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农民

Peasant

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‘Peasant’ (*nongmin*) is a modern historical and political category in China, and Mao Zedong had more to do with its construction than any other individual. At the turn of last century, *nongmin* emerged as a translation of the English term peasant. While the category usually had negative connotations—such as backwardness, superstition, and ignorance—some took *nongmin* to be a positive category. For instance, in the first decade of the twentieth century, a moment in which the capitalist transformation of China was leading to a more pronounced rural-urban divide and worsening conditions for peasants, early Chinese anarchist Liu Shipei saw rural rebellion as having revolutionary potential and the peasant as a revolutionary subject.¹ Liu took a populist position on the peasantry, in the belief that rural revolution implied a resistance to capitalist transformation by a unified peasantry in a way that would significantly transform rural social relations.

While Liu mapped a potential historical transformation, in his narrative the peasant was largely an essentialised figure. Others followed a similar, though less anarchist-inflected, populist view of the peasant. Li Dazhao, one of the founders of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), believed that the peasantry was a singular, if disorganised, class.² A less revolutionary populist vision of the peasantry emerged with the Rural Reconstruction Movement of Liang Shuming, Y. C. James Yen (Yan Yangchu), and others, who believed that rural education and governance reforms could lead to a unified rural sphere immune to class differentiation, and to a stronger China safe from capitalist and imperialist intervention (see also Ou’s essay in the present volume).³ Nonetheless, the dominant image of the peasant in early twentieth-century China was negative, portraying the peasantry as holding China back from progress and in need of modernisation. For example, Chen Duxiu, an intellectual of the New Culture Movement

and another founder of the CCP, viewed peasants as petty-bourgeois reactionaries who at best stood on the sidelines of revolution, if not in its way. In his opinion, they would never play a progressive role in history.

These dichotomous images of the Chinese peasant, however, were brought together into a new dynamic unity within the Maoist theory and practice of rural revolution, a result that was achieved by paying particular attention to the question of class differentiation. During the revolution, Mao came to understand the political inclinations of peasants as two-fold, depending on the local material and political conditions: as potentially tending towards rebellious activity, on the one hand, or towards the protection of their individual petty-bourgeois land holdings, on the other. The task of revolutionaries then became to investigate why certain peasants—especially ‘middle peasants’ (*zhongnong*)—would become revolutionaries instead of conservative defenders of the status quo. This ‘revolutionary peasant dialectic’ formed one of the most important and influential political inventions of China’s short twentieth century (from 1900 to the 1970s), and has been referred to by historian Philip C. C. Huang as the ‘dialectic of rural revolution.’⁴ Yet this dialectic began to disintegrate soon after the CCP victory in 1949, devolving into the earlier incongruous and static images of the peasantry. With China now undergoing rapid capitalist agrarian change, the question of class is returning in a new form.

The Peasant Dialectic of the Chinese Revolution

The methodology of the revolutionary peasant dialectic that emerged in China in the first half of the twentieth century did not seek a true comprehension of the essential nature of the peasantry. Rather, it sought a historical grasp of rural class differentiation aimed at understanding which classes of peasants would most likely become revolutionaries, and under what material and political conditions this kind of change could occur. In 1926, Mao argued that rural China at that time had eight classes, ‘each having different economic positions and living conditions. This in turn influences their psychology, so that their attitudes towards the revolution also differ.’⁵ The ‘attitude’ (*taidu*) of the petty-bourgeois landholder class, the middle peasant of later analysis, was decisive for revolutionary strategy, and the turning of the richer and middling landholders towards revolution was a crucial moment in the unfolding of revolution. The petty-bourgeoisie was, thus, a wavering class.⁶

Mao came closest to a populist vision of the peasantry in his famous 1927 ‘Report on an Investigation of the Peasant Movement in Hunan,’ in which he went so far as to claim that the Hunan uprising was a fulfilment of the ‘historic mission’ (*lishi shiming*) of the peasantry to ‘overthrow the forces of rural feudalism.’⁷ Yet Mao quickly returned to focus on rural class analysis, and in the sober 1930 ‘Report from Xunwu’ gone was the spontaneity of the revolutionary peasants of the previous ‘Hunan Report,’ replaced by more in-depth investigations and interviews that contained a far greater amount of sociological detail.⁸ In this later writing there was no abstract peasantry. Rather, the peasantry was riven with class divisions, and it was acknowledged that only detailed social investigations would lead to proper revolutionary practice. For Mao and the CCP, who, following Stalin, viewed China as a semifeudal and semicolonial society (see Barlow’s essay in the present volume), the primary axis of class in rural areas was

landownership. Chinese Trotskyists such as Ren Shu, Yan Lingfeng, and the Chinese Economy group, on the other hand, believed that society was already capitalist, and that the main rural class contradiction was between capital and labour.⁹ Organisationally, the CCP dominated, even if the debate on the nature of rural Chinese society was inconclusive.

By the late 1930s, the revolutionary peasant dialectic had become the CCP's orthodox position. There was a consensus around the idea that the peasant had a 'dual nature' (*liangchongxing*).¹⁰ As Mao stated in 1939, 'the positive or negative attitude of the middle peasants is one of the factors determining victory or defeat in the revolution, and this is especially true after the agrarian revolution [land reform] when they become the majority of the rural population.'¹¹ But as the Party began to contemplate victory in the Civil War, the increasing fear that the conservative side of 'peasant consciousness' (*nongmin yishi*)—which derived from a petty-bourgeois class of small property owners—might prevail led to worries that, after liberation, the defensive attitude of the peasants towards their property would eventually block socialist development. In such a context, in 1948 Mao argued that the Party had to be vigilant against 'agrarian socialism' (*nongye shehuizhuyi*), a 'reactionary, backward, and retrogressive' form of rural socialism based on the principle of an absolute egalitarianism of landholdings.¹²

With the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the CCP turned to socialist modernisation, within which agriculture was to play an important but subordinate role. Party leaders saw a high level of accumulation from agriculture as the only way to underwrite the industrialisation process, which focussed on heavy industry.¹³ To feed industrialisation, the agricultural economy had to be developed, but under the conditions of a high and growing level of surplus extraction. Within this situation, the more conservative view of the peasant as a potential block to socialism and industrialisation, and as an object in need of modernisation, took precedence.¹⁴ The revolutionary peasant dialectic, which had brought the dual images of the peasant into dynamic unity, thus began to break down.

Dialectical Breakdowns and Theoretical Reversals

This process of dialectical breakdown accelerated in the early 1960s, following the demise of the Great Leap Forward, and is especially visible in historical debates on peasant revolution from that time.¹⁵ As political stances became increasingly rigid, the image of the peasant bifurcated into a revolutionary actor that carried the seeds of socialism, on the one hand, or a conservative and reactive class of small property owners that could never escape their own conditions without outside help, on the other. For example, the historian Bai Shouyi, interpreting peasants from a class viewpoint, argued that peasants could create their own 'peasant dictatorship' (*nongmin zhuanzheng*) to represent their interests just as a proletarian dictatorship represented the interests of the proletariat.¹⁶ Cai Meibiao, representing the orthodox Marxist stance of more senior Party historians such as Guo Moruo, Fan Wenlan, and Jian Bozan, argued to the contrary, that peasant rebels could not be revolutionary because they did not have the political consciousness necessary for the revolutionary overthrow of feudalism, and that their rebellions were simply spontaneous outbursts, largely without historical significance.¹⁷ In his view, peasant wars were neither real social revolutions

nor the prime motor of history under feudalism, and it was only with the appearance of the bourgeoisie or proletariat that the conscious overthrow of feudalism could be accomplished.

During the Cultural Revolution, the more orthodox stance was attacked as conservative, and many of its proponents lost their academic positions. Nonetheless, from the early 1960s on, the peasant revolutionary dialectic that had guided the revolution was at a standstill. Diagnoses of the peasant inclined either to one side or to the other, depending largely on political engagements rather than concrete analysis of class, interests, and material conditions.

These debates reemerged and were reframed in the post-1978 reform period. As rural policy shifted to support the Household Responsibility System (*jiating lianchan chengbao zerenzhi*), effecting a return to household farming, the conservative side of the peasant's dual nature was initially emphasised, and peasants were portrayed as a conservative block to modernisation. As the 1980s proceeded, however, the valence of the dichotomy reversed. From then on, in the dominant discourse peasants could become a subject of modernisation only if they became more entrepreneurial. In a remarkable reversal, it was exactly their petty-bourgeois nature—which, within Maoist discourse had been the cause of their conservatism—that now made them progressive. Under this new formulation, class and class differentiation disappeared as problematic elements. It was rather the risk-taking individual farmer who became the motor for rural economic development. In an influential text, reformist intellectuals Wang Xiaoqiang and Bai Nansheng argued that the transformation of the rural economy—rather than simply its quantitative growth—depended on the 'quality' (*suzhi*) of individual peasants, with *suzhi* denoting 'the quality of engaging in commodity production and management' highlighted by an individual entrepreneurial attitude.¹⁸

This discourse on the low quality of peasants was central to the controversial television documentary *River Elegy*, which aired in China in the months preceding the 1989 protest movement. The series blamed China's lack of development on the peasantry, which with its low quality stood as a block to modernisation.

In the vast, backward rural areas, there are common problems in peasant [quality] (*suzhi*) such as a weak spirit of enterprise, a very low ability to accept risk, a deep psychology of dependency (*yilai sixiang*) and a strong sense of passive acceptance of fate It's not the lack of resources, nor the level of GNP, nor the speed [of development], but rather this deficiency in the human [quality] that is the essence of this so-called notion of 'backwardness.'¹⁹

In other words, the rebellious side of the nature of the peasants was chaotic and disruptive to social progress, and only petty-bourgeois self-interest could lead to entrepreneurial progress.²⁰

From Peasant to Low-end Population

This reformulation of the peasant comprised the basis for both the liberalism of the reform-period and the state's view of rural modernisation.²¹ But it was not long before this formulation was challenged by the reemergence of a populist politics of the

peasant around the turn of the millennium. Growing out of the New Left critique of market utopianism in the early 1990s, pro-peasant scholars such as Wen Tiejun and He Xuefeng took a Polanyian stance, arguing that free market policies and the invasion of the countryside by the forces of capital would destroy peasants and rural society, destabilising China as a whole.²² In their writings, only a unified peasantry built through cooperative villages and protective state policies could prevent this dire outcome. These ideas developed in relation to rural activist and cooperative practices that came together under the name of ‘New Rural Reconstruction’ (*xin xiangcun jianshe*), a label that drew from the populist movement of the 1930s mentioned above.²³ While the Movement generated considerable innovative practices, it had less influence on state policy. From the pro-peasant perspective, the policies of the Hu-Wen administration were a mixed bag for rural society: on the one hand there was the abolition of the agricultural tax in 2005, but on the other, those years saw an acceleration of the entrance of capital into the countryside, a facilitation of land transfers, and a limitation of cooperative relations.²⁴

With the rapid growth of agribusiness and the formalisation of land transfers allowing for the accumulation (and dispossession) of rural land, it is more and more difficult to talk of a unified peasantry. In response, newer scholars are paying more attention to class differentiation and capitalist agrarian transition in China, although it is less clear what political stances much of this new academic work presents.²⁵ At the very least, however, peasants today are being treated less as an essentialised, general abstraction, and more as a historical formation or process that requires explanation (i.e. de/repeasantisation, class differentiation, new spatial formations, etc.). One might even question whether the category *nongmin* does the analytical and political work it used to do. The rural-urban divide, so central to the Mao years, now plays a much different role in structuring social relations, everyday life, and political economy, with so many rural residents no longer living in the countryside or, in many cases, not even knowing how to farm. Responses to the evictions of ‘low-end population’ (*diduan renkou*) at the edges of Beijing at the end of 2017 point to some possibilities, with the extent of public outcry against and debate concerning the evictions seeming to surprise the Chinese state. While many see the term ‘low-end population’ from a liberal viewpoint as a form of discursive discrimination, the analyses of others suggest its importance in reviving discussions of class in the Chinese context.²⁶ With the acceleration of capitalist transformation in China, especially in the agricultural sector, class analysis and historical inquiry are as necessary as ever.

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