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CHINA: DEVELOPMENT POLICIES  
AND RURAL CHANGE

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Let me state at the outset that I do not pretend to be an "expert" on China: my limited knowledge and understanding is based on reading, in the fields of anthropology and economics, and a short official visit to China in 1984. Not being a "China watcher", my own perspective is oriented to Chinese views of their own society. Furthermore, as an anthropologist I have a professional preference for looking at individual trees rather than at the wood as a whole, although I also believe that it is important to look at these trees in relation to the larger wood. The Chinese wood, though, is enormous.

The People's Republic of China is the third largest country in the world (after the USSR and Canada), feeding over one-fifth of the world's population (over one billion people) on slightly over 7% of the world's arable land. China's population distribution is skewed around the 375 mm/15" isohyet, with eastern China supporting some 80% of the total population, while western China with its mountains and deserts is very sparsely populated but has natural resources important to development, notably oil, coal and other minerals. Only some 12% of China's people officially live in cities: 88% are "rural" dwellers ranging from full-time farmers, through seasonal commuters to temporary urban jobs, to regular commuters to permanent city workplaces.

China is also the world's oldest centralised state, unification having been achieved within roughly contemporary boundaries during Europe's "dark ages". Her history during the middle ages is one of technological innovation (the compass, gunpowder, coal, etc) ahead of the west. But China's history is also one of recurrent revolts by the peasants against their exploitation by the class of the "gentry" and intellectuals which made these technological and political advances possible. From the beginnings of China's recorded history (three millennia ago), her peasants have been "revolutionary" in the Copernican sense of that term. The tradition of peasant revolt is one that China's politicians necessarily regard as a significant policy factor.

## 2. BRIEF HISTORICAL REVIEW

China's recent history, from the nineteenth century, is that of limited colonisation in and through the "treaty ports" on the eastern seaboard and inland rivers, which were prised open after the Opium War of 1840-2 by the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Russia, the United States of America and Portugal. In these treaty-ports were established within existing urban islands, modern trade and industry, surrounded by a vast sea of rural poverty. This early colonisation was later supplanted, starting in 1895, by Japanese imperialism which ebbed and flowed through various parts of China from its bases in the north (Dalian, Manchuria, and Qingdao being the most important) and in the

offshore island of Taiwan. Notwithstanding Japanese support for the last Chinese imperial dynasty (the Qing), it was overthrown in the first revolution of 1911. The major Chinese struggle against Japanese domination began in 1931 and lasted until Japan's capitulation in August 1945. The anti-communist Guomindang was finally displaced by the second revolution, after two decades of internal struggle, in 1949, when the People's Republic of China was declared under the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). The Goumindang regime fled to and established itself on Taiwan, taking advantage, in nationalisation and land reform programmes, of the Japanese capitalisation of plantation agriculture and some industry on this island between 1895 and 1945.

The CCP administration's most immediate and urgent task in 1949 was to stabilise the yuan and bring Weimar-type inflation and grain hoarding under control. Then it turned to land reform, involving both redistribution and registration of individual parcels. The peasant household did not long remain the basic unit of production, however. In 1952, the process of collectivisation began, moving from mutual aid to elementary to advanced co-operatives in four years, and then in 1958 on to "people's communes", sub-divided into production brigades and teams. Prior to 1955, co-operation in pooling tools, animals and land was voluntary, and it is in this period - whether due to voluntary co-operation, land redistribution or other factors, singly or in combination - that impressive gains in farm output were recorded. As collectivisation was speeded up in 1956, coinciding with increases in the proportion of grain output statutorily procured from peasants, rural hunger became evident in villages like Kaixian'gong (Fei 1983:160-1), even prior to the first drive toward rural industrialisation during the "Great Leap Forward", which began in 1958.

The establishment of the communes coincided with poor weather during the "Great Leap Forward" (1958-61), during which time Mao attempted to push rural industrialisation on an inadequate technological base and to some extent at the expense of peasant agriculture and consumption. It is estimated that some 15-20 million "surplus deaths" occurred from lack of food during this period. From 1959 to 1962, the rate of net natural population increase hovered at around five per thousand, down from well over 20 per thousand in the years preceding and succeeding the Great Leap (Tian Xueyuan 1981:37). The Great Leap was succeeded by five years of more conservative policy designed to rehabilitate agriculture, but this swing of the Chinese political pendulum was reversed again between 1966-76, during the "Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution", against which all of current policy may be glossed as a reaction.

Yet Mao's basic policy of "walking on two legs" (ie. those of agriculture and industry) continues to inform current policy. Today this policy has been combined, not with Mao's inward

looking "self-reliance", but with "opening to the west" to take advantage of recent technological advances while retaining a basically socialist (ie. centrally co-ordinated) economy in which public ownership ("ownership by the whole people") remains dominant even while collective and increasingly private ownership (eg. in the transport and other service sectors) continue to expand. The pricing mechanism has become a very important policy tool in restructuring the Chinese economy and modes of management, but socialist indices (notably the rate of "accumulation" or reinvestment, and the balance between investment ratios in heavy and light industry) are still regarded as critically important in national economic planning. The "privatisation" of cultural education (music, art, sport), medicine and other professions is today legitimised by the additional services so provided, in the context of their overall scarcity in Chinese society.

China has in fact reached a developmental plateau as a result of Maoist policies. The majority of China's citizens are now clothed, fed and sheltered such that the average life span has been extended to comparability with developed countries. But something more than economic redistribution and preventive health programmes is now needed, if China is to surpass its earlier achievements and not stagnate on this plateau of equally distributed relative poverty, low educational levels, and in international terms obsolete technology.

### 3. CONTEMPORARY POLITICAL ECONOMY

Today the class divisions of Old China (gentry, literati, landlords, rich, middle and poor peasants) no longer characterise New China, but the rural-urban divide remains significant in many ways. Per capita income in 1984, for example, averaged Y355 among the peasantry (1), whereas per capita expenditure in the cities averaged Y608 (2). China has certainly managed to raise rural incomes and improve rural access to services. However, the rural-urban gap, in both income and expenditure, has also been maintained at a ratio of roughly 1:2.

There is also a significant gap in earnings between state employees and workers in "collectively-owned enterprises". In 1980, this ratio was Y803: Y624 (Yu 1984:603). This gap may be related to the different costs involved in establishing such differentially-capitalised enterprises: to create one job in the state-owned sector costs up to 5 times more than in collectively-owned enterprises (Yu 1984:582). However, levels of living are generally low for everyone, as a result of state appropriations based on low wages, which some Chinese regard as exploitation of workers. In this context, it is hardly surprising that the State Council (China's equivalent of Zimbabwe's Cabinet and Public Service Commission combined) has recently ruled out further wage increases without corresponding increases in productivity (Zhao

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Ziyang 1985). Nonetheless, certain functionaries of both state and "collectively-owned" enterprises have regular access to cars, luxury foods and increased living space as part of their "work". The life-style of this very small minority is notably different to that of "ordinary people", including intellectuals as well as workers.

However, in the countryside, among a significant minority of peasants, the post-1978 agricultural reforms have created a range of "peasant" wealth inconceivable during the Maoist years, and well in excess of average urban incomes. Although the average peasant income remains half that of the average city dweller, given that peasants outnumber urbanites 8:1, in absolute terms, there must be many more peasants than town dwellers who have incomes above the national average.

The agricultural reforms based on the peasant's own labour capacity were actually started in the poorest rural areas which had virtually nothing to lose by experimentation, such as Fengyang county, Anhui province, where before 1980 peasants without food in winter begged in towns and cities as far afield as Nanjing, 100 kms distant (see also Myrdal 1984:44-56). Such peasants having shown that "development" is possible under altered policy conditions, that they themselves were not personally responsible for their poverty through idleness or similar, special efforts are now made by most local authorities to assist those whose physical or mental disability does make it difficult for them to earn wealth through their own labour.

#### 4. RURAL DEVELOPMENT POLICIES AND EXPERIENCE: AGRICULTURE

Central policy toward the Chinese peasantry and countryside has explicitly turned back to the early 1950s in order to consolidate and expand further agricultural development, and has reinstated the peasant household as the basic unit of rural production. Four of every five communes have already been stripped of all their non-economic responsibilities (administrative, military, medical, educational). Where they survive, these modified communes have become purely economic enterprises in the collective ownership mode, concerned with agricultural infrastructure (irrigation, flood control, water development) and agricultural processing, as well as with rural industries, including energy.<sup>(3)</sup> Many more production brigades than communes survive as economic enterprises, and they have often been reconstituted as "co-operatives". Although agricultural production has been devolved to the level of individual households, collective and co-operative control of the agricultural infrastructure, energy and manufacturing has been retained, I think, primarily because of the difficulty of disaggregating the industrial investments made by the collectives prior to 1976, to the level of household management. Rural industrialisation requires larger units of control and investment than households, at least in the situation

where households do not have the necessary financial resources for such investment: but even that is changing now in rural China.

The change in agricultural policy occurred because collectivised production did not deliver the output levels required for food self-sufficiency: see table 1. Prior to 1978, China barely managed to achieve an output level of 300kgs of grain per head of population (Lardy 1983:149, table 4.2), the level at which grain is voluntarily marketed by peasants after their retentions for personal consumption. Grain procurements, including agricultural taxes, have varied up to 45% of total output (Lardy 1983:34, table 2.1), but the "commodity grain index" has only very recently surpassed 50% (meaning that half of all the grain produced is sold). To illustrate the impact of these figures, I shall take one specific example. In Kaixian'gong village, in the triple-cropping "heartland" province of Jiangsu, grain procurement peaked at 40% in the late 1950s, when virtually a generation disappeared from this village as a consequence (see table 2).

Table 1. China: grain and cotton output in selected years.

year	grain (m tonnes)	index	cotton (m tonnes)	index
1949	113.20	100	0.445	100
1952	163.90	121	1.304	293
1979	332.12	293	2.207	496
1984	407.00	360	6.080	1.366

Sources: China Today (1985:210, table II); Zhao Ziyang (1985).

Table 2. Selected indicators: Kaixian'gong in different years.

indicator	1936	1956/7	1981	1984*
total population	1 458	1 440	1 761	2 372
total households	360	600	432	572
average household size	4.05	2.40	4.08	4.15
sex ratio (M:F 1:)	0.84			
dependency ratio 1 worker: dependants)	0.62	0.52	0.95	0.77
total grain output (jin)	900 000	1 983 000	2 398 000	3 840 000
grain output per mu pa	3-400	560	1 000	1 431
external appropriations of grain as % of total output	25	40	35	33

Note: \* these figures incorporate three production teams added to the village in the 1970s after the village boundaries were altered, which have been excluded from the 1981 figures. Sources: Fei (1983); Geddes (1963); field notes (1984).

However, by 1984, even though grainland had been converted to

other crops and notwithstanding transport and storage problems, national grain output averaged nearly 400 kgs per head(4) and consumption averaged 230kgs per head(5). These achievements are generally attributed to the price increases and more flexible marketing practices associated with the agricultural reforms.

While output remained well below demand, the Chinese state used a system of compulsory delivery quotas for grain and all other foodstuffs, from all communes, at fixed prices, in order to procure food for urban consumption. The grain was sold at procurement prices, with the state absorbing in subsidies the costs of transport and distribution. Rationing restricted urban demand.

Recently, from 1983, food has become sufficiently available to permit the rationing system to be dismantled in stages, and China has abandoned its former compulsory quota deliveries to the state in favour of the "contract system". Previously, in the collectivised system, the production team held the smallest unit of the state quota for each agricultural product. From 1979 to 1983, therefore, as in the early 1960s (Eckstein 1977:81), the teams entered into contracts with their constituent households to deliver "contracted" sub-divisions of the quota, with a financial penalty (to buy in the deficit from elsewhere) for short delivery. The contract system is now established all over China, but since teams no longer exist as such (they are often co-operatives, but sometimes defunct except for dispute settlement), contracts are signed between households and local administrative units, usually townships. All produce in excess of the contract is controlled by the producing household and sold into the free markets if not consumed. The proceeds and profits of such surplus are retained by the household, which is now taxed in new ways. The most efficient rural households earn enormous incomes, of Y50,000 or more annually; and the "tail-enders", whom rural administrations make special efforts to assist, are less poor than they used to be. Commodity circulation in the countryside has increased markedly, reflecting this greater wealth.

However, the contract system, in its effort to increase the efficiency of labour, has not only created vast rural income differentials (even while allowing many peasants to become richer than urbanites), but has also abandoned the concept of equal access to the means of agricultural production. "Specialised" households contract for acreages much in excess of ordinary households, and have also begun to hire labour, on conditions carefully policed by the state. As prices for agricultural commodities have been increased to encourage farm output, state and municipal subsidies have been diverted to urban consumers to shield them against the inflationary erosion of their wages and salaries (which are still set within the framework of the 9-grade state system and, even with increased bonuses, in 1984 worked out at a maximum of less than Y200 per month: contra Eckstein 1977).



The restructuring of China's economy as "market socialist" is a massive exercise in understanding and balancing functional interrelationships in the total economy: it is not a simple switch to "capitalism".

##### 5. RURAL DEVELOPMENT POLICIES AND EXPERIENCE: INDUSTRIALISATION

China has long suffered from a labour surplus. During the period of collectivised agriculture, this surplus was absorbed in infrastructural projects based on manual labour, especially transport (roads) and water development (irrigation, flood control). "Walking on two legs" has therefore long been seen as desirable, but the first experience of rural industrialisation, during the Great Leap Forward, was a disastrous experience, wasteful and grossly inefficient, and ecologically damaging (as has been most of China's post-1949 growth). This legacy continued after the Great Leap in the small-scale, local fertiliser plants and foundries, the majority of which have been closed and/or rationalised since 1979, for reasons which relate primarily to China's need to use her available energy as efficiently as possible.

The second strand of industrial experimentation in China's countryside began in the early 1970s, as urban collectively-owned enterprises sub-contracted ("put out") simple aspects of their manufacturing process (eg. of bicycles) to peri-urban communes with surplus labour, and helped these communes to acquire the necessary equipment and machinery to make these parts. This link between urban and rural manufacturing has expanded considerably in recent years, and has permitted the development of daily commuting by residents of rural villages to factory work in their neighbourhood.

The third facet of rural industrialisation has been the independent development of manufacturing, by townships and even villages much more remote from major centres. Often (for example, in Kaixian'gong), the strategy behind such rural industrialisation proper has been an attempt to achieve vertical integration off the existing productive base in agriculture (in this case, silk). However, so far this strategy has not been as successful as in theory it should be, because the most obvious area for the development of manufacturing, notably textiles, and in particular silk and cotton weaving, comprises a state manufacturing monopoly and the state has therefore not permitted the intended integration to occur. So Kaixian'gong, which has produced and spun silk since the 1930s, is permitted to weave only synthetics, the raw materials for which are imported from as far afield as Japan!

As the previous paragraph suggests, there are various constraints on rural industrialisation in China. Here I shall discuss only two important constraints at each of the central and local levels.

Central policy, especially fiscal, affects access to investment funds, and very recently, in an attempt to dampen demand, the Bank of China has raised interest rates, specifically for this type of investment, as well as more generally.

The second major central constraint pertains to energy, on which all industrialisation is crucially dependent. China has an energy deficit, particularly in its countryside. Electricity comprises only 13.64% of rural China's productive use of power, notwithstanding its emphasis on small hydro-electric stations. In 1983 these small rural stations had a total generating capacity of roughly 2 400 megawatts (a little under twice Kariba's total capacity), or 42% of all rural electricity consumed. Coal generates more than three-quarters of all power used in rural production, and oil the remaining 11 per cent. Turning from productive to domestic use, although China pioneered the biogas technology, 3.76 million biogas plants provide only 0.23% of all domestic power used in rural China, while straw (grain stalks), firewood and animal manure provide 99.63% of domestic energy needs (Deng Keyun 1985). Rural factories, like those in Kaixian'gong, which, having no energy sources of their own save a back-up diesel generator, draw their power from the national grid, are frequently and without warning switched out when urban demand peaks or overloads the grid, thus increasing their production costs as well as endangering both their quality of and delivery dates for output.

The most important local constraints on rural industrialisation include, firstly, the lack of technical and managerial skills, although marketing skills are now developing very rapidly (helped not only by increasing practice as plants have taken responsibility for marketing their output surplus to state quotas, but also, in peri-urban situations, by links to urban enterprises).

Secondly, although overmanning is problematic for the efficiency of rural industries, industry is used to absorb underemployed agricultural workers. Overmanning is then used to raise rural incomes by employing unnecessary workers at urban wage levels, thus retaining a greater proportion of the value produced among its rural producers, rather than turning it over to the state through various mechanisms of appropriation. There has been a massive switch of labour from farming to industry in the past seven years. Fei (1985:20) notes that one-third of the labour force which is classified as "rural" in southern Jiangsu province, has left farming for industrial employment in villages, or to commute to small towns. In just three years, between 1981 and 1984, in Kaixian'gong, the proportion of the labour force employed full-time in industrial and "sideline" enterprises nearly doubled, from 23% to 42% (Fei 1983:218; field notes, 1984).

The problem of excess rural workers is a particularly intractable one, which is reflected in the persistence of labour migration in the People's Republic of China, notwithstanding the controls on rural-urban mobility which used to operate in the past. These controls included the rural exit and urban entry permits from the employing enterprises, party branches, and security bureaux; together with the urban food and clothing ration cards. More recently these controls have been relaxed or removed, as the new marketing system has required much greater mobility. Most often labour migration is organised not on an individual but on a team basis, mainly for construction work on roads and buildings especially in the underdeveloped (western) areas. Workers are shipped out by the local administrative authority (township, autonomous state, county) as a contract team for a specific time period, usually one year. For example, in 1984, when I visited Zhou village, in Dali Autonomous State (Yunnan Province), it had 800 workers in a construction team sent out on annual contracts (see also Fei 1985). The team's total wages are generally remitted back to the "shipping" authority. During the period of collectivisation, the individual members (or their families) drew only the equivalent of their locally-defined work points, irrespective of the contract price. Today the team controls its own earnings, and may distribute any surplus arising from early completion or cost effectiveness, rather than turning it over to the local authority. This form of labour migration may substitute for industrial employment as a means of absorbing underemployed rural labour.

## 6. PROBLEMS OF RURAL DEVELOPMENT IN CHINA

From what I have said above, it should be clear that many components of the rural development "problematic" are as visible in China as in any other third-world country, while ecological damage and environmental pollution are arguably worse. The past emphasis on grain production (which, as Eckstein (1977:207, 230) notes, put 80% of the total sown area to grain and some 70% of the labour force to producing 20% of the GDP), has had serious ecological effects, especially in those mountainous regions unsuited to grain production. Although one can argue that, in the short run at least, people should take priority over the environment, such policies lead to ecological degradation which, in the longer term, both endangers the very base of production and constitutes an ongoing threat to health. For example, 80% of Chinese cities have no sewage treatment plants; respiratory diseases exacerbated by aerial smog are rife, especially in winter; clean drinking water is increasingly scarce as rivers receive not only human but also industrial effluent; cancer has become the second major cause of death. China's industrialisation to date has been purchased at the expense of her environment, and she is now having to face these problems and pick up the ecological and health bills for past policies, in both city and countryside.

Against this background, among many problematic issues of Chinese rural development, in my opinion three will be particularly critical in the years ahead. These are three sets of contradictions: between technological modernisation and employment; between patriliney and demographic policy; and between women's productive roles and their position in the family structure. All three of these contradictions feed into the problem, of achieving further growth without sacrificing too much equity in the world's most populous nation, which is becoming increasingly consumption-oriented. Is socialist consumerism self-contradictory? Or does contemporary China - in which today's "truth" is tomorrow's historical relic - indicate a new viability for "socialism with (cultural) characteristics" that are not tied to self-abnegation?

(a) the contradiction between technological modernisation and employment is a variant of the old problem of capital versus labour-intensity. With the "basic needs" of her population largely met, and in the context of the rural underemployment detailed earlier, China's problem for the productive future mismatches the requirements of an increasingly "high" technology against a vast population of poorly educated and largely unskilled workers, both rural and urban. Rising unemployment is being countered at present by the increasing privatisation of employment in services; and by a demographic policy which in normal circumstances permits each family only one child. Even with full state controls of both employment and social reproduction, the question of ideology must arise in this sector, for it is even more difficult to "put politics in control" of the technology of the 1980s (eg. computerisation, nuclear medicine) than it was in the 1950s.

(b) There is a very basic antipathy between Chinese patriliney and current demographic policy. Since 1979 the "one child family" policy has been strictly enforced among the Han (who comprise over 93% of the total population). As yet, however, the 55 "minorities" have only been "encouraged" to limit their families through positive sanctions. There are financial and other inducements to sign the one-child contract, which in the past included additional food rations, and today guarantee entry to "good" schools and preference in new housing lists. Secondly, negative sanctions penalise those who do not sign the reproductive contract with the state. If a second child is born, the extra allowances paid must be repaid from the time of receipt. A third child automatically entails the loss of an urban job and banishment to the countryside. More recently, surplus pregnancy has entailed enforced abortion. But China, especially rural China, remains strongly patrilineal, even if its patriarchal tendencies have been curbed by the state, and the cultural preference for male heirs has led to the readily-acknowledged problem of an increase in female infanticide. Female infanticide was part of Old China, as demographic statistics clearly reveal (see table 2), but after

the 1949 revolution, encouraged by propaganda campaigns against it, the practice declined. After 1979, the state has had to wage war against its resumption, as the new demographic policy has brought to a head the confrontation between the state ideology of female equality and the rural reality of the traditional social structure and its own ideology.

(c) Contemporary demographic policy also feeds into the broader problem of women's productive roles in the national economy and society, on the one hand, and their productive and consumer roles in household and family structures on the other. Although an attempt was made during the Great Leap Forward to collectivise consumption in team and even brigade canteens, it was quickly abandoned as inefficient in releasing labour for fieldwork and wasteful of limited food resources. So even while production was collectivised, the household remained the unit of consumption in China. The traditional contradictions between women as reproducers providing domestic services, and women as producers, have thus been reproduced in a socialist economy (Croll 1979, 1984). Permitting women to remain tied into traditional subservience within family structures is reciprocally part of the demographic problem, but perhaps more importantly is also the major obstacle to realising their social liberation in accordance with their long-standing legal equality in New China.

Finally, then, one might end this limited and selective review not merely by noting the similarities between China and other developing economies, but more pointedly by noting that China herself is today apparently more conscious of such similarities than she has professed to be in the past. Today, therefore, China's rulers profess the relevance to themselves of the experiences of other countries, particularly in the fields of technology and economics. What the Chinese themselves see as learning to manipulate their economy in time-tested ways to achieve the ends of social policy, outsiders often dismiss as selling out to the forces of international capital. In any serious attempt to understand Chinese reality, I suspect that this view is unprofitable in all senses of that term.

NOTES

1. Beijing Review 28, 16, p. IV, 22 April 1985. One yuan is roughly equivalent to 50 Zimbabwean cents.
2. Beijing Review 28, 17, p.V, 29 April 1985.
3. Beijing Review 28, 20, p.16, 20 May 1985.
4. Beijing Review 28, 16, p. IV, 22 April 1985.
5. Beijing Review 28, 16, p.16, 22 April 1985.

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