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ON A SLIPPERY ROOF

Gao Wangling and Liu Yang

CHINESE FARMERS AND THE COMPLEX AGENDA OF LAND REFORM

UNDERSTANDING THE HISTORY of the last fifty years of rural change in Mainland China cannot be achieved if land reform is not considered as the first and major issue to be analyzed. Land reform was indeed the starting point of the rural revolution led by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Launched as early as 1946 in the areas located under communist control when the war against the Japanese ended, it was implemented a few years later, in 1951, in the regions officially liberated by the new political power when the People's Republic was founded on 1 October 1949.

Land reform paved the way for a series of significant transformations thereafter. In order to make sense of the present, Chinese scholars have recently shown a renewal of interest for this particular moment of the past. However, studying land reform remains a difficult task. Administrative archives, when they can be accessed, offer but one specific perspective on the issues at stake. Oral history is confronted, as recent studies show, with the reluctance of many farmers to recall this past or with their insistence to report the official version of the events concerned.

Victims of land reform are more eager to speak – and our analysis is mostly based on their accounts –, but obvious difficulties face scholars using such evidence. Fortunately or not, this group of victims is rather large. As a matter of fact, it includes not only those whose land and other property was taken away, but also those who were targeted at the very beginning of the movement, that is accused of being “landlords” and “rich peasants” and persecuted as such only because they were locally influential, even though they were eventually labelled “poor peasants” later during the campaign.

Indeed, if we consider this political campaign to be based on the “New Democracy” principle, as was formally declared, that is to say on the basis of a political agenda laid down by the CCP during the war against Japan that aimed at creating a united front between socialism and capitalism in this transitory period, we cannot but misunderstand the whole movement and fail to see its impact on the changes that occurred later. Land reform was indeed much more influenced by the principles underlying the concepts of class struggle and dictatorship of the proletariat.

In trying to reach some comprehension of land reform in China, a process characterized by so many “mass campaigns” launched one after another, many questions can be raised. The most important concern the motives explaining farmers’ involvement and participation in the movement, on one hand, and, on the other, the factors that account for the growing radicalism observed during the reform. Due to various limits and constraints, this study will mainly address the second issue.

In order to understand how land reform was effectively implemented, we decided to focus on a single locality. Fieldwork for this study was largely conducted in Gan village (near Chifeng City, located in Heilongjiang province). At the time we visited the village, in 2003, there were all together 42 households, most of which had migrated from Shandong province, cultivating a total of 1,300 *mu*.¹

Growing Radicalism

The overt purpose of the land reform launched by the CCP, as articulated in official documents, was to put an end to the “feudal land ownership system” and the landlord class, and to establish a world in which all tillers had their own land.

However, some researchers have argued that in so-called Chinese feudal society, conflicts or social tensions did not arise only between landlords and tenants but had many other sources. In addition, they argue that the number of landlords before 1949 was overestimated [Qin and Su 1996]. According to the various studies that deal with the Republican era (1911-1949), the share of cultivated land owned by landlords was actually below 40%, and a quarter of these lands was possessed in by collective owners, owners thus being schools, temples, extended families or lineages.

Such common property should not be considered as equivalent to private ownership. In North China, the number of landlords was lower than in the south, and in some Chinese villages, there were no landlords at all. A Chinese scholar [Wang 1996] explains that, generally speaking, the poorest peasants would possess at least 2 or 3 *mu* of land prior to 1949,

with landless farmers representing to less than 1 or 2% of the whole population.

Moreover, according to recent studies, if tenants could rarely claim that they payed no rent at all, they would often partly ignore the rent agreement and pay slightly less than required. Under the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911), the rent effectively paid usually accounted for 80% of the officially fixed amount. It thus represented 30% of the crop harvested and not 50%, as often asserted in the past [Gao 2005].

Ideologically speaking, before the Revolution, Chinese farmers did not associate rent with the concept of exploitation. Other principles constrained their behaviour, like those related to the fact that as land was the property of others (whether it had been painfully accumulated or simply inherited), it could not be taken away without compensation. Otherwise, it was robbery. Furthermore, many peasants believed in fate and in coping with events as they come, and had no understanding of concepts such as those of “class” and “class struggle.”

One of the persons interviewed, Dai Yutang, who was among the first group of farmers in Gan village to join the CCP during the land reform campaign (he was later classified as a middle peasant), recalls the prevailing perception of landlords before 1949:

A landlord at that time, you did not have to care about him or fight against him; usually, his fortune would not last more than three generations. His grandson

1. 1 *mu* is equivalent to 1/15 of a hectare.

would be poor. And how did this landlord initially get rich? Looking back at the roots of his wealth, in 80 or 90% of cases, you would find that he had worked hard for it. Landlords and rich peasants in our village, none got rich by quick luck. Take the Dai family, for instance: the four brothers all worked as hired workers for a while, but during land reform they were all labelled “landlords” or “rich peasants” because of the land they had been able to buy.²

As a consequence, land reform could not be carried out if farmers’ opinion and perspective did not change. Although a kind of ideological transformation was overtly achieved during this campaign, it should be noticed that, even during land reform, some farmers would reject the label of “landlord” officially assigned to others whose land and houses were confiscated and redistributed. Some of them even returned the property when landlords’ land and houses were given to the poorest.

How did land reform actually proceed in Gan village? First, through the introduction of a new vocabulary. Right after winning the war against the Japanese, in 1945, the CCP took the nearby city of Chifeng. Meetings were held to educate villagers and introduce them to new words such as “exploitation” or “class.” As Dai Yutang recalls:

As soon as the Communist Party arrived, land reform was launched, they made propaganda against the feudal society and its inequalities. It was pointed out that inequalities had developed during the last decades. We talked about the “class standpoint,” that is about how poor people were previously forced to work

for the rich as hired hands, on long or short terms. This was now considered to be unfair and exploitative behavior.³

If there were many ways to encourage farmers to participate in land reform, “holding meetings” during which these new words were used to expose the bitter situation faced by farmers in the past was one of the most effective means. That was done in every single village and it was repeated throughout the whole campaign. Use of these new words during public debates became standard, indeed obligatory oratory practice. In the meantime, attending these assemblies became a symbol of personal right and social status. If someone was denied the right to attend a meeting, it implied that he was excluded and had been identified as a “class enemy.” As a consequence, no one would voluntarily skip meetings and risk being excluded from the whole movement. This led to a situation in which formerly passive participants took initiatives, individuals pooled into groups, minorities turned into majorities [Moscovici 2003: 239].

Dai Yukun, labelled a “middle peasant,” was initially sceptical about such propaganda. However, he could not resist the words he heard over and over again:

From morning to night, you heard all these words. Those meetings, didn’t I go to all of them? Didn’t I learn something? Of course I did. At the time, think about it, a word like “landlord,” you would begin to

2. Dai Yutang, 79 years old, middle peasant, interviewed February 12th, 2005, Chifeng City.

3. Idem.

consider: are these guys really landlords? Is there any such thing as a landlord? You got into that kind of reasoning, you got into these words, no matter whether you were a landlord or not.⁴

From the very beginning, such meetings were associated with the denunciation and execution of “traitors” and “local despots.” In other words, the use of a new vocabulary was combined with the terror induced by the numerous executions carried out. No landlord was found in Gan village. However, a man named Ding living in a neighbouring village, who owned large amounts of land and had served local authorities while they cooperated with the Japanese, was branded as a “traitor to the nation” during the movement against local despots, which, in every locality, marked the launching of land reform:

As soon as areas were liberated, traitors were arrested. It was before the movement of class labelling. Those who were rich were targeted, but also those said to be traitors or local despots. Some of them got shot; for the smaller landlords, nothing much happened, they were only forced to diminish rents and loan interests.⁵

In many places in North China, landlords were executed under the charge of being “traitors.” For example, in the mountainous area of Kunyu (Shandong province), an elderly farmer recalls:

The family name of these landlords was Feng. Feng Jianzhi was educated and had studied in Japan. He was quite a nice person and was highly considered all over the locality. Initially, the Communists wanted to use him but he would never

really pay attention to them. In 1942, the Japanese came, he did not surrender to the Japanese but joined the Nationalist Party. He was thus executed by the Communist Party during land reform as a traitor [Wang 2004: 19].

In other words, individuals, targeted as “traitors” and “bandits” were singled out during this first stage of land reform. All of them were denounced as “landlords” too, thus, establishing a link with the new economic classification that characterized the ongoing movement. Some were prominent figures that might have served the former political power; others were only locally influential people that were not necessarily even wealthy. In Gan village, totally unexpectedly, Dai Yukun, who was until then considered to be a progressive youth in a small village where no one could be identified as either a traitor or a big landlord, was put on the first list of persons to be targeted just because he was locally respected.

A few years later, in the newly liberated areas, the first stage of the land reform campaign was also characterized by a policy “to eliminate bandits and to oppose local despots.” And the targets, whatever the grounds on which they were accused, were all designated as “landlords.” It should be noted that in a traditional understanding, “traitors,” “bandits” and “despots” are all considered to be immoral people. As the qualification of “landlord” was

4. Dai Yukun, 87 years old, middle peasant, interviewed September 9th, 2003, Chifeng City.

5. Interview with Dai Yutang, August 25th, 2003, Chifeng.

added to this list, “landlords” as a social category could not but be negatively appraised. Their face, to use a familiar expression, was blackened. The principles considered by farmers to be legitimate in governing daily life and the shared norms used to distinguish between “right” and “wrong,” “good” or “bad,” were all of a sudden challenged.

With Dai Yukun, two other men were arrested at Gan village during that campaign against local despots. One of them was Dai Yuzong, a student, whose family owned more than 100 *mu* of land and hired three workers at home. He was labelled a “landlord.” The second one was Xu Dianqing, a small businessman who did not have much money or land:

Shortly after we were arrested, were sent to Beiwazi village and stayed there for four days. Two men from a neighbouring village were shot. One was a landlord, Li Xiang, who did not have too much land but was found keeping records about what was taken away from him by farmers at the beginning of land reform; the other was Zhang Chun, who was not even a middle peasant but had helped soldiers from the Nationalist Party to arrest people. The day after these executions, the three of us were taken back to our village and were denounced and charged in front of the villagers. Wagons were driven to load on food grain and stalk from our homes. Everything was taken away, including pots and pans, bowls. Nothing was left.⁶

Those actions triggered further violence and struggles. Afraid of being denounced again, Dai Yukun fled from his home village.

A number of middle and even poor peasants who should by no means have been harmed, were then persecuted:

Those attending the meetings were asked if the farmer selected as a potential target was a rich peasant or a landlord. The answer was totally up to the masses: if most people said yes, then he was a landlord. No matter what he really was. Pick the tallest among the dwarfs. Just look for ones with some features that fit and he will become a target. If you had just a little bit more than nothing, then you had a chance of becoming a target.⁷

The situation observed at Gan village shows that, during this first stage of land reform, the so-called “class line” was actually ignored. In other words, class labels were arbitrarily assigned. Among a total of 42 households, 18 were then charged and persecuted, which amounts to more than 40% of the village population. Such a percentage was far above the official quota assigned by the CCP of 10% of the population to be targeted, which already implied, nation-wide, qualifying a total of 36 million persons as “enemies,” an unprecedented event in China.

If we take Chifeng county as an example, 16% of total population were categorized as “landlords” or “rich peasants,” not including other negative class labels. In other nearby localities such as Taihang, more than 20% of the

6. Interview with Dai Yukun, February 13th, 2005, Chifeng.

7. Interview with Dai Yukun, August 30th, 2003, Chifeng.

population were labelled “landlords” and “rich peasants.” (Yet, later on, it would be acknowledged that more than half of these verdicts were wrong.) The justification for such an escalation was:

Struggle must be deep, targets must be extended. If we do not do so, we will not succeed in mobilizing farmers [Hinton 1980: 110].

Among the 18 households whose members were persecuted in Gan village, there were officially at that time 4 landlords, 6 rich peasants, and 8 middle or poor peasants. The so-called “landlords” were all farmers who had hired workers but who did not rent any land out. According to official regulations, they should have been considered as “rich peasants” rather than “landlords.” They belonged indeed to the “capitalist” and not to the “feudal” economy. In Inner Mongolia, but also in North-Eastern China, numerous cases were found in which rich peasants and “managing landlords” were wrongly declared to be involved in the “feudal economy” and eliminated on these grounds during land reform.

In localities around Gan village, farmers owning only 1 or 2 *mu* of land were also branded as landlords.⁸ A senior cadre who experienced land reform was asked about the classification process of landlords:

- What were the criteria applied to identify a farmer as a landlord?
- Renting out land was enough.
- Would it be sufficient to rent only 1 *mu* out?
- Yes, 1 *mu* was enough.⁹

According to the historian William Hinton [1980: 280], in most villages of China where middle peasants represented the majority of the population, many were thus treated as “landlords” or “rich peasants” during the first stage of land reform, a process that spread terror all over the countryside.

The rich peasants picked out in Gan village, of whom Dai Yukun was considered to be one until his class status was revised, should actually have been categorised “middle peasants.” Dai Yukun, who had started to understand the formidable power of the CCP, recalls:

Terror came from the fact that any place, at any time, people could be arrested. Everyone was scared to death... No one knew who would be next.¹⁰

Another farmer, Dai Yutang, adds:

Everyone was scared and anxious, no matter what you had, a wagon, an oxen or a horse, or if you had hired a worker in the past. If somebody said something, just one word, you were done.¹¹

In local archives, one reads:

A lot of farmers, middle peasants or even poor peasants, as long as they were not starving and had some means to survive

8. Idem.

9. Interview with Xu Wei March 2nd, 2002, Beijing.

10. Interview with Dai Yukun, October 2nd, 2003, Chifeng.

11. Interview with Dai Yutang, October 15th, 2003, Chifeng.

were very scared, not knowing when they would be beaten.¹²

In Chifeng, this seems indeed to have been a widespread phenomenon. The slogans heard at that time were:

Charge against the big households first,
then against the small ones, then against
the cadres.
Flatten every mound, fill in every hollow.
Flatten every household, flatten every-
thing.
Take away every possession.¹³

The landlords were frightened, so were the middle peasants, but also the poor peasants who possessed some food grains. Because when the middle peasants would be totally deprived of their food grain, it could be the poor peasants' turn.

As a matter of fact, even poor peasants were afraid despite the fact that they had just been able to reverse their destiny thanks to land reform. Their newly acquired "poor peasants" title did not prevent them from being accused. Dai Yukun explains:

You didn't have money? Then you could still be considered as a poor landlord. You could be put under control. They did not go after your money because you did not have any; they were after you as a person. No matter if you had been poor for eight generations, if you were a big mouth before land reform, then they would attack you, they would give you a bad class label and persecute you.¹⁴

Such class labelling was associated with violence. Physical assault towards individuals was very common throughout land reform.

According to local archives in Chifeng, despite the repeated orders coming from higher authorities aiming at reducing violence and limiting errors in the identification of political targets, local officials found it difficult to accept such policy and act in conformity with it. Local cadres believed that the resort to force (beating, dragging, hanging) was the only way to carry out land reform and effectively deprive landlords of their possessions in order to redistribute them. As a result, in Chifeng, physical violence was used in every single meeting.

Hanging, for instance, was common, coupled with freezing, burning, dragging, and so on. It had become a kind of rule, as if without such violence the meetings would have lost their momentum. When they caught someone and dragged him out, the other farmers labelled "landlords" and "rich peasants" would be forced to watch the scene outside. They were all frightened to death, and hence some quickly agreed to confess on the spot.¹⁵

In Gan village, after Dai Yukun's fled, his wife was dragged by a draft animal on the dirt. Dai Yuxiang, a rich peasant's wife, was burned (her case was the worst local burning case).

12. Archives of Songshan District: "Summary of Land Equal Distribution of Songshan District," May 17th, 1948, 1-1-26.

13. Idem.

14. Interview with Dai Yukun, August 30th, 2003, Chifeng.

15. Archives of Songshan District: "Primary Summary of Chifeng County Land Work and Party Rectification Campaign," June 13th, 1948, 1-1-26.

The wife of Xu Jian, a poor peasant, was beaten up and stripped of her pants during the beating. A land reform activist, Wang Ruihua, recalls that each time he was in tears when confronted with these scenes.¹⁶ Some historians estimate that 3 to 5 million persons were killed during land reform, the majority being medium and small landlords [Huang 2001: 275]. In most cases, the victims were beaten to death.

We interviewed a senior cadre from Taihang area, who mentioned that at the beginning of land reform, he did not understand why a few elementary school teachers were called back from the city to their home village and then beaten to death. It is only afterwards that he was told that targets included not only “bad despots,” but also “benevolent despots,” or “non despots,” as school principals or doctors were called in South China. In Kunyu district (Shandong province), a person named Feng Jianzi belonged, for instance, to the group designated as “benevolent despots.” He was executed just because of this purported class status:

At the time, the very good guys did not survive. This man regularly helped the poor and offered money to neighbours at New Year. I even got 5 yuans from him. He had actually helped the entire neighbourhood. When he was killed, people were all grieving, who wouldn't they? [Wang 2004: 21]

Xu En of Gan village was arrested because he had uttered so-called “destructive words.” Local militia leader Wang Fengyi recalls:

I arrested him because he said: “Look at those guys, they are using the Communist

Party to pretend they have guts.” Such a person, you had to arrest him, to put him down, otherwise he would have had a destructive effect, cancelling with one word all the work you had been doing for two days.¹⁷

Xu En had an overbearing style but very few material belongings. He was nonetheless labelled a “rich peasant.” He might not have fit the criteria to be considered as a local despot and was not accused of being one. However, all the despots who were executed were designated as “rich peasants” or “landlords.” Actually, it did not matter if these people owned land or not, or how much property they had. The important thing is that they were, for various reasons, locally influential. Before land reform, people would listen to their opinions and follow them.

One of the purposes of such widespread resort to force was to prevent any resistance. It was perceived as the only way to abolish formerly legitimate rules and principles. As a consequence, all political meetings, all sessions during which victims exposed their grievances did not rely merely on the invocation of new arguments and categories, rather words were followed by violence and terror. The target of the revolution, which originally was to overthrow a specific political and social system, thus came to focus on a particular group of persons in each village. Moreover, it

16. Wang Ruihua, 78 years old, middle peasant, interviewed October 7th, 2003, Chifeng.

17. Wang Fengyi, 81 years old, middle peasant, interviewed October 12th, 2004, Chifeng.

progressively turned from big despots and landowners to local smallholders, affecting a much larger social group than initially intended.

In recent times, some scholars have argued that, in a complex social environment, a discrepancy may obtain between what they call “representational reality” and “objective reality.” According to them, from land reform to the Cultural Revolution, the representational reality of class struggle in rural areas has been increasingly diverging from objective reality, the widening gap between the two having had a significant impact on the formulation of CCP policy [Huang 1995]. Such an argument is used to explain why the material basis of class, carefully delineated in theory, gave way to quotas and labels that were arbitrarily applied during land reform.

From another perspective, however, one can argue that the distinction between what was real and what was not was not a matter of concern for the farmers involved. Neither was the question of distinguishing the true from the false [Moscovici 2003: 112]. The fact that the target group during land reform was progressively extended from so-called “local tyrants” and “despots” to “medium and small landlords” and so too the fact that landlords had to be identified even where they did not exist, were not just matters of contingency, nor did they result from a discrepancy between objective and representational reality. It was rooted in a deeper inner logic that drove the choices and actions of the new political leaders. This transfer was underpinned by a political and ideological project, namely to seize power in the countryside, rather than by the existing situation.

In this perspective, the designation of landlords as traitors and local tyrants was considered as a powerful weapon. This instrument was best applied during the assemblies gathered at the beginning of land reform; it aimed at exposing what was called “the bitter past,” that is the sombre events and injustices faced by farmers in the past. However, the issue of how the Revolution conquered people’s minds and gestures, and what were the main tools used, is a specific issue that falls beyond the scope of this study.

It had been widely accepted that land reform benefited the majority of Chinese farmers and was supported by most of them. However, the detailed accounts of this period now emerging in China, including those stemming from our own study, tend to show that the majority was actually a minority, and one should hence be very cautious with regard to such hasty appraisals. It is nonetheless true that land reform affected every inhabitant in the countryside. Farmers finally came to accept the CCP arguments and ideology and became participants, whether voluntarily or not, whether they had been persecuted or not.

Let us take Dai Yukun as an example: he had fought against the movement at the beginning, yet later convinced himself that this was a totally new society in which new arguments were to prevail.¹⁸ In other words, the legitimacy acquired by the new political power relied both on violence (*li*) and on the use of new arguments and concepts (*li*), the latter element

18. Interview with Dai Yukun, September 28th, 2003, Chifeng.

backing the former, a situation often expressed by Dai Yukun and Dai Yutang by stressing the concomitant existence of two “*li*”.

Thus, the Party gained maximum control over rural society, and such was the most important achievement of land reform.

The Internal Logic of Land Reform and Its Long-Term Effect

The above account does not aim at describing the whole process of land reform, rather at pointing out some of its features as acknowledged by Chinese historians and that requires an explanation. I here refer to the pervasiveness of radical and excessive actions and behaviour. As William Hinton [1980: 249] put it, posing what in our view is a major question: “Why did the whole movement deviate so much?” Or, put another way: “Why did it prove impossible to carry out a peaceful land reform?”

In fact, the CCP had put forward the principle of peaceful land reform. Such a possibility had been discussed in 1946 and related experiments had been carried out in Shaanxi, Gansu and Ningxia provinces. In 1950, it was argued that the war being over and the Communists having prevailed over the Nationalist Party, a milder land reform could be put on the agenda. However, this is not what happened. What are the reasons for such a failure? To answer this question, one has to look at the political motivations underlying land reform.

Land reform was initially described at aiming at the liberation and development of the forces of production. Such economic consequences were actually difficult to observe in the short run. Evidence of the contrary eventually became manifest. During the first one

or two years after land reform, output actually diminished in many villages.¹⁹ Yet, whatever the controversial effects of egalitarian land distribution on economic development, this was not the main issue on the revolutionary agenda. For the CCP, there was another political goal to achieve when land reform was carried out in Chifeng: to seize power in China by military force.

In this context, it is not surprising that land reform was used before 1949 to support the armed struggle between Communists and Nationalists. It was definitely a land reform during which the slogan “Join the army and help the frontline” was widely accepted. Farmers were encouraged to join the war effort in response to land redistribution. Scholars have recently argued:

If farmers’ support was required only to solve the land problem by redistributing it, then the violence which has plagued land reform would not have been necessary. Land reform could have been carried out in a less turbulent and more peaceful manner. In reality, land reform was a form of war mobilisation; land distribution was only a way, or an excuse if you want, to achieve it [Zhang 2003: 43].

In 1948, Mao Zedong [1996: 132] indicated indeed that “the newly liberated areas should make full use of the experience coming from the anti-Japanese war,” and consider as their core objective the fight against traitors, the elimination of despots, and the reduction of rent and loan interests rather than land reform. However, it could be argued that, in addition to

19. *Mao Zedong wenjuan* (*Mao Zedong’s Selected Works*), Beijing, Renmin chubanshe, 1966.

liberating the forces of production and supporting war mobilisation, land reform was assigned a third aim that was never clearly expressed: to restructure society in the countryside at the grassroots level.

This issue was not left totally unarticulated by Chinese leaders. For example, Du Runsheng stated that mobilizing the masses and readjusting grassroots level organisations should be declared the first fundamental task of land reform, and this met with Mao's approval and that of the Central Committee of CCP. This reorganisation process had started prior to land reform, but without land reform, it would have been very difficult to implement such fundamental changes. Therefore, the land reform led by CCP did not aim only at "changing the dynasty" but at "changing heaven and earth." It was intended to remove locally influential people in every village and designate new local leaders, and this could not be achieved without following the path of a violent land reform [Gao 1994]. We will not here describe this very complex process, rather shall focus only on one of the main consequences of the resort to violence and the appropriation of all kinds of goods and resources in a fashion hardly conform with clear economic criteria: the damage caused to the protection of property rights and to productivity. Such miscalculations explain why collectivisation was soon to be considered as the only solution to improve the economic situation.

Land was a relatively abundant resource in Chifeng. As a consequence, the local outcome of land reform in Gan village was the distribution of 6 *mu* of land *per capita*. Some poor peasants were given landowners' houses. As houses and buildings were few, some militia members got

just a big and a small pot, and that was it. Opium, gold and silver seized while searching the households were all remitted to the county government. Therefore, land distribution did not really improve farmers' productivity and material wellbeing.²⁰

Rather than the expected increase of agricultural output, famine actually plagued Chifeng in the years immediately following land reform. Similarly to Zhang hamlet of Mount Taihang area, where ordinary farmers became afraid to be charged when some people were convicted of exploitation and punished, the inhabitants of Gan village developed a new way of thinking. As fear developed, large numbers of households began to spare their efforts. They would work just enough to meet family consumption needs. In Shilidian, located in east Mount Taihang area, middle peasants tried to protect themselves in order to avoid becoming the next targets of the campaign [Hinton 1980: 249]. They put on ragged clothes and ate only coarse food in front of other people. Some sold draft animals such as donkeys and used less fertilizer in the fields:

Output unavoidably went down [Crook and Crook 1982: 14].

The causes for the famine in Gan village are related to a number of issues. First of all, farmers who had just received extra land were afraid of a sudden change. They feared the Nationalist Party might still be victorious one day and take back these lands. Secondly, land

20. See "Primary Summary of Chifeng County Land Work and Party Rectification Campaign."

reform led to a reduction in the number of draft animals and other means of production. Finally, some of the farmers who had acquired new land did not work hard. Some of them did so because they were less able than others. Some villagers explain today:

Without a draft animal you don't have good harvest. But also, some poor fellows were not good at tilling the land while the rich ones were down. This was indeed a very bad year.²¹

But, more importantly, repeated resort to force and struggle during land reform had directly affected incentives for production among all strata of farmers. Land reform had somehow been disconnected from the issue of productivity; it had damaged relationship to property. As a consequence, destruction and waste ensued in many villages. Much food grain and forage was ruined or wasted. Farmers even forgot to plough land for the following spring.²² According to farmers in Chifeng, famine came half from heaven (due to bad natural conditions) and half from men (due to persecution for working too hard). One of them recalls that he kept slapping his own face and saying: "You deserve it, you deserve it."

During land reform, although some farmers were assigned new land, they were still lacking other goods and equipment required for farming (such as draft animal, tools, seeds, and money). They might receive a share of the resources taken from those who had been expropriated, but this were inevitably dispersed and wasted. Attacks on industrial and merchant enterprises resulted in an even greater shortage of goods and essential products. All these were objective

factors constraining farmers' behaviour. But such behaviour was also influenced by a shared attitude regarding the dangers of working too hard, the lack of recognition of better farming experience and productive capacity, all of which reduced incentives to work. This mentality had a great impact on farm production. This attitude was not anchored in an explicit and intentional resistance to the land reform movement, but farmers found themselves on a slippery roof and had no control of the situation.

"Inactive and passive," "wasting resources," "involved in indolent sabotage": these are the words found in archive records to describe farmers' behaviour during that period.²³

Some middle peasants and even poor peasants who owned a few things were constantly in fear of their home being searched; they slaughtered their pigs and sheep for food, stayed at home doing hardly anything. Witnessing the fate of middle peasants, poor peasants were discouraged and thought that working hard was of no use, that one would be charged as soon as he got better-off. Opium-addicted peasants thought that the CCP would let no one starve to death and would sell their goods for opium:

After the repression began, I was not in the mood for taking care of my life, nor did I work as I used to.²⁴

21. Interview with Dai Yutang, September 24th, 2003, Chifeng.

22. See footnote 20.

23. Idem.

24. Idem.

Some farmers were even afraid to collect firewood. Middle peasants would gather and cry:

It's better to get addicted to opium.²⁵

A hard-working upper-middle peasant gave up work as soon as the struggle against local despots and landlords began, for he was afraid to get richer than others.²⁶

These reactions were not unreasonable. Land reform had negatively affected many former sources of legitimacy. First of all, the rights associated with the private ownership of means of production, a principle that had prevailed for thousands of years, ceased to be guaranteed. Private land and draft animals could be confiscated. As a consequence, who could guarantee that the land newly acquired would be kept by its new owners? (A few years later, such property was indeed transferred to the cooperatives.) The same uncertainties affected agricultural production: becoming rich could lead to being selected for torture and being dispossessed of any means to protect one's existence. Such a possibility led to another logical response: farmers became defiant towards increasing work and productivity.

After land reform, Chinese peasants were thus afraid of getting rich. They adopted many forms of behaviour to resist CCP calls for raising farm output.²⁷ In response, they met with local officials' criticisms:

The Party distributed land to you, how can you disobey the Party?

This became the strongest official argument after land reform, an argument that legitimated all political and economic demands of the CCP

in the countryside. To support economic development, the CCP adopted a policy stating that the major effort of rural Party branches was to concentrate on the recovery and development of farm production. A few political readjustments were made to achieve this aim (like the use of old slogans such as "To get rich is a virtue").

However, this policy met with limited success, the major problem being that farmers were not motivated to work. If figures vary from one locality to the other, from one year to the other, one thing appears certain: if land reform had resulted in a substantial increase of grain output in China, such as the one observed during the first years after the implementation of the "household responsibility system" in 1978, then the prompt launching of a new movement, that of collectivisation, would not have been necessary.

25. Idem.

26. Idem.

27. To a certain extent, Chinese peasants were even successful in diminishing total agricultural output. It should be noticed that reducing production became a widespread response among peasants under collective economy, a response that I qualified as one of their "major acts of resistance." Total output of food grain in 1952 was 327,8 billion *jin* (that is 163,9 billion kg). It had just recovered the records observed before the war against Japan, that is before 1936 (but the ratio between land and population had changed, and the situation was much worse than before as regards cash crop production). In 1955, production reached 367,9 billion *jin* (183,95 billion kg), showing only a slight increase. Figures for the two following years are not reliable. The CCP expected a 30% increase of food grain after collectivisation, but this target proved very difficult to achieve.

In Chifeng, three years of famine thus followed land reform:

In 1948, 1949 and 1950, everyone suffered, the yield per *mu* was 50 kilograms, sometimes about 25. Everyone was starving.²⁸

One third of the population had no grain left, whereas the other two thirds could only afford a mixture of vegetables picked in fields with some grain. Some farmers could only wait and bid on fate; survivors suffered great pain.²⁹ From that time on, the land-reform brigades had to organise spring planting. They adopted the slogan “Not a piece of land should be wasted, no one can be lazy, everyone has to work,” which was immediately followed by the campaign for the creation of mutual-help teams which initiated collectivisation in the Chinese countryside. It should be noted that famine was not a pervasive phenomenon at that time. But it is no coincidence if mutual-help teams were encouraged in Zhang hamlet and Lishidian village just after land reform. Starting in 1948, Gan village experienced failures in shaping one mutual-help team after another and then a cooperative, but, ironically enough, out of these unsuccessful efforts emerged a model cooperative.

Land reform caused damage and waste not only to farming but also to industry and commerce. Far from liberating productive forces as was declared, it achieved a contrary result. Through land reform, the CCP acquired an extended control over Chinese villages as it had intended to. This was achieved through the use of a discourse endowed with power but also through resort to violence and repeated,

arbitrary repression. This brutal policy had unanticipated consequences on productivity and property relations. It affected further developments of the Chinese rural revolution, raising new questions about fairness and unfairness, right and wrong, to which various answers were tentatively given at different points in time. The effects went far beyond the expectation and imagination of most people involved in the movement, driving Chinese countryside towards the Great Leap Forward and People’s communes.

Conclusion

Several decades had to pass before the initial aim of the broad revolutionary movement which began with land reform vanished and its logic disappeared. As the former objectives became pointless, new politics were adopted at the end of the seventies, consisting primarily of withdrawing pejorative class labels previously assigned and redistributing collective land under the well-known “household contract system.”

What had been initiated by a land reform was thus concluded by a yet another land reform which, however, did not prove clear and definitive. This second land reform was indeed oriented and affected by the political and social elements inherited from the specific forms of collectivisation implemented in China after 1953. These forms cannot be disconnected

28. Interview with Dai Yutang, Wang Ruihua, October 7th, 2003.

29. Archives of Songshan District: “Chifeng Spring Plowing Report,” April 15th, 1948, 1-1-25.

from the anticipated and non-anticipated effects of the first land reform. In other words, the current problems faced by the Chinese countryside, the lack of consistence and clarity of present property rights in Chinese villages, with all its dramatic consequences, cannot be

understood without taking into account the specific history of a successive series of appropriation processes of agricultural resources. These processes, considered to be more or less legitimated by farmers, began with the first land reform.

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Résumé

Gao Wangling et Liu Yang, *Sur un toit glissant. Les paysans chinois et l'agenda complexe de la réforme agraire*. La réforme agraire est souvent présentée comme le point de départ de la révolution rurale du parti communiste chinois. Une enquête menée dans un village de la province du Heilongjiang permet d'illustrer comment le parti communiste chinois s'est implanté dans les zones rurales, y renversant les anciens responsables locaux et y

Abstract

Gao Wangling and Liu Yang, *On a Slippery Roof: Chinese Farmers and the Complex Agenda of Land Reform*. Land reform is often said to be the starting point of the Chinese Communist Party's rural revolution. A study conducted in a village in Heilongjiang province shows how the Party took root in rural areas by ousting officials there and reshaping power at the local level. The voices of this movement's real victims (land-owners and, too,

reconfigurant les instances du pouvoir. Les auteurs donnent la parole aux véritables victimes de ce mouvement, à savoir les propriétaires fonciers, les paysans riches et les paysans moyens riches. Ils montrent que la réforme agraire a profondément affecté les principes normatifs liés aux notions de propriété et de production. Les phénomènes observés ont ouvert la voie aux étapes ultérieures de collectivisation et de formation des communes populaires, signalant que la réforme agraire ne peut être uniquement comprise comme un mouvement visant à renverser un « système féodal » dans le cadre de la « nouvelle démocratie ».

Mots clés

étiquettes de classe, exécutions, « nouvelle démocratie », province du Heilongjiang, réforme agraire

well-off and wealthy peasants) are presented herein. Land reform has had a deep impact on normative principles related to the concepts of property and production. The way was thus opened for collectivization and the formation of People's communes. This suggests that land reform is not to be seen only as a movement for overturning a "feudal system" while setting up a "new democracy."

Keywords

class labels, executions, "new democracy," Heilongjiang province, land reform