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# *Socialist Household Production: Some Implications of the New 'Responsibility System' in China*

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## **Introduction<sup>1</sup>**

One form of the new 'responsibility system' in the Chinese countryside contracts the use of land or other means of production from the production team (comprising usually 20 to 40 households) down to individual households. Under this system, termed 'contracting production to households', households are free to organise production and to dispose of the produce as they please, as long as they deliver on schedule an agreed quota of prescribed goods and do not hire labour or buy and sell land. This system is expected to raise the quality of performance in the countryside because it shifts the weight of responsibility for profits and losses from the team to the household, and thereby links individual performance more closely with income than was the case before [see Gray in this issue].

In assessing the results of this policy, it is important to determine not only whether the goal of higher performance and production levels has been attained, but also, what effects it is having on the changes of realising the longer-range goals of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), notably the eventual voluntary re-collectivisation of agricultural production. Realisation of this latter goal presupposes that production teams will have adequate capital and personnel to achieve economies of scale through further mechanisation of agriculture, and that inequalities in wealth between households will not develop so far as to prevent production teams attempting to re-collectivise from being able to offer substantial material advantages to rich households.

From the perspective of this long-term aim, current reports suggest that the household-contracting system is creating problems. Consumption levels appear to be rising and can be expected to continue to do so because of a rising number of births. This, in turn, reduces the amount of surplus available for the production team, which is supposed to be accumulating savings for future capital investments. In addition, inequalities in wealth appear to be on the increase.

Currently available data, however, make it difficult to determine how prevalent these problems are [but see Croll 1982]. If widespread, they would have serious consequences for the economy as a whole over the long term. For this reason, it seems important to develop methods which can help us ascertain what the likely consequences of household contracting might be, even if information on actual conditions is limited.

## **Data, Method and Basic Assumptions**

The major source of data used for this study was a collection of essays written by 43 Chinese students of sociology who attended a course I offered in rural and urban sociology from November 1981 to January 1982 at Nankai University, Tianjin. These students came from 18 leading Chinese universities. Although only five students had actually grown up in the countryside, almost all had worked in production teams for at least one year. Since they had been selected as the first class in sociology in China since the subject was banned in 1952, and were in the main highly motivated to understand Chinese society and to resolve its social problems, most of the students read avidly all reports they could obtain about social and economic conditions, notably internal materials which circulate among China's political and intellectual elite, but may not be exported to other countries. I feel that the essays they wrote provide a wealth of information which has greatly enriched what I could observe at first hand on my visits to China in 1980 and 1981-82.

The answers to two essay questions form the basic core of this analysis. The first question was: what in your opinion are the major advantages and disadvantages of the contracting-to-household system? The second question, posed after presenting a short summary of George Foster's theory of the image of limited goods [Foster 1965], was: do you think that Foster's hypothesis explaining competition and conflict among peasants is applicable to Chinese peasants in the past or present? If not applicable to the present, how would you describe the peasants' current concerns and behaviour? This question aimed to determine the guiding perspective, goals and possible conflicts of interest existing among the rural population and to elicit information on emerging inequalities of wealth.

In addition to the essays themselves, four sources of supplementary data were used: discussions with these

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<sup>1</sup> An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Institute of Development Studies in March 1982, which greatly helped me clarify my ideas. I am particularly grateful to Ester Boserup, Christine and Gordon White and Kate Young for valuable suggestions.

same students, which often clarified or further elucidated essay answers; the as yet unpublished results of investigations carried out by these students on various aspects of rural life during 1980 and 1981; my own observations and interviews with peasant families in 1980 and 1981-82; and the results of a prior detailed analysis concerning Chinese peasant concerns and typical behaviour patterns based on village-level accounts describing the process of land reform and collectivisation conducted by the CCP [Hazard 1981a].

On the basis of an analysis of these sources, the major concern of Chinese peasants appears to be — as it was during earlier phases of the organisational transformation of the Chinese countryside — the concern for *securing a material existence*. I mean by this that if a Chinese peasant<sup>2</sup> were confronted with the alternative of acquiring great wealth far exceeding his material subsistence needs at high risk or of obtaining an adequate but small income at low risk, he would choose the latter.<sup>3</sup> The following essay answer is typical:

as for peasants' value orientations, their major interest is the desire to acquire material security. Therefore, their main aim is to secure food and to seek security. They do not desire luxuries going beyond these basic needs. Even now, with the modernisation of agriculture, the situation has not changed much.

If this is the primary interest of Chinese peasants, then we must view behaviour patterns which appear most frequently and regularly among the majority of the rural population as representing *risk-avoiding* or *risk-reducing* strategies.<sup>4</sup> If, for instance, higher consumption levels, more children and the revival of clans

<sup>2</sup> When using the term 'peasant' I am referring to the head of the household who makes the major decisions concerning investment and consumption. I do not rule out the possibility that sons, daughters and wives may have different perspectives. Their views, however, are not the subject of this paper.

<sup>3</sup> Many other studies have also explained the behaviour of peasants living close to the subsistence level as motivated primarily by the concern to reduce risks and uncertainty. [See especially: Cancian 1967 and 1972; Lipton 1968; Migdal 1974; Ortiz 1973, 1979 and 1980; Scott 1973 and 1976; Wharton 1963 and papers by Wharton, Behrman, Mellor and Myint in Wharton (ed) 1969 and Wolf 1979]. Although this paper basically agrees with these authors, it diverges on details, since Chinese peasants today face a certain combination of risks which is specific to their situation.

<sup>4</sup> In concentrating on peasants' concern for security, I do not wish to imply that peasants have no other interests (such as the desire for material comfort, satisfaction in their work or relaxation and entertainment outside of work). I am, however, claiming that these latter interests are not *primary* movers of peasant behaviour. They are interests which influence behaviour only when the primary interest in security is being adequately met. Thus, my concentration on this major interest means that I cannot explain *all* behaviour-choices of peasants. However, I would claim that I am explaining those which are most likely to occur regularly among the majority of the peasant population.

really are frequent phenomena, then it should be possible to explain these patterns as attempts to reduce or avoid risks. This paper will concentrate on identifying the major uncertainties in securing a material existence today under the household-contracting system and describing how households are most likely to try to reduce or avoid these uncertainties. Because of the lack of adequate data, it will not be possible here to differentiate risk structures and strategy-responses for different regions. However, it should be kept in mind that considerable regional variation is probably likely.

## The Structure of Risks under Socialist Household Production

Although the peasants are working hard under the household-contracting system, many are working hard because they are afraid (that is) because their livelihood is uncertain. In my village, many are saying, 'What if we don't get the harvest in on time? What if, after handing in our quota we don't have enough to eat?'

In particular, the essays indicate that rural households with contracts to teams are particularly concerned about their control over access to land and labour.

### Risks in access to land

Frequent reference was made to problems connected with the style of implementation of the household-contracting system. The following quote is typical:

a widespread problem of the household-contracting system is the way it is implemented. In some production teams, no written contract is made, so that, if the team changes its mind, the peasants have no way of insisting on their rights. Even if a written contract exists, it may not set down all the details. Often, for instance, the duration of the contract is not stated, so that the peasants do not know how long they can use the land. In my village, where the contracting system has been carried out for two seasons, this problem has been corrected. But in the neighbouring villages there are still problems. Also, there is the problem of how the land is to be distributed. Everyone wants the best land, and the cadres try to distribute this land equally and fairly, but this means that each year you probably do not receive the same piece of land. Because the criteria for distribution are not clear, the peasants worry whether they will get land that is fertile and conveniently located.

Even more frequently, reference was made to the uncertain duration of the policy of household-contracting as such:

when the peasants ask them, some team cadres say that the policy will last only three to five years. Others say it will last for their lifetime. In reality, no one really knows, and the newspapers are also not clear (on this point). But the peasants want to be able to set up a (long-term) plan. This situation makes it difficult for them, and they feel worried.<sup>5</sup>

### Risks in access to labour

This year, my father was ill and my paternal uncle came to help out. My mother wrote me: 'What would we have done without your uncle? Our life now is not easy'. Other households in the village also have problems of labour power. Some send their sons to the city to work on construction while others are short of workers and have too many mouths to feed. In the past, this wasn't so serious because the collective (production team) produced the grain and you could borrow extra grain if you did not earn enough through workpoints. Now, there is no collective grain, or if there is, everyone is too busy on their own field to pay attention to families with hardships. Even organising occasional labour between households is difficult because the cadres must also earn their livelihoods from their own manual labour and have no time to help others.

This and other essays indicate that peasants under the household-contracting system are particularly concerned about securing appropriate amounts of labour power both on a daily, and on a periodic basis. The problem of daily access derives from the fact that the hiring of labour is officially not allowed, and households must depend mainly on the labour available in their own households, supplemented by informal arrangements with kin. Since households are biological and social units following specific developmental cycles, the ratio of dependents to labourers inevitably varies over time, leading to temporary excesses or shortages of labour, which in some way must be ironed out. In addition, households are far smaller than production teams, so that the material consequences of illness or death of one member are more immediately and strongly felt than would be the case under the collective organisation of production. Finally, the household-contracting system appears to have weakened the local system of leadership, so that the responsibility for securing adequate labour on an occasional basis is thrown back on individual

households. Since labour-hiring is not permitted, the peasants must rely on informal bonds of reciprocal obligation. These bonds, however, appear not to be so strong that households feel secure in the willingness and reliability of kin, friends and neighbours to help out when they are urgently needed.

In sum, peasants today under the household-contracting system appear to view their access to land and labour as less secure than under the prior system of production organisation within the production team.

### Common strategy-responses

According to the essays, peasants are responding to these risks in similar ways, so that certain patterns of response are discernible.

### Responses to the Problem of Land Access

Three responses to the problem of land access are most frequently cited: clientelism, the predatory exploitation of the land, and the emphasis on sidelines.

*Clientelism* One means of reducing the risks involved in acquiring secure access to land is to give 'gifts' of services or goods to those cadres who negotiate production contracts (usually production team cadres) in the hopes that these will reciprocate by taking their interests into account. Although social opportunism, as it is often called by my respondents, is mentioned, it appears to be less common than the other two strategies mentioned below. One reason for this might be that the political risks involved are high. Campaigns with the purpose of criticising local leaders who accept bribes and exercise favouritism have occurred at periodic intervals in many rural areas. Leaders can therefore be expected to be wary of accepting gifts of this kind, and peasants would hardly want to take the risk of having leaders, under the pressure of criticism, accuse them of being initiators of such 'gift-giving' exchanges.

*Predatory exploitation of the land* One respondent describes this tendency in the following words:

the system gives peasants the right to use but not rights of ownership. This is a problem which does not help in improving the conditions of production. Because the peasants know that they will be giving back the land to the production team, either at the end of the season or when the policy changes, they do not take care of the soil, and go all out in exploiting it. In this way, the land becomes increasingly impoverished.

Although the government obviously does not condone such behaviour, one respondent points out that households which pursue it are more likely to avoid

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<sup>5</sup> Risks in access to land are, of course, still lower than in capitalist societies, where peasants may lose access to land entirely. The concern for future access to land indicated in my data suggests that Chinese peasants are comparing their situation today with the situation in the period immediately prior to it, when production teams not only owned the land, but also organised and managed its cultivation as a collective.

criticism than in the past because of the widespread propagation of the slogan: whoever gets rich is glorious, whoever remains poor is a (stupid) bear.

In principle, the slogan intends to praise only those who get rich by their own efforts and use the means of production responsibly. In fact, however, it makes it easier for dishonest and careless people to get rich through cunning and the misuse of the means of production.

Today, everyone competes with each other to see who can get rich fastest. The way you get rich is of no concern. Whichever method makes you rich most quickly is (seen as) the best method.

As an earlier quotation indicated, this competition to get rich by the fastest means possible should be understood not as an expression of rationally planned profit-maximisation, but rather as a strategy to obtain a modicum of security — an economic cushion under circumstances of high risk.

### **Emphasis on sidelines:**

if the responsibility system is allowed to develop too far, it may prevent a further development of agriculture. Team members like sidelines because they can improve their incomes faster than in agriculture (ie land cultivation), and the work is less hard. Further, it is a more secure source of income than agriculture because you are not dependent on the production team to give you the necessary means of production. The more is invested in sidelines, however, the more the cultivation of the land is neglected.

This excerpt indicates that, under the responsibility system, where access to land is less secure than under the prior system, production in sidelines takes on new significance as a risk-avoiding strategy. In addition to the advantages domestic sidelines have always had over land cultivation (the quicker profits and lighter work load noted above), it has the additional advantage under the responsibility system of reducing the dependency of the household on the whims of team cadres and the vicissitudes of policy changes. If current publication emphases are any indication, domestic sidelines production, and especially the raising of pigs and chickens, and the making of clothes, is undergoing a literal boom.

### **Familial Responses to the Problem of Labour**

Because hiring of labour is not permitted, households are forced to adopt familial solutions to their labour problems. Although the prohibition of labour-hiring existed prior to the household contracting system, we have seen that the risks in labour access deriving from household-based production have increased. As a consequence, a successful resolution of the labour

problem is today not merely a question of relative advantage, but has taken on existential significance.

*Joint family and more children* Two strategies are being adopted as a means to reduce the risks linked with the small size of the production unit: the prolongation of the joint family phase in the developmental cycle (when at least two married brothers live together with their families), and more children. While the first strategy offers a quick solution to the problem of size raised by the household-contracting system, the latter strategy pays off only in the long-run after the children have reached an age when their labour power can contribute to household income. Despite the uncertainties perceived concerning the duration of the current policy, the planning of large families was one of the most frequently mentioned responses to the household-contracting system in the essays:

the household-contracting system makes the family planning campaign ineffective because having many sons is an advantage.

Although there is a surplus of labour already, this system makes matters even worse.

The family planning campaign could only work when the production team could impose material sanctions on households. Now, with the responsibility system, everyone produced their own food. The production team does not have the power anymore to withhold grain.

The main reasons given for the desire for more children, despite the uncertainty of future policy and the increasing man/land ratio was seen to be the increased emphasis on domestic sidelines. In sidelines, children can be productive for the household earlier than in land cultivation. Furthermore, the household can provide them with employment, even if land is, in the future, not allotted according to the number of labourers in the family.

But why do even the richer households appear to prefer to reduce the risks of small workforce size by an enlargement of the workforce, rather than through the purchase of labour-saving machines and/or draft animals? The answer appears to lie in the greater political risks connected with such a strategy:

during collectivisation, the wealthier households had to hand over their draft animals and large implements to the collective. These households have not forgotten their losses. Since the responsibility system will not exist forever, they do not want to repeat the experiences they had then. If you have many children, however, the collective does not expect you to hand them over in the same way. You only lend the collective their labour for

part of the day, and during that time, they are earning workpoints.

Another respondent points out a second political risk involved: "who knows whether the model peasants of today will be labelled as "capitalists" later on?"

*Marriage timing and marriage finance* An important strategy for ironing out inconsistencies in the labour force due to births and deaths is the timing of marriage and childbirths. In this way, a situation can be avoided in which both the oldest and the youngest generation are simultaneously dependents of the working members of the household. Ideally, children should be entering the production process at the time when grandparents are leaving it.



Richard and Sally Greenhill

Grandmother and grandchild in household production.

Realising this idea, however, is easier said than done. Even assuming that potential wives are adequately available, financing a wife appears to be an increasingly expensive undertaking for households with unmarried sons. In particular, brideprices and the expenses connected with nuptial ceremony are rising. Some respondents explained the increasing expense of marriage as being due to the increased value of women both as mothers and as workers under the household-contracting system.<sup>6</sup> As mothers, they are more valuable because the value of children has risen. As workers, their value has risen, because they are assuming work in sidelines, their traditional work area.<sup>7</sup>

The burden on household expenditure has been further aggravated by the prohibition on the part of the government of investment in land. In pre-Communist rural society, one of the main means of displaying wealth and security in order to obtain a wife was investment in land. This means of display, although hardly inexpensive, had the advantage of being at one and the same time both display article and capital investment. Today, display must take different forms. Although capital goods such as a sewing machine or a pig can also serve this dual function, they are less expensive and therefore less indicative of wealth and security than land was in the past. As a consequence, households must adopt additional means of displaying wealth.

An apparent favourite object for this purpose is the building or the expansion of a house. Building materials are in many regions of rural China very expensive, so that the size of a house is a good indicator of wealth.<sup>8</sup> In addition, it is also a sign of security because on the one hand it concentrates in one

<sup>6</sup> That brideprices have varied in both pre-1949 and socialist China according to the value of females as labourers is discussed by Croll [1981:50-54] and Parish and Whyte [1978:181,186ff]. The close relation between brideprice and the female's work contribution to the household is also noted for other societies by Boserup [1970].

<sup>7</sup> Certain sidelines were traditionally done by men, such as carpentry, metal-working and Chinese medicine [Cohen 1976:88]. However, those which seem most prevalent in the Chinese countryside today, perhaps because they require little specialised training, namely pig- and poultry-raising and textiles, were traditional women's work [Cohen 1976:147], and appear to remain so today [see Croll 1977:805; Hazard 1981c; Parish and Whyte 1978:205]. For the central importance of female labour for the proper functioning of the household as a production unit under collectivised agriculture, see Croll [1981:152-6].

<sup>8</sup> For instance, in Yuelu Brigade near Changsha, one family had spent 1300 yuan on a simple small house built of bricks with a packed clay floor. It had taken them three years to save this amount, and the cost was considered very low, since a large proportion of the building materials came from the old house which had been torn down, and they also had paid nothing to the neighbours and relatives who helped build the house. In almost all family interviews, the pride in the house and the preoccupation with plans for its expansion were noted.

location a large number of persons, so that cooperation of married brothers in production on a daily basis is more likely, and on the other, it provides adequate space so that nuclear family units (married brothers and their wives and children) have some privacy, thus reducing the likelihood of seriously strained relations, which is a common characteristic of joint families. Apart from these expenses, consumer goods are now also becoming objects of wealth display and marriage finance.

### **Clan and affinal ties**

The adoption of familial solutions applies also to the problem of organising large workforces. Two channels for organising labour at this level are clan membership and affinal ties [see Gallin 1966:151; Parish and Whyte 1978:172]. In both instances, measures must be taken to ensure that a basis for cooperation exists, even when no cooperation is necessary at the moment. One means of strengthening clan bonds is the tightening of rules of clan exogamy [see Granet 1930:154; Parish and Whyte 1978:171]. Another means applicable to both clan and affinal ties is the cultivation of customary ceremonial exchanges of small gifts and services.<sup>9</sup>

### **Implications for China's future socialist development**

Is household production in the PRC in the long-run incompatible with socialist development? Specifically, how will the likely strategy-responses of peasants under the household-contracting system affect the prospect of recollectivisation?

At present, these prospects appear bleak. Production teams will have difficulty accumulating capital for future purchases as long as households continue to adopt a 'get-rich-quick' attitude. Since in the past, production team cadres proved often to be incompetent in managing team production, there is a lack of confidence in the ability of the production team to organise production efficiently in the future. Also the training of young people to take on future leadership positions within the collective is unlikely to be a spontaneous outgrowth of the household-contracting system, since on the one hand, the skills needed to enhance household income today are not the same as those needed to organise large-scale production, and on the other hand, children are attending school less regularly, because they are being integrated into the household production process (especially sidelines) starting at an early age.

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<sup>9</sup> For these customary exchanges in their various forms in pre-1949 and present-day China, [see Croll 1981:45-54; Granet 1930:156ff, 161-5; Hsiao 1967:333-44; Parish and Whyte 1978:185; Wolfe 1972:119-27].

Furthermore, inequalities in wealth between households, which would also jeopardise the chances for future recollectivisation, can be expected to increase,<sup>10</sup> despite the government's prohibition that land and labour be marketable commodities. An intrinsic characteristic of the household-contracting system is that it discriminates against households with relatively less labour power. This source of inequality is accompanied, however, by four others, all of which, in combination, increase inequalities even more. First, even with equal numbers of workers, levels of performance vary considerably between households based on differences in work motivation, work discipline and skills. Second, the same level of expenditure for marriage financing is more 'expensive' (relative to income) for a poor household than for a rich one. At the same time, it is (ironically) less effective in securing female labour and reproductive power, since its wealth display is not as convincing as a wealthier household, being usually connected with cutbacks in consumption in such vital areas as food intake [Croll 1981:53 note; Wolf 1972:144]. This differential effect of the same expenditure level for marriage financing is reflected in the tendency for poorer households both to marry their sons to women who are considerably older than they are (and often widowed, making their brideprice even lower), and to lose their daughters-in-law on the grounds of not having been 'kept' well.<sup>11</sup>

A third source of inequality is the government's current propagation of the slogan, 'whoever gets rich is glorious, whoever remains poor is a (stupid) bear'. This slogan, which appears to have gained wide currency in the villages, embodies in effect the creed of survival of the fittest. Those who are poor because they do not have adequate labour power at their disposal and who are needy of aid from the production team's welfare fund, are conveniently stigmatised as stupid by their better-off neighbours, in turn making a refusal to support such families out of the welfare fund easier.<sup>12</sup> Although such families do not starve, but instead receive grain from the production team in the form of loans, they are still put in debt to the team.

<sup>10</sup> For the equalising effects of certain features of collectivised agriculture prior to the introduction of the household-contracting system, [see Tsou, Blecher, Meisner, 1979, Part II, esp. pp 155-180]. For an opposing emphasis, concentrating on sources of inequality including those between households and therefore presaging many of the current problems, [see Nolan and White 1979].

<sup>11</sup> [Parish and Whyte 1978:193,198]. I am here, however, understating the case. Normally, it is precisely the poorer households which must pay a higher brideprice, because they cannot offer the girl comfortable living conditions [see Croll 1980:52, and Parish and Whyte 1978:190f].

<sup>12</sup> Before the introduction of the household-contracting system, team members were apparently extremely reluctant to support team members who had no family to provide for them out of the team's welfare fund [Davis-Friedman 1978]. The equalising effect of the welfare fund and other social services is discussed by [Ng 1979:55ff].

Apart from this misuse of the government's slogan, the creed of survival of the fittest is also convenient in covering up less acceptable ways of getting rich, namely those which are not based on the fruits of one's own physical effort (the officially commended way to get rich), but are rather a result of cunning and trickery.

Finally, membership of a clan which is large and cohesive enough both to organise bigger work teams effectively and to ensure access to such crucial resources as water at times when weak water is scarce has definite advantages. Although clan ties in general cross-cut lines of economic cleavage so that poor and rich households might belong to the same clan, thus counteracting the increasing inequalities arising from the other two factors discussed above, it is also possible to imagine a system where clan strength and economic wealth reinforce each other. For instance, if a clan has control over the main water sources, the wealthier members might find it advantageous to permit even the poorest members of the clan access to the water, so as to avoid divisiveness which would weaken their political position *vis-à-vis* other clans in the village.

### Household Production and Socialism: an Uneasy Alliance?

Although these are the likely consequences of the household-contracting system under present conditions, the question still remains whether they are *necessary* concomitants of it, or whether steps can be taken to remove or at least reduce the severity of these consequences, while still retaining the basic policy of household production.

A review of the determinants of peasant behaviour makes it evident that they are responding to a combination of factors connected only in part with the household-contracting system. The household-contracting system makes household composition even more important than in the past, but the strategies open to peasants to resolve their labour problems are circumscribed by a policy independent of the responsibility system, the prohibition of labour-hiring and investment in land. Similarly, both the risks in access to land linked with an incorrect implementation of the system, and the slogan legitimising the wealthy and stigmatising the poor can be removed. But the greater uncertainty concerning the duration of current policy cannot, as long as a socialist state persists which claims the right to determine production policy in the countryside.

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