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**Landlords, Peasants and Communists: Land Reform and Ownership in Pre-Collectivization  
Rural China 1949-1955**

This paper was prepared for the course “China’s Reform and Changing Role in the Global Economy,” with Pieter Bottelier.

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This research is a historical description of landownership and land reform policy of pre-collectivization China from 1949 to 1955. The following discussions will first provide a description of the Communist policy of land reform throughout China as well as the execution thereof. Secondly, the discussion will discuss the actual execution and the results of the policy, and how it is related to the Communist Party's later adoption of collectivization. Overall, the paper will demonstrate that pre-collectivization land-ownership destroyed much of the traditional feudal model of landownership, but was ultimately an imperfect socialist policy because it was still a form of private ownership: this led to the Communist prediction that in just one generation, people would again be divided into rich and poor farmers (for example, under this ownership model, people could pass down their lands to their children, and heirs who would have many children would have poor families). Also, neatly classifying a massive population into several distinct classes for the purpose of land redistribution was a difficult task, and in certain reported cases, peasants felt fear and dissatisfaction because of this policy. These defects in the land reform policy were combined with other reasons to ultimately bring forth Mao Zedong's collectivization from mid 1950's and on.

## **INEQUALITY IN LAND OWNERSHIP: CHINESE RURAL SOCIETY BEFORE LAND REFORM**

Before describing the Communist land reform and the resulting form of land ownership in detail, it is important to understand the context under which the reform was carried out. This section will provide a general description of the rural economic situation throughout China, the problems peasants suffered, and the solution that the Communist Party offered.

Although the Communist slogan "land to the tiller" gives an impression of distributing land to landless tenants, the majority of peasants in China owned the land they tilled<sup>1</sup>. Despite the fact that rate of landownership throughout China differed (for example, tenancy was only 12% in Hubei, while more than 30% in Jiangsu Province before the land reform), no single Chinese province had an agrarian economy where the rate of pure tenants exceeded that of land-owning farmers<sup>2</sup>. The major goal of the Communists therefore was to correct the difference between the rich and poor and achieve economic equality in the countryside, rather than giving lands to poor tenants<sup>3</sup>.

Although the majority of peasants in China may have owned the land they cultivated, the difference between rich landlords and peasants was enormous in many areas. For example, in the south and central south of China, landlords who were only 3-4% of population owned more than 30% of the arable land of the region, sometimes exceeding 50%. Although the peasants in certain areas of south China were much richer than their northern counterparts, even here landlords and rich peasants who were only 8% of the population owned more than 30% of the land, with the remaining 92% owning 60% of the land<sup>4</sup>. While the Communists recognized important regional

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<sup>1</sup> Suzanne Pepper, *Civil War in China: The Political Struggle 1945-1949* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 1999), 237

<sup>2</sup> Suzanne Pepper 234

<sup>3</sup> Suzanne Pepper 244

<sup>4</sup> Vivienne Shue, *Peasant China in Transition: The Dynamics of Development Toward Socialism, 1949-1956* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 59-60

variations of land ownership pattern in their surveys they concluded that despite these differences, it was clear that much of land of China was owned by a numerically few class of landlords and that the enforcement of agricultural equality was “justified without question, and would bolster the Party’s legitimacy in the minds of the vast majority of peasants”<sup>5</sup>.

This generally unequal pattern of landownership meant that much of China’s peasants had to engage in subsistence farming<sup>6</sup>. Many peasants could not feed their own family by cultivating the land they owned, and therefore resorted to working as hired laborers for the landowners. For the peasants who were unfortunate enough to work for an exploitative landlord, life could be harsh. Although many landlords treated their laborers reasonably, this depended greatly on the yearly harvests and the financial situation of the landlord families: in some years poor peasants could not find works and therefore were unable to feed their families<sup>7</sup>. This inequality and instability in economic life was exploited by the Communist Party for its own political strength in the regions affected by the land reform. By promising equality and stability in economic life through redistributing the land, the party garnered support from much of the poor peasants, and sometimes the middle peasants as well. In some cases, 90% of villagers openly supported the land redistribution<sup>8</sup>, although this rate differed depending on various factors such as landlords’ behavior toward the poor peasants, the regional economic wealth and political stability. Nevertheless, much of the poor peasant population throughout China initially welcomed the land redistribution<sup>9</sup>.

## NATIONAL LAND REFORM POLICY

The land reform itself followed a carefully devised national policy. The policy outlined a general principle of social classification, land redistribution and the unit of execution of the policy. However, because of sheer size of China and enormous regional variations, many problems arose and these will be discussed in a later section, in the context of the Communist decision to transition the country into a more radical land reform in the form of collectivization.

## SOCIAL CLASSIFICATION

For the land reform to be properly carried out, it was important for the Communists to distinguish between the exploiters and the exploited. The entire rural population of China was divided into several main categories: landlords, rich peasants, middle peasants, poor peasants, and landless laborers. The landlords owned land but could afford not to work on it themselves. They generated income by hiring laborers to work on their fields, and also some industrial or commercial enterprises to supplement their agricultural income. Likewise, the rich peasants hired the laborers to do agricultural work, but they were different from the landlords in that they had to work on their own lands. According to the Communist definition of social classes, rich peasants derived more than quarter of their income by means other than their labor, or “exploitation” such

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<sup>5</sup> Vivienne Shue, 52

<sup>6</sup> Suzanne Pepper 233

<sup>7</sup> Peter J. Seybolt, *Throwing the Emperor from His Horse: Portraits of a Village Leader in China, 1923-1995* (Boulder: Westview Press 1996) 36

<sup>8</sup> Sulamith Heins Potter and Jack M. Potter, *China’s Peasants: The Anthropology of a Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1990) 39

<sup>9</sup> Suzanne Pepper 234

as leasing their land and making loans to their poorer neighbors<sup>10</sup>. The middle peasants sometimes hired labor, but unlike rich peasants, they derived less than quarter of their income from means other than direct labor. The poor peasants owned some of the land they tilled, but rented the rest from others in the village, and they generally did not possess all the tools or animals they needed. According to the Communist perspective, this class was often exploited by the aforementioned other classes because they were usually tenants and debtors<sup>11</sup>. They also frequently relied on working for other households for their income. Finally, hired laborers owned no land, and relied almost exclusively on working for the landlords or rich peasants. These laborers were even less secure than the poor peasants<sup>12</sup>. This classification and the subsequent redistribution of land were to be done on the basis of township level. In certain cases, the administrative level could be extended to county level when necessary, but seldom beyond that level<sup>13</sup>.

### NATIONAL GUIDELINES

Thus having classified the rural population into these different classes, the Communist Party also provided a general guideline for the redistribution of land. The landlords and rich peasants were the primary targets of a township's property confiscation efforts. Once the land was confiscated (often through violent and arbitrary means – to be discussed later), it was redistributed according to the Party's national guideline. The guideline stipulated that the confiscated land had to be distributed first to the poor peasants and hired laborers<sup>14</sup>. Landlords and rich peasants were forced to give up their land to the government. After the land was distributed to the poor peasants and the landless, the remaining land was to be distributed to these richer classes so that they were given back an amount equal at least to that of poor peasants<sup>15</sup>. The Communist Party stipulated that the former landlords work on the land themselves instead of selling or renting it out, so they could "reform themselves through labor"<sup>16</sup>. The land reform also endowed women with the right to own land, and as a result even single women, divorced women and widows were entitled to the equal amount of land as men<sup>17</sup>. The principle also stipulated that households with more dependent family members would receive more land<sup>18</sup>. Despite the various difficulties faced by the Communist Party in executing this principle, the policy ultimately destroyed the rural political order based on feudal domination of the landlord class, and transferred a staggering amount of land to poor peasants.

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<sup>10</sup> Vivienne Shue 50

<sup>11</sup> Vivienne Shue 54

<sup>12</sup> Fei-Ling Wang, *Institutions and Institutional Change in China: Premodernity and Modernization* (New York: Macmillan Press 1998) 99

<sup>13</sup> Vivienne Shue 65

<sup>14</sup> Vivienne Shue 61

<sup>15</sup> Fei-Ling Wang 98

<sup>16</sup> Vivienne Shue 61

<sup>17</sup> Irene Tinker and Gale Summerfield, *Women's Rights to House and Land* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers 1999) 241

<sup>18</sup> Vivienne Shue 65

## PROBLEMS WITH LAND REFORM

Although land reform achieved the Communist Party's political aim of destroying the feudal political order in the countryside, it also raised serious problems that ultimately contributed to the Party's decision to adopt collectivization. Problems associated with the land reform include difficulty in classifying the population into neatly defined categories, the inability of local communist cadres to effectively carry out policies, and unnecessary use of violence to members of the rich and middle peasant classes which the Party sought to avoid. The following paragraphs discuss some of the major problems associated with the enforcement of the land reform. These are by no means the only problems that the Communist Party encountered, but are reasonably illustrative of the major dilemmas that the Party encountered.

## DIFFICULTY IN SOCIAL CLASSIFICATION

In Chinese rural townships, it was often difficult to clearly classify individuals and households into different social classes according to the national policy because there were many complicating factors. For example, if a woman of poor peasant origin recently (within a month or even less) married with a landlord husband, she could have been labeled both as a landlord and a peasant, despite the fact that she may not have engaged in any exploitative actions. Conversely, there were many cases where a peasant who in fact owned much land was labeled as a poor peasant because of various loopholes in the national guideline which the local communist leaders could not effectively cope with. This common inefficiency in social classification system sometimes brought tragic results. Consider the case of an ill widow who lost her husband recently before the land reform.

The widow hardly engaged in any exploitative actions, because although she did not work on the land herself she only had her son and one hired laborer to work on less than 2 acres of land she owned. Also, no one in the village resented her as a landlord. However, because she fitted in the national criteria of a landlord, she was classified as such by the communists and was required to deliver a large amount of grain in compensation for her "exploitation" of local peasants. When she could not afford to do so, she committed suicide in fear of what would happen to her.<sup>19</sup>

Unfortunately, such cases were not isolated to certain townships or villages. The national guideline was vague and unclear that it often depended on the decision of individual local communist leaders to decide a family's social classification. This meant that someone who raised the ire of a local communist leader or certain influential villagers could be labeled as a landlord when in fact he was not. This was especially true for many land managers and rich peasants who were deemed to be "bad elements" by local communist administrators. Many absentee Chinese landlords hired local managers to collect rent, oversee the tenants, and maintain the fields. According to scholars' research, these managers often came from poor peasant background<sup>20</sup>. But because these managers were paid to work as the landlords demanded, they were seen as class "traitors" associated with the landlords<sup>21</sup>. Also, these managers often came into direct

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<sup>19</sup> Sulamith H. Potter and Jack M. Potter, 51

<sup>20</sup> Shu-min Huang, *The Spiral Road : Change in a Chinese Village through the Eyes of a Communist Party Leader* (Boulder: Westview Press 1989) 47

<sup>21</sup> Shu-min Huang, 47

contact with local villagers and as a result were often the target of local hatred and fear. Consequently, many such managers were condemned and executed as “landlords” despite the national guideline would have labeled them as poor peasants<sup>22</sup>. Such irregularities were aggravated by the fact that many townships and villages were administered by local communist cadres who were former residents of the area. This meant that these communist cadres were not entirely free from personal grievances and emotions when they came back as administrators of the town<sup>23</sup>. Furthermore, economic relations in rural villages were in fact much more complex and difficult to understand than the communists expected<sup>24</sup>, and as a result multiple class labels could sometimes be applied to a single household. Therefore, the vague national guideline on social classification of rural residents led to many unnecessary tragedies and violence which the Party sought to avoid.

## **VIOLENT DEVIATIONS FROM NATIONAL GUIDELINES**

Even in townships where social classification was carried out reasonably well, many people suffered at the hands of the local communists because of the Party’s need to carry out a “struggle” against the landlords. This was especially true of townships that had no landlords or rich peasants, but only middle and poor peasants. In such areas, peasants who were relatively well-off became the targets of communist hatred despite the fact that they did not deserve such violence according to the national guideline. From the beginning, the notion of class struggle was seen as the essential building block of a new communist society in rural areas. It was thought that the peasants’ social awareness would increase through violent class struggles against the landlords<sup>25</sup>. The local communist cadres therefore felt both implicit and explicit pressure to instigate class struggle within their townships. Land reform work teams consisting of communist cadres were regularly reviewed and criticized by the Party, and “it was usually the land reform work team cadres who took the blame if a trend toward ‘peaceful land reform’ grew to serious proportions”<sup>26</sup>. Conversely, local cadres who were able to instill class consciousness through struggle were rewarded for their successes. The national land reform policy stated that “‘If, on the other hand, they want the land from the landlords, then they have truly stood up’”<sup>27</sup>, clearly indicating that building the peasants’ animosity toward their class enemies was an essential purpose of the land reform, besides merely redistributing the land. As a result, many rich and even middle peasants were “required” to act as scapegoats for their townships, and were forced to give up their properties and even suffered imprisonment and public humiliation.<sup>28</sup> As the Party recognized, this deviation was particularly dangerous, because it could not afford to alienate middle peasants, who made up a significant portion of China’s peasantry.<sup>29</sup>

## **REDISTRIBUTION PROBLEMS**

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<sup>22</sup> Sulamith H. Potter and Jack M. Potter, 52

<sup>23</sup> Shu-min Huang, 45

<sup>24</sup> Vivienne Shue, 85

<sup>25</sup> Fei-Ling Wang, 98

<sup>26</sup> Vivienne Shue 83

<sup>27</sup> Vivienne Shue 84

<sup>28</sup> Shu-min Huang 45

<sup>29</sup> Sulamith H. Potter and Jack M. Potter, 53

Even after the successful confiscation of wealth from the town's wealthier residents, the problem of redistribution remained. It has been mentioned above that the poor peasants received priority during redistribution process. But the poor peasants themselves often disagreed on who needed to receive more property than others. The government guideline failed to distinguish between various sub-categories of the poor peasant and hired laborers class, and the task of assigning priority among these poor peasants was left to local communist cadres and the peasants themselves. To do this, "small group discussions were to be held in the area so that the peasants could express their wishes...reconciliation of conflicting wishes, and compromise"<sup>30</sup>. Sometimes it was difficult to reach compromise between poor peasants through such small group discussions, and left certain local elements dissatisfied with the result of redistribution. Still another problem in redistribution was that some properties just could not be redistributed. While dividing farmland among different households was a relatively simple task, communist administrators and peasants encountered great difficulty in deciding how to divide properties such as fish ponds, streams, lakes, reservoirs, orchards, tea groves and other forms of agricultural properties that could not be divided easily because of their physical characteristics<sup>31</sup>. Such difficulties delayed redistribution of these properties, and in some cases this led to much dissatisfaction among peasants, and they acted alone without the Communist Party's sanctions<sup>32</sup>. Such actions often led to uncoordinated violence and struggle between the villagers, and the Party had great difficulty controlling such breakouts of dissatisfaction, and was forced to resort to forceful measures to rein in the peasants.

## LAND REFORM AS AN IMPERFECT SOCIALIST POLICY

Besides the problems in enforcement of the policy, land reform had certain fundamental anti-socialist aspects with which the Communist Party was gravely concerned. Land ownership after land reform was private ownership not unlike the system of ownership that existed before the reform. The land reform simply redistributed the land for new owners, and much like the previous form of landownership, "title deeds were to be made out for each household and rights of inheritance by legitimate heirs were to be reaffirmed"<sup>33</sup>. It was this assurance of private ownership of adequate land that greatly inspired the poor peasants to support the Communist Party policy. At this stage of land reform the Party seldom discussed government control of land or their true socialist goal of collectivism<sup>34</sup>. The Party members believed that a form of private ownership had to be allowed until the technological and economic base was developed and modernized for the purpose of building a socialist society in rural villages. However, Mao Zedong and his supporters were vocal in their disagreement of present land reform policy. Mao and his supporters believed that "If they accepted the existing institutional arrangements (reminiscent of old feudal social order) classes would re-emerge in the countryside and a new conservative rich peasantry would arise to oppose further reform...defeating the Revolution"<sup>35</sup>. The Party further concluded that their present slogan "land to the tiller" may have appealed to the

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<sup>30</sup> Barbara P. Hazard, *Peasant Organization and Peasant Individualism: Land Reform, Cooperation and the Chinese Communist Party* (Fort Lauderdale: Verlag Breitenbach Publishers, 1981) 57

<sup>31</sup> Vivienne Shue 87

<sup>32</sup> Vivienne Shue, 88

<sup>33</sup> Vivienne Shue, 65

<sup>34</sup> Sulamith H. Potter and Jack M. Potter, 59

<sup>35</sup> Sulamith H. Potter and Jack M. Potter, 59



peasants' old sense of ownership and private interest, but in order to achieve a true socialist society, their sense of private entitlement to inheritable properties had to be effectively eliminated.

Secondly, the land reform had another fundamental problem. The land was to be redistributed on the basis of townships, and therefore townships that were inherently less wealthy were still poorer compared to other townships with much more natural resources even after completion of land redistribution. This regional economic inequality was initially not perceived as a problem, but the Communist Party gradually recognized this problem and saw that there was an emergence of unjust economic inequality between poor towns and richer towns<sup>36</sup>. Such regional inequality, while not based on class inequality, nevertheless did much to irritate the Communist Party's socialist sensibilities. Furthermore, other aforementioned problems associated with executing the land reform were becoming even more serious and apparent to the Communist Party members, who therefore began to engage in intense debates about the course of Chinese land reform. In this debate, Mao Zedong and his supporters eventually won, and collectivization was officially announced in December of 1953, less than four years after initiation of the land reform.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the Communist Party's land reform program from 1949 to 1955 had important consequences, but was ultimately replaced by a more thorough and socialist collectivization. Although the land reform thoroughly destroyed the old feudal landlord class, it was faced with various difficulties in execution. Social classification of millions of rural population always proved a complex and difficult task, and even after successful classification problems such as distribution remained. More fundamentally, the land reform still ensured the old private form of ownership, and the Communist Party was gravely concerned with the possible reemergence of old class structure in rural villages, as well as regional economic inequalities. Ultimately, a debate between Mao Zedong who believed in collectivization and other members of the Party ensued, and Mao eventually succeeded in steering the Party policy into the direction of collectivization. Pre-collectivization land reform therefore was an extremely important event in the history of socialist China, but was ultimately an imperfect socialist policy.

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<sup>36</sup> Sulamith H. Potter and Jack M. Potter, 60

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