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## 原始积累

## Primitive Accumulation

Jane HAYWARD

**T**he creation of wealth is often ascribed to hard work and dedication by those who have it. Yet, '[i]n actual history,' wrote Karl Marx, 'it is a notorious fact that conquest, enslavement, robbery, murder, in short, force, play the greatest part.'<sup>1</sup> Primitive accumulation (*yuanshi jilei*) is the transfer, often by violent means, of formerly common resources into the hands of a privileged few so that they can be utilised for the creation of private profit, thus depriving everyone else of an autonomous means of existence. Chronologically, primitive accumulation is precapitalist—it is the process by which the exploitative class relations inherent to capitalism come into being. Marx called it the 'original sin' of the capitalist mode of production.

Historically, the basis of primitive accumulation is the centuries-long process of the peasantry being driven off the land. This process takes different forms in different countries during different historical epochs.<sup>2</sup> The classic account of this is the enclosure movement in feudal England. As common lands were taken over for sheep pastures by the aristocracy in response to the rising demand for commercial wool, the English peasants, deprived of their means of subsistence, had no choice but to sell their labour in order to survive. Over time, the peasantry was transformed into a propertyless class of industrial workers—a proletariat—providing the cheap labour which eventually came to fuel the British industrial revolution. Such processes, as they unfolded in various ways across the countries of Western Europe, were accompanied by parallel forms of primitive accumulation overseas, as the rising colonial powers seized foreign lands and enslaved native peoples, providing ever more resources and cheap (or free) labour to perpetuate the cycle of capitalist expansion.

The Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) relationship with the concept of primitive accumulation has been conflicted. In that it signifies the founding moment of exploitation of one class by another, it is considered the root of all capitalist evil. Thus, the presence or lack of primitive accumulation was a defining marker of difference between

unjust capitalism and morally superior, egalitarian socialism. The Chinese socialist state under Mao was therefore organised in such a way that nation-building should take place without the occurrence of primitive accumulation, through the creation of—at least in aspiration—non-exploitative forms of social and economic organisation. This meant no accumulation externally via colonisation—an impossibility in any case, given the hostile international environment of the Cold War—and no private property domestically.

Production was to be organised on the basis of communal ownership, based on a system of work units (*danwei*), and via the collectivisation of agricultural production in the countryside (see the essays by Gao and Kevin Lin in the present volume). The relationship between urban and rural, industry and agriculture, was thus organised on the basis of an alliance between workers and peasants, under which grain produced by agricultural communes was cheaply supplied to industrial workers in the cities. With both workers and peasants as the owners of their respective means of production, primitive accumulation was rendered impossible—in theory, at least.

### *The Search for Primitive Accumulation*

Yet, while primitive accumulation was to be avoided at all costs in the building of the new socialist state, paradoxically, it continued to be regarded as a necessary component for the realisation of socialism. Since primitive accumulation was the process by which two antagonistic classes emerged—those with property and those without—it was the very thing that produced class struggle (see Russo's essay in the present volume). In the somewhat simplistic version of Marxist theory to which many Chinese communists subscribed—based on a universalist, stagist version of history—class struggle was the basis of social dynamism and of revolutionary possibility.<sup>3</sup> For centuries, European thinkers from Hegel to Weber had conceived of China as a static and unchanging society which, under absolute despotic rule, was incapable of historical progress. For Chinese communist intellectuals, China's apparent stagnation in comparison to European capitalist development likewise caused concern. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, debates flourished on questions such as: why had capitalism not developed in China as it had done in Western Europe? Was there something lacking in Chinese society? And, most importantly, where lay the potential for socialist revolution predicted by Marx, on which the CCP had pinned its hopes as well as its legitimacy?

With these questions in mind, Chinese economists and historians scoured China's past to uncover moments of primitive accumulation. These efforts often corresponded with a search for the 'sprouts of capitalism' (*zibenzhuyi mengya*) in Chinese history. This term refers to moments of early commodification that scholars attempted to locate in order to disprove the common depictions of developmental stagnation, which, besides being factually inaccurate, contradicted the stagist version of history underpinning CCP doctrine.<sup>4</sup> For many intellectuals, however, these 'sprouts' on their own were not synonymous with actual primitive accumulation and were therefore insufficient to demonstrate the sundering of Chinese society into two antagonistic classes.

The discussions on whether or not primitive accumulation had taken place at some point in Chinese history are usefully summarised in an article published in 1962 in the *People's Daily* by the economist Peng Zeyi.<sup>5</sup> For some, according to Peng, these moments

were evident in commercial activities dating as far back as the mid-sixteenth century, under the Ming Dynasty. Others argued that it was not until after the Opium Wars, with the violent impact of invasion from foreign capitalist powers in the mid-nineteenth century, that China's entrenched feudal social structure was shattered enough to kick-start processes of primitive accumulation. There were others for whom even colonial invasion could not bring about real primitive accumulation. For these scholars, China's lack of a strong monarchical regime meant it was incapable of enacting political violence of sufficient potency to reconfigure China's social structure. They compared Chinese history to that of England, where the monarchy had acted in alliance with the British bourgeoisie, forcibly reshaping society to forge a class structure—including a large labour force—conducive to profit-making and capitalist expansion.

Under Mao, these discussions remained sensitive, however. The implication of the historical failure of Chinese society to produce class struggle was taboo, as was any reference to primitive accumulation actually occurring during the Mao era.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, a number of scholars were purged during the Anti-rightist Campaign of the late 1950s for daring to suggest that China's unequal economic system, founded on the cheap extraction of grain from the rural communes in order to feed industrial workers in the cities at low cost, was, in fact, a form of state primitive accumulation based on the exploitation of China's peasantry.<sup>7</sup> Further discussions concerning such matters were suppressed during the Cultural Revolution.

### *The Return of Primitive Accumulation*

After the death of Mao, primitive accumulation reappeared in policy discussions of the reform period as the regrettable, but necessary, starting point by which China was to reclaim its rightful place in a universalist world history through successful participation in the global capitalist economy.<sup>8</sup> After a tentative reemergence in scholarly literature in the early 1980s, its passage to widespread acceptability was assisted by an article in 1989 by Wen Tiejun, a well-known left-wing scholar of China's peasantry and agricultural economics.<sup>9</sup> Wen published what he claims was the first article to openly recognise the role of primitive accumulation as an essential aspect of Chinese socialist modernisation under Mao. The article concerned Wenzhou—a city famed for its early and hugely successful adoption of market policies in the reform period. In the article, Wen's reference to 'state primitive accumulation' during the Mao period implicitly referred to—without stating explicitly—the extraction of capital for industry from the countryside via the rural communes. Wenzhou's economy, Wen argued, had stagnated under Mao due to a lack of investment because of its location across the strait from Taiwan. Yet, with the new sense of economic freedom that came with the reform era, the Wenzhou inhabitants began to take full advantage of their only abundant resource, low-cost manpower—in other words, cheap industrial labour. According to Wen, it was this 'human capital primitive accumulation' that led to the extraordinary levels of economic growth for which Wenzhou is famed.

This article was significant for two reasons. The first was Wen's use of the term 'primitive accumulation' with reference to industrialisation under Mao. This helped pave the way for other scholars and policymakers to use this concept when referring to various elements of China's modernisation in the contemporary era which were deemed

unfortunate, but necessary. The second was Wen's description of fully marketised labour as a source of primitive accumulation. Wen appeared to be hinting that—now that the period of state-managed industrial growth via rural communes was over—primitive accumulation in a different form, based on the extraction of cheap labour for industry, was the new foundation of China's economy. The peasantry would continue to be the primary resource fuelling national economic growth, he was suggesting, but now in the form of industrial migrant labour in the cities (see Day's chapter in the present volume).

Shortly afterwards, Wen published another influential article which explicitly discussed primitive accumulation both as central to Chinese modernisation, and as founded on an unequal urban-rural relationship.<sup>10</sup> Wen portrayed the Chinese state under Mao as unexceptional in its use of primitive accumulation, viewing it as different from Western capitalism only in terms of its 'Eastern-style':

The main differences between societies of the East and West originate in their different resource environments and their different historical processes of state capital primitive accumulation . . . . China is a typical state which carried out Eastern-style primitive accumulation. It did not, as did Western states, carry out plunder and expansion externally, but mainly deployed internal 'self-exploitation' . . . extracting accumulation from the countryside[.]<sup>11</sup>

By accounting for China's difference from Europe by virtue of it being *Eastern* as opposed to *Western*, rather than framing the difference as one of *socialism* versus *capitalism*, Wen normalised primitive accumulation as a universal process deployed by modernising states globally, thus avoiding the prior association of primitive accumulation with capitalist states in particular. Stripped of its political baggage, the term could then be applied freely to Chinese development processes without the ideological rupture which would have occurred from deploying an 'evil' capitalist concept within a nominally socialist state.

### *The 1990s Onwards: Back with Abandon*

Wen claims that his repeated advocacy since the mid-late 1980s that primitive accumulation is a normal and necessary process for modernising states and, as such, was central to Maoist industrialisation, led to this position being 'accepted by the majority of scholars' by the late 1990s.<sup>12</sup> It is hard to avoid the irony that this conceptual shift in the language of Chinese socialism in favour of a mode of development situated right at the heart of classical capitalist transition theory was ushered in through a positive appraisal of Mao, for whom this very notion would have been anathema. Yet, it was no doubt Wen's associating of primitive accumulation with Maoist, rather than capitalist, development which facilitated its passage into mainstream socialist discourse.<sup>13</sup>

In fact, in a discursive double movement, just prior to primitive accumulation's return to the mainstream, the term 'class' (*jieji*) had been dropped from the official lexicon of Chinese socialism, replaced by the far more anodyne phrase 'social strata' (*shehui jieceng*).<sup>14</sup> This allowed the term primitive accumulation to roam free in public discussions while rendering silent, and invisible, its negative association with class

exploitation, which was, in fact, inherent to it. According to Qin Hui, another well-known scholar of China's peasantry, by the late 1990s the term primitive accumulation was being bandied around quite casually by local officials and in the media, sometimes used in a positive sense to denote rapid economic development.<sup>15</sup> Qin also observed that the common occurrence of the term 'capitalist primitive accumulation,' a phrase never used by Marx, likewise stemmed from a misunderstanding of the concept. For Marx, primitive accumulation was a precapitalist phenomenon, but in postreform China it had become naturalised as a feature of early capitalism—the first stage of the market economy, and therefore something to be embraced.

This important shift in the available language of policy, therefore, was not limited to rhetoric but reflected what had come to be considered acceptable in terms of how society and the economy were organised. The widespread embezzlement of public assets, often by dubious legal means and/or force while taking the appearance of the legitimate privatisation of state-owned enterprises, for example, was viewed as simply part of a universal historical trend of 'transition' to modernity—and whether that meant a socialist or a capitalist modernity was increasingly irrelevant.<sup>16</sup> The promotion of urban industrialisation by redirecting central state budget allocations to the cities, leaving lower-level rural governments to fend for themselves, similarly normalised the countryside as a legitimate target of capital extraction, now by means of excessive taxation and often illegal fees imposed on rural households.<sup>17</sup> With the concept of class excised from discussion and primitive accumulation consequently defanged, the formation of a proletariat—both via layoffs from state-owned enterprises and in the form of rural migrant workers flooding into the cities (in large part to escape the decimation of rural living conditions) now seemed entirely coherent with socialism, albeit 'with Chinese characteristics.'

Meanwhile, the spate of rapacious land grabbing in the countryside, enacted by real estate developers in cahoots with local officials, and facilitated by the somewhat nebulous system of collective ownership over rural land, appeared all too similar to the enclosure movement of medieval England from which capitalism had originated.<sup>18</sup> Although widely condemned by scholars on the left, many people tolerated, and some even welcomed, these occurrences, which were perceived as unfortunate but necessary steps on the elusive universal path along which China would finally join the rest of the developed world.<sup>19</sup>

### *The Road Ahead*

Today, while it is difficult to consider China as being 'precapitalist' (let alone socialist), the restructuring of Chinese society in the interests of capital expansion continues apace. While the countryside remains a primary resource for national capital accumulation, the focal point appears to have shifted from people to land. Although rural land ownership remains collective, policies of land transfer have produced a quasi-land market which is efficiently performing the work of class differentiation, gradually transforming a relatively egalitarian society of smallholder farming households to one of larger farms and employed labourers.<sup>20</sup> In the name of 'civilising' the countryside, meanwhile, a variety of state policies are geared towards the removal of villagers from their homesteads and their relocation into dense tower blocks, either on the outskirts

of their villages or in far off townships, freeing up their land for use by incoming agribusinesses or other more profitable enterprises.<sup>21</sup> Meanwhile, as expanding urban metropolises are branded 'world cities' to attract international investment, urban land encroaches further into the countryside.

These days, however, low-cost migrant labour is being evicted from China's cosmopolitan urban areas, no longer welcome in these increasingly exclusive playgrounds for wealthy global elites.<sup>22</sup> Marx would have recognised these social upheavals as the long process of reconfiguring China's class structure as the Chinese state is transformed into a component within the global capitalist economy. These epoch-defining historical transformations are neatly packaged, explained, and justified in official language as 'the primary stage of socialism' (*shehuizhuyi chuji jieduan*).

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