Jiangsu Province, the team's approach to rural revolution was heralded as a model for future campaigns. In a glowing account of the Bureau Work Team's time in E'qian, a top Party leader praised the team for mobilising the village masses to attack not just landlords, who typically did not personally take part in agricultural production, but also well-off farmers.[1]

These farmers, classified as 'rich peasants' (富农) by the Work Team, regularly engaged in agricultural production; they were, by definition, hardworking labourers. But their relative wealth allowed them to rent out their excess lands or hire agricultural workers. So while these rich peasants were among the most productive farmers in E'qian, the Bureau Work Team treated them as little more than parasites, full of tricks (投机取巧), and ready to hog (独吞) any and all property. By organising the village poor, who were said to have nothing to lose and everything to gain (不怕损失), to attack E'qian's rich peasants and confiscate their property, the Central China Bureau declared that the Work Team had discovered the key to rural revolution.[2] E'qian was only a single village, but the message from this model work team reverberated throughout the Chinese countryside for a half-dozen years: revolutionary activism,

often violent and always divisive, came before the practical concerns of agricultural production.

Redefining Rural Labour

The period of land reform, the most formative years of the Maoist rural revolution, created dramatic but largely short-lived changes in the relationship between farmers, land, and labour. These transformations began in 1945 as the war against Japan ground to a close, kicking into high gear with the release of the May Fourth Directive in 1946.[3] This document launched the Party's first land reform campaigns—massive events designed to fundamentally alter all aspects of rural life, including the ownership of land. These campaigns, which did not come to a close until 1952, were carried out in an endlessly diverse countryside against an always changing political backdrop. At the start of land reform, the Communists were locked in a life-and-death battle against their Nationalist rivals. By the end of the campaigns, Communist Party leaders were in the final stages of cementing their hold over the newly established People's Republic of China (PRC). Most of the changes to rural labour that land reform wrought were short-lived due to the subsequent implementation of collectivised farming. But the land reform classification scheme—theoretically predicated on a family's relationship with land and labour—endured even after collectivisation. The Maoist class system became a defining characteristic of China until the reform era.

Maoist theories of rural classes, based on the exploitation of labour in the countryside, were unheard of when they arrived in Chinese villages; previously rural labour was understood in practical rather than in abstract or theoretical terms. While not discounting the possibilities of serious complications from weather and human factors, there existed in rural China an obvious relationship between labour and the household economy. Through agricultural production, farming families had the opportunity to earn profits, which could be reinvested, most often in the purchase of more and better land. It was thus not unreasonable for villagers to dream of gaining wealth through labour, often with the goal of not having to work the land themselves but renting their fields to tenants or hiring labourers.

Party reports framed the rural rental and hiring systems in terms of inequality and exploitation, emphasising how a small number of landlords permanently controlled large tracts of land.[4] In the vast Chinese countryside, there were indeed many instances of fabulously wealthy landlords

living extravagant lives. The Party used such examples to promote the idea that landlords, parasitically living off the labour of their tenants and workers, were immoral and worthy of denunciation if not direct verbal and physical abuse. Intellectuals visiting the countryside on behalf of the Party, meanwhile, went to great lengths to provide theoretical justification for the argument that it was impossible for poor peasants to prosper under the old regime. The feudal nature of the countryside, they reasoned, ensured the eternal prosperity of the landlord class at the expense of the rural poor. Villagers, however, had good reason to doubt such theoretical assertions. As Xiaojia Hou has argued, there was no clear relationship between landholding and wealth: renters might even be more prosperous than landholders.[5] The long-accepted tradition of partible inheritance among sons, moreover, made maintaining a large estate for multiple generations inherently difficult. The result was a fluid rural social order in which labour was essential for survival and offered the possibility of prosperity.

A Tectonic Shift

The arrival of land reform work teams, dispatched by the Communist Party to remake the countryside, turned this rural order and its assumptions about labour upside down. Changes to landholding patterns were, by definition, among the most fundamental of the campaign's many aims. The accumulation of wealth, including the ownership of excess land—long a bedrock of economic security—was now labelled as nothing more than a form of exploitation. Not having adequate access to land—once an existential crisis for Chinese farmers—now offered a path to prosperity through revolutionary activism. Labour, particularly one's relationship to land and agricultural production, stood at the centre of this tectonic shift.

Under the careful guidance of visiting land reform work teams, villagers were taught to rethink their labour, as well as the labour of their neighbours, through the lens of exploitation. The Party released a host of guidelines and policy documents to help work teams and local cadres determine class status, emphasising the centrality of calculating the ways in which some villagers exploited the labour of others. Those who rented out land or hired farmworkers were given the loathsome labels of landlord or rich peasant; those who were not involved in any serious exploitation of labour were cast as middle peasants; farmers who were tenants or hired out their labour, finally, were declared poor peasants or hired hands. During the

process of class division, better-off families took great pains to emphasise their own labour in hopes of receiving a more favourable class label.[6] All members of rural society, from landlords to the landless, were best served by calling attention to their poverty in hopes of keeping their property, and perhaps gaining greater distributions from their wealthier neighbours.[7] In the process of class determination, two critical stress points emerged, both involving labour. First, how much labour could a middle peasant exploit without being classed as a rich peasant? Second, what to do with rich peasants who farmed their own land while also exploiting others by renting out extra fields or hiring workers? In both cases, the theoretical assumptions underlying these questions were pushed aside in the search for greater wealth to distribute to the rural poor.

In theory, work teams dispatched by the Party teamed with local cadres to determine class status by calculating the amount of income families earned by exploiting the labour of their neighbours. In practice, however, other concerns crept into the process of class determination. Most notably, poor activists pushed for greater gains from fields that wealthier peasants were farming themselves. Early land reform directives were highly contradictory—on one hand, instructing cadres that the lands personally farmed by rich peasants, including land they farmed with the help of hired labour, should not be touched.[8] Yet as early as 1946 the Central China Bureau, while noting that no more than 10 percent of households should lose land, also allowed cadres to take the lands rich peasants personally farmed if these fields were needed to satisfy the needs of poor peasants.[9]

This directive foreshadowed a troubling trend of encroaching on the wealth generated by the non-exploitative labour of Chinese farmers. By 1947, for example, the East China Bureau began warning against the continued existence of a 'rich peasant line' (富农路线). According to this report, compiled one year after the start of land reform, landlords still had excess and good land.[10] And because cadres had not confiscated any rich peasant land, many poor peasants and hired hands did not have enough land. For Party leaders in the East China Bureau, past land reform policy had erred in taking care of landlords and especially rich peasants before considering the needs of their poorer neighbours. As a result, work teams and local cadres were instructed to settle accounts with landlords, giving them a share of property only after taking care of poor peasants and hired hands. In a major blow to hardworking farmers, the Party now approved the confiscation of the lands rich peasants farmed themselves to make up

for past exploitation.[11] A push to equalise landholdings, meanwhile, made the property of middle peasants another attractive target for activists.

Political Labour in the Countryside

The radical turn towards egalitarianism in land reform in 1947 firmly established a new form of work in the countryside: political labour. Now, instead of the endless drudgery of agricultural production, villagers could receive material rewards through revolutionary activism—most importantly, struggling against their neighbours for property and hidden wealth. The choice between agricultural production and political activism represented a major contradiction in the Maoist rural revolution. As historian Fangchun Li has demonstrated in his study of land reform in northern China, although the Party presented production (生产) and liberation (翻身) as compatible, if not perfectly harmonious, in reality, attempts to stress rural liberation invariably damaged agricultural production.[12]

During the first land reform campaigns in 1946, the Party had pushed back against the tendency of poor activists to attack wealthier neighbours to the detriment of agricultural production. Early land reform directives, for example, stressed limiting struggle to keep production going. For most landlords, 'struggle' (斗争) was to be confined to open discussion to facilitate the transfer of land; only the most obstinate of landlords were to be subject to confrontational attacks.[13] But as early as the autumn of 1946, poor peasant activists were moving against not only rich peasants, but also middle peasants. As the Central China Bureau warned, this threatened the agricultural production of middle peasants, which was essential to the rural economy.[14] As one report from the Taihang base area made clear, while rich peasants exploited the labour of hired hands, the result of this exploitation was a high level of agricultural production.[15] Targeting these rich peasants could only damage the local economy.

Yet land reform directives continued to suggest that agricultural and political labour could coexist without friction. In the summer of 1947, for example, a report from the Northeast instructed work teams and local cadres to combine struggle with production. But the nature of the struggle proposed by the report—a campaign of 'digging out treasures' (挖财宝) to end peasant poverty—was exactly the sort of political labour that wreaked havoc on agricultural production.[16] During this and similar land reform campaigns, which went by a variety of colourful names,

peasant activists tortured and killed class enemies in search of hidden wealth. Because these class enemies invariably included rich and middle peasants, agricultural production suffered mightily. Later campaigns, especially those launched following the establishment of the PRC in 1949, attempted to limit violent struggle for economic gain, in no small part to promote agricultural production. But throughout the many years of land reform, villagers tended to approach rural revolution with economic gains in mind.[17]

Legacies

The impact of the Party's successive land reform campaigns on agricultural production was incredibly diverse, but one common trend was an initial reluctance to commit to farm work due to fears of future redistributions. Xi Zhongxun, one of the Party's most important leaders in the Northwest Bureau, raised this issue in early campaigns in a letter to Mao Zedong. Xi, now better known as the father of Xi Jinping, noted the plight of hardworking peasants after land reform: now hailed as labour heroes due to their hard work, they might find themselves attacked by neighbours jealous of their excess grain.[18] Many of those who remained poor in the aftermath of land reform, meanwhile, were lazy or gamblers, not to be trusted with leadership positions. According to Xi, the prospect of future redistributions brought fear of prosperity to the countryside. However, once villagers felt land reform was truly complete, the traditional belief in the value of labour returned. Thus, many Party reports emphasised how land reform fuelled agricultural production. One such report, penned by future Minister of Agriculture and eventual Cultural Revolution victim Liao Luyan, stressed how peasants, now owners of land and agricultural tools, were eager to produce.[19] The flipside of this belief also returned: a strong disdain for those who were considered lazy or simply bad at farming, including many new to the harsh realities of rural labour.[20]

In the aftermath of land reform, new labour practices offered the possibility of redefining China's rural classes. Taking part in labour after the close of the campaigns, for example, offered a path for class enemies to join with the peasant masses. This started with punishing criminal landlords with forced labour (劳役); minor offences such as selling or hiding property might receive a one-year sentence, while major crimes such as spreading rumours or handing out bribes could fetch up to five years of forced labour. Such punishments, however, were designed to be

rare. The final rounds of land reform featured better treatment for rich peasants and even landlords, who were guaranteed a share of land to farm. In this way, land reform seemed to create a path towards the creation of villages full of owner-cultivators, entirely free from exploitation and class conflict. Landlords, now taking part in agricultural production, were to have their class status reevaluated after five years of labour.

This oft-promised milestone, however, was never reached. First, the landholding system created in the wake of the campaigns was short-lived. At the start of land reform, Deng Zihui, a Party specialist on agricultural affairs, had written to Liu Shaoqi arguing in favour of a 'middle peasant economy' (中农经济) made up of owner-cultivators, as opposed to Soviet-style collectivisation.[21] But only a few short years after land reform, the Party forcibly moved to collectivise rural farms—a policy shift that would have profound impacts on rural labour practices. As for landlords and other class enemies, taking part in agricultural production was never enough to remove their class labels. They and their descendants would remain class enemies, pariahs for the remainder of the revolutionary era. Despite engaging in labour for decades, rich peasants and especially landlords remained useful to the Party as symbols of exploitation. For this reason, the class statuses that work teams gave to villagers, based on a snapshot of labour practices viewed through the lens of exploitation, remained the true legacy of land reform.