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集体主义

Collectivism

GAO Mobo

Despite collectivism's maligned and misunderstood status today, at the time of its implementation in the Mao era, it was seen as a necessary solution to achieve a scale of food production that could feed China's massive population. Collectivism was a revolutionary idea and a potential solution to underdevelopment. To understand this, it is important to grasp the background conditions of China's complicated land-tenure system inherited by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) when it came to power in 1949. First, China has been forced to rely on just 7 percent of the world's arable land to feed between one fourth and one fifth of the world's population. Second, in most of southern China, mountains and hills were cultivated to grow food in terraced plots not suitable for large-scale mechanised farming. Third, in large areas of rural China, communities had been (and continue to be) based on lineage or clan villages.¹ Finally, although land reform in the early 1950s allocated land equally on a per capita basis, it was feared that without collective reinforcement, this equality might revert to well-trodden historical disparities between landowners and the landless—a prospect that was anathema to communist ideology. Collectivism was viewed as an attractive option with which to overcome these constraints, develop agricultural production at a scale that could feed China's masses, and even generate a surplus for industrial development.

Land Reform in the Mao Era

Land reform involved confiscating land from larger landowners—identified as the class categories of landlords and rich peasants—and redistributing it to households on a per capita basis. Land reform was central to the CCP's ideology, and the violence of the land seizures and struggle sessions was justified by the need to emancipate the peasantry from their oppressive landlords (see Javed's essay in the present volume).²

Due to the existence of lineage villages, the implementation of these ideals was not homogeneous. As a result of historical heritage, villagers in one village could end up controlling more, or less, land than their neighbours.

In spite of widespread mass support, this form of household ownership of land did not last long. Immediately after 1949, China faced two grave structural challenges: how to look after the poor and the disadvantaged in rural areas and how to obtain enough food to feed the increasing urban population while at the same time accumulating capital for industrialisation. Based on their understanding of the current conditions, and their conceptualisation of how development should unfold, the Chinese leadership in the mid-1950s came to the conclusion that collective farming was the most rational approach to address macroeconomic development and serve the needs of the people—the majority of which were poor, illiterate peasants struggling for survival. A collective could look after the poor and disadvantaged, and provide essential services such as health care. It was hoped that collective land ownership would guard against the recreation of unequal class dynamics in the countryside by making it impossible to transfer land from the poor to the better off. It was also seen as a way to mobilise labour power in order to achieve large-scale infrastructural projects—such as irrigation—despite the limited technology available at that time, while also increasing the state's capability to extract food to feed the urban sector, as well as capital surplus from farmers to develop industry at a faster rate.

It could be argued that collective farming succeeded in fulfilling all of these tasks. By the end of the Mao era, the Chinese people were reasonably healthy and educated. Life expectancy increased from a mere 39 to 68 years. Though life remained spartan, inequality had been reduced dramatically. Irrigation infrastructure had been improved beyond the CCP's wildest expectations. By the end of the 1970s, China had become the sixth largest industrial power in the world, whereas in 1949 the country's industrial capacity was on par with that of a small nation like Belgium. But these successes were not achieved without costs. There was a constant shortage of daily necessities and living standards remained low. The most disastrous cost was the famine that followed the Great Leap Forward (1958–62), when the Chinese authorities rapidly organised the 'people's commune system' (*renming gongshe zhidu*) across the country and encouraged people to put into practice many fanatical ideas, such as setting up backyard furnaces to make iron and steel.³ Although the famine resulting from the Great Leap Forward is used by many to discredit collectivism *tout court*, this is an unfair reduction of the possibilities of collective organisation to one of its most extreme manifestations.

Life in the Commune

When the commune system was initiated in 1958, it was organised according to the logic of 'the bigger, the better,' based on the assumption that larger communes were better equipped to mobilise resources to achieve large-scale projects, and that disputes among villages would disappear in the vastness of collective life (see Tomba's essay in the present volume). A commune was set up by combining several villages into one administrative unit. These assumptions were flawed. In a large commune of several thousand households or more, it was difficult to manage and supervise production activities. This administrative failure was largely responsible for the decrease in food

production during the crucial planting season of 1959. In the early 1960s, having learned a costly lesson, the commune system was downsized, a change that led to certain improvements in management and supervision. The system in this new form lasted until the early 1980s. Within one 'commune' (*gongshe*) there were ten or so 'production brigades' (*shengchan dadui*), each one of which was comprised of ten or so production teams (*shengchan xiaodui*). A team would normally consist of ten to twenty households, depending on the size of a village. A village of more than thirty households would most likely be divided into two teams. Each team would have a five-person leadership group, usually composed of a team leader, an accountant, at least one woman member, a person responsible for the granary, and a work point record keeper.

In this structure, the production team would be in charge of managing the land under its control. Everything produced on this land was shared by team members after deduction of taxes and levies paid to the state, and all the production activities were arranged by the team leadership. With this system, supervision and monitoring were easier and more transparent. Within one team, the contributions of each member to the collective were recorded and rewarded according to a so-called 'work point system' (*gongfenzhi*). All villagers received an equal amount of staple food on a per capita basis, with the only difference being between adults and children. To those households that contributed more than the worth of what they had received, the leadership applied the principle of 'to each according to one's work' (*anlao fenpei*) by either giving cash converted from the value of the earned work points at the end of the year, or by distributing non-staple food like oil, sugar cane, or fish from public ponds. The households that had contributed less would not be able to receive these products. Every year, all team members would assemble to evaluate each other's contribution to the collective, taking into account age, strength, work attitude, and gender. This evaluation would then be quantified through a ten-point system. Those villagers who received the highest score would usually be assigned the hardest work, but women were usually assigned less arduous manual labour, like pulling a wheel barrel or ploughing the paddy fields.

The commune leadership would not intervene in day-to-day production activities. Usually, they enforced policies and disseminated political messages from the centre. They were also responsible for the promotion of specific programmes—such as those on health and hygiene, and on how to use new technologies. As a result of reforms of collective structure and management, by the end of the 1970s, there were already signs of improvement in the life of Chinese farmers. By the middle of the 1970s, another development also contributed to improving the rural situation: the establishment of 'commune and brigade enterprises' (*shedui qiye*). Contrary to mainstream historical narratives of a lost decade of economic stagnation, companies of this kind actually originated during the Great Leap Forward and increased during the Cultural Revolution (1966–76). These Mao-era experiments in rural production were precursors to the creation of township and village enterprises (TVEs) developed in the 1980s after decollectivisation. Although TVEs are praised by scholars for contributing to lifting China's rural areas out of poverty, their origin in Mao-era collectivism is often conveniently erased from the historical narrative.

The Afterlife of the Collective

As a rural development model, collective agriculture was a mixture of success and failure. According to William Hinton, one third of the communes of the Mao era performed well, one third did very badly, and the rest fell in between.⁴ Nowadays, however, communes are painted with the brush of failure, erasing the differences between them and their underlying potentials. It is almost entirely forgotten that the practice of combining collective life with private initiatives, such as the 'household contract responsibility system' (*jiating lianchan chengbao zeren zhi*), originated in different parts of the country in the Mao era.⁵ Praised for bringing about the end of the collectives and initiating rural economic reform, the contract responsibility system did not necessitate the undoing of the collective system. The outcome was not historically inevitable and, in hindsight, was perhaps lamentable. In fact, there are still a few hundred villages that have resisted the pressure to dismantle the sources of their power, and remain collective until this very day.⁶ While the end result of the economic reforms initiated by Deng Xiaoping was in fact the restoration of household farming and land redistribution, it has to be pointed out that the dismantling of the commune system has not entailed the total abandonment of collective agriculture. Land is still collectively owned, and households only maintain the land use rights distributed to them.

Those who pushed for dismantling the commune system argue that production output during the Mao era remained low because the system of collective farming tolerated 'free riders.'⁷ Arguments and evidence against such an economic rationalist position are too complex to be presented here, so I will only mention two facts that in my opinion undermine such an approach. First, due to Cold War era sanctions imposed by Western powers, China was forced to 'transform itself through its own efforts' (*zili gengsheng*) (see Yang's essay in the present volume), and pursue the price scissors strategy of keeping the price of agricultural produce low while setting the price of industrial goods high in order to accumulate capital to invest in industrial development and modernisation efforts. Second, technology, such as hybrid rice crops and chemical fertilisers, was not available at that point in China. Without the technology of industrial agriculture, collectivisation attempted to increase food production on limited arable land for a massive population.

The Collective Roots of Today's Economic Miracle

It is easy to dismiss collectivism without understanding its political economic goals and the circumstances under which it was developed. The economic development and wellbeing of China's rural population today were built on a foundation of collectivism. Ironically, China's economic 'miracle' of the reform era can also be explained as a result of its collective past. The collective ownership of land has provided a large well-educated but cheap labour force that has allowed China to become the 'factory of the world' over the past three decades. And it is this very same collective land ownership that to this day supports the families of hundreds of millions of migrant workers. In China, there are hardly any urban slums because collectively owned land acts as a social security net. If there is no work to be found in the cities, migrant workers can always return to their hometowns. They can also leave their families, children, and elderly relatives on the

familial plot of land. If farmers were dispossessed from their land and without jobs in the city, today's China would face the spectre of proletarianisation on a scale of which Marx and Mao could only dream.

There are two major issues today that are used as rationale for the wholesale privatisation of land. One is the prevalence of predatory rural land grabbing, a situation in which state agents and developers work together to seize land from farmers for commercial development. While this phenomenon has seen some signs of easing recently and is mainly limited to areas next to urban centres, it is often used as an argument for privatisation in the belief that once the land is privatised, the titleholder will be properly compensated. The second issue is related to efficiency and scale economy, and is based on the assumption that only privatisation can allow the market to play its full role in increasing competition, and thus boosting agricultural productivity. These two issues remain extremely controversial in China today. And it could not be otherwise, since a decision on whether land remains collective may well decide the future direction of the entire country.⁸

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