

China: From Peasants to Workers

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From Commune to Capitalism:

How China's Peasants Lost Collective Farming and Gained Urban Poverty

By Zhun Xu

New York: Monthly Review Press, 2018, 154 pages, \$25 paperback.

TODAY CHINA'S GEOPOLITICAL ambitions grow as quickly as its own contradictions. With the Jasic worker-student strikes last year and Hong Kong's anti-extradition bill protests earlier this summer, it is time to consider the economic and political alternatives to neoliberal globalization from the perspective of the Chinese working class.

Zhun Xu, now an assistant professor of economics at Howard University, argues that the key might be in China's past. *From Commune to Capitalism* disputes the long-established claim that the decollectivization of Maoist-era peasant communes was better for the economy and an initiative wholly championed by the peasantry.

Xu shows that decollectivization under then-supreme leader Deng Xiao-ping and the post-Deng leadership, like collectivization under Mao, was a fundamentally top-down process that elicited a complex array of reactions from the peasantry. In the first chapter Xu writes: "decollectivization served as the political basis for the capitalist transition in China, in that it not only disempowered the peasantry but also broke the peasant-worker alliance and greatly reduced the potential resistance to the reform." (16)

Three Perspectives

Xu outlines three main positions the Communist Party leadership held toward decollectivization at the time: the pro-collectivization "socialist" forces led by Mao, the anti-collectivization "capitalists" led by former Premier Liu Shao-qi and Deng and the "populist" camp, which promoted small family farms over collectives and generally sided with the capitalists. With the death of Mao, the capitalist camp quickly maneuvered its way into political leadership and, since the late 1970s, has pushed for market reforms.

Chapter Three reveals the problems Xu finds in the prominent research model developed by former Senior Vice President of the World Bank Justin Lin. While it supposedly established a correlation between Deng's market reforms and increased production output, Xu argues that in 1978 the reforms did not happen uniformly across the nation. Lin's model does not take into account that, in certain locales, some reforms took place after the production season of a given year.

In addition, Xu points out that the technological developments in machine power and chemical fertilizer inputs that accompanied some of the increased output were investments from the collective era.

More importantly, the final two chapters demonstrate that the decollectivization process was by no means spontaneous. While the absence of mass unrest did signal some discontentment with the

communes, Xu shows that the heavy political pressure that stimulated an efficient dismantling of the communes was the determinant factor.

In reality, only the cadres and a small part of the peasantry gained from the reforms. The Chinese Communist Party was able to diminish the political capital of both the urban working class and the rural population through decollectivization.

The state eventually invested less into agriculture, and a newly-disenfranchised population of rural folks entered the cities as a new class of migrant workers. The subsequent urban glut lowered wages and exacerbated inequality. Today China's ever-increasing population of almost 290 million migrant workers testify to the persistence of this problem.

Xu's nuanced focus on the working-class and peasants' capacity for effective democratic self-organization is a necessary takeaway. Admitting that both collectivization and de-collectivization are top-down initiatives, Xu identifies "democratic control of the state by the workers and peasants" as the key to a truly stable and thoroughly effective process of workers' self-management.

How the Communes Functioned

Xu's fieldwork in Songzi county, interviewing cadres and peasants who lived through collectivization and the reforms, reveals some practical ways in which peasants effectively maintained their communes and combatted the "free-rider" problem.

Interviewees pointed out that teams kept detailed records of each plot of land and who farmed which. There was collective decision-making in the work-point system among the cadres and peasants. Work avoidance was tackled by buddy systems and simply by the fact that most people in a commune knew each other and kept each other accountable.

Of course, not every commune functioned perfectly, and issues of stratification between cadre and peasant proved widespread enough to encourage some to accept the reforms. But recovering these voices reveals how the benefits of workers' control is crucial to identifying sites of struggle today. While there is no movement for re-collectivization (in fact, there had never been a popular movement to begin collectivization in rural China), descendants of the "populist" camp that Xu identifies in the '70s hold influence over important contemporary iterations of workers co-ops and alternative food networks in rural China.

Xu is right that these forces do not directly organize to challenge capital, but one cannot deny these movements are at the forefront of countering the excesses of China's neoliberal policies and bureaucratic oppression. Promoters of the New Rural Reconstruction Movement like Wei Tiejun often occupy a tenuous and shifting relationship to capital, despite not actively antagonizing the state. Yang Hai-rong writes that despite their internal incoherence and diversity, these rural movements form a critical mass that challenges the ongoing dominant neoliberal vision that promotes urbanization and capitalization of agriculture as a viable future for China ... Even as many dismiss the Mao-era rural commune system, this recent past experience has perhaps sharpened their practical — though not always theoretical — egalitarian sensibility on the one hand, and has on the other hand made it easier for them to project a communal coherence that they hope to revive in the future. [1]

While showing the potential of redefining state boundaries and challenging anti-capitalist policies, Christof Lammer and Matthew Hale's fieldwork also critiques contemporary instances of rural co-ops as implicated in capitalist modes of production. [2]

In other words, Xu's separation between the two camps of "socialism" and "populism" over

decollectivization may be slightly overstated. Stressing the overlap between different social agents that support workers and peasants' self-organization would be vital in understanding China's grassroots sites for anti-capitalist resistance.

Xu's point on the need to rebuild the peasant-worker alliance continues to hold true, but it is still unclear as to what concrete ways are available. As He Congzhi and Ye Jingzhong point out, decades of compelled urban-rural migration have fundamentally shifted traditional care network, family and village structures. [3]

How can we take into account these fundamental shifts in social and class consciousness, transformed by the effects of market reforms, as we understand and uplift concrete manifestations of democratic movements on the ground?

The Future Lies in the Past

Xu's text deftly reminds us that the key to the future is in China's past: the glimpses of democratic socialism in an otherwise authoritarian state. But we must also understand that the Maoist-era communes are no more than an auxiliary guide to our present and future. Despite Xu's recovery of the socialist potential of the communes, one must not forget that this whole process of collectivization began by state fiat, and not by peasants' self-organization.

Xu conveniently brackets out discussions of other Maoist initiatives like the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution, since they precede the time period in focus. The different consequences of each, however, does not negate the fact that the curtailing of workers' democracy centrally determined the state of things under the CCP from Mao to Xi Jin-ping.

At the same time, we cannot dismiss or forget the radical instances of workers' and peasants' self-organization in modern Chinese history — from the "Yan'an spirit" of cooperatives and mutual aid in the wake of the 1930s Long March to the struggle of Jasic workers and students today. [4]

Understanding the complexities of the concrete struggle of China's rural and urban masses against capital today, no matter how "reformist" or "revolutionary," is the only reliable pathway to a democratic socialist future.

Promise Li

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Footnotes

[1] Yang Hai-rong and Chen Yiyuen, "Debating the rural cooperative movement in China, the past

and the present," *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 40.6 (2013): 975-6.

[2] Christof Lammer, "Reworking state boundaries through care: 'Peasant friends', 'greedy entrepreneurs' and 'corrupt officials' in an 'alternative' food network in China," *Vienna Working Papers in Ethnography* 5 (2017): 1-29. Matthew A. Hale, "Tilling sand: contradictions of "Social Economy" in a Chinese movement Wfor alternative rural development," *Dialectical Anthropology* 37.1 (2013): 51-82.

[3] He Congzhi and Ye Jingzhong, "Lonely Sunsets: Impacts of Rural-urban Migration on the Left-behind Elderly in Rural China," *Population, Space and Place* 20.4 (2014): 352-369.

[4] On the Communist Party cadres and peasants' experiences in 1930's Yan'an, see Maurice Meisner, *Mao's China and Now* (New York: The Free Press, 1999): 47-50.