

1962

In 1962, the Party-State in Beijing decreed that China's farmers should participate in a new form of agricultural organisation that would persist for the next two decades. It not only entailed an entirely new collective system of property ownership within village neighbourhoods and hamlets, but also gave rise to new types of work relations, and dramatically reshaped social relationships in hundreds of thousands of villages. It constituted the final step in the tumultuous series of reorganisations of agriculture during the 1940s and 1950s.

Working Together in Agricultural Production Teams: The Work Lives of the Majority of Chinese Under Mao

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The farmers of China experienced, first, land reform and then a succession of progressively higher forms of collectivisation, leading to the utopian and ultimately tragic Great Leap Forward of 1958–60. During the Great Leap period, a rural market town and all of the villages that surrounded it were declared a ‘commune’ (公社), and Chinese Communist Party officials in the market-town command posts of the new communes directed the labour of thousands of farmers. It was imagined that communes would provide the organisational foundation of material plenty. Stories circulated in China’s mass media about miraculous achievements in far-flung parts of the country. In a competition to achieve similar miracles, large squads of farmers were instructed to plant seeds so tightly packed together that the seedlings crowded each other out; during the agricultural busy seasons, they were sent to work at hastily planned dam sites; they were told to eat free meals in public mess halls and to melt their own metal cooking utensils in primitive backyard steel furnaces that produced useless junk. Huge quantities of grain were shipped off to the cities and onward abroad as exports while rural officials competed to exaggerate the size of local harvest yields. The consequence of all this was a collapse in rural production during 1959 and 1960 and a plunge into starvation in many parts of the countryside.¹

The specific system of collectives that will be the focus of this essay was created out of the ashes of that tragedy. The information about how it actually operated at the grassroots level derives from more than 100 interviews that Anita Chan and I conducted in Hong Kong during the 1970s and early 1980s with emigrants from about four dozen Chinese villages. At the time, it was not possible to conduct research inside China, and the constant flow of people into Hong Kong from the mainland provided a feasible alternative.²

Production Teams as the Basis for Landownership and Work

When the collectives were totally reorganised in 1962 in the aftermath of the Great Leap Forward, agricultural production within each village was placed in the hands of 'production teams' (生产队). Each production team contained some fifteen to forty neighbouring households who collectively owned a block of agricultural land, and its member households worked the land together and shared in the proceeds. In the wake of the Great Leap Forward's failure, the idea was to create a collective unit small enough for members to perceive the relationships between their own contributions of labour, their team's productivity, and their family's benefits.

To encourage the farmers to accept their team head's leadership, the head was normally either elected by team members or informally chosen by consensus, though in a minority of cases the team heads were selected by a higher-level Party organisation. In some other cases, even if elected, the production team head was chosen by one large kinship group or clique to the detriment of other such groups, and cases were reported of nepotism, favouritism, and abuses of power. But, despite such occurrences, on the whole the teams were relatively democratic in the way leaders were chosen—which had no parallel in any other parts of the Chinese political system.³

The new system contained a number of attractive features. By providing farmers with a share in a larger stretch of land than any family could farm on its own, it gave each household protection against natural disasters or unexpected illness. It also provided for a relatively equitable distribution of incomes among households, and it organised and paid for a range of public services. In many villages, by the late 1960s or 1970s, almost-free health care and elementary schooling were being provided through production-team revenues—reaching much of rural China for the first time in history. Production teams also paid for the sustenance of orphans, widows, and the childless elderly. In much of rural China, mortality rates declined dramatically and the length of villagers' lives began to approach that in developed nations.

The countryside was able to achieve these gains in part because the state under Mao was strong and penetrated communities effectively. The state's drive to transform villages had a downside, however, in both the political

and the economic spheres. Although Mao Zedong and other Party leaders were now willing to tolerate a system of ownership and production by relatively small production teams, and allowed farmers to select their own production-team heads, at the same time the national leaders were unwilling to give the production-team members enough leeway in figuring out what crops to grow or enough say on how their own teams and villages were run. The system ultimately was top-down. The belief at the helm of the Party was that China's villagers, left to their own devices, would not continue to move China forward into ever higher forms of socialist society; the villagers needed to be controlled and prodded for their own good.

There was a second important factor. The national leadership was convinced that, to develop the national economy, agricultural surpluses needed to be squeezed from the countryside. However, without strong institutional mechanisms in place, the villagers would not so willingly sacrifice their own material interests for the greater good of China by providing the state with cheap agricultural provisions to help build up Chinese industry. The consequence was that, in the new system of governance that was put in place after the collapse of the Great Leap Forward, the production teams sat at the very bottom of a political hierarchy dominated by a top-down chain of Party rule that reached from Beijing into each and every village. The village was now called a 'brigade' (大队) and was headed by a Party secretary who was appointed by the Party leadership of the commune, who in turn were appointed by the Party leadership of the county, who were appointed by the next higher level of the Party.

Daily Work and the Complex Issue of Pay

The Party-State officialdom above the village was nowhere to be seen in daily life, though. Farmers soon became accustomed to a new work routine that some preferred. Before, they had worked on their own, on their own plots. Now, they normally worked together with neighbours in small squads. The men often engaged in different types of work than the women and so, depending on the time of year and the task, the women enjoyed a chance to work in a squad of fellow women; young people had opportunities to work and socialise in their own squads; and older men sometimes in their own groupings. The younger women, in particular, who in China always married into a village from outside, no longer felt socially isolated and continuously under the thumb of their

parents-in-law and husband. Instead, they spent the day with their own network of acquaintances; they earned their own income from the team in 'work-points' (工分) and so could independently contribute to their household's income; and, through this and through their new social network, they saw their standing rise in both the household and the community. So, too, did the young men, who, with the strength of youth, often earned more than their fathers.

The men's tasks normally paid more than the women's. For instance, during the dry season in Chen Village, a community in Guangdong Province that I have studied,⁴ when dredging the nearby river, the men were the ones who dug out the mud from the river bottom while the women hauled it up the riverbank and packed it into the dykes. The men were paid for each bucket they filled and the women for each bucket they toted. It was the women's work that required the greater skill and effort, since the dykes were tricky to ascend under the swaying loads of dredged mud. But over the course of an hour, the men's digging paid almost twice as much as the women's carrying. The village women did not publicly complain, however; they tacitly accepted that their lower status meant lower pay.

In a few agricultural seasons, ways were found to dispense with the complexities of recording and awarding payments by piece rate. For instance, the Chen Village farmers at harvest time worked in tightly knit squads of a dozen or so members of both genders, much as they had done even in traditional times in the rice regions of southern China. Without having to break their work rhythm, half of the squad members cut the crop; others would rush the sheaves to a small thresher at the side of the field; two men worked the hand threshing machine; and the two strongest men hustled the loads of grain into the village. Since the pace of the squad members' work was so closely interlinked, work-points were awarded to the squad as a whole based on the tonnage harvested. In this 'group task work', the squad members would hold a post-harvest session to appraise one another's labour contributions and determine among themselves how to divide up the totality of squad work-points.

During the height of radical national policies in the late 1960s and early 1970s, this method of payment was extended to all the work in what was titled the Dazhai system.⁵ In this, all of a production team's members sat in judgement of one another at periodic team meetings. But, in a twist, they were to award work-points based not on what a team member had physically accomplished but rather on his or her attitude and effort.

Initially, this worked well. But, over time, the appraisal meetings descended into acrimony, as members began to vociferously defend their own work and took umbrage if awarded lower points. To avoid this, by the early 1970s the best men were being appraised as worth ten work-points a day, the average man was getting 9.5, and the worst nine points—a very narrow spread. Eventually, the best and most energetic workers resented this and stopped working as well, and the teams' production sputtered.⁶ Ultimately, the Dazhai appraisal system had to be abandoned here and elsewhere across China.

Private Endeavours

The rights of farmers to engage in private sideline production had been guaranteed by the state (with temporary exceptions during radical campaigns) since 1962.⁷ China's leaders had learned through the disastrous experiences of the Great Leap Forward that some private spare-time endeavours, particularly maintaining a family vegetable plot, were a 'necessary adjunct to the socialist economy.'⁸ The regulations of 1962 let the production teams set aside 5 to 7 percent of their arable land for these family plots. Because most Chinese villages have little land per capita, the plots were relatively tiny. A family held only temporary use rights to them, and the size of its plot was readjusted from time to time as additional children were born and older children married out. Families were also permitted to privately raise animals such as pigs, chickens, and ducks, to plant limited numbers of fruit trees in courtyards and on hilltop wasteland, and to fish or produce cottage handicrafts after hours.

These private activities were essential to the farmers' livelihoods in two ways. Whereas the collective fields provided almost all of China's grain, the private sector provided the bulk of the farmers' vegetables and meat. This was reflected in the saying, 'For the bottom of the rice bowl, rely on the collective. For the top of the bowl, rely on ourselves.' Their private endeavours were also the farmers' most important source of cash income. At the end of each collective harvest, each household's cumulative work-points were computed and the family was paid in both kind and cash. Payment in kind came first, and the team was supposed to guarantee to each family the staple food grains that it needed even if it had earned insufficient work-points and had to go into debt to the team. Such families received no cash from the collective and depended entirely on their private sidelines for money to spend. In poor villages,

many families found themselves in this circumstance. But even the best-off households in prosperous villages did not have much ready money to meet the costs of a family funeral or a son's wedding. On such occasions, farmers sold what they jokingly referred to as their 'piggy banks'—one or more of their hogs. For all farmers, prosperous or impoverished alike, a second rural saying applied: 'For eating rice, rely on the collective. For money, rely on your private sidelines.'

Under the government's own pricing mechanisms, much of the collective grain was sold cheaply to the state to fulfil a sales quota while vegetables and pork fetched far better prices. As a consequence, farmers could earn considerably more per hour from their private endeavours than from collective labour. All told, from among all the villages for which I have such information through interviewing, approximately one-quarter to one-third of the peasants' gross annual income (including both in kind and cash) derived from the private sector.⁹ In two of the poorest villages for which I have interview data, where the earnings from the collective fields were very low, up to half of the family income was derived from such private activities.

This became a source of conflict between team leaders and farmers: the farmers' desire to focus on this valuable private production inevitably impinged on the productivity of the collective sector. Squad leaders were constantly on the lookout to stop team members sneaking off early from work, preventing them from clearing too much barren land to expand their private production, and haranguing members to rest during rest breaks rather than scramble off to their private endeavours.

From above, the Party-State periodically reacted to keep the private endeavours quite limited in extent and under tight control. One means, used especially during the 1970s, was to close the periodic farmers' markets in rural towns at which farmers sold their private produce. During radical periods, officialdom not only clamped down on this, but also sometimes launched campaigns to directly tighten the reins on families' vegetable plots. These campaigns were usually backed vociferously by the ideologues among Party leaders, who warned shrilly that private undertakings encouraged a selfish 'small-producer mentality'. The last major campaign of this type, the Line Education Campaign (路线教育运动) of 1974–75, was pushed by the group around Mao later dubbed the Gang of Four, and was so draconian that it needed to be removed from local cadres' hands to avoid retaliation against them by villagers. Squads of officials sent from above took over many of China's villages to push the campaign

through; in Guangdong Province alone, 120,000 officials were dispatched to villages.¹⁰ They forcibly reduced the size of the family vegetable plots, implemented very strict limits on the numbers of ducks, chickens, and pigs that farmers could raise, and imposed harsh fines equivalent to several days' wages on any team member who took leave during the day to attend to private matters.

The radical leadership also periodically launched directives during the 1970s that adversely interfered with the production teams' collective activities. Chen Village in subtropical Guangdong provides an illustration: one year the Maoist leaders in Beijing decided that each region should be 'self-reliant', so Chen Village's production teams were ordered to grow crops such as wheat and cotton that were woefully unsuited to the climate. Another time, the teams were ordered from above to forgo collectively planting profitable vegetable plots and to fill in money-making fishponds to plant more grain, and, when national slogans and policies flip-flopped, to reexcavate the fishponds and again 'diversify' the teams' crops.¹¹

The End of Collective Farm Work

The farmers' support for collective agriculture could not endlessly be tested year after exhausting year by dysfunctional Party policies like these and by heavy grain exactions. Rural living standards were stagnating and by the late 1970s farmers' patience was running thin. Disillusionment and stalled production eventually led to the abandonment of agrarian socialism a few years after Mao's death. Coming almost full circle, Party officials in the early 1980s reintroduced household farming—with a twist: families could cultivate fields independently as though these were their own, but landownership remained in the hands of the production teams (on this, see my essay on 1981 in this volume).

The litany of failed radical programs during the 1970s should not lead us to believe that most of what occurred during the two decades of production-team work went against the interests of the farmers. There was much that was good in the collective system: the labour-intensive building of agricultural infrastructure and the provision of economic security, basic health care, and welfare for the needy. During the 1970s, émigrés from the countryside made it clear during interviews that the production teams, if left to their own devices, could have operated reasonably efficiently and productively. Had the state been less interventionist, had it allowed the production teams a much wider degree of independence

in their economic operations, it is conceivable the system of teams could have persisted successfully over the long term. But for too much of the two decades in which Chinese agriculture operated through production teams, the Party-State was unwilling to keep its hands off.