

Empowered or Enfeebled?

A Comparative Study of Communist Land Policies in China, 1945-56

A Bachelor's Essay by
Fredrik Uddenfeldt

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Supervisor: Prof. Michael Schoenhals

Abstract

This thesis inquires into the land policies carried out by the Chinese Communist Party during the 1940's and 50's. Using contemporary research and original sources, the land policies of the two periods are described and compared. It is concluded that the land movements of the two periods were different in both aims and outcomes. The "land reform movement" of the 1940's was launched in a context of Civil War and was aimed at generating peasant support by raising living standards in the countryside, whereas the "cooperativization movement" of the 1950's was instead aimed at facilitating the industrialization of "New China." This was done at the expense of the peasants who had helped the CCP come to power a decade earlier.

摘要

在本文里，作者就共产党上世纪40与50年代所施行的土地政策进行了叙述与比较。参考资料以当代研究成果与中文原始材料为主。本文得出的主要结论为：上世纪40与50年代施行的土地政策在实质意义上是不同的。40年代所谓的“土地改革”是在国共内战的环境下实行的，是共产党以提高贫穷农民的生活水平，获取广大农民的支持为目的的；相反，50年代的“农业合作化”的目的却是为了在经济、农业平稳发展的基础上使“新中国”的工业化进一步得到飞跃性的发展，而付出代价的却是帮助共产党夺取政权的广大中国农民。

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Chapter One

In this thesis I will describe, analyze and compare the rural policies carried out during the Civil War (1945-49) and the First Five-Year Plan (1953-58). The aim is to go beyond ideologically deterministic explanations such as “the Chinese Communists favored land reform because they were communists.” Instead, by examining the economic, political, and historical contexts of the two periods, I will attempt to provide a more comprehensive view of the Communist land policies. The questions that I seek to answer are:

1. *Was the collectivization movement a continuation of the preceding land reform movement? How did the two movements differ in terms of aims and outcomes?*
2. *Can the origins of the collectivization movement be found in the preceding land reform movement?*

In chapter one, a brief background, describing the events leading up to the Civil War, will be provided, followed by a survey of existing research. Next, in chapter two, the Civil War period is described and analyzed, with focus on the land reform movement. In chapter three, the cooperativization movement will be described and discussed, both from a political and economic perspective. Finally, in chapter four, the two questions posed above will be answered.

Historical Background

During the 1937-1945 Resistance War against Japan¹, the Communists and Nationalists of China formed a “united front” and vowed to make combined efforts to fight the invader instead of fighting each other. Although this alliance at times only existed in name it meant actual policy concessions for both parties: For the Communists it meant a suspension of the radical land reforms which they had been experimenting with in the Jiangxi-Fujian Soviet area² before the Long March. Instead they carried out more moderate forms of land reform, such as rent and interest reduction and rural tax reform in areas under Communist control, like the Shanxi-Chahar-Hebei border area in northern China; the Nationalists, for their part, vowed to stop the persecution and killing of communist activists. But as the Japanese surrendered to the Allies in 1945, the Communists and Nationalists soon found themselves at loggerheads again, and as the Communists no longer were bound by the concessions made during the War of Resistance

¹ Also called the Second Sino-Japanese War, Eight Years' War of Resistance, War of Resistance, or the Japan-China War (used in Japan.)

² Mao Zedong, *Land Law* (7th Feb. 1930), in Stuart R. Schram (ed.), *Mao's Road to Power, Revolutionary Writings, Volume 3, From the Jinggangshan to the Establishment of the Jiangxi Soviets, July 1927-December 1930*, pp. 256-260; *Preface to Fundamental Laws of the Chinese Soviet Republic*

against Japan, they once again embarked on radical land policies such as expropriation and the redistribution of land.¹

The Chinese Communist Party had started out as a clique of young urban intellectuals inspired by European Marxist thought postulating that historical development in the 20th century would be all about the conflict between capitalists and workers. But China was still an agrarian economy lacking an urban proletariat and therefore some of the leading CCP figures, like Mao Zedong,² early on turned their eyes to the countryside in search of “class” conflict. The Chinese countryside in the early 20th century was largely the same as it had been for centuries, or even millennia.³ Although circumstances could differ vastly between regions and even neighboring villages, the traditional power structure, in which landowners, temples, and the gentry dominated rural politics, still prevailed in many villages.⁴ Below the rural elite were independent tillers, and on the bottom of rural society were poor peasants and peddlers. Social mobility was restricted, but industrious peasants could climb the social ladder by, for example, working in other areas during the slack season and expand their land holdings. But violating the traditional hierarchy by violent means was considered criminal, on the very least immoral.

In this rigid power structure Chinese communists found their class conflict.⁵ The large landowners, or landlords, became the capitalists of China; and the poor peasantry, “cruelly exploited” by the landlords, became the “rural proletariat”. The Communists called this skewness⁶ in land distribution the “land problem” (*tudi wenti*). The solution to the problem was spelled *land reform*, which could encompass a wide variety of measures ranging from tax reform, rent and interest reduction, to direct expropriation and redistribution of land. The Communists

¹ Suzanne Pepper, *Civil War in China*, p. 235

² Mao Zedong 毛泽东, *Hunan nongmin yundong kaocha baogao* 湖南农民运动考察报告 [Report of an Investigation of the Peasant Movement], in *Mao Zedong xuanji di yi juan* 毛泽东选集第一卷 [Selected Works vol.1] (Beijing, 1970) p. 12 passim

³ Hsi-huang Chen, *Agricultural Development in Mainland China: Past, Present, and Future*, in *Industry of Free China*, Oct. 1994, p. 47

⁴ For an in-depth description of the traditional village and particularly the role of the gentry, see Fei Xiaotong, *China's Gentry*, (University of Chicago Press, 1953 [1973]), pp. 75-90

⁵ Mao Zedong 毛泽东, *idem*, p. 14

⁶ Due to a lack of trustworthy and comprehensive data, considerable debate and confusion prevails as to how land holdings were distributed. For a more thorough discussion, see: Joseph W. Esherick, *Number Games: A Note on Land Distribution in Prerevolutionary China*, in *Modern China*, Vol. 7, No. 4 (Oct., 1981), pp. 387-411. He concludes that although the exact figures remain unclear and that geographical differences are vast, it seems that, in the 1930s, “landlordism” was still a quite widespread phenomena, and that “it [would be] quite ludicrous to conceive of China as a nation of smallholders.”

reckoned that victory would be within reach if they could improve the lives of the millions of peasants of rural China.¹

Land reform was not only about poor peasants and landlords. Stuck in between these two extremes were the independent tillers. According to the agrarian class theory imported from the Soviet Union they were defined as “middle peasants”.² This group constituted the absolute majority of the peasant population and can in *relative* economic status be compared to the middle class in industrialized economies, defined only by its relative position in between the rich and the poor. In a speech given 1919, Vladimir Lenin stated that “[a] middle peasant [...] is a peasant who does not exploit the labor of others, who does not live on the labor of others, who does not take the fruits of other people's labor in any shape or form, but works himself, and lives by his own labor.”³

Landlords and rich peasants, being the primary political target for the Communists in rural China, were hit first by land reform. The leading landlord family or families were often the political, economic and moral center of the village. Through land reform, the Communists could weaken these families economically and replace them with a new, loyal, leadership.⁴ As this old elite was forcibly removed from power, the middle peasants found themselves in a new position; they constituted the economic backbone of the countryside and were often the biggest contributors of grain to the war effort.⁵ The Communist Party could not do without them.

¹ Mao Zedong, *The Hunan Problem* (4th July, 1927), in Stuart R. Schram (ed.), *Mao's Road to Power*, Vol. 3, pp. 15-17

² For a description of Marxist views on the peasantry, see Tom Bottomore (ed.), *A Dictionary of Marxist Thought*, (Blackwell, 1983 [1988]), pp. 363-65

³ Vladimir Lenin, *The Middle Peasants*, in Lenin's Collected Works (4th English edition, Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1972), pp. 246-47

⁴ Suzanne Pepper, *Civil War in China*, p. 298

⁵ Ren Bishi 任弼时, *Tudi gaige zhong de jige wenti* 土地改革中的几个问题 [Several Problems in Land Reform], in *Jiefang zhanzheng shiqi tudi gaige wenjian xuanbian*, p. 110

Survey of Existing Research

*Civil War in China: The Political Struggle*¹

In this piece of work, Suzanne Pepper convincingly shows how the Chinese communists – miraculously and contrary to all expectations and predictions of the so-called “China hands” – managed to defeat Chiang Kai-Shek’s Nationalists and conquer the world’s largest country.

She concludes that the Civil War was an immensely complex and chaotic period not easily generalized upon, but that certain factors definitely proved decisive to the outcome of the war. The people had by the latter half of the 1940s lost all hope in the KMT government; rampant corruption, raging inflation, decades of fighting and war proved too much for a people tired of war. The Communists, on the other hand, played the role of the underdog all along; starting from scratch as a group of a few devoted revolutionaries, in contrast to the eminent KMT, the CCP faced low, or no, expectations, and could slowly build up strength in the countryside. Through a long process of learning, the Communists mastered the art of political organization, propaganda, and social reform. In this process, land reform proved a valuable asset, not only to gain the support of poor peasants but also to channel resources to the front and to gain political control at the village level.

*Chinese Village, Socialist State*²

This classical study, made by three American scholars, tells the tale of the village Wugong in rural Hebei and its place in China’s dramatic 21st century of dynastic decline, invasion, war, famine, and revolution. Particular focus is devoted to the tense relationship between the rising socialist state and the traditional village; how old social ties between villagers and clan members became increasingly tense as the new social order required a new form of loyalty based not on kinship or place of birth but on ideology.

¹ Suzanne Pepper, *Civil War in China: The Political Struggle, 1945-1949*, (Rowman & Littlefield, 1999, 2nd ed.)

² Edward Friedman, Paul G. Pickowicz, and Mark Selden, *Chinese Village, Socialist State*, (Yale University Press, 1991)

Chapter Two: Land Reform During the Civil War (1945-49)

In traditional rural China, the importance of owning land could not be overemphasized. Except the inherent value of land as a means to produce food, with no functioning financial and fiscal system, investment in land was also the only way of passing on wealth to one's children. Making the matter of land even more important was a central aspect of Chinese culture: Ancestor worship. To honor one's ancestors the family lineage must be continued, something that is done by producing sons who carry with them the family name. But since marriage always has been a costly affair in China, money is required to fulfill one's moral duties, and in rural China money was equal to land. Thus, ancestral worship had two "side effects": Great attachment to land and male offspring.¹

In the light of this, it is hardly surprising that the "land question" took on such great importance during the tumultuous 21st century. Land meant life, and as agricultural production declined slowly but steadily during the years of famine, war, and political failure, owning land became more vital than ever before.² Simply put, on one side of the conflict were poor peasants on the verge of subsistence craving more land – on the other, more well-off peasants defending their hard-earned land; Communists on one side propagated egalitarianism and a "land revolution", while the traditional land-owning elite together with conservative forces among the Nationalists strove for harmony and preservation of the old order.

The main source of ideological headache for the Communists was not the choice between poor and rich peasants, but rather how to treat the middle peasants. Being neither rich nor poor and being neither "exploiters" nor "exploited", they did not fit well into the black and white scheme of Marxism-Leninism as understood by many communists. Many were hard working self-made independent farmers, constituting the majority of the peasant population, also being big contributors to the war effort.³

¹ Edward Friedman, Paul G. Pickowitz and Mark Selden, *Chinese Village, Socialist State*, p.77

² Ramon H. Myers, *The Peasants Economy: Agricultural Development in Hopei and Shantung, 1890-1949*, (Harvard University Press, 1970), pp. 278-284

³ Ren Bishi 任弼时, *Tudi gaige zhong de jige wenti* 土地改革中的几个问题 [Several Problems in Land Reform], in *Jiefang zhanzheng shiqi tudi gaige wenjian xuanbian*, p. 110

Communist Base Areas and Economic Reforms

During the Resistance War against Japan, when the “united front” between CCP and KMT still existed, the Communists were well established in many rural areas in the North. As a result of the Japanese military pressure, the Communists had been forced to relocate from urban areas, or areas difficult to defend against the heavily armed Japanese, to remote and mountainous rural areas, often in the border regions between provinces. To the extent that it was possible, ambulatory Border Region Governments governed these areas.¹

Although still bound by the “united front” concessions and thus unable to carry out radical land policies, the Communists were in these remote areas able to experiment with progressive but relatively moderate social and economic reforms. This period of national resistance and patriotic build-up proved extremely valuable to the Communists. Much knowledge of military affairs, the rural economy and political organization was gained during this period. Many Communist activists were often of academic or gentry background and participated in the Communist cause for patriotic rather than ideological reasons. Therefore, the Communist movement gained real momentum during this period of national resistance. Later, Mao even thanked the Japanese aggressors for “wakening the Chinese people.”²

One “moderate” measure that proved successful was tax reform, implemented in the areas under Communist control in northern China. Although the amount of tax collected did not differ substantially from that of the Nationalists, the new tax scheme was of a more progressive nature. The aim was to make tax levies more “sensible” and that no one should go hungry after paying tax. As to the concrete measures, poor peasants and tenants were generally exempted from tax payment, which was offset by rich peasants and landlords paying more tax than before. But perhaps even more significantly, the majority of peasants, the independent tillers or middle peasants, were untouched by this tax reform. Thus, the tax reform succeeded in increasing the meager incomes of many poor peasants without alienating the large body of independent tillers,

¹ For a more elaborate description of the Communist base areas, see Lyman P. Van Slyke (ed.), *The Chinese Communist Movement: A Report of the United States War Department, July 1945*, (Stanford University Press, 1968), pp. 129-30

² Reportedly, Mao, when receiving Japanese politicians in 1961, said “The Chinese people learned an important lesson when the Japanese militarists occupied most of China. Had the Japanese not invaded China, the Chinese people would not have gained consciousness [*juewu*], and would never have united, and we would still be in the mountains, unable to watch Peking opera.”

http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Mao_Zedong#Sourced ;

<http://www.duping.net/XHC/show.php?bbs=11&post=1023291>

while at the same time weakening the economic (and political) power of rich peasants and landlords.¹

The next major reform initiated by the Communists was called “rent and interest reduction” (*jianzu jianxi*)², also known as “double reduction.” Although it followed along the same line of experimentation and moderation, it was certainly more radical than the earlier tax reform. Once again, the aim was to reach out to the Party’s ideological “target group”, the poor peasants and the tenants. This was to be done by forcing down the interest rate on land, which was paid by tenants to landlords – often in the form of grain or labor. In times of drought or flood, these levels could reach usurious levels, and the Communists sought to reach out to the poorest victims of these price fluctuations by setting the maximum interest rate level to 20-25 percent.³

The earlier tax reform, launched during the Resistance War, had been accepted by many richer peasants as a patriotic measure to strengthen the country. This new reform, however, engendered more opposition from peasants, especially from those leasing large amounts of land, making it difficult for local cadres to carry out the central directive. Also, in villages with low rates of tenancy, local cadres attached small importance to the reform. Further, the campaign was launched during a time of raging war, and there was little need for unnecessary intra-village conflicts caused by confrontational land policies. These factors resulted in a vast difference in implementation across regions and between villages; in a minority of villages it was implemented thoroughly, while in most it only existed in name or as propaganda slogans.⁴

One war ends. Another breaks out

In 1945, following the nuclear bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the Japanese suddenly surrendered unconditionally, resulting in a temporary power vacuum in China. After ordering the Japanese to surrender to Nationalist troops only, Chiang Kai-shek quickly reestablished Nationalist order in all big cities, whereas the Communists, knowing well that the cities were still out of their reach, remained in the countryside.⁵ Although formal peace talks were being held on and off, relations between the two parties were in reality as tense as ever. Chiang Kai-shek

¹ Friedman et al., *Chinese Village, Socialist State*, pp. 40-44; Jiangsui He, *The Death of a Landlord: Moral Predicament in Rural China, 1968-1969*, in Joseph W. Esherick, Paul G. Pickowicz, and Andrew G. Walder (eds.), *The Chinese Cultural Revolution as History*, p. 133

² *Ibid.*, p. 44

³ Deng Liqun 邓力群, Ma Hong 马洪, Wu Heng 武衡 (eds.), *Zhongguo de tudi gaige 中国的土地改革 [Land Reform in China]*, (北京: 当代中国出版社, Beijing: Dangdai chubanshe, 1996), pp. 120-123

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 121; Friedman et al., p. 44

⁵ Jay Taylor, *The Generalissimo: Chiang Kai-shek and the Struggle for Modern China*, (Harvard: Belknap, 2009), p. 331

believed that after almost a decade of fighting the Japanese, China was his to rule. The Communists, on the other hand, would not accept conceding their strong rural bases in the north. While the polite façade of the peace talks was still being upheld, both sides were hedging their bets, preparing for a long conflict. Finally, in March 1945, the first large-scale battle was fought in Manchuria. One month later, after a battle in which 7,000 Nationalist soldiers were killed, CCP forces captured the Manchurian city of Changchun.¹

Signs of Radicalization

The first sign of a shift in policy away from rent and interest reduction was the “Directive on Liquidations, Rent Reductions, and Land Problems”, commonly called the “May Fourth Directive” because of its release date, May 4th 1946. Although widely cited as a major shift in land policy, the document was, according to Suzanne Pepper, “neither excessively radical, nor very systematic”. The directive was only circulated as an intra-party document, and because of its lack of clarity the ensuing local campaigns “took a variety of different forms, some more radical than other, in the areas where it was implemented”.²

The directive can instead be seen as an adjustment of central policy to the actual conditions in many villages. Demand for land remained acute among poor peasants, and in Communist strongholds where local landlords lacked the military means to protect their holdings, land was confiscated and landlords were beaten or killed even before the promulgation of the May Fourth Directive, the only difference being that it was called “settling old accounts.”³ However, while the Party probably approved of peasants roughing up landlords, they seemed more concerned with the middle peasants:

The land of middle peasants must absolutely not be infringed on. Any middle peasant whose land is infringed upon must be repaid and compensated accordingly. Throughout this movement we must obtain the sympathy and satisfaction of the middle peasants, including rich middle peasants.

4

Between July 17th and September 13th 1946 the CC Work Committee held a “National Land Conference” in the small Hebei mountain village of Xibaipo, attended by 1000 delegates and

¹ Jay Taylor, *The Generalissimo*, pp. 346-47

² Suzanne Pepper, *Civil War in China*, pp. 244-245

³ *Ibid.*, p. 246; Deng Liqun 邓力群 et al., *Zhongguo de tudi gaige* 中国的土地改革, pp. 151-155; 179-80

⁴ *Zhonggong zhongyang guanyu tudi wenti de zhishi* 中共中央关于土地问题的指示 [Central Committee Directive on the Land Question] (4th May, 1946), in *Jiefang zhanzheng shiqi tudi gaige wenjian xuanbian* 1945-49, p. 2

chaired by Liu Shaoqi.¹ At the conference, Liu gave a speech in which he criticized the leadership of the Shandong, Jin-Cha-Ji (Shanxi-Chahar-Hebei), and Jin-Sui (Shanxi-Suiyuan) border regions for not carrying out land reform thoroughly. He further emphasized the need to fulfill the peasant's urgent demand for land, and criticized the work-style of some cadres as corrupt and "bureaucratic." Regarding corruption, Liu said that "some veteran cadres even married the daughters of landlords, and during land reform they helped their fathers-in-law."² The resolution reached after the conference, issued October 10th 1947, stated that

China's agrarian system is unjust in the extreme [...] Less than 10 percent of the rural population held approximately 70 to 80 percent of the land, cruelly exploiting the peasantry. Farmhands, poor peasants, middle peasants, and other people, however, who make up over 90 percent of the rural population, hold a total of approximately only 20 to 30 percent of the land, toiling throughout the whole year, knowing neither warmth nor a full stomach.³

This message was formalized in the "Outline Agrarian Law" (*Zhongguo tudifa dagang*) and was issued the same day.⁴ It was clearer and more systematic than the May Forth Directive issued the year before. Two of the 16 articles stipulated stated that "land to the tiller" was to be realized, and that all proprietary rights of landlords, temples, ancestral shrines, and other institutions were to be abolished. Above all, article 6 stated boldly that

[...] all land of landlords in the villages, and all public land, shall be taken over by the village peasant organization, and together with all other village land, in accordance with the total population of the village, irrespective of sex and age, is to be equally distributed to the village population; and with regard to the quantity and quality of land, take from the haves and given to the not-haves, so that all villagers obtain land equally; and it shall be the individual property of each person.⁵

The conference and the ensuing Outline Agrarian Law marked a clear radicalization in land policy; the primary message was egalitarian distribution of land, a clear departure from the cautious approach of the May Forth Directive. In effect, this meant encroachment of middle

¹ Tony Saich (ed.), *The rise to power of the Chinese Communist Party*, p. 1197

² Liu Shaoqi 刘少奇, *Guanyu tudi huiyi gedi huibao qingxing ji jinhou yijian de baogao* 关于土地会议各地汇报情形及今后意见的报告 [Report to the CC Concerning Each Locality's Report to the Land Conference on Conditions and Suggestions for the Future] (4th August 1947), in *Jiefang zhanzheng shiqi tudi gaige wenjian xuanbian* 1945-1949, pp. 71-72

³ *Zhongguo tudifa dagang* 中国土地法大纲 [Outline Agrarian Law], in *Jiefang zhanzheng shiqi tudi gaige wenjian xuanbian* 1945-49, p. 85

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

peasant land, since most land belonging to landlords and rich peasants already had been expropriated.

Nevertheless, caution should be applied when interpreting these directives. As probably goes for any guerilla movement, what is decided at the top is not necessarily translated into corresponding actions on the ground. Thus, the impact of documents such as the outline agrarian law at the village level is difficult to assess. As witnessed by William Hinton, a contemporary visitor and participant in the land reform movement in a Shanxi village, the time required for policy to reach local cadres and translate into action was quite long, and the results varied between areas.

No doubt, as reports of victories won by the PLA reached the villages, the confidence of local cadres grew, and perhaps even more important, it also boosted the confidence in the Communist movement of non-activist peasants. While military victory still seemed distant, many peasants, for fear of retribution upon the return of the Nationalist army, hesitated to participate in the land reform movement and in the so-called “speak bitterness meetings” (*sukuhui*), where Communist activists admonished peasants to speak out against the “feudal exploiters” and give witness of the “crimes” committed.

The Spring Thaw of 1948

Merely two months after the Outline Agrarian Law was issued, voices urging caution in land reform could once more be heard. 25th December 1947 a meeting was held in the Shaanxi village of Yangjiagou, attended by influential CCP figures like Mao Zedong, Zhou Enlai, and Ren Bishi. At the meeting the land question was discussed¹, and in his report² to the meeting, Mao also spoke of it, striking a cautious tone, saying that “our policy is to rely on the poor peasants and unite solidly with the middle peasants”, and furthermore warning against once again committing the “ultra-leftist” mistakes made during the years 1931-1934.³

A few weeks later, 12th January 1948, Ren Bishi held a speech at an enlarged meeting of the Northwest Field Operations Military Front Committee, repeating Mao’s message of unity, saying that “[the middle peasants] possess rich production experience which is worth studying by poor peasants and hired labor” and that “the middle peasants are our permanent allies”, while noting that “between 30 and 40 percent of the soldiers in our PLA soldiers are middle peasants.” Ren

¹ Tony Saich (ed.), *The Rise to power of the Chinese Communist Party*, p. 1199

² Mao Zedong 毛泽东, *Muqian xingshi he women de renwu* 目前形势和我们的任务 [The Present Situation and Our Tasks], in *Mao Zedong xuanji di si juan* (Mao’s Selected Works vol. 4), p. 1139

³ *Ibid.*, p. 1146

also spoke of the problem with middle peasants being wrongly classified as “productive rich peasants” or “bankrupt landlords”, and not getting their share of the “fruits of struggle” (items confiscated from landlords and rich peasants.)¹

In several telegrams and intra-party directives² issued during February and March 1948 Mao once again touched on land reform, criticizing CCP news agencies and newspapers for “one-sidedly propagating a poor peasant-farm laborer line” while overlooking the importance of uniting with the middle peasants; further stressing the need to avoid “leftist mistakes” and the importance of not hastily carrying out land reform before the situation on the local level has been consolidated. Finally, in June 1948, a speech given by Mao in the Shanxi-Suiyuan border region was published in the People’s Daily. As soon as this publication appeared, the border region governments summoned county leaders and ordered them to convene county conferences.³

At these conferences, which were attended by all village cadres, the “adventurist poor peasant line” was harshly criticized. As witnessed by William Hinton in Long bow village, village cadres, who until then had been following the *Outline Agrarian Law*, were astonished and confused. Was it their fault that the Party leadership had changed its mind? But still, the prestige of the Party remained high, and few questioned its ultimate authority.⁴

This policy volte-face should be seen in the light of CCP’s increasing success in the battlefield; after Lin Biao’s so-called Winter Offensive of 1947-48, the People’s Liberation Army had gained the upper hand over the Nationalists.⁵ Further, since most of the land belonging to landlords and rich peasants had already been confiscated and distributed to poor peasants and tenants, the only “extra” land remaining was that of middle peasants. Thus, at a critical stage of the war,

¹ Ren Bishi 任弼时, *Tudi gaige zhong de jige wenti* 土地改革中的几个问题 [Several Problems in Land Reform], in *Jiefang zhanzheng shiqi tudi gaige wenjian xuanbian*, p. 110

² See Mao Zedong 毛泽东, *zai butong diqu shishi tudifa de butong celüe* 在不同地区实施土地法的不同策略 [Different tactics for carrying out the Land Law in different areas] (Feb 3 1948), in *Mao Zedong xuanji di si juan* (Mao’s Selected Works vol. 4), p. 1172 ;

Mao Zedong 毛泽东, *Jiuzheng tudi gaige xuanchuan zhong de zuoqing cuowu* 纠正土地改革宣传中的“左”倾错误 [Correct the “left” errors in Land Reform Propaganda] (Feb. 11 1948)], in *Mao Zedong xuanji di si juan* (Mao’s Selected Works vol. 4), p. 1175 ;

Mao Zedong 毛泽东 *Xin jiefangqu tudi gaige yaodian* 新解放区土地改革要点 [Essential Points in Land Reform in the Newly Libearted Areas] (Feb. 15 1948), in *Mao Zedong xuanji di si juan* (Mao’s Selected Works vol. 4), p. 1178 ;

Mao Zedong 毛泽东 *Guanyu qingkuang de tongbao* 关于情况的通报 [Circular on the Situation] (Mar. 20 1948), in *Mao Zedong xuanji di si juan* (Mao’s Selected Works vol. 4), p. 1192

³ William Hinton, *Fanshen*, pp. 576-78

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 584-600

⁵ Odd Arne Westad, *Decisive Encounters, the Chinese Civil War, 1946-1950*, (Stanford University Press, 2003), pp. 175-77

when large swathes of KMT territory became in reach for the PLA, CCP leaders felt urged to cool down the overheated land reform movement for fear of losing the support of the key group of independent tillers.

As part of this “cooling down” of the land reform movements, starting in 1948, official documents and directives emphasizing the securing of private property appeared.¹ Local governments were instructed to issue land deeds to all holders of land (including women.)² Contradictory as it may seem – thousands of rich peasants and landlords, if still alive, had seen most of their land confiscated or expropriated by 1948 – but this talk of “property rights” was aimed at reassuring the big and growing group of middle peasants. Directives were issued to local governments in northern China, instructing that all holders of property – women as well – were to be given a land deed.

The lot of Chinese Women and their Land Revolution

Finally, a crucial aspect of the Chinese revolution hitherto unmentioned – and underrepresented in existing literature – is the role of women. For centuries upon centuries, women, regardless of social standing, had been on the absolute bottom of the Chinese society. If poor, they worked the fields together with their men; if the household could afford it, their feet were bound and were forbidden to leave home alone. Before the revolution of 1911, men were free to take as many wives as they could afford, while women could only dream of divorce. The only opportunity to exercise power for Chinese women came with the marriage of their sons and the arrival of a daughter-in-law. Shortly put, life was miserable for most Chinese women.

It is therefore far from surprising that the foreign ideas of equality between the sexes proved explosive – particularly so in the traditional countryside. Women were often the most ardent supporters of the revolution, and women’s associations, the greatest fear of tyrannical husbands and mothers-in-law, were set up in many villages.³ The issue of women’s proprietary rights also became burning hot during the course of land reform; even if a women had the right to divorce her husband, she would be left without land and could thus not afford it. These new ideas clashed violently with the traditional views on the women’s role in society and gave rise to

¹ Mao Zedong 毛泽东, zai Jinsui ganbu huiyi shang de jianghua 在晋绥干部会议上的讲话 [Speech given at Jinsui cadre conference] (April 4, 1948), in Mao Zedong Xuanji, Vol. 4, pp. 1201; See also Zhongguo de tudi gaige 中国的土地改革, pp. 235-42

² Zhongguo de tudi gaige, p. 235

³ Jack Belden, *China Shakes the World*, (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1949 [1970]), pp. 316-17

more debate than anything else.¹ Although women's rights to land probably more than often only existed in name, it certainly gave many women an unprecedented feeling of worth.

The issue of women's rights is a good example of how the land reform movement was about more than just land and the distribution of it. Land was intimately associated with the traditional social order and the balance of power in the countryside; therefore, challenging this traditional structure of land ownership was tantamount to opening Pandora's box, ultimately leading to fundamental social change in the countryside. In rural China land meant power, and gaining land meant empowerment.

Summary: Land Reform during the Civil War

The Civil War between CCP and KMT was the final crescendo of the violence that had lasted for almost half a century. The so-called Communist "land reform" was as much a spontaneous uprising as a result of conscious policies launched from distant leaders in the caves of Yan'an. Chaos prevailed in the country, communications were medieval, and local conditions differed vastly across regions; this, among many other factors, makes it difficult for us to draw general conclusions. What was true for a village in Shanxi might be far from the reality in Hebei on the other side of the Taihang Mountains; the realities of land reform were as many as there were villages. In some villages the relations between landlords, independent tillers and tenants were rather harmonious and few saw the need for violent struggle; in others, peasants wished no more than killing the local tyrant, and in such villages the arrival of communism was only the spark that ignited the fire.

What we can conclude is that this peasant "movement" was by no means centrally orchestrated or planned, and if so, to a very low extent; rather, it was of a highly decentralized nature, largely shaped by local conditions and the years of resistance against Japan. Driving forces were often peasants themselves, craving land to feed their families, and women seeking empowerment. No doubt, the role of Communist leadership was important, but local grievances and bad blood tended to be the fuel of reform. Significant of this distance between the Communist elite and village activists and peasants is the occasional efforts of the Communist Party to halt and slow down the movement, such as in the spring of 1948; CCP leaders were aware of their lack of control of the land movement and were not willing to let the land issue jeopardize the conquering of the big cities and the rest of the country.

¹ Hinton, *Fanshen*, pp. 184-88

By the late 1940's, either through tax reform and other economic policies or forced expropriation, land distribution in most villages had changed radically. As a result, rural China had been fundamentally reshaped, not only economically, but also socially and politically; the old elite had been usurped, women had gained unprecedented (though still limited) powers, and various socialist organizations had by large replaced old traditional rural institutions. Many families had been reunited and enriched; others had been torn apart or become impoverished.

To conclude, the term "land reform" can be both misleading – since it misses out several crucial aspects of the motley peasant movement – and yet very accurate; land meant everything in rural China, and the term "land reform" can therefore, in this sense, mean anything. Since virtually everything in the Chinese countryside – power, money, morality, status, and marriage – revolved around land, reforming land meant reforming everything. Consequently, this "land movement", as we perhaps better call it, was a motley movement with many driving and often conflicting forces: On the one hand, the Communist Party and its ambition to take over the country, and on the other hand millions of hungry peasants interested not in ideology, but survival.

Chapter Three: The Collectivization of Agriculture 1955-56

During the three years that preceded the launch of the First Five-Year Plan (1953-57) the Chinese economy recovered steadily, largely owing to the restoration of law and order, and the curbing of inflation, etc.¹ At the same time China also participated in the Korean War, in which the People's Liberation Army got the opportunity to show that it was no longer a gang of peasant soldiers in rags drinking millet gruel, but a highly disciplined and professional army. The success in Korea – where the North, with PRC support, managed to fight the US-backed South to a stalemate, gave the Communist leadership much longed-for international prestige², and above all, the Soviet Union, which during the Civil War had regarded CCP with suspicion, expressing doubts about the leadership capabilities of Mao Zedong, now seemed to accept the leaders of New China.³

Cooperativization⁴ and its Various Stages

With the country under control, both politically and economically, voices urging accelerated socialization began to be heard and before long a the First Five-Year Plan was launched in 1953. As a part of the socialist transformation, the traditional family-based agriculture was to be replaced by larger production units, comprising several households, supposedly benefiting from economies of scale. This agricultural cooperativization can be divided into three successive stages: Mutual-aid teams (MATs); elementary agricultural producer's cooperatives (elementary APCs) and advanced APCs.

During the Civil War, in areas under communist control, some peasants, either spontaneously or under the leadership of party trained cadres, formed “mutual-aid teams” (*huzhuzu*) usually consisting of 5-6 households. The main rationale behind the formation of these groups was to use farm implements and draft animals more efficiently. If peasant A had a plow but lacked a donkey to pull it, and peasant B lacked a plow but had a donkey, they could by sharing their implements and working together greatly improve their efficiency – and incomes. In poor rural China, where many peasants lacked even the most basic farm implements, this kind of resource pooling could make a big difference. And during the slack season, some mutual-aid teams also engaged in sideline professions such as peddling, rope making or peanut oil making, further

¹ Frederick C. Teiwes, *Establishment and Consolidation of the New Regime*, in Cambridge History of China, vol. 14, p. 51

² Teiwes, *Establishment and Consolidation of the New Regime*, p. 60

³ Mao on Sino-Soviet Relations: Conversations with the Soviet Ambassador. Document 1: Mao's Conversation with Yudin, 31 March 1956, in Cold War international History Project Bulletin, Issue 6-7 (Winter 1995/1996), p. 166

⁴ The terms cooperativization (*hezuohua*) and collectivization (*jitihua*) are here used interchangeably.

increasing incomes¹. However, although making economic sense, cooperation also involves risk-taking and requires trust. In villages long plagued by Japanese occupation, famine and general chaos, these necessary conditions for cooperation were seldom met. Therefore, peasant cooperation was by no means a matter of course and the number of mutual-aid teams was far from large.

The next “stage” of cooperativization was the so-called agricultural producer’s cooperatives (APCs). Described in Party terms, “the semi-socialist agricultural producer’s cooperative is a transitional measure to lead the peasants towards socialism in a natural, non-coercive manner.” The main difference between the APCs and the earlier and less advanced mutual-aid teams (MATs) was the way in which land holdings were treated. Members of mutual-aid teams only shared implements and draft animals – while households of APCs in addition to this also pooled their land holdings, although members still retained formal ownership of their land and could withdraw at will. In return for investing their land, peasants were given income by the cooperative. The size of the income was determined by the amount of land and labor hours invested. However, the proportion of income determined by land – the land dividend – was subject to considerable debate: To encourage households with much land but little manpower to join, some cooperatives set the land dividend high, to the chagrin of large households with little land. As the tone of the cooperativization debate became increasingly harsh, the policy to attract large landowners was deemed opportunistic – it was claimed that poor households with much manpower but little land were “exploited”, and the land dividend was reduced. Eventually, in the mid 1950s, when cooperativization reached its “high tide”, this land dividend was removed completely, thus making labor the only source of income.

This last type of organization, with no land dividend, was the “highest” form of cooperation and was called “advanced APC”. Income was determined by the amount of “work points” earned. The system with work points was designed to encourage hard work, but it required the cooperative to keep books, and with several hundreds of co-op members, of whom only a small minority could read and write, recording every task done and work point earned by the members naturally proved a herculean task. Even more significantly, members of the advanced APCs no longer had the right to withdraw from the collective; their land was now the legal property of the co-op. Thus, the land of member households was in effect expropriated. Some scholars argue that the agricultural crisis – and the ensuing famine of 1959-61, with tens of

¹ Friedman et al., *Chinese Village, Socialist State*, p. 78

millions of victims – was partly the result of this last point: With members being unable to withdraw from the collective, the incentives to work hard were severely weakened.¹

Finally, in 1958, the word “People’s Commune” entered the Chinese political vocabulary. They were amalgamations of several advanced APCs, containing 5,000 households and 10,000 acres of land. After the agricultural crisis and the ensuing famine of 1959-61 the People’s Communes remained only as administrative units – similar to villages and townships – while teams of 20-30 households organized actual production, resembling the earlier APCs.

The Political Process of Cooperativization

In 1949, before the final victory and the founding of the People’s Republic, the Communists declared agricultural cooperativization a “fundamental goal” that was to be implemented gradually, and no time plan was specified.² This cautious attitude remained throughout the first years of the People’s Republic; the leaders, Mao among them, stressed the restoring of production levels. Since the most productive peasants often belonged to the richer segment of the rural population – the so-called middle peasants and rich peasant – these groups had to be reassured that radical future land reforms would not damage their interests. As a result of this, a slogan of the time was “maintaining the rich peasant economy” – coined by the supreme leader himself.³

In 1951 a slight shift in tone could be heard: the Shanxi Provincial Committee proposed to the party centre that mutual-aid teams should be upgraded in order to prevent “the spontaneous inclination of peasants towards capitalism” and to prevent mutual-aid teams from becoming “manors of the rich peasants” [*funong de zhuangyuan*]. Further, the report questioned the principle of private ownership, suggesting that it “should be gradually weakened until negation”. Finally, regarding the dividends in APCs, the provincial committee proposed that the land dividend should increase in line with production growth.⁴ However, Liu Shaoqi, the P.R.C. president, was not pleased by this proposal, calling it dangerous and utopian “agrarian socialist

¹ Justin Yifu Lin, *Collectivization and China’s Agricultural Crisis 1959-61*, in *The Journal of Political Economy*, Vol. 98, No. 6 (1990), pp. 1228-1252

² Teiwes & Sun, *The Politics of Agricultural Cooperativization*, p. 6

³ *Ibid.*, p. 6

⁴ Zhonggong Shanxi Shengwei 中共山西省委, *ba laoqu huzhu zuzhi tigai yibu* 把老区互助组织提高一步 [Upgrade mutual-aid teams in old liberated area], in *Nongye jitihua zhongyao wenjian huibian* (1949-57) 农业集体化重要文件汇编 [Compilation of important documents regarding the agricultural cooperativization 1949-57], (Zhonggong zhongyang dangxiao chubanshe; Central Party School Press, 1981), p. 35

thought.”¹ Clearly, the new government was not yet ready for thorough land reform and potential rural conflicts; many domestic issues remained to be solved: for instance, the areas of Xinjiang and Tibet had just recently been “liberated”², and the southern province of Guizhou was not “pacified” until 1951.³

However, Liu’s statement about the Shanxi proposal – although in harmony with party consensus – reportedly angered Mao, who earlier had been of the same opinion himself. Mao, who now suddenly seemed to favor a slight policy radicalization, started pushing for more mutual-aid teams. To supervise the promotion and upgrading of mutual-aid teams, a Central Rural Work Department was set up in November 1952⁴. This new organization was led by Deng Zihui, an old and trusted revolutionary colleague of Mao. Provincial and local leaders quickly became conscious of the change in political climate and followed suit. In their eagerness to manifest loyalty and revolutionary zeal they set up cooperatives at an unprecedented pace – often forcing peasants to join the local cooperative, and before long the national target was surpassed.⁵

In reaction to this sudden cooperativization fever, Mao warned against “excessive interference in the peasant economy” and Deng Zihui launched a program called “opposing rash advance” (*fan maojin*) which led to the dissolution of thousands of MATs and APCs. The leaders still feared stirring up conflicts in the recovering peasant economy, seeking to avoid the bloodshed and chaos that had followed the Soviet cooperativization under Joseph Stalin. But as the honeymoon of “New China” neared its end and the First Five-Year Plan (commencing in 1953) approached, agricultural policy once more began to lean leftwards. In late 1953 a new ambitious target was launched: 35,000 APCs were to be set up by fall 1954. At the same time, Mao started criticizing Deng’s earlier initiative of “opposing rash advance” – in spite of his earlier support.

¹ Liu Shaoqi tongzhi dui Shanxi shengwei “Ba laoqu huzhu zuzhi tigao yibu” de piyu 刘少奇同志对山西省委“把老区互助组织提高一步”的批语 [Comrade Liu Shaoqi’s Comments on Shanxi Provincial Committee’s “Upgrade mutual-aid teams in old liberated areas”] (3rd July 1951), in *Nongye jitihua zhongyao wenjian huibian*, p. 33

² Jeremy Brown and Paul G. Pickowicz, *The Early Years of the People’s Republic of China: An Introduction*, in Jeremy Brown and Paul G. Pickowicz (eds), *Dilemmas of Victory: the Early Years of the People’s Republic of China*, p. 9

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 7-8.

⁴ *Zhonggong zhongyang guanyu jianli noncun gongzuobu de jue ding (jielu)* 中共中央关于建立农村工作部的决定(节录) [Regarding the decision of the Central Committee to establish Rural Work Department], in *Nongye jitihua zhongyao wenjian huibian 1949-57*, p. 77

⁵ Teiwes and Sun, *The Politics of Agricultural Cooperativization*, p. 7

Once again, the seemingly bold plan of 35,000 APCs by 1954 was surpassed by far: As many as 90,000 elementary APCs were created by the spring of 1954¹. Whether these extraordinary figures reflected reality or if they were the result of overenthusiastic local leaders “rounding the numbers” is hard to tell, but it nonetheless stood clear that the whole country had been struck by a severe cooperativization fever. By 1955, 633,000 elementary APCs had been set up, an astonishing growth from 18 APCs in 1950. The size of the cooperatives also increased over time: from 10-15 households in the early 1950s to 45-50 households in 1956-57.²

As the number of cooperatives surged, Deng Zihui found himself in an increasingly uncomfortable position. Just as in the case of Liu Shaoqi’s critical comments on the Shanxi proposal in 1951 that were subsequently rebuked by Mao, Deng Zihui’s relatively cautious approach to land reform – although in harmony with Party policy – now fell out of favor with the supreme leader as well. In a famous speech given in mid-1955 at a conference of local leaders, Mao, most likely referring to Deng, scornfully said that “some of our comrades, tottering along like women with bound feet, are complaining all the time, ‘you’re going too fast, much too fast’”.³

In response to Mao’s speech, provincial leaders⁴ convened meetings to discuss and transmit the words of the Chairman and reported back to the Central Committee in less than two weeks. The general theme of all reports was self-criticism. One report, by the Hubei Central Committee, read as follows:

*We, the provincial party committee, believe that, on the issue of socialist transformation of agriculture, we have been thinking in a rightist fashion, manifested in our fear of developing too many [cooperatives] and our fear of chaos. But is this really true? What is this fear based on? [...] Our thinking is unclear and half-baked like half-cooked rice.*⁵

¹ Zhongyang pizhuan zhongyang nongcun gongzuobu guanyu di er ci quanguo nongcun gongzuo huiyi de baogao 中央批转中央农村工作部关于第二次全国农村工作会议的报告 [Report by the Central Rural Work Department on the second national rural work conference, endorsed and transmitted by the Central Committee] (3rd June, 1954), in *Nongye jitihua*, p. 246

² Agricultural Cooperativization in China Editorial Board (1987b), taken from Justin Yifu Lin, *Collectivization*

³ Mao Zedong, *On the Cooperative Transformation of Agriculture*, in *Selected Works*, Vol. 5, p. 184.

⁴ In the official compilation “*Nongye jitihua zhongyao wenjian huibian*” reports from eight provinces (Hubei, Liaoning, Anhui, Shanxi, Henan, Zhejiang, Gansu, Fujian and Yunnan) are included, transmitted to the Central Committee between August 3rd and 12th. It is unclear to the author whether other provinces failed to report back or if their responses were not deemed important enough to be included in a “compilation of important documents”. It can however be noted that the comments on the reports done by the Central Committee are all approving, with the standard phrase being “XX provincial committee’s policy is correct” (XX shengwei de *fangzhen shi zhengque de*).

⁵ *Hubei shengwei guanyu nongye shengchan hezuoshe bushu wenti de baogao* 湖北省委关于农业生产合作化部署的报告 [Report on the cooperativization of agricultural production by Hubei Provincial Committee] (3rd Aug. 1955), in *Nongye jitihua*, p. 378

Another report, made by the Central Committee in Henan, is strikingly upbeat in its self-criticism:

*After hearing Chairman Mao's directive on agricultural cooperativization, we embraced it unanimously and felt both elated and heartened. After studying and discussing [the directive], we engaged in criticism and self-criticism, condemning our erroneous thinking, [...] greatly improving our socialist revolutionary courage and self-confidence.*¹

Clearly, there was now little doubt among local leaders about the intention of the Party center. The cautious approach earlier promoted by the Central Rural Work Department and Mao was now a closed chapter. The final avalanche of cooperativization now swept over the country.

The political turbulence in 1955 is significant in several ways. Apart from the human impact, measured in the surge in co-op membership, it also demonstrates the ultimate authority of Mao himself. Until mid-1955, the cooperativization process had not led to any significant intra-party controversy; intra-party discussion mostly concerned the pace of cooperativization and mere technicalities, not the overall policy direction, and Mao was never or seldom personally involved in the debate.² But his eventual contribution made a heavy impact: In 1954, before the speech, only 200 advanced APCs had been set up countrywide; in 1956, the year after the speech, the number had reached 540,000.³

What is most significant here is the shift from elementary to advanced APCs. Earlier, when mutual-aid teams were converted into elementary APCs, the transition was relatively smooth due to the fact that peasant members still had the right to withdraw and get their land back. Now, when peasants were about to lose the legal right to their land, a lot more was at stake – both politically and economically. This, perhaps above all, reflects the influence of Mao: The Central Rural Work Department, well aware of the risks and difficulties in forcing recalcitrant peasants into collectives, had until mid-1955 more or less successfully promoted a cautious line of cooperativization based on the principle of voluntariness and mutual benefit. But with the Chairman changing sides, the cautious approach became impossible. Local leaders were by 1955-56 well aware of the new political winds blowing in Beijing and started setting up

¹ *Henan shengwei guanyu nongye hezuohua wenti de baogao* 河南省委关于农业合作化问题的报告 [Report on the cooperativization of agriculture by Henan Provincial Committee] (4th Sept. 1955), in *Nongye jitihua*, p. 399

² Kenneth R. Walker, *Collectivization in Retrospect: The "Socialist High Tide" of autumn 1955-Spring 1956*, in *The China Quarterly*, No. 26 (Apr.-Jun., 1966), p. 30

³ Justin Yifu Lin, *Collectivization and China's Agricultural Crisis 1959-61*, in *The Journal of Political Economy*, Vol. 98, No. 6, pp. 1232

advanced APCs at an astonishing pace. By 1957, 753,000 advanced APCs had been set up¹, which meant that 99% of China's rural population had been collectivized.

The Economics of Collectivization

Despite the economic recovery of the early 1950s, China was still a poor country lacking a modern industry, relying almost completely on the traditional rural sector. In this context the first Five-Year Plan was launched. Emphasis was on rapid development of a national heavy industry, a matter of national pride.² This required large amounts of capital; something that China lacked at the time. People, or lots of peasants, were the only resources available. Thus, to realize the First Five-Year Plan, this only resource – labor – had to be turned into capital in some manner; capital that could be used for investment in heavy industries.

This is where agricultural cooperativization enters the picture. Just as the communists had done during the Civil War, when resources were channeled to the front through loyal local leaders who had usurped the local traditional elite, they now attempted something similar: By collectivizing agriculture and making the Party-run collective the local administrative unit controlling the rural economy³, the bargaining power of the (Party-run) state was maximized, enabling it to procure grain below market price. This, apart from being profitable for the state, also translated into cheap food prices in the cities, and above all, cheap food for the growing number of industrial workers. However, with prices being artificially low, peasants — by selling grain at low prices to the state — incurred a loss. This encouraged them to sell second-grade grain to the state while selling the best produce at the local market, where prices were higher, and thereby compensating for the loss. To prohibit this kind of economic behavior, the local markets – as old as China herself – were clamped down upon, deemed a capitalist relic of the old society, and eventually completely banned.⁴ Agricultural Producers Cooperatives were ordered to “help the peasants shake off the yoke of usurers, grain hoarding speculators, and various commercial exploiters” and were forbidden to engage in trade activities.⁵ Although black markets remained in operation, these changes rapidly and truly reshaped the social and economic landscape of the Chinese countryside.

¹ Justin Yifu Lin, *Collectivization and China's Agricultural Crisis 1959-61*, in *The Journal of Political Economy*, Vol. 98, No. 6, pp. 1232

² Justin Yifu Lin, Fang Cai, and Zhou Li, *The Lessons of China's Transition to a Market Economy*, in *Cato Journal*, Vol. 16, No 2 (Fall 1996), p. 202

³ Friedman, Pickowicz, and Selden, *Chinese Village, Socialist State*, p. 186

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 154-55; p. 173;

⁵ *Zhongguo gongchandang zhongyang weiyuanhui guanyu fazhan nongye shengchan hezuoshe de jueyi* 中国共产党中央委员会关于发展农业生产合作社的决议 [CCP Central Committee resolution on the development of Agricultural Producer's Cooperatives] (16th Dec. 1953), in *Nongye jitihua*, pp. 225-26

Herein lies one explanation to why CCP leaders pushed for agricultural cooperativization with such eagerness: It was simply a necessary means to the ultimate end – building up a capital-intensive heavy industrial sector. A central directive issued 16th December 1953 makes this standpoint clear:

If we [the Party] harbor a negative attitude of noninterference towards the [agricultural] cooperativization movement, if we feel contented with the small-scale peasant economy, and if we do not point out the correct and promising road of socialist transformation to the peasants, then the frontline position of socialism in the countryside will inevitably be lost, leading to a spontaneous strengthening of capitalist forces. This would hinder our efforts to increase rural productivity [...] and disrupt the balance between industry and agriculture, destroy the planned economy, and hinder the industrialization of our country. This policy and practice is obviously erroneous.¹

Cooperativization: A Summary

The cooperativization of agriculture was carried out in an astonishing pace: In a time space shorter than a decade the entire rural population had been communalized. The reasons for this rapidity were many: In order for China to develop a heavy industrial sector, capital had to be accumulated. By collectivizing agriculture and gaining firm political control of the countryside the state could procure grain at cheap prices, and thus earning a profit (capital), which could be used for investment in the heavy industries. What enabled the process to gain pace was a combination of top leaders eager to develop the industries, and local leaders hoping to impress provincial and national leaders by accelerating collectivization in their area, leading to something reminiscent of a political chain reaction.

As to the results, the plan to develop heavy industries was to some extent successful. This, however, was done at great cost for the rural population. When peasants no longer worked their own land – it now belonged to the collective – and were rewarded through a complicated and unmanageable work point system, incentives – or the links between hard work and money in hand or food on the plate – were severely weakened. Ironically, while the ability to engender trust between peasants and getting them to cooperate had enabled the communists to win the Civil War, the lack of trust between farmers in the collective – “why should I work hard if no one else does?” – was now a threat to the economic foundation of the People’s Republic. Eventually, this erosion of the traditional economy, combined with inefficiencies and mismanagement at higher levels, led to one of the worst famines in human history with tens of millions of victims.

¹ Ibid., pp. 215-16

Chapter Four: Conclusion

Now we can return to the answers posed in the beginning and answer them:

1. *Was the collectivization movement a continuation of the preceding land reform movement? How did the two movements differ in terms of aims and outcomes?*

First of all, while the land movement of the first period mainly aimed at changing the *distribution* of land (“take from the haves and give to the not-haves”), the later cooperativization movement instead aimed at redefining the *ownership* of land. Peasants who had gained land in the late 1940’s were deprived of it just a decade later when land became cooperative property. Further, as for the purposes of land reform and cooperativization, the former movement aimed at gaining peasant support by developing the existing rural economy with small family farms still being the basic unit, whereas the purpose of the latter mainly was to channel resources to the cities to facilitate industrialization and to provide the growing number of urbanites with cheap food.

Next, as we have seen, the land policies of the Civil War empowered many peasants, especially women. This, however, can certainly not be said of the later collectivization movement. As the clout of the state steadily grew stronger during the 1950’s, with the Party demanding ever more control of the economy, the power of the individual peasant household dwindled. Everything, even cooking, was to be done within the domains of the collective, and private farming was extensively thwarted. While the driving forces of land reform during Civil War had been the peasants themselves, they had by the mid-1950’s become small pawns of production in a much larger game of industrialization and state building.

1. *Can the origins of the collectivization movement of the 1950’s be found in the preceding land reform movement?*

Regarding the roots of collectivization, they are only ostensibly found in the land reform movement. Collectivization, rather than being a spontaneous and homegrown movement such as early land reform, was, in a country with little capital but many peasants, a necessity of the Soviet model of rapid heavy industrialization and state building.

Nevertheless, certain similarities can still be found: In the same manner as during the Civil War, when critical resources were channeled from the villages through a loyal local leadership, the state was in the 1950’s channeling resources from the countryside to the cities and the

industries. During the 1940's, the Party leadership learned an important lesson of the economic value of political control of the countryside.

Simply put, the driving force of early land reform came from below and stemmed from a true demand for change, whereas agricultural cooperativization lacked this “organic” nature and was forced from above.

Something that illustrates the fundamental difference between the two periods is the official terminology used: The communist land policies launched prior to the First Five-Year Plan (1953-58) were defined as “land reform” (*tugai*), while those carried out after 1953 were called “cooperativization” (*hezuohua*) or “collectivization” (*jitihua*). How can this be explained? Land reform was about more than just land, it was about reshaping the political landscape in the villages by usurping and replacing the traditional elites with a new, loyal, leadership, and after this had been done and land had been expropriated and distributed fairly equally – although often without touching the land of middle peasants – land reform was said to be “completed”. Cooperativization, on the other hand, mainly regarded the ownership of land and the way in which land was used; replacing the traditional family-based farming system with a new collective system with large units, with the ultimate aim of providing for the industrialization in the cities.

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