

1981

After three decades of collective agriculture (see Unger's essay on 1962 in the present volume), the return to family farming in the early 1980s was a seismic shift in the lives and labour of the majority of Chinese people. It did not, however, occur everywhere at the same time. The year 1981 witnessed the largest number of villages making this shift, but some villages did so earlier and some later. In fact, the conversion from collective agriculture to household farming was rolled out across China, one county and province after another, over four years, from 1980 to 1983.

Abandoning Collective Farming and the Effects on Labour

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By the late 1970s, many of China's farmers were frustrated. Due to a wave of failed radical policies pushed in the 1970s by Mao Zedong's closest followers in Beijing (today pejoratively called the Gang of Four), earlier gains in rural livelihoods had begun to stagnate. Before the mid-1970s, many farmers had perceived benefits in owning and working the land together with some fifteen to forty neighbouring households in what were titled 'production teams' (生产队). Interviews I conducted in Hong Kong during the 1970s with émigrés from China's countryside revealed that previously there had been acceptance and a large degree of support for the team-based effort. Most villagers appreciated the economic security of being a member of a team in case they suffered personal illness or injury. Grassroots collective ownership and work had also provided the means to organise farmers' labour during slack seasons to level fields or improve irrigation systems and thereby raise yields. And it had provided a means to invest in agriculture on a scale beyond what individual households could ever afford. But things were turning sour in the 1970s. Political commands from above, pushed by the new radical leadership around Mao, forced production teams to convert fields devoted to cash crops to concentrate on low-priced grain crops. The teams were being told to 'volunteer' some of their grain free of charge to support the revolution. Farmers were prohibited from raising extra pigs and chickens privately in their spare time, denying them an important source of cash income. As one imposition after another descended from above, the farmers' willingness to work hard for the mutual benefit of the households in their production team was waning.¹

However, the farmers did not abandon collective agriculture and revert to household-based farming on their own. Orders to do so came from above in the early 1980s. Chinese newspapers and journals of the time, however, painted a different picture. Much as they had erroneously reported about collectivisation in the 1950s, the official Chinese media made it seem that the abandonment of collective farming was a spontaneous grassroots movement. A flurry of English-language academic articles in the 1980s reiterated what the official Chinese writings averred.

But interviewees from Chinese villages repeatedly have reported otherwise, saying they were instructed to dismantle collective production and adopt household farming. By this point, many of them were disillusioned and happy to do so, but they were not the initiators.

The very first moves towards household farming had indeed originated with farmers during 1978–79 in two poor and remote counties of Anhui and Guizhou provinces, in hamlets where farmers had barely enough to eat. Their secret acts were quietly permitted by local officials and then, more publicly, by Anhui's Party secretary Wan Li. In 1980 Li was promoted to Beijing as the minister in charge of agriculture. China's new leaders were aware of the rural discontent and slowing work pace and, starting that year, Chinese Communist Party secretary Hu Yaobang, Premier Zhao Ziyang, and Wan Li, in separate and uncoordinated ways, pushed for relaxations in agricultural policy. But they did not specifically call for household farming and in fact were ambiguous about their intentions. One result was that provincial leaders had to figure out how to proceed. Coming after the repeated purges of officials during the 1960s and 1970s for being out of step with the Party line, they looked sideways to see what other officials were doing. As relaxations in rural policies gathered pace, they climbed aboard and ordered the parcelling out of collective fields to families to cultivate independently.²

As household farming was adopted in one province after another, there were significant increases in agricultural production in 1982–83, and this validated and embedded the new farming practices. As a consequence, by the end of 1983, 97.8 percent of all production teams in China had handed out their land to households.³ In sum, a complex and unplanned interplay between the top leadership, which was hesitantly open (but not committed) to household farming, and provincial and subprovincial leaders, who felt strong tacit pressures to show their political loyalty by embracing new 'reform' policies, culminated in an entirely new agrarian order.

This national scenario was confirmed by interviews I conducted in Hong Kong in mid-1983 with twenty-eight emigrants from eleven Chinese provinces who had recently returned from extended visits to their home village, ranging from a week to several months.⁴ Twenty-six of the twenty-eight villages in my sample had converted to family smallholdings by the end of 1982, and twenty-four of the interviewees related that in their own villages the decision was made exclusively by officials at levels far above that of the village. In only two villages had the production teams'

cadres and peasants themselves taken the initiative, and in one of these they had jumped the gun and swung over to family smallholdings in a belief that instructions to do so would soon come down from above.⁵ The other village was in Fengyang, the impoverished county in Anhui that became famous as the first place in China where farmers, in 1979, secretly began cultivating their fields as households.⁶ All of the other twenty-six villages passively waited for upper levels to tell them what to do and, when the upper levels did move, in only two of these villages were the peasantry informed that they could choose for themselves which system they preferred. The remaining twenty-four villages were shifted, without choice, into exactly the same system of family smallholdings, called 包干到户, in which each family gained use rights to fields without rental charge, with the amount of land based strictly on how many people were in the family. The land remained the property of the production team as a whole, but individual households could use most of the land that was allotted to them to diversify into any crops they liked and they could sell those crops on their own. To all intents and purposes, team members had been transformed into independent smallholders—albeit without a right to sell the land or convert it to non-agricultural purposes. That same system prevails today in the majority of China's villages.

The Immediate Consequences to Livelihoods and Labour

According to my twenty-eight interviewees, families with a large number of dependants were worried about the return to family farming, as were the elderly without close relatives, and families headed by women or by weak or chronically ill men. According to an interviewee who was sympathetic to collective agriculture, 'before, if they weren't physically able-bodied, they were given lighter work and still got their work-point income, but now they'd have to take care of the entire agricultural process, including all the really heavy work'. However, the majority of able-bodied families simply looked after their own interests—and, going by the interviewees' accounts, in the surveyed villages something like three-quarters of the households were in favour of disbanding collective agriculture and the remainder were opposed.

Some of the opposing households soon found that they, too, were better off. In good part this was due to policies the government had initiated even before the disbandment of collective agriculture. In particular, the government in 1979–80 began offering better prices for most types of

agricultural produce. Largely as a result of this, official statistics for China showed a rise of 67 percent in real per capita villager incomes between 1978 and the end of 1982.⁷

Prices for agricultural produce continued to rise for a few more years after 1982. Taking advantage of this, many households further raised their living standards by working more efficiently. Whereas in the last years of collective agriculture the pace of work had slowed, now, with their own families the sole beneficiaries, farmers pushed themselves. Households with adequate labour power could now strive to quickly plant and harvest sufficient grain on a portion of their fields and then use the remaining land to grow labour-intensive high-priced commercial crops. Many also found time to begin raising large numbers of hogs and poultry for the market, or rented village ponds to raise fish for urban consumption. Per capita peasant incomes leapt by 14.7 percent in real terms in 1983—a point at which all households were engaged in family farming—and climbed yet again in 1984 by exactly the same percentage: that is, by about 30 percent in two years.⁸

A downside, though, was that many women lost their status as independent income-earners. Before, they had worked together all day with other team members, often in squads of fellow women, and had developed their own social standing in the team. They had earned their own work-points and their own share of the harvest yield, demonstrably contributing much-needed income to the family. This had especially enhanced the situation of the as-yet-unmarried daughters. Now, when family farming was introduced, they worked under the direction of the *paterfamilias*, they were no longer working alongside other women, and did not bring home their own income. In these respects, rural women's circumstances and personal status declined.

However, the return to household farming soon was accompanied by a release of spare family labour from the fields, including young unmarried women. During the 1980s and 1990s, the fastest-growing sector of China's economy was rural industry—still publicly owned by rural townships and villages—which thrived because it was based on considerably cheaper labour than China's urban state-owned factories. The young rural factory workers rode or walked to work from their village homes each day, brought home much-needed cash from their personal wages, and worked in their spare time in their family's fields. Some of the young adults soon began spreading out across China in search of job opportunities. When the teams had practised collective agriculture, they did not

have permission to move, but now they were able to leave unimpeded. The number of migrant workers from the countryside has now swelled to more than 200 million—with major implications for farming that will be observed later in this essay.

An Egalitarian Legacy

The experiences of the previous period of collective agriculture had accustomed farmers to a commonly held moral premise that every household had a right to receive enough from the land to subsist. For instance, a plot of land had been distributed by the team to each household near its home to grow vegetables for its own consumption. The size of these plots (自留地) had expanded and contracted as families added and lost members, and each readjustment restored within the production team an equal per capita vegetable plot size. In addition, families who could not earn enough to feed all their children had obtained an annual grain ration 'on loan' from the production team for each of their young children; the cost of the loaned grain would be finally deducted from the family's earnings after the grown children entered the team's labour force. Villagers who had become accustomed to their production teams making these adjustments to balance out the family cycle were favourable to continuing such adjustments in the post-collective period in a different form, as being in their family's long-term interests.

They were glad that in the early 1980s, when all fields were handed over to households to farm independently, the same principle of equal per capita land size was used that had previously been applied to small household vegetable plots. Across China, farmers decided to retain this egalitarian principle into the future. Since the fields were still owned collectively by all of the team's households, they were able to recalibrate use rights over time. Starting in the 1980s and into the 2000s, every half decade or so they met as a group to readjust the team's fields. Each time, families that had grown in size through births or weddings and faced a shortage of land gained larger landholdings, and families that had decreased in size through deaths or the departure of daughters into marriage lost land, to recreate an equal per capita possession of land. The national government opposed these land readjustments, and passed regulations in 1993 and more strictly in 1998 to prohibit the practice. But the farmers ignored these

official directives and reallocated land at least once and often periodically, meeting quietly to discuss and vote on whether the time had come to readjust landholdings yet again.

In mid-2008, a survey questionnaire I helped devise collected a wealth of information in fifty-seven of Anhui Province's rural counties from 476 production teams (now retitled by the government as 'villager small groups,' 村民小组). The survey was implemented by students at Anhui Agricultural University who came from villages. They obtained answers to the questionnaire from their own and sometimes also one or two nearby 'villager small groups' when they went home for the summer of 2008. The findings were startling. Some 452 of the 476 villager small groups in the survey—that is, 95 percent—had reallocated their fields at least once since 1984 to recreate equal per capita landholdings, and most had done so more than once. A second survey using the same questionnaire was implemented that same year by seventy schoolteachers in one rural Anhui county. It found that all but one of the ninety-one surveyed villager groups (98.7 percent) had reallocated land and had conducted an average of 3.8 land redistributions since 1984.⁹

China's Migrant Workers and Their Ties to the Land

Practically all of the young villagers who sought work elsewhere in China after the disbandment of collective agriculture moved without their families, because China's system of household registration (户口, *hukou*) erected legal barriers to migration (see Hayward's essay in the present volume). The Chinese authorities tightly implemented the registration system in much the same way as the South African Government used the pass system in the days of apartheid—and, similarly, families could not accompany workers.¹⁰ China's registration system is a legacy of the period of Mao's rule, when the government used it to segregate peasants and urban people by barring migration from rural to urban areas. In its original form, *hukou* required rural residents to remain in agricultural production in their own village to feed the urban populace, and urban population growth was strictly kept in check. In the post-Mao era in the 1980s and 1990s, the same system instead served as a way of making use of the huge cheap surplus labour power of rural areas in new labour-intensive export industries, while forcing the migrant workers' families to remain

behind in the countryside. This policy saved city governments a lot of money, since they did not have to provide migrant families with access to urban health care and schools.

Most of the factories preferred to hire young unmarried women in the belief they were more 'obedient' (听话) (see Anita Chan's essay on 1993 in the present volume). The women were usually dismissed by the time they were twenty-four, on the grounds they were becoming too old to endure the fast-paced production-line work. Thus, the majority of the young women who left villages to find urban jobs had to then leave factory work and return home. The men often found jobs in construction and could continue working into middle-age. Agriculture became 'women's work', with young wives and their mothers-in-law and older men doing most of the work.

By the latter part of the 1990s, increasing numbers of the young wives began leaving their villages, even after giving birth, to take up low-end sweatshop or service-industry work, often in the same city as their husbands. It was too difficult to make ends meet otherwise, as crop prices were declining. They normally left their children behind in the care of grandparents. This trend accelerated after 2003 as China's export industry continued to expand rapidly and needed more labour than could be supplied just by young unmarried rural women. Factories therefore began opening their doors to migrant workers older than their mid-twenties, including men. It became increasingly common in poorer parts of the agricultural heartlands for villages to be occupied largely by grandparents and young children, with the younger generation of adults returning for a week each Chinese New Year. But many parents did not want to endure separation from their children and, within another half-decade, some of them began taking their young children to the city where they worked, sometimes bringing along a grandmother to care for them.

Most of the factory and construction jobs were temporary, though, and migrant workers regularly found themselves between jobs or became burned out and had to quit urban work for a while, returning to their village and farm work in the interim. A majority of migrant-worker families have experienced this type of circular migration between village and urban job, exacerbated by the fact that often their children, once of school age, cannot enter urban schools.¹¹

Other families, though, departed the countryside for such a long period that it seemed permanent. It therefore became an issue as to whether those households should receive land in the next redistribution given they had left the village, had not personally cultivated land for an extended period, and instead had leased out their allotted fields. But, according to the Anhui survey, 76.5 percent of villager small groups continued to make land available to families who had moved away. They realised that access to land back home provided a much-wanted safety net for these migrant families, whose urban status remains precarious due to China's ongoing household registration policy. Almost all villagers have close relatives who have become migrant workers, and having land as a backup is an option many village householders obviously wish to keep open.

Notably, though, there was a drop-off in the frequency of land reallocations after 1995 that persisted through to the 2008 survey. My Anhui survey statistics show that, between 1996 and 2008, only 33 percent of the villager small groups reallocated land for demographic reasons. A major reason is that after increased numbers of young villagers started leaving the countryside to take up work in urban areas, they remitted part of their income to their relatives in the village, so there is now a lower dependency on agriculture; and also, with more labour working elsewhere, there is less population pressure on the land. These two factors work against a felt need for land readjustments.

In the past decade and a half, the national and regional governments have turned away from supporting household farming and, in many districts, have endorsed agribusiness as 'modernisation'. Pressures have been exerted on villager small groups to lease all their land to a large-scale farmer or corporation—sometimes on contracts lasting several decades.¹² While most of China's villages retain family smallholdings under villager small groups, in the villages where agribusiness has taken over, many of the households and migrant workers have lost their access to farming. Their precarity has worsened.