

## The Early Years of the PRC 1949-56 - Land Reform and effects of Central Planning

### Key Issues:

How successful were the policies

What effect did these policies have on the lives of the people involved.

### To understand

- Transition from feudalism to socialism
- Early land reform, liquidating the land lords
- Spread of land reform
- Collectivisation, causes of and its effects on the peasants, Chinese society and the CCP
- Changing pace of reform, mutual aid teams, Agricultural Producers
- 12 year agricultural Programme
- CCP attitudes to the countryside
- Changes in the CCP approach towards land reform
- Importance of agriculture in Chinese economy, tensions between peasant aspirations and long term Communist aims

Land and how to reform the holding of land was a thorny topic. In simple terms, the Communist party described pre-CCP land distribution as feudal and post-CCP as socialist, communist, marxist. It was more complex. Land holdings pre CCP were not all feudal (definition of feudal: where people of a certain rank give/rent land to people of lower rank to live and work on in return for rent or food). In Southern China 56% of people rented land, in North China only 10-15% rented land and in Yangtze valley most of the land was owned by rich peasants. This was why, in the early years Mao had been pragmatic about land reform, 'liberating' it were landlords were brutal, very large, or, more importantly, not politically useful but keeping it with landlords were they supportive or could be defined as peasants.

In 1947, Liu Shaoqi suggested a very egalitarian form of land distribution but 1948 saw Mao denounced this remaining in favour of the moderate/pragmatic approach.

However, in the Civil War, in areas of Communist support, harsher more 'Communist' redistribution was enforced so as to gain support from the poorer peasants.

In 1949, with the founding of the PRC, Land Reform was universally applied but remained 'moderate' for now.

1950 Agrarian Reform Law put the principle of moderate land reform into law, not targeting wealthy peasants.

That said, villages behaved independently and many were encouraged, by party members, to struggle against landlords. A type of anarchy ensued and within this 40% of cultivated land was said to have been redistributed. Landlord deaths counted between 750,000 to 1 million.

By 1952, Land Reform was complete and, in the main, it bought the regime massive support from the peasants.

## Collectivisation

Land Reform had always been an ideological stepping stone to creating larger units of collective land which would be more efficient in feeding China.

From 1951, **Mutual Aid teams** were encouraged. These comprised of 10 or fewer households, normally arranged on family lines. Families pooled equipment and labour but land remained privately held.

Next came **Agricultural Producers Cooperatives (APCs)** where land was centrally managed but still privately held. These were made up of 3-5 Mutual Aid Teams. Animals, labour, equipment was pooled and food/money received was distributed according to the contribution. Even these APCs were rolled out at different rates with the first in 1951 but none in the South until 1954 although APCs were policy by 1953.

Even now, Mao was sensitive to alienating the peasants and where there was dissent, normally in areas where Mutual Aid teams had not been used and APCs introduced, Mao urged caution. In 1955, he called a halt to APCs in Southern provinces as anti Communist feeling grew and rich peasants started to slaughter animals rather than hand them to the APC.

This started to change with certain rural areas seeing a resurgence in rich peasants hiring labour and buying land (capitalist peasants) and with a focus turning to industrialisation.

By the mid 1950's, agriculture was secondary and supportive of the industrialisation plans (to be studied). The population involved in industrialisation was a small percent of the overall population in China and needed to be increased. On the flip side, Mao and the Communist leaders started to feel that the peasants were producing more food and not providing it to the cities. In 1955, Mao on a visit to the problematic South said 'the peasants want freedom and we want Socialism'. Economic planners, and Mao, now felt the peasants were being indulgent in terms of the size of their families and their over eating! They were not very communist in their outlook. Mao himself said in 1959, 'Peasants are hiding food, there is no Communist spirit in them!'

Compare this to the start of Mao's reign where he had massive peasant support thanks to his policies (Land liberation and rent control) and fair treatment (PLA vs NLA). His approach to Marxism was also entirely based on a revolution driven by the peasants. He himself was a peasant.

In 1955, The Conference of Local Party Secretaries was called to circumvent the opposition to APCs within the Central Committee, as many Central Committee members were supportive of the peasants. At this Conference, collectivisation was speeded up.

In 1956 and 1958, Mao directed the 750,000 existing APCs (or collectives) to be joined together to make larger **communes** ( or high level APCs). **In 1958, this collectivisation became a key part to the Great Leap Forward (or the second Five Year Plan).**

Facts: 750,000 collectives became 26,000 communes  
The communes in total contained 120 million households (of 5 people each)

Everything was controlled centrally, farming methods, sale of produce, setting of prices

Private farming ended

Passports were needed to go from commune to commune

The official line was that the peasants had organized themselves into collectives (from the Central Committee and newspapers of the time) and Mao maintained the policy was a direct response to their wishes (democratic centralism, Marxism dialectic)

See Source from Lynch p76

So, the spread of land reform and collectivisation was driven and enforced by Mao under the guise of it being the people's will, although it was entirely against the people's will.

### **Consequences/Effects of Land Reform:**

Collectivisation saw the end of private farming and thus there was no incentive to produce more than was needed, farmers were told what to produce and what price they would receive. This led to not enough food being produced. This led, in part to the Great Famine (see below)

Mao effectively enforced his view on the peasants when, previously, his aim had been to improve their lives. This was a personal and theological change.

CCP as the party of the people starts to be questioned.

The start of real central control and monitoring via installing Party Cells in grassroots rural China via collectivisation.

Start of dogmatic and self delusional Mao - or a continuation?

Realisation that Communism does not match with the ideals of the peasants.

One of the major consequences was also the Great Famine. The Famine itself does not fall exactly in the studied period but it can be an essay topic as a 'what were the causes of' searching for a description and discussion of Land Reform.

### **China's Great Famine 1958-62**

In addition to the effects of collectivisation, Mao believed Chinese agronomists had made discoveries to revolutionise food production by following: **Lysenkoism**

Trofim Lysenko was a Soviet pseudo scientist who claimed to have found a way of increasing rice and wheat yields by 16x. This was entirely false but USSR influence on policy in the early days was such that Lysenko's teachings were seen as faultless. His 'findings' were the basis of an eight point plan drawn up by Mao in 1958. These 8 points were to be applied equally across all crops which meant **all crops then failed** as only certain points are relevant for certain crops.

The points were:

Use new brands and seeds

Plant closely

Plough deeply  
Use new farm tools  
Improve field management  
Control pests  
Increase irrigation

Following these rules ultra closely had various consequences but one famous one is **Sparrowcide**. It was decided sparrows and other birds that ate crops should be extinguished so, on seeing these birds, villagers would make as much noise as possible with cans/pans etc to the point that the birds dropped from the air in exhaustion. Pictures of dead birds were published and villages competed to kill the most birds.

The effect was that insects and small creatures were not eaten so ate grain. Equally, larger vermin were not eaten by larger birds and multiplied and ate grain stores.

#### **Effects:**

**Famine was catastrophic** Food production plummeted with 200 million tonnes of wheat produced in 1958 down to 160 million tonnes in 1962)

This affected the whole of China but the Central belt was worst affected. In total, 50 million people died.

Desperate measures such as cannibalism and selling family members were not unusual.

**Famine in Tibet** was the most notable. 24% of its 4 million population died. This was because in Mao's attempt to 'hold on' to Tibet despite continued resistance, in response to another uprising in 1959, he enforced mainland Chinese agricultural policies on Tibet. They were no longer allowed to plant barley or oats (staple foods) but wheat and maize unsuited to local soil. The nomadic yak herders were told to settle and become 'farmers'. The resulting famine was not only catastrophic but politically motivated.

**Reaction of those in local government** was to say that the agricultural policies were working and sometimes to pick up crops, move them to an area being inspected, and then return them after a visit. Local government knew of the famine but dare not say.

Mao eventually acknowledges the famine but blames:

- Hoarding of grain by peasants - untrue
- Mistakes by local officials - partially true but driven by policy and fear
- Bad weather - true