

A Commune in Sichuan?

Reflections on Endicott's Red Earth

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(with the help of many others)

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Stephen Endicott's *Red Earth: Revolution in a Sichuan Village* (New York: New Amsterdam Books, 1991) is one of a few enjoyable village studies that provide a carefully documented, detailed account of the system of agrarian "people's communes" that dramatically transformed rural and urban China from the late 1950s to the early 1980s. As such, it provides important insights to students of modern Chinese history, researchers on "development" in general, and even to social activists concerned with how to create a better post-capitalist world. To those who recognize the unsustainability and injustice of capitalism but think no better alternative is possible, that "communism is a good idea in theory but will never work in practice," pointing to China as an example of its failure, *Red Earth* demonstrates that, while the PRC was never communist (and never claimed to be), some of the communistic arrangements it experimented with did work despite unfavorable circumstances, and it was not any inherent impracticality that led to their abandonment.

Many reviews of this classic study have been published, one of which can be accessed for free online,¹ so below I focus on those parts of the book related to the commune period, using these as a springboard for a broader reflection on China's experience with agrarian socialism and the lessons this offers to anti-capitalists of all stripes today. But first I start with an overview of Endicott's analysis.

Endicott's Perspective

Stephen Endicott, born to Canadian missionary parents in 1930s Shanghai and raised in Sichuan for 13 years, belongs to the tradition of (more or less critical) praise for the Maoist path of “socialist construction” by Western observers such as the Hintons, the Crooks and Jan Myrdal.² In the acknowledgements section of *Red Earth*, Endicott cites these writers in particular and their “search for the realities of modern China” as a source of inspiration, noting that he “may not agree” with their perspectives (xiii).³ Like William Hinton’s *Fanshen* and *Shenfan*, overall *Red Earth* stays close to the words of interviewed villagers and local “cadres”⁴ (with – apparently paraphrased – direct quotations accounting for about a quarter of the book’s narrative sections), while incorporating information from official records, including quantitative data presented in 27 tables. Endicott’s own analysis is suggested in the epilogue, where he reflects on four decades of changes in MaGaoqiao village as observed during several visits from 1980 to 1988. In 1980, he writes, the villagers

worked in collective groups under the production teams and were proud of the co-operative medical clinic, the school, the electrified grain processing mill, the big tractors, the methane gas pits by the side of every house and other tangible achievements. The socialist collective period clearly had been a time of qualitative change in productive capacity, highly successful in turning surplus labor into capital for economic growth. The value of the capital construction – the roads, railway, waterways, reservoirs, fish ponds, reclaimed wasteland, new orchards, leveled fields – went unrecorded in the account books; statistically they did not exist, but they were there, nevertheless, for the eye to see. (211)

Despite all this development, however, “Individual living standards, in terms of housing and available consumer products, had not changed much in two decades” (212). Somewhat surprisingly, “the people seemed to understand this disappointment as a consequence of their contribution to the

industrialization of China under conditions of external threats from imperialist powers” (212). At the same time, Endicott notes vast improvements in health and life expectancy (211, 155-6) and modest progress in the replacement of “old ways of thinking and behavior” with “socialist values” – “enough to have an on-going impetus for equality, social justice, women’s emancipation” (211). For now let us just note in passing that Endicott relegates the latter three – presumably central goals of communism – to a separate paragraph following that on the development of productive capacity, seeming to associate them with a Marxist “superstructure” secondary to the changes in MaGaoqiao’s “economic base.”²⁵

When Endicott returned in 1983, the land had been contracted to individual households, other collective assets had been auctioned off to the wealthiest or best-connected villagers, the village no longer supplied grain or other basic necessities to needy villagers, the party-state was helping the most successful one third of village households to invest in individual market-oriented enterprises, poorer villagers were working for these enterprises, and the gap between rich and poor was growing rapidly (212-213). In 1986, however, Endicott observed some disillusionment with individual entrepreneurialism among ordinary villagers and a renewed focus by both central and local levels of the party-state on collective entrepreneurialism, with all loans by the county government in the past year going to cooperative and collective enterprises (213). By March 1988, MaGaoqiao had “reorganized as a joint co-operative divided into seven small co-operatives.” Households continued to contract land, but now a contract would be renewed each year only if the household fulfilled certain obligations to the cooperative (including quotas for certain crops), and the cooperatives would “re-establish their accumulation funds for capital investment and to provide services to their members before, during and after production – better seeds, credit, technical information, machinery, sales and transportation facilities” (218-219). This change was made partly in response to a drought that had led to deadly fighting among farmers, followed by a flood that had washed away 24 houses and put 70 families on relief. Local cadres attributed both disasters to the dissolution of collective institutions and increased competition among families. As team leader Wang Daoquan put it,

“Things that should be done for the public welfare could not be done; everyone was busy doing his or her own business” (218).

Endicott concludes that Chinese leaders were still grappling with “two problems left unresolved by the early period of socialist construction: how to increase the productivity of farm labor so as to raise living standards appropriate to a modernized China, and secondly how to reform a style of leadership that tends to degenerate into bureaucratic commandism” (214-215). Below I argue that the former problem – or rather the push to raise productivity itself – was a key factor leading to the latter. Endicott doesn’t make this connection, instead apparently taking for granted the Dengists’ emphasis on individual incentive mechanisms and claiming that the collective work-point system had been “wasteful of labor power, open to favoritism and abuse by cadres, and increasingly resented by the villagers” (215). As for “commandism,” Endicott gives only various theories put forth by others, among which the only cause proposed (by the China Historical Materialism Study Society) is “remnant feudal ideas” (216). The proposed solutions all take for granted the need to raise productivity, although there is a phrase that might be taken as a vague suggestion that productivity is less important than equality and social welfare: “Many people worry that the ‘cures’ offered by the free market or by the free-standing co-operatives may be worse than the ‘illness’ of socialist collectives” (217).

The book closes on a hopeful note that “In the struggle between individualism and collectivism, the balance has shifted once again in favor of the more socialist-minded” (219), but this is tempered by the fear that “a new rich peasant class” may yet prevail over “the collective interest” (220). This designation of rich peasants as the main threat to China’s rural communities and their poorer members, and this framing of the issue as a “struggle between individualism and collectivism,” both point to a theoretical confusion in the way the communes have been understood by their proponents and detractors alike. Below I attempt to untangle this confusion while using Endicott’s account of MaGaoqiao, along with other sources, to demonstrate the existence of communistic elements in China’s agrarian communes, propose an alternative explanation of their

failure, and thereby redeem the communes as providing both positive and negative lessons about how to create better alternatives to the capitalist present.

My Perspective

Let's start by distinguishing between *communist*, *communistic*, and *socialist* types of social relations and proposing rough definitions. These definitions are gleaned from the history of the communist movement since its emergence from workers' struggles against capitalism in mid-19th century Europe, along with predecessors such as the Radical Reformation, millennia of "primitive communist" societies throughout the world, and communistic relations in the interstices of class-divided societies.⁶

A "communist" society is one where *everyone can participate directly in the planning of production and distribution according to need*, on the basis of *common access to the means of production*.⁷

"Communistic" refers to arrangements approaching that ideal in the context of antagonistic social systems – such as the global capitalist system that limited and shaped China's communes and other communistic experiments elsewhere.

"Socialism" has been used to mean many different things – from communism to the capitalist welfare state to anything Barack Obama advocates. Here I use it in a narrow sense referring to those societies called "socialist" by ruling Communist Parties, as in the USSR and the PRC until the 1990s, which had one foot inside and one outside the global capitalist system, differing from capitalist societies mainly in that (1) the means of production were concentrated in the hands of the party-state and (largely state-controlled) semi-autonomous collectives (such as the communes in China), (2) the party-state *systematically* directed the means of production – and the investment of capital produced through their use – toward developing the forces of production and destruction (whereas capitalism had developed these forces *haphazardly*, more slowly, and with the aid of colonial spoils), (3) a primary (if not the main) force driving this process of state-directed development was defensive military competition with the major capitalist states, which was in turn driven by

commercial competition among firms in those states and their capital's need to expand into the territories ruled by Communist Parties, and (4) CP ideologues regarded socialism as transitional to communism and beholden to "the laboring masses of workers and peasants," so at least some socialist states experimented with communistic arrangements and policies that did not fit comfortably into a productivist logic of development – such as certain aspects of China's agrarian communes described in Endicott's *Red Earth* and discussed below.

Many observers have dismissed the "people's communes" as functionally comparable to the factories and factory-farms of capitalism. They were established under strong top-down pressure, membership was not determined voluntarily, and they were fundamentally shaped by the process of "socialist primitive accumulation": state extraction of surplus-value from commune members to fuel China's industrialization and military modernization, mainly through the "price scissors" (below-value grain procurement prices coupled with above-value prices for urban industrial goods), as well as through the state's use of underpaid rural labor for capital construction (digging canals, building roads, etc.).⁸ However, closer inspection through accounts such as *Red Earth* reveals a more complicated picture. It may be helpful to borrow from what Karl Marx wrote about the Russian *obshchina* (another kind of agrarian commune, also "crushed by the direct extortions of the State") in the late 19th century, where he discerned a "dualism" between its "collective" and "property" aspects, either of which might "gain the upper hand" depending on the "historical surroundings."⁹ The Chinese communes likewise seem to have possessed a dual nature, with exploitative functions (inevitably giving rise to authoritarian tendencies) uncomfortably intertwined with communistic elements.

Moreover, the Chinese communes possessed an important advantage over most experiments associated with the communist movement (such as the Paris Commune of 1871 and other short-lived arrangements that emerged from the uprisings of workers and peasants in Russia and the Ukraine in 1917, Spain in 1936, Hungary in 1956, etc.¹⁰): many communes were basically self-sufficient, being based on farming a variety of crops, for both use and sale, combined with other industries, locally-

run health services, etc., and they began to diversify, increase productivity (through both sustainable and unsustainable methods), and dramatically improve life expectancy. Among the arrangements that emerged from uprisings elsewhere, I'm not aware of any that managed to work out smooth distribution of basic necessities among the various units, divided as they were by industry (the Spanish system, for example, suffered from food shortages). In defense of the latter, one could point out that (1) they were in the midst of war or warlike conditions, so much of their energy and resources were devoted to fighting, and they didn't have time to work out smooth systems, and (2) they were part of popular movements against capitalism, so they might have developed into more ideal arrangements as they gained both resources from capitalist hands and peace as their enemies receded. But couldn't the latter possibility be posed for the Chinese communes as well? That is, if their "historical surroundings" had changed so that the pressure to supply large amounts of cheap grain and labor was relieved, mightn't their communistic seedlings have come into bloom? Of course such counterfactuals are moot, as is the question of whether we attribute these seedlings to communistic elements in the minds of policy-makers such as Mao Zedong, popular initiatives or something else. My point is simply to encourage anti-capitalists of all stripes to recognize there are both positive and negative lessons to learn from the Chinese communes, as from any other experiments with new social relations one may point to.

1958-1961: The Great Leap Forward and the Formation of Junction Commune

I begin with the most controversial part, which is also the historical beginning. Endicott opens his account of the Great Leap by highlighting a concrete link between its origin in the worsening international situation of 1957 and the Leap's impact on the peasants of Junction township (*Lianglukou xiang*) in Shifang county, Sichuan. At the grain station – housed in a former temple to the Fire God – where peasants carried their grain for sale to the government (by then the monopoly purchaser), in place of traditional couplets about weather and fortune, the Communist

Party inscribed the words “Behold the waves of anti-imperialist movements on the five continents – The imperialist powers are declining daily.” Endicott comments,

The link between this invisible but vaguely inspiring revolutionary outer world and the peasants’ grain could be inferred by the centerpiece: Chairman Mao’s portrait. Through the local broadcasting system everyone was familiar with Mao’s words... “Wait until we’ve made thirty million tons of steel... When we’ve achieved this, then we shall be able to negotiate with the Americans with a bit more spirit. (44)

Endicott reminds us that, after a brief easing of relations with the US following the Korean War, China’s state planners had felt safe to revamp the national budget in the second five-year plan, reducing the size of the military, diverting spending from military and heavy industry to agriculture and light industries, raising living standards (in part by raising grain procurement prices), and developing international trade as a new source of capital (trade with many countries having been blocked by the US embargo). Unfortunately, “a sudden hardening of US policy towards China in 1957 threw the Chinese leaders into temporary confusion and dealt a fatal blow to their planning” (45). Cold warriors such as John Foster Dulles rose back to prominence in the US Congress and renewed their saber-rattling. “Between 1953 and 1958 the United States threatened China with nuclear attack seven times during the crises in Korea, Indo-China and the Offshore Islands in the Taiwan straits” (45). The Pentagon stationed guided missiles with nuclear capability on Taiwan and deployed the Seventh Fleet at several locations off the coast of China, the CIA increased its activities such as training Tibetan guerrillas (contributing to the 1959 uprising),¹¹ and the US boosted its military and economic aid to allies on China’s borders, including the anti-communist forces in Vietnam. Meanwhile the USSR – responding in part to China’s moves toward détente with the US – became increasingly hostile, denying help in building a nuclear deterrent, demanding the immediate repayment of loans (including those for aid in the Korean War). “In response to the new situation

Mao, along with most of China's top leaders, proposed a self-reliant 'great leap forward' to mobilize the vast reserves of peasant labor in revolutionizing agriculture through communes and militias, and they made an appeal for local initiative to conquer China's technological backwardness... aiming to reach the level of British industry in fifteen years" (46).

Here it requires a turn to Maurice Meisner's history of the PRC to recall that "communization" (the transformation of agrarian townships into industrially diverse and self-sufficient communes) and "the transition from socialism to communism" were not part of the December 1957 Politburo proposal which launched the Leap. "Only a few months before Mao anticipated that it would take five years or more to consolidate the existing [simpler and smaller-scale] collective farms," with private household plots and markets still constituting a significant parallel economy throughout China.

The communization movement involved the complex interplay of the spontaneous radicalism of rural cadres and poor peasants from below with the radical utopianism of Mao and Maoists from above... with the result that the movement acquired a fantastic momentum of its own and proceeded at a frantic tempo that far exceeded the hopes and expectations of even its most radical exponents. The first of the communes appeared on an experimental basis in Henan province in April 1958... [In July] the amalgamation of collectives into communes spread rapidly in Henan and Hebei provinces and certain areas of Manchuria. The movement spread without official Party sanction and with little central direction, but it received powerful ideological encouragement from Maoist leaders. In the July 1, 1958 issue of [the new Maoist periodical] *Red Flag*, Chen Boda... first used the term "people's commune" to describe an expanded and reorganized collective in Hubei [which had] succeeded in combining agricultural and industrial production, and it had produced "all-round" people who were acquiring scientific and technological knowledge in the course of working, integrating "technological revolution" and "cultural revolution," and learning to

perform essential administrative functions as well as advanced production methods...
thereby opening the road “on which our country can smoothly pass over from socialism to
communism.”¹²

At the end of this article I examine the ideology underlying Chen Boda’s statement in more depth. Here let me just note in passing that the most important theoretical error of Maoism and the key to understanding why “communism” failed in China is, simply put, the belief that experimentation with communistic social relations implies an increase in the scale, efficiency and output of production, or in Marxist terms that the *transition to communism* can take place at the same time as the *development of the forces of production* – and this *even while the state not only continues but intensifies its extraction of surplus-value*.¹³

It should also be highlighted that the Maoists’ talk of “communism” was not just populist rhetoric. It would be difficult to make sense of campaigns such as the Leap without recognizing how they sought to diverge from the USSR’s more narrowly productivist model of development (which the Maoists regarded as having already led to the “restoration” of capitalism there,¹⁴ and which the dominant faction of China’s party-state leadership still advocated), and to promote experimentation with distribution according to need, mass participation in the planning and management of production, devolution of certain state functions to self-sufficient communes (including the goal of replacing the standing army with popular militias), mass supervision of elected leaders, women’s liberation, and “abolition of the three big differences” – between mental and manual labor, city and countryside, and workers and peasants.¹⁵

Endicott recounts how, in imitation of the communes in northern China being touted as national models, the leaders of Junction decided to pool all the township’s farmland, livestock, machinery and other means of production into one big commune to be managed by over 100 teams of about 30 to 40 households each,¹⁶ with food and other necessities provided for free in addition to monthly wages determined by democratically elected team accountants according to the amount of work each able-bodied member performed (52-67, 123). The commune adopted public canteens,

nurseries, “homes of respect for the aged,” and “other collective welfare measures to emancipate women from the drudgery of the kitchen, and presently men and women began to receive wages for their labor, supplemented by free supply of such items as rice, oil, salt, soya sauce, vinegar and vegetables” (52), along with free “food, clothing, medicine, child-delivery, even your haircut” (57). This was declared as beginning “the gradual transition from the socialist principle of ‘to each according to his work’ to the communist principle of ‘to each according to his needs’” (52). As midwife Yang Yongxiu put it,

In the past all households (women) cooked, and looked after their own children while at the same time we women had to work in the fields. But with the opening of the canteens cooks prepared meals for all the people. Special people raised pigs collectively and the children had kindergartens and nurseries and all the people who worked in these areas were elected by the commune members... I was the happiest I’d ever been. (55)

All this “absolute egalitarianism” (a favorite Dengist term of contempt for crimes against “nature”) is conventionally cited as a major factor leading to the famine, and to the alleged failure of the communes. Such an explanation seems ridiculous when you know that all along the state was squeezing large amounts of grain and labor from the communes. During the Leap, the campaign to “surpass the UK and catch up with the US” (and to use grain to repay China’s debt to the USSR), the belief that enthusiasm could increase output by improving farmers’ ability to cooperate on larger scales (even without modern farm machinery in many areas), and the practice of rewarding officials who reported higher grain yields all conspired to create an atmosphere where provincial and county governments put pressure on the communes to exaggerate their output and sell off more grain than they could afford to lose – long after shortages became obvious. Wang Daoquan, elected leader of MaGaoqiao village’s team #5, recalls,

One day [in late 1958] Deng Yuanming, our team accountant, went to the commune to report on our output of grain. He told them it was 500 *jin* per *mu* [250 kg/0.067 ha or 3.75 t/ha]. They turned him away saying, “No, that’s not the number. You can’t pass the gate.” We talked it over and sent him back a second time to say it was 700 *jin* per *mu*. Again they said no. They told him that if the number wasn’t up to 1,000 *jin* per *mu* then he could not get his figures accepted. So he said “Yes, yes, it is 1,000 *jin*.” Then he passed.

... This happened because those who could show the best results had a better chance to become a model or an official. It was another kind of competition...

In the spring of 1959 Chairman Mao became worried about the results of boasting and urged us not to accept unreasonable demands, but... [i]f people had some inner doubts, they didn’t dare speak them out because they noticed that cadres were dismissed for raising questions about the way things were going. (58-59)

Here Wang is referring to Mao’s April 1959 letter to village and team leaders encouraging them to reject such unreasonable demands from superiors, writing “It must be said the some of the lies are squeezed out by a higher level which brags, oppresses its subordinates, and indulges in wishful thinking, making life difficult for those who are under it” (249). Unfortunately Li Jingquan, party secretary of Sichuan, criticized this letter for “blowing a cold wind” on popular enthusiasm and ordered local officials to ignore it and maintain existing output targets (249). According to economic historian Chris Bramall, Li sought to gain entry to the Politburo by quickly pushing through more “Utopian” elements of the Leap, such as larger-scale village-level management over the more common team-level management, and then persisting in such practices long after they had been abandoned in other provinces due to the problems of combining such rapid and untested institutional change with high levels of extraction, and this partly accounts for why the famine was worse in Sichuan than any other province.¹⁷

The death toll is still highly disputed for China as a whole, with some scholars arguing it was actually lower than normal years prior to the Communist takeover and about the same as normal years in contemporary India (China's annual death rate having fallen from 29/1,000 in 1949 to 12/1,000 in 1958 due to relative peace and dramatically improved access to food and health care, compared with 25.4/1,000 at the height of the famine in 1960 and 24.6/1,000 in India during the same year).¹⁸ But Bramall estimates 8-15 million excess deaths in Sichuan alone from 1958 to 1963, at a death rate of 54/1,000 in 1960.¹⁹ In Junction, Endicott estimates as many as one in ten people died during the famine, with 300 deaths in MaGaoqiao village alone – 20% of the population (55-56).

In addition to the fatal combination of rapid institutional change with increased grain collection under the conditions of an authoritarian system driven by military competition with the US and bureaucrats' pursuit of personal promotion, another major aspect of the Leap that also contributed to the famine was the chaotic beginning of rural industrialization. In Junction this consisted mainly of the "iron and steel campaign":

Responding to the party's call for self-reliant participation in the Great Leap, the county government asked each village in Shifang to recruit about seventy of its best, most capable young men and women for the new production front... To the beating of gongs and fireworks 11 per cent of the commune's work-force marched out, banners waving, with their bed-rolls and cooking utensils, to discover ore bodies and establish a blast furnace high in the Dragon Gate Mountains. It was the same in other communes and soon the county mobilized 12,000 people to the task. (52)

As is well known, throughout China such campaigns contributed to the famine by suddenly diverting a large portion of the agricultural workforce out of farming even while the state was demanding more grain. It is also well publicized that much of the iron and steel produced by such campaigns and "backyard furnaces" was useless. In this case, however (and Bramall and others have reported similar

cases elsewhere), the campaign did have a positive impact on the county's long-term development. In addition to "gaining technical knowledge and new skills in social organization," the iron-and-steel brigades discovered coal, limestone and phosphorus in the mountains, and they built the county's first railroad in a few months and started hauling these precious minerals out of the mountains in less than a year, laying a big part of the foundation for Shifang's later industrialization. Considering the major mode of transport in this area prior to the railroad was the shoulder-pole, it is important to note that "each engine could pull a load that would have taken a thousand peasants to carry on their shoulders" (53).

1962-1982: Two Decades of Egalitarian Development

Although Endicott does not put it in exactly these terms, it seems clear to me that the main cause of the famine was the fact that the government suddenly diverted large amounts of agricultural labor-power into (often poorly-planned and fruitless) rural industrialization campaigns while simultaneously demanding more grain than previously (shipping much of it off to the USSR for debt repayment, while the latter suddenly withdrew all 1,200 of its technical advisors stationed in China), complicated by the difficulties of adapting to the communes' experimental arrangements for production and distribution (along with severe floods, droughts and pests affecting about 60% of China's cultivated area – not including Shifang).²⁰ Nevertheless, both Mao's contemporary right-wing opponents (led by president Liu Shaoqi and general secretary Deng Xiaoping) and anti-communists elsewhere, past and present, have laid the blame squarely on the "utopianism" of the communes' social experimentation – especially their more communistic aspects such as need-based distribution.²¹ Then and now, Chinese Communist Party ideologues have framed this in Marxist terms, claiming that China's forces of production were not yet developed enough to enable such "advanced" relations of production, and eventually this became the main theoretical justification for completely dismantling the communes and marketizing Chinese society in general. But the gist of their argument is similar to the reasoning that has become hegemonic globally over the past few decades,

encapsulated in what neoclassical economists call “the free-rider problem”: when people can use goods and services for free, and when contribution to the production of those goods is voluntary, people tend to consume more than they produce, leading to shortages and falling productivity. The solution proposed by both neoliberals and Dengists alike has been to use market mechanisms to discipline the masses into diligent producers and frugal consumers. As political scientist Elinor Ostrom and others have pointed out, such theories fail to account for the fact that many societies throughout human history and prehistory have managed to do well (at least in terms of life expectancy and happiness) without regulation by market mechanisms.²² I won’t get into the various explanations of how communistic arrangements work under certain conditions. Here I just want to highlight that the dominant explanation for the failure of communism in both China and elsewhere is not only inaccurate, but also highly ideological, in that it has been used historically to suppress experiments with egalitarian arrangements and restore the conditions for widening the gaps between rich and poor, city and countryside, mental and manual labor, managers and managed, etc.

At the time, the Dengists compromised with the Maoists, allowing the communes to remain with most of their more communistic aspects excised or scaled down. Many communes had already abandoned these experiments in response to the crisis, but the state also helped fertilize the sprouts of agrarian capitalism by restoring the “three small freedoms” – private plots, free markets and private sideline enterprises – and encouraging teams to contract collective land to households to raise productivity (66). (It was at this time that Deng Xiaoping made his famous statement that “it doesn’t matter whether a cat is black or white, so long as it catches mice” – it’s often forgotten that the “mice” implicitly referred not to peasant prosperity but to cheap grain for urbanites, soldiers and bureaucrats.)²³ Later, with stimulation from Maoist campaigns such as “learn from Dazhai” (Dazhai being a village in Shanxi touted as a model for “everyone getting rich together”), communes such as Junction resumed their attempts to combine the communist ideals of equality, need-based distribution and participatory management with the apparent requirement for some kind of labor incentives to maintain sufficient productivity for improving living standards while meeting state

quotas. Certainly this problem would have been simpler if the latter pressure were removed, and some communists may think such problems are irrelevant under today's conditions of abundance and high productivity, but (setting aside the question of whether many aspects of industrial production should be abandoned as unsustainable or alienating), it seems likely that this problem will remain to some extent until we figure out (following the Situationists²⁴) how to make all the necessary and desired forms of production enjoyable enough that people will do them for fun.²⁵ Junction never managed to find a perfect balance, but it did manage at least – experimenting with four different systems of remuneration – to gradually raise output and living standards while making sure everyone had access to sufficient food and health care, with the highest income in MaGaoqiao's team #5 only four times the lowest in 1980, and 2/3 the households at roughly the same income level (130).

After the Leap-era free-supply system was scrapped, Junction's villages continued to supply all villagers with a basic grain ration and other goods accounting for about 1/3 of village income, only now it kept records, and if a household did not have enough work points to pay for it all at the end of the year it would accumulate interest-free debt until it was able to pay. Meanwhile the teams experimented with various methods of remunerating labor democratically. The Dazhai system involved rating the value of each member's labor on a scale of one to ten, through discussion among teammates, and then revising that rating once a month on the basis of one's performance. If someone was rated 8, the accountant would credit her with 8 points for each full day of work (of any kind) and 4 points for each half day of work. This made it easy to reward people who worked more or harder than others at the end of the year, in a way that most regarded as fair. Unfortunately, this system

depended on a high level of social... consciousness among the members. If group meetings were poorly led or ineffective, a lazy person could go out and stand in the field gossiping half the day without doing much and still get his or her circle [credit for a full day of work], since rewards were not directly linked to results as in the piece-work contract system. (127)

This led to falling enthusiasm among those who felt they were not being reimbursed for working harder. After experimenting with this method from 1967 to 1971, the villagers went back to an earlier, more complicated system called “three contracts, one reward,” this time splitting the teams into smaller groups of accounting “so that members could feel more intimately accountable to each other” (129). Endicott’s description of this system (125) sounds similar to the system famously proposed six years later in Guanghan county (also in Sichuan), known as “contracting production to groups” (*baochan dao zu*). In the Dengist narrative of PRC history that has come to dominate the popular imagination, Guanghan’s adoption of this system is credited as one of a few spontaneous sparks of decollectivization, so it is important to note (1) that this was in fact quite different from dollectivization (*baogan*), and (2) similar arrangements had been adopted elsewhere as early as 1971 and used successfully for many years prior to state-imposed decollectivization in 1982. Here is Chris Bramall’s description of the 1977 Guanghan innovation (abbreviated “BCDZ”):

Under BCDZ, the production team signed a contract with each work group in which the team agreed to allocate a certain number of work points to the group when it had met an output quota. If the group was able to over-fulfill its quota, it received extra workpoints or was even allowed to retain the entire surplus. In this way, a clear incentive was provided for output maximization. At the same time, however, the essentials of the collective economy were retained. The control of the means of production remained in the hands of the production team and the value of each work-point depended upon the performance of the entire production team. In effect, distribution remained the prerogative of the team even though production was decentralized to the group and ultimately to the household.

The *baochan* systems thus amounted to modified forms of collective farming. They sought to combine the positive incentive effects of small-scale farming with the capacity of the collective to mobilize surplus profits and labour for infrastructural projects. Thus

baochan centred around the retention of the production team as the unit of account.

Although groups and households received additional workpoints for over-fulfillment of their contract, the value of these workpoints was dependent upon the performance of other groups or households within the production team. Crucially, however, the awarding of workpoints in the late 1970s on the basis of output generated powerful incentive effects compared with both the task-based and Dazhai workpoint systems. It was the decentralization of production to households and groups that made this new system possible; collective workers in the Maoist era moved between jobs during the year and were rarely responsible for seeing a single crop through from beginning to end.²⁶

This system wasn't perfect either but it sufficed to gradually raise incomes without sacrificing equality or the ability to conduct collective capital-construction projects (the key to Junction's long-term development) for the remaining 11 years of the commune's existence.

Probably the most admirable accomplishments of the commune system were in the area of public health. Life expectancy in Shifang county doubled, from 33 to 66.7 years, between 1949 and 1980 (155-156), and in China as a whole rose from 35 to 68 years, with the fastest increase between 1965 and 1980, at one of the fastest rates in world history (whereas after 1980 the rate of increase slowed to below the world average, increasing only to 71.8 years as late as 2003).²⁷ This was largely due to rural public health campaigns and experiments with "cooperative health care" beginning during the Great Leap Forward but really taking off after the Cultural Revolution in 1968. The Leap involved a national campaign to bring under control "the four pests" – originally defined as rats, flies, mosquitoes and sparrows. (The latter was changed to bedbugs when people realized that killing sparrows increased the number of insects – a major ecological mistake that has been blamed for exacerbating the famine in some parts of China.²⁸) This campaign soon expanded to include the snails that cause "snail fever" (schistosomiasis), an ancient scourge of China's rice-farming regions, with one in four people in Junction found to have the disease in the first systematic check in 1959

(159). The disease is fatal if allowed to run its course, and in earlier stages causes ghastly symptoms and disruption of metabolism, children's maturation and women's menstrual cycles. In the communes of Shifang county, the campaign against snail fever "followed a national pattern that included both medical and political dimensions":

By means of posters, radio broadcasts, films, exhibitions and mass meetings the peasants learned the nature of their ancient enemy. Once they became aware of the sources... they joined in making plans and in forming a public health army to defeat it... Each production team appointed a medical orderly and organized groups of seven or eight people to gather the snails from the banks of the irrigation ditches. (159)

This campaign successfully reduced schistosomiasis but didn't eliminate it, so in 1975 Shifang mobilized 50,000 people to revive the campaign:

They dug new irrigation ditches and filled in the old ones to eliminate the snails' habitat. [They] tried to interrupt the life-cycle of the worms at another point by preventing feces containing live eggs from contaminating the fields... by making cement-lined pits to store the excrement for several weeks until the heat generated by the ammonia killed the parasites. (This process also created methane gas for cooking and lighting. At the end of five years 55 per cent of the families in [MaGaoqiao village] had such methane gas pits for curing fertilizer and also for creating inexpensive fuel.) (160)

In addition to such preventative measures, the campaign also sought to treat cases of infection through annual inspections starting in 1959:

The huge scale of this effort could only be accomplished by local people using simple, improvised methods with a minimal dependence on outside experts... Each [village] set up a temporary headquarters with about ten staff – one trained person from the county hospital, one person from the commune and the rest from the production teams. (160)

By 1982 the number of people with the disease in Junction was reduced to four. Sociologist Wang Ximing notes that in another part of the Western Sichuan Plain, where (unlike in most parts of China since decollectivization) the sub-village teams continue to hold annual assemblies and play an active role in public life, the teams have organized snail-hunts (*mieluo*) twice every year since 1957, and since 1960 no one has contracted snail fever, whereas in a more typical village in Hubei where such collective activities disappeared long ago, in 2004 1,050 of the village's 1,879 residents were found to have the disease, and eight had died from it in the past three years alone.²⁹

The main component of the communes' "public health revolution," however, was the "cooperative health care" system and its "barefoot doctors." In 1949 there was only one Western-style clinic in all of Shifang county, and that was expensive and inaccessible for the vast majority of the population. There were a few doctors of traditional Chinese medicine in the market town of Junction, but they did not visit the villages and could not cure many common ailments in any case. After the Communist takeover, the new township government brought these doctors together to found a clinic, which added a doctor of Western medicine during the Leap. Finally in 1968, in response to Mao's "June 26th Directive on Public Health," the county bureau of public health gave Junction 20,000 yuan to establish a twenty-bed hospital with an X-ray machine and staff for several departments of both traditional and Western medicine, and it also launched the campaign to establish village clinics and train "barefoot doctors." The latter were villagers trained by qualified doctors for three to six months in "basic first aid, Chinese medicine, acupuncture, the use of thermometers, the dispensing of vaccines by injection and drugs for influenza, stomach upsets and other common ailments" and paid in work points from each village's collective fund, like any other villager. By 1975

such efforts resulted in raising the number of medical personnel in Shifang county from 592 to 3,420, among whom 658 were barefoot doctors (156-158).

The main problem the clinics faced was the cost of medical supplies. Junction's leaders invited the commune members to submit proposals about how to deal with this problem, and one method they came up with was to grow medicinal herbs, which could be compensated in work points or used in lieu of the annual 3 yuan each member was supposed to contribute to the clinic. Any herbs not used by the clinics could be sold to the state to fund purchases of Western medical supplies. One village volunteered to experiment with this and soon it spread throughout the commune, and eventually – through media publicity – throughout Sichuan. (The province even funded the building of an auditorium seating 600 in the village in order to accommodate all the visitors who came to learn about this model.) Eventually some younger members of the commune who had returned home after attending college in the city set up a collectively-owned factory for making pills out of herbs grown in Junction. By 1985 this had grown to employ 106 commune members and sell four million yuan worth of medicine annually. Regarding the factory's management, director Ran Shengxiang says,

We are all jointly masters of the enterprise, there is no such thing as giving bad treatment or beating workers. We have a workers' congress and a women workers' committee that join us in making plans and regulations. The financial position of the factory is posted on the wall at the end of every month for everyone to see...

Each month I take 48 yuan which is 40 per cent of my wage. This is for living expenses. The other 60 per cent will be linked to economic results... It is the same for everyone who works here. (166)

Unfortunately Endicott doesn't go into any more detail about the extent to which the ideal of "democratic management" was practiced in Junction's collective enterprises.³⁰ As for the measures

they took to contribute to the commune as a whole, Endicott notes that most of the enterprises used locally-produced raw materials (such as the herbs just mentioned and other agricultural products, as well as the minerals from the nearby mines opened during the Great Leap) to produce goods that could be used by the commune (in medicine, agriculture, construction, home use, etc.) in addition to raising funds through sales. After taxes and administrative costs, the commune distributed the profits as “grants in support of schools, medical care, farmland reconstruction, purchase of farm machinery, or as bonuses to families that agreed to have only one child, according to the wishes of the various brigades,” with the remainder given directly to each team (93). In order to prevent the formation of a gap between enterprise employees and the other commune members (between “workers” and “peasants”), the commune devised a special system of remuneration:

The factory credited each worker supplied by the production team with work points and sent the cash (except for bonuses) to the production team for the general year-end distribution in which the workers also took part. Since factory work paid more than farm work, these work points boosted the value of the whole team’s work day rather than just benefitting a few individuals, and at the same time no widening gap appeared between the incomes of the workers and the peasants. In 1980, for example, this system boosted the average value of the work day on the commune from 78 cents to 90 cents, with the result that the average annual *per capita* income in the whole commune rose... from 152 yuan to 173 yuan. (92)

But the development of these enterprises was difficult at first, due in part to restrictions under the Liu Shaoqi government. Reasoning that the initial attempt to industrialize the communes during the Great Leap had played a role in causing the famine, in 1962 the government went to the opposite extreme by prohibiting communes from setting up new collective industrial enterprises “for years to come” (88). The leaders of Junction tried to circumvent that restriction in 1966, “adding an

agricultural machinery workshop and a building construction team to the five small enterprises that had survived the Great Leap,” but, in the words of commune director Yang Changyou,

It was either not allowed at all, or if allowed then no help was given to get it going. Once an official from Chengdu, at the provincial level, helped us start a brick kiln, but then got into trouble for it. We could not get loans and our construction unit, with about thirty people, was not given permission to operate in the towns. (88)

It wasn't until 1976 that the government resumed its support for rural industrialization, with Shifang county loans to rural enterprises rising from 150,000 yuan in 1974 to 1.7 million yuan in 1978, along with grants, technical advice and a three-year tax holiday (89-90). Junction's collective enterprises rose from 9 in 1975 to 23 in 1982, by 1985 employing 2,300 people (up from 301 in 1975) and earning the commune 960,000 yuan (over 41,000 in 1975) (90).

Although Endicott doesn't address the degree to which employees or other commune members were able to participate in the management of these enterprises, he does discuss some experiments with “mass supervision” of rural cadres. Most of these methods were flawed or even disastrous, and they rarely reached beyond the village level to exert any direct influence over the more powerful organs of the party-state or its system of “socialist primitive accumulation.” Nevertheless, along with the obvious negative lessons, we may also be able to glean some useful ideas from these efforts to increase the level of popular control over the administration of public affairs beyond the mechanism of periodic elections.

Meisner tells us that the “Four Clean-ups” campaign – part of the Socialist Education Movement formally launched in 1963 – was originally outlined by Mao Zedong as way to combat “the increasingly bureaucratic character of the Communist Party and the widespread corruption which pervaded local rural Party organs” by “mobilizing the masses” through independent “poor and lower-middle peasant associations.”³¹ By the time the campaign reached Junction in 1966, it had

already been reformulated through compromise with Deng Xiaoping and Liu Shaoqi, each of whom revised the Central Committee resolution to reflect their fear that such a campaign would threaten agricultural productivity and “the organizational viability of the CCP.” In the event, although the entire six-month procedure was initiated and directed by a special “work team” sent by the provincial CCP committee, it did “mobilize the masses” to form independent peasant associations supposed to monitor village and team cadres. Endicott does not discuss the associations’ long-term efficacy, except that they were officially dissolved after the Deng government repudiated the Cultural Revolution in 1981 (144).

I won’t get into to the somewhat absurd details of the Four Clean-ups; the upshot is that the provincial work teams convened village and team assemblies where the villagers criticized their cadres for alleged abuses of power, leading some to lose their positions (most of whom were reinstated in the next election), and scaring them all into “serving the people” more scrupulously in the future (97-111). One problem with this method of “mass supervision” is that it led to false accusations and unfounded personal attacks motivated by petty ambition and the competition to appear more “leftist.” In the similar “One Strike, Three Antis” campaign in 1968, the vice-leader of MaGaoqiao’s team #5 committed suicide out of stress and humiliation, even though his crimes seem minor (embezzling 150 yuan, cutting down three collectively-owned trees to make a wheelbarrow, etc.) (118-120). On the other hand, perhaps false accusations, humiliation and even occasional bloodshed are small prices to pay for the creation of a culture in which people in positions of power are afraid to abuse that power (inasmuch as such positions are necessary). Such spectacles of “mass criticism” may bear comparison with the macabre rituals and myths of certain “primitive communist” societies that function to forestall even the idea of trying to monopolize power or resources.³²

The Cultural Revolution could be seen in part as an extension of this approach to “big democracy.” In Junction the compromise of local Red Guards (whose antics had paralyzed the commune administration) with an army-dispatched Mao Zedong Thought Propaganda Team resulted in the formation of a commune-level “revolutionary committee” in 1968, incorporating Red Guards

and cadres into one organization (118). This replaced the former commune administration and presided over most of the experiments with egalitarian and participatory development discussed above, along with accomplishments in women's liberation, education, farmland reconstruction and irrigation, until the commune was dissolved in 1982.

1982: State-led Decollectivization and Marketization

The rationale of the Deng Xiaoping government in dismantling the communes and promoting marketization has been discussed above. Here I want to add details from *Red Earth* indicating that these changes were not justified, at least in the case of Junction, even according to the Dengists' narrow criterion of increasing output (in Deng's words, whether or not the commune system "caught mice").³³

First there's the question of whether the commune members wanted to decollectivize. According to Endicott,

Villagers at MaGaoqiao did not seem eager to give up collective farming. Those interviewed as late as 1981 reacted negatively to talk of structural reform returning the responsibility for production to individual households. In spite of the fact that they knew about such experiments elsewhere in Sichuan, they were not anxious to follow suit. (134)

At first I assumed the "experiments elsewhere in Sichuan" referred to Guanghan county, which is often touted as a pioneer of decollectivization, but it turns out (as mentioned above) that Guanghan's 1977 experiment was with a form of collective farming similar to that devised in Junction as early as 1971. I have seen no evidence that peasants anywhere in Sichuan spontaneously proposed decollectivization. Zhao Ziyang (appointed by Deng Xiaoping as Sichuan's party secretary in 1975) introduced experiments with decollectivization to 10% of Sichuan's production teams in 1980, and asked the rest to follow suit in 1982, with 94% finally doing so by 1983.³⁴ Apparently in 1981, 21% of

Sichuan's teams voluntarily decollectivized in imitation of the original 10%, and surely many peasants eagerly embraced the opportunity to return to family farming (Endicott's account is ambiguous on this point, and the only two relevant quotations he provides – expressing uncertainty and discomfort with the change – are from a team leader and the commune party secretary). But among the several Sichuan villages for which I am aware of such data, all waited until the government ordered them to decollectivize in 1982 or 1983, and one (Baoshan village in Pengzhou) actually resisted the change, telling the government they had decollectivized but secretly continuing to use a collective system – a system which became a foundation for its now renowned “socialist” village economy.³⁵

As for the question of income, Endicott reports that, in Junction, “the commune collective system (not including the private plots and household sidelines) tripled or even quadrupled (in the case of [MaGaoqiao's] No. 5 production team) the individual peasant's spending power from 1975 to 1982,” with Junction's per capita net income rising from 78 yuan in 1975 to 240 in 1982 (135-136). This figure includes industrial enterprises as well as farming, but table 7 (231) shows that MaGaoqiao's income from farming alone rose from 415,660 yuan in 1980 to 510,129 in 1982, while wages and profit distribution from commune industries rose from 17,000 to 83,000. However, it is important to note that this rise in income began only after a ten-year decline, indicated by Endicott in terms of a fall in the “value of the work day”³⁶ at MaGaoqiao from 0.95 yuan in 1965 to 0.66 in 1970 and on down to 0.47 in 1975 (83). Endicott attributes this primarily to the combination of two factors: (1) “after 1966 the government did not increase the procurement price of grain again until 1979,” and (2) “escalating costs for the modern inputs needed to produce such high levels of commodity grain – the chemicals, plastic sheeting, hybrid plants, electricity, and tractors” – and let's not forget the diesel fuel to run those tractors. “By 1975, ten years after the introduction of modern science to farming, expenses rose sharply from 15 to 26 per cent, while the annual per capita income from the collective collapsed from 51 yuan to a reported 17 yuan” (83). Table 12 (236) explains that (also in MaGaoqiao) the cost of “modern scientific inputs” for agriculture increased from 16% of income in 1965 to 26% in 1975, after which it began to fall slightly. Table 17 (241) shows that the

percentage of income the farmers of MaGaoqiao got to keep after subtracting production costs, state taxes and village fees fell from 64.6% in 1965 to 59.4% in 1975, rising slightly to 63.5% in 1980. Here it's especially interesting that this figure peaked at 78.3% in 1983 only because the county government temporarily lowered the price of agricultural inputs in order to offset popular criticism for its promotion of the enrichment of a minority of "specialized households," i.e. entrepreneurs, as part of the Dengist push toward marketization and "letting a few people get rich first" (140). In 1985 (the last year in the table) after-tax net income fell back to 69.8%.

These figures strongly suggest that the roller coaster of peasant incomes from farming during these years had more to do with how the state priced grain and agricultural inputs in a given year than whether farming was organized collectively or individually. As for output, Endicott's table 11 (235) shows that Junction's grain output grew continuously from 1963 to 1982 (from 6,410 tons to 11,585), and actually fell (to 11,318 tons) in 1985 (the last year on the table). Rapeseed output likewise grew continuously (from 129 tons in 1963 to 650 in 1980), except that it fell slightly (to 635) in 1982. Crop yield (output per unit land, according to table 10 on page 234) for rice, wheat and rapeseed also rose continuously in Junction and nationally, with the national yield of rapeseed falling in 1983.

Endicott's data for Junction is consistent with Chris Bramall's study of Sichuan as a whole.³⁷ There Bramall shows that agricultural output value grew by 9.1% in Sichuan between 1977 and 1982, but only 4.9% between 1982 and 1988, and the output value of commune-level collective industry grew faster during the first period as well (747). He also compared the gross value of agricultural and industrial output of different counties from 1975 to 1982, finding that output value increased 1.5% faster in those counties that had not yet decollectivized than in those that had already decollectivized before autumn 1982, concluding (albeit tentatively) that "If anything, decollectivization seems to have had an adverse effect upon the rate of increase."

The evidence of Endicott and Bramall thus indicate that, in Sichuan at least, the communes did not fail to increase output for either agriculture or industry, and I have seen little evidence of a

widespread push for decollectivization among the peasantry. Endicott also provides a detailed depiction of how the county party committee went systematically about dismantling the communes, promoting a few “specialized households” and marketizing social life, but I will leave that for you to read yourself.

Conclusion: What Could Have Been Done Differently under the Historical Circumstances?

In the first section of this paper I noted Endicott’s characterization of MaGaoqiao’s historical twists and turns as defined by “the struggle between individualism and collectivism,” and his fear that a new rich peasant class would prevail over the collective interest. I claimed that these statements point to a theoretical confusion among both proponents and detractors of the China’s agrarian commune system. Endicott’s own data introduced above suggest to me that the more important struggle determining both the prosperity of MaGaoqiao and the success or failure of its collective and individual endeavors alike was something more like a class struggle between the peasantry and the developmental state bureaucracy, the latter compelled by a combination of defensive military competition with the major capitalist states and the bureaucrats’ individual pursuit of promotion to rapidly develop China’s forces of production and destruction. That is, the villagers’ fortunes seem to have fluctuated with the intensity of pressures to extract surplus-value from them, depending on how the state priced grain and agricultural inputs, how much grain and other products the peasantry was pressured to produce and hand over, and how much underpaid labor peasants were asked to contribute to rural capital construction (building canals, etc.).

This is not to say that such extraction was not at all beneficial to the peasantry in the long run. Some of the capital construction projects described in *Red Earth* resulted in new means of production controlled exclusively (and more or less democratically) by village or team collectives: expanded, squared, leveled and irrigated farmland; fishponds, orchards, etc. And the peasants also used or otherwise seem to have benefitted from most of those projects that expanded state-owned capital (canals, roads and railroads, mines, etc.) and commune-owned capital (collective enterprises) –

at least until much of this (along with certain village and team means of production) was auctioned off and converted to the exclusive service of individual profit at the expense of collective interests. As for grain quotas and the price scissors, it could be argued that a period of such “socialist primitive accumulation” was the only way, under the historical conditions discussed above, for China to industrialize and militarily modernize enough to raise living standards through increasing productivity, improving access to modern health care, etc., while defending against imperialist threats. The plan was to squeeze the peasantry for a few years until a certain level of development was reached and then start reimbursing them by reversing the flow of value (*fanbu*). Writers such as Pao-yu Ching argue that this reversal had already begun to take place in the 1970s, since state investment in agriculture and the production of agricultural inputs increased, and the price scissors relaxed (that is, the terms of trade became more favorable to agriculture).³⁸ On the other hand, the price scissors never disappeared or reversed (indeed, as mentioned above, grain procurement prices were frozen between 1966 and 1979), and increased state investment in agriculture and inputs meant only an increase in agricultural output and productivity, not a decrease in the rate of exploitation – as suggested by Endicott’s aforementioned figures for the falling “value of the work day” until 1975, which didn’t surpass the 1965 level until 1982. A better indication that a reversal was beginning may be the state’s massive reallocation of funding and trained personnel into rural health care and education after 1968.

In any case, while it seems accurate to say that the social wage (access to social services such as health care) rose from about 1968 and the rate of exploitation fell from about 1975, and that Mao and his followers intended all along to reverse the flow of value as soon as possible (with the Dengists’ narrow productivism being an obstacle to such a reversal), my point is just that a more or less contradictory relation between peasantry and bureaucracy continued throughout the lifetime of the commune system. When this contradiction became intense – as during the Great Leap famine – peasants rebelled, refusing to sell any more grain to the state, hiding and defending it from teams sent to collect it, seizing grain from state granaries, and even taking up armed struggle and “seizing

power” in some places.³⁹ Some observers have also argued that the alleged low productivity of collective farming and many peasants’ tendency to focus energy and resources (such as manure) on their private plots were forms of resistance to state exploitation.⁴⁰ It seems likely that, in some cases, peasants welcomed or even pushed for all-out decollectivization for this reason. But it’s also clear that their contradiction with the bureaucracy – and the state-owned capital whose interest it served – only grew following the few years of more favorable conditions mentioned above, and to this was added a whole new set of contradictions with the formation of new exploitative classes or class-fractions: the minority of “rich peasants” mentioned by Endicott above (some of whom became capitalists), along with various other new forms of private and state capital, for which the profit motive and (now increasingly globalized) competition among firms combined with the previously dominant forces of defensive military competition and bureaucratism to increase the rate of exploitation and multiply its mechanisms (now including wage relations, interest on loans, predation by commercial middlemen, price-gouging by providers of services previously provided by the collective, etc.), to say nothing of the dramatic rise of direct expropriation of land and the often fatal pollution of water and air. Until the party-state resumed efforts to mitigate these contradictions around 2005, there should be no doubt that the degree of the peasantry’s exploitation by all these forms of capital in combination increased since the late 1980s, leading to rising frequency and scale of peasant resistance.⁴¹ But we must understand this not as something entirely new but a worsening, privatization and diversification of the contradictory relation that already existed in simpler, less antagonistic, “socialist” forms during the preceding periods.⁴²

My aim in writing all this is not to point fingers at Mao-era China or the commune system as exploitative or authoritarian. In comparison with other cases of such rapid and large-scale modernization, such as Germany under Bismarck, the USSR under Stalin or Japan under Hirohito,⁴³ China almost certainly modernized in the most egalitarian and democratic manner, without conquering new territories to provide cheap resources,⁴⁴ and under particularly unfavorable conditions – including devastation by a century of invasions and civil war, embargo and imperialist

threats by the nuclear-armed US, and antagonistic relations with the USSR after 1957. My purpose is rather to show that the communistic experimentation associated with the Great Leap Forward and the agrarian commune system did not fail because of any inherent impracticality of communism, but basically because they were introduced by a party-state that was simultaneously (and partly as a means to eventually realize communist goals) extracting surplus-value from the commune members. But were there other options under the historical conditions?

On an ideological level, as mentioned above, we can at least say that the Maoists were wrong to imagine the transition to communism as going smoothly together with a rapid increase in output and development of productive capacity, especially under the multiply unfavorable conditions of the Great Leap Forward discussed above. More conventional Marxists (including the Dengists, as discussed above) take from this the lesson that the forces of production must achieve a certain high level of development before communization becomes possible, but this contradicts the apparent predominance of more or less communist arrangements among prehistorical societies and in many “primitive” groups observed throughout history. Even if we aim to incorporate modern science and technology into communist arrangements, it is important to recognize both that these are not necessary precursors to communism, and that communism actually requires abandoning or modifying many technologies, modes of organization and entire economic sectors developed for capitalist purposes.⁴⁵ The Maoists apparently recognized this to some extent (promoting, for example, experimentation with various methods of participatory collective farm management and remuneration, and the introduction of new appropriate technologies such as methane-burning stoves). But the overall political/economic vision captured in Endicott’s phrase “the struggle between individualism and collectivism” took for granted the high modernist faith in scale that still dominates the world’s thinking about agriculture, giving it a fatal Marxist twist by assuming, at the extreme, that the larger the scale of collectivization (of farming and as many other aspects of production and life as possible), the more communist an arrangement is. When reading texts such as *Red Earth* or Chen Boda’s influential comments (quoted above) on the first experiments with

“people’s communes,” one wonders whether the consolidation of smaller into larger-scale arrangements is being eulogized because it’s believed to be more *egalitarian* or more *productive*, apparently the assumption is that the two go naturally together. This contradicts millennia of experience that the most communist (i.e. the most participatory, egalitarian, democratic, etc.) arrangements that have also been the most successful – among both traditional and experimental arrangements – have tended to focus most production on small-scale cooperation, with larger-scale cooperation and exchange among small groups coordinated through voluntary federal, rhizomatic or segmentary lineage relations.⁴⁶ This is not to say that communism can’t be done on a larger scale, or that it can’t be more productive than allowed by Paleolithic technologies. New technologies such as the internet have already begun to make possible certain forms of communistic cooperation on a global scale, and surely we could create more such technologies appropriate to making communism work on various scales and at higher levels of productivity. But the conventional Marxist beliefs that capitalist “socialization” of the forces of production points directly to communization of the relations of production, that communism can simply take over the existing capitalist technologies and ways of organizing production, and in the Chinese case, that essentially capitalist forces of production must be developed either prior to or during the transition to communism – all seem unfounded, mystical, and potentially dangerous.

On the other hand, even if the CCP (or whoever happened to be in power in China) recognized that communism neither requires development of productive capacity nor should simply adopt capitalist technologies or increase the scale of production, could they or the communes survive without doing so? Probably not, unless the imperialist threat of the major capitalist states disappeared from the picture. So the practical options for Chinese communists were (1) to focus their efforts on promoting revolution in the major capitalist states (not really an option for most Chinese communists), (2) to retire from the political sphere and wait until the conditions became more suitable for communization (as many Chinese anarchists did), (3) to shift gears to developing China as a nation-state, waiting until either China become the new global superpower or communization

began in the major capitalist states (as the Dengists did), or (4) to try to do both at the same time, hoping to defend China's sovereignty while beginning the transition to communism within Chinese territory, hoping the communist movement would spread and undermine the major capitalist states (as the Maoists arguably did).

One problem with the Maoist option is that, by developing China into a powerful nation-state, it created (despite all attempts at "cultural revolution") the conditions for the bureaucracy inevitably engendered by such development to augment its power through marketization and globalization, dismantling the communes and pushing China ever further from communization.⁴⁷ Another problem is that, even during the height of Maoism, this conflation of communism with development and state-building either turned international supporters away from communism or led to similar ideological confusion in their ranks – in both cases decreasing the chances for truly communist revolution in the major capitalist states.⁴⁸

To recapitulate the main points of this paper, Endicott's *Red Earth*, among other sources, indicates that

- (1) at least some of the communes had communistic aspects, and were established as part of a movement conceptualized as beginning "the transition from socialism to communism"
- (2) it was not those aspects that led to the Great Leap famine, but the combination of rapid institutional experimentation with a transfer of much of the rural workforce out of agriculture even while the state was procuring more grain than before, in an ideological and bureaucratic atmosphere that rewarded exaggeration of yields
- (3) some communistic experiments (such as need-based distribution) were abandoned and stigmatized because the famine was wrongly blamed on them
- (4) output and yield of most major crops and rural industrial products grew throughout the commune period, some even faster toward the end of the period (1977-1982) than after decollectivization

- (5) the global dominance of capital and capitalist states such as the US led most Chinese communists to focus on either state-building or attempting to combine state-building with experiments in the direction of communization; complete communization would have probably been impossible without revolution in the major capitalist states
- (6) meanwhile, records of China's "people's communes" such as *Red Earth* provide some specific positive and negative lessons about how to organize post-capitalist arrangements in the future.

And that future becomes ever closer as the environmental and social crisis of global capitalism deepens. At the same time, China's rise to replace the US as the global superpower renders anachronistic the historical limitations emphasized above: if the conditions for communization to begin in China were not yet ripe in the 1920s, 1950s or 1980s, there should be no doubt that they are approaching ripeness now.

Guiyang, May 4, 2010

- ¹ The online review is [by Herb and Ruth Gamberg \(Monthly Review, June 1990\)](#). Excerpts of other reviews are online [here](#).
- ² William Hinton's main account of the commune period, as experienced by a village in Shanxi, is *Shenfan: Continuing Revolution in Chinese Village* (New York: Random House, 1983). The Crooks' account of the early commune period is *The First Years of Yangyi Commune* by Isabel and David Crook (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966). Jan Myrdal's account of the early commune period is *Report from a Chinese Village* (Penguin, 1965). In addition to *Red Earth* and *Shenfan*, other helpful studies are Byung-Joon Ahn, "The Political Economy of the People's Commune in China: Changes and Continuities" (*Journal of Asian Studies*, May 1975, vol. 34, no. 3, 631-658); Gordon Bennett, Ken Kieke and Ken Yoffy, *Huadong: The Story of a Chinese People's Commune* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1978); Anita Chan, Richard Madsen and Jonathan Unger, *Chen Village: Revolution to Globalization* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009); Fei Hsiao-t'ung, *Chinese Village Close-up* (Beijing: New World Press, 1982); Mobo Gao, *Gao Village: A Portrait of Rural Life in Modern China* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1999); Han Dongping, *The Unknown Cultural Revolution: Life and Change in a Chinese Village* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2008); Sulamith Heins Potter and Jack M. Potter, *China's Peasants: The Anthropology of a Revolution* (Cambridge: University Press, 1990); Gregory A. Ruf, *Cadres and Kin: Making a Socialist Village in West China, 1921-1991* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998); and Benedict Stavis, *People's Communes and Rural Development in China* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1974).
- ³ I haven't noticed any clear point of disagreement with these authors, except that Endicott may be a little more critical of certain Maoist decisions and practices than Myrdal or the Crooks – such as Mao's cult of personality (128) and the freezing of the state's grain procurement price at a low level between 1966 and 1979, while expenses rose from 15% to 26% and annual per capita income fell from 51 yuan to 17 (83). In both cases (and there are others), however, Endicott hesitates to blame Mao and his followers in the party leadership, pointing out other possible causes. At no point in the book have I found an explicit statement of disagreement with any Maoist decision or practice, and more importantly, Endicott seems to share the Maoists' overall framework, values and goals of "socialist construction." His appraisal of national Maoist leaders' decisions about the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution seem more positive than Hinton's somewhat critical appraisal in *Shenfan*.
- ⁴ In English writings on the PRC, "cadres" (a translation of *ganbu*) refers to both CCP members and administrative personnel. During most of the period of the agrarian "people's commune" system, "rural cadres" referred to cadres at commune, brigade (i.e. village) and team levels. Administrative cadres at brigade and team levels were democratically elected by all members of their respective brigade or team, and (in theory and at a couple points in Endicott's account) both administrative and party cadres were subject to popular criticism and recall. The existence and details of popular elections for commune-level administrative cadres seems to have varied from place to place and time to time. Such elections are not mentioned in *Red Earth*, but it does say that local "red guards" paralyzed the commune administration until a "Mao Zedong Thought Propaganda Team" from the army came and negotiated a power-sharing settlement in 1968 (118), and it discusses a few cases of popular participation in commune-level administrative planning, such as the anti-schistosomiasis campaign (159). Endicott notes that from 1956 the MaGaoqiao village party branch had become "a tight little group" that "accepted no new applications for membership" until it was forced to open up in the 1966 "Four Clean-ups" campaign (101, 109 – discussed below). The book mentions administrative cadres who were not party members (e.g. page 105) and the fact that village and team administrators were elected democratically (e.g. page 102). Several were recalled ("overthrown") in campaigns such as the Four Clean-ups.
- ⁵ Endicott does not use the terms "superstructure" or "base" here but his narrative here and elsewhere seems to imply such a conventional Marxist framework. Why this is a problem should become clear in my analysis below.
- ⁶ On the history of these terms, see Arthur E. Bestor, Jr. 1948, "The Evolution of the Socialist Vocabulary," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, vol. 9, no. 3. On predecessors of the communist movement see [Communalism: From its Prehistoric Origins to the 20th Century](#) by Kenneth Rexroth; [Communism in Central Europe at the Time of the Reformation](#) by Karl Kautsky; and [Cromwell and Communism: Socialism and Democracy in the Great English Revolution](#) by Eduard Bernstein. The concept of "primitive communism" was proposed by Jean-Jacques Rousseau and theorized, on the basis of Lewis Henry Morgan's anthropological evidence, by Friedrich Engels in [Origins of the Family, Private Property and the State](#). Much of Morgan's evidence and thus Engels' theory has been discredited, but, along with [Kropotkin's Mutual Aid](#), Engels is still useful as a starting point for thinking about communistic aspects in many historical and probably most prehistorical societies – aspects which have been documented by many more reliable sources, such as the following: Pierre Clastres, *Society against the State: Essays in Political Anthropology* (New York: Zone Books, 1987); Rolf Jensen, "The Transition from Primitive Communism: The Wolof Social Formation in West Africa" (*Journal of Economic History*, vol. 42 no. 1, 1982); Claude Meillasoux, *Maidens, Meal and Money: Capitalism and the Domestic Community* (Cambridge University Press, 1981); Elinor Ostrom, *Governing the commons: the evolution of institutions for collective action* (Cambridge University Press, 1990); Joanna Overing, *The Piaroa, A People of the Orinoco Basin: A Study in Kinship and Marriage* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975); Marshall Sahlins, *Stone Age Economics* (London: Routledge, 1974); Marjorie Shostak, *Nisa: The Life and Words of a !Kung Woman* (Earthscan, 1990); and Colin Turnbull, *The Forest People* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1968).

⁷ Kolinko once summarized an important idea on the communist left: “Communism is neither some far-off utopia [n]or a planned out society, but is part of the struggle, in which the existing mode of production is changed, new relations and new needs arise and the means are appropriated for the fulfillment of those needs” (“[The Subversion of Everyday Life](#)”). My inclination is to agree with this view and resist the temptation to sketch “recipes for the cookshops of the future” (as Marx sarcastically put it). My purpose in this article is not to pose the Chinese commune system as anything like a blueprint for what communist society should look like, but merely (1) to point out that they contained some communistic features (in an admittedly limited sense of “communistic” but one that I find necessary for intervening in the prevalent pessimism reflected in all-too-common mantras such as “communism is a hopeless utopia, it would never work”), (2) to show that some of these communistic features actually did work, that the main reason they had difficulties was that the state was putting pressure on the communes to squeeze out surplus-value to fuel China’s rapid industrialization (itself driven by US military pressure), and that it was not due to any inherent impracticality of communistic arrangements, and (3) to encourage readers to consider the positive and negative lessons these offer to future efforts toward communization. The communist left’s usual approach to this issue is to say “the communes weren’t communist, they were just units of state-capitalist exploitation,” but this approach seems untenable when one learns more about how these communes functioned. As detailed below, they shared key features with experiments widely regarded as communistic (agrarian collectives in the Spanish Revolution, for example), and more importantly, they dealt with practical issues that will probably haunt any efforts to create more egalitarian, participatory social arrangements in the future.

⁸ The standard translation of Preobrazhensky’s term is “primitive socialist accumulation” – I have changed the word order to make it more understandable. On the economics of this process in China and background on the academic debate about it, see Laixiang Sun, 2001, “Price Scissors, Rationing, and Coercion: An Extended Framework for Understanding Primitive Socialist Accumulation,” *Economics of Planning*, 34(3): 195-213. For a theory that rural collectivization and the commune system facilitated this process by reducing transaction costs, see 温铁军, 《中国农村基本经济制度研究》, 中国经济出版社 1999.

For an argument that this process was already being reversed in the 1970s (that the state had begun to give more value to the peasantry than it extracted), see “[How Sustainable is China’s Agriculture? A Closer Look at China’s Agriculture and Chinese Peasants](#)” by Pao-yu Ching, pages 11-12. I will discuss this argument in the conclusion below.

⁹ Karl Marx, “[First Draft of Letter to Vera Zasulich](#).”

¹⁰ On the Paris Commune of 1871 see Karl Marx, *The Civil War in France*. On Russia 1917-1921 see Rod Jones, “[Factory Committees in the Russian Revolution](#).” On Spain 1936-1939 see Gaston Leval, *Collectives in the Spanish Revolution*. On Hungary 1956 see Andy Anderson, *Hungary ‘56*.

¹¹ Tsering Shakya, *Dragon in the Land of Snows* (New York: Penguin Compass, 2000), 170-180.

¹² Maurice Meisner, *Mao’s China and After: A History of the People’s Republic*, Third Edition (New York: Free Press, 1999), 218-219.

¹³ One reader commented here that developmentalism is not unique to Maoism. My point here is that the Maoists sought to *combine* development of productive capacity *with* (what they envisioned as) the transition to communism (doing so by continuing the process of “socialist primitive accumulation” – although they regarded that as a necessary evil to be reversed as early as possible). This seems to be unique, even among Marxists in power (in part because – ironically perhaps – so few Marxists have promoted experimentation with communistic arrangements in the first place!).

¹⁴ Meisner (ibid) goes so far as to frame the Maoists’ anti-bureaucratic and pro-“communization” efforts as opposed to the “Stalinist” model of development, but to say this may be misleading, since the Maoists themselves actually framed such efforts as upholding Stalin’s legacy against the “revisionism” they associated with Khrushchev. On the other hand, Mao and his followers had also criticized Stalin’s productivism during Stalin’s lifetime (see, for example, Mao’s “[Critique of Stalin’s Economic Problems Of Socialism In The USSR](#)”), and in reality (whether the Maoists recognized this or not), Deng Xiaoping and Liu Shaoqi’s overall approach to “socialist construction” in general (including their privileging of development over communist goals, as well as their related rejection of Maoist mass mobilization to supervise and rectify cadres in favor of conventional Leninist top-down internal party discipline, etc.) were more consistent with Stalin’s precedent than the Maoists’ unorthodox ideas and methods.

¹⁵ On the conception of communism underlying Maoist campaigns such as the Leap, see Meisner (op cit) passim, e.g. chapters 11-13 and 17.

¹⁶ Endicott does not mention the number of teams or households in Junction when it first “communized” in 1958. On page 68 he refers to a map from the mid-1970s listing 118 teams with 5,188 households, but on table 11 (page 235) 119 teams are listed for 1963-1985. Considering that the population of MaGaoqiao village alone grew by 48% (550 people) from 1963 to 1973 (after falling by as much as 20% during the famine), the number of households would have been considerably lower in 1958. My estimate of “about 30 to 40 households” per team comes from these figures and Endicott’s statement that 30-40 households was the average for China (67).

¹⁷ Chris Bramall, *In Praise of Maoist Economic Planning: Living Standards and Economic Development in Sichuan since 1931* (Oxford University Press, 1993), 327.

¹⁸ Utsa Patnaik, [“On Measuring ‘Famine’ Deaths: Different Criteria for Socialism and Capitalism?”](#) *People’s Democracy*, September 26, 1999.

¹⁹ Bramall op cit, 295-297.

²⁰ The 60% estimate comes from Meisner (op cit), 235. Endicott cites oral (56) and documentary (229) evidence of abnormal rainfall in Shifang, but concludes that “in a rice-growing area such abundance of water, while possibly having some influence on the yield, does not spell disaster unless there is actual flooding by the rivers, which no one suggested had happened” (56).

²¹ Li Minqi goes so far as to argue the opposite: that in the CCP leaders’ debates about the Leap, Mao was actually on the least “utopian” side, warning against the dangers of adventurist policies that led to the disaster, whereas Deng and his followers were the strongest proponents of those policies (Li, *The Rise of China and the Demise of the World Capitalist Economy*, 44-50.)

²² Elinor Ostrom, *Governing the commons: the evolution of institutions for collective action* (Cambridge University Press, 1990); Michael Taylor, *Community, Anarchy and Liberty* (Cambridge University Press, 1982). Also see Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Times* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1957), chapters 4-6, where he argues that the world’s first market-based economy, which emerged in 19th century Europe, is unsustainable (in social terms – he doesn’t even get into its ecological unsustainability, virtually unknown at the time) because it diverged so radically from all previous human experience, where markets and commodity exchange – when they existed at all – had always been subordinate to and regulated by other economic/social/cultural principles.

²³ It should be noted in passing that, generally speaking, people are attracted to private enterprise only because their needs and desires are not satisfied through other channels, and they at least think they have sufficient capital to satisfy these needs and desires more easily through private enterprise. If the communes were able to supply their members with all their necessities and some of their more easily realizable desires, their members would more eagerly devote their time and energy to the collective. The communes were not able to do this at first because of both the scissors effect and their low level of development (not a problem for “primitive communism,” but it became a problem in China when some commune members came to believe they could raise their standard of living more easily through other channels). And the communes could not raise their level of development (including through the mechanization of farming, which only makes sense on a larger scale than any household plot in most parts of China) if the members were devoting all their time and energy to private enterprise. So it was a vicious circle. The Maoist approach to this problem was to stigmatize private enterprise as selfish and glorify contribution to the collective as altruistic. Such a moralistic approach looks almost fascist when one focuses on the aspect of “socialist primitive accumulation” (that is, the Maoists seem to be telling the peasants to be altruistic, diligent and frugal in order to fuel the state’s growth, with the promise that the state will start giving back more than it takes once it reaches a certain level of development). But even without this drain on the collective economy, any project aiming for self-sufficient egalitarian development would probably have to deal with the same dilemma, as long as there seem to be opportunities for individual enrichment outside the collective. Again we return to the central problem of the uneasy combination of communism and development. Communization on the basis of sufficient resources (with or without modern labor-saving technologies) should be able to avoid this problem.

²⁴ On the need of communism to transform productive activity so was to overcome the division between work and play, see, for example, Raul Vaneigem, [“The Decline and Fall of Work.”](#)

²⁵ Hairong Yan comments, “When I visited a village in Shanxi last year, I asked a peasant in his 60s what difference he saw in working during the collective period and after. He said during the collective period it was more fun (with many people working collectively) and later it’s very boring (just himself and his wife working together, with few words being exchanged between them through the day).”

²⁶ Chris Bramall, “Origins of the Agricultural ‘Miracle’: Some Evidence from Sichuan,” *The China Quarterly*, No. 143 (1995), 743-744.

²⁷ Wang Shaoguang, [“People’s Health Matters Too.”](#)

²⁸ Judith Shapiro, *Mao’s War against Nature: Politics and the Environment in Revolutionary China* (Cambridge University Press, 2001), 88. Unfortunately only anecdotal evidence is provided (in this case as in most of the claims made in this highly ideological book).

²⁹ [“Villager Teams on the Chengdu Plain: A Study of Jing Village”](#) by Wang Ximing.

³⁰ For a discussion of how “democratic management” was practiced (and subsequently undermined) in urban state-owned workplaces, see Joel Andreas, [“The Erosion of Paternalistic Democracy in Chinese Factories,”](#) lecture at the UCLA Center for Chinese Studies, May 2009.

³¹ Meisner (op cit), 274-276.

³² Such myths and rituals are discussed in several of the anthropological accounts listed above, such as Clastres’ *Society against the State*.

³³ Here I will not address the question of whether labor productivity (efficiency) rose or fell, since this seems more difficult to determine, I’m less familiar with whatever relevant literature may exist, and *Red Earth* does not provide any quantitative date about this. It seems likely that it fell, since after decollectivization output continued to increase (albeit more slowly)

while labor-power transferred out of agriculture much faster. Land productivity (yield) clearly increased starting in the late 1970s, but this is not entirely a good thing, since much of this increase came from the unsustainable application of synthetic fertilizers, pesticides and herbicides. (Some came from more sustainable methods such as improved irrigation and drainage, leveled and squared fields, and the more debatable methods of diesel-fueled mechanization and high-yield varieties of seed.)

³⁴ Chris Bramall, "Origins of the Agricultural 'Miracle': Some Evidence from Sichuan," *The China Quarterly*, No. 143 (1995), 744.

³⁵ On Baoshan see "社会主义新农村之光——四川省彭州市宝山村新农村建设调查" by 赵昂. The only other published English account of decollectivization in Sichuan I know of is Ruf's *Cadres and Kin*, where he notes that the party secretary of Baimapu commune in Meishan county allegedly resisted decollectivization "until party superiors in the county government gave him explicit orders to enact the new official policies" in 1983, warning that "the abandonment of redistributive socialism in favor of a privatized market economy would lead to polarizations in wealth and, ultimately, to social and political instability," and trying (successfully) to build up the commune's collective enterprises as "a safety net for families that might be adversely affected by the decollectivization of agriculture" (130). According to sociologist Wang Ximing, most of the Sichuan villages where he has inquired about decollectivization follow this pattern, but he suspects the change would have been more warmly welcomed in Sichuan's mountainous areas, since the benefits of cooperation are fewer and less obvious there (Bramall also makes this point), and they lack the Western Sichuan Plain's long-standing tradition of cooperation in water conservancy projects. This corresponds to Bramall's report that most of the first villages to decollectivize were in mountainous areas (*ibid*, 744-5). (More on whether peasants wanted to decollectivize below in note 39.)

³⁶ Actually this is not a fall in the value of the work day in Marxian terms (that is, the amount of value transferred from one person into products during one day), but just the opposite: more value was being transferred from the farmers to the state (via the products – mainly grain) per day because the state was paying the farmers less for the products relative to the prices it was charging the farmers for agricultural inputs – as roughly illustrated by the figures below. So the value of the work day rose because the price of the work day (paid indirectly via the price of grain) fell.

³⁷ Bramall, "Origins."

³⁸ Ching, "How Sustainable is China's Agriculture?" 11-12.

³⁹ Endicott mentions reports of peasants' armed rebellion and power seizures elsewhere (66), but relations with the state were relatively harmonious in MaGaoqiao and only grain-hiding occurred there (60). Starting with the 2006 publication of a Chinese book by Gao Wangling on "peasant counter-action during the people's commune period" (高王凌, 《人民公社时期中国农民反行为调查》, 中共党史出版社), a new literature on Mao-era peasant resistance has begun to take shape. (Gao objects strongly to the use of the term "resistance" to describe what he theorizes as "counter-action," but such objection seems unfounded – there is a long tradition in China and elsewhere of describing such behavior as forms of resistance or "passive resistance.") The newness of this literature (including both new evidence and theoretical questions about how to analyze it) makes it difficult to say much conclusive about it. What is certain is that, throughout the collective period, peasants in many parts of China did underreport and steal grain, and redirect their energy and resources to private plots. (Endicott mentions a struggle over how much manure should be applied to private and collective plots on pages 121-123.) Less certain is how prevalent this was, at which times and places, and to what extent either contemporary or after-the-fact reports may have been fabricated, exaggerated or covered up for political reasons. (Both then and now there are several reasons pointing in different directions. Some of these are discussed in an unpublished manuscript by Felix Wemheuer called "The Politicization of Hunger: Food and peasant-state relation in China (1949-1962)," presented at Yale University Program in Agrarian Studies, October 16, 2009. Thanks to Wemheuer for sharing this manuscript and introducing me to this emerging field.) Another question is whether such resistance should be interpreted as pushing toward decollectivization, as argued by Gao Wangling and others. **My argument is that such peasant resistance was against state extraction of surplus-value in the form of grain, and if in some cases it took the form of diverting energy and resources to private plots, this was because the state procured grain from collective plots only. Both (pro-decollectivization) Dengists and liberals and (pro-collectivization) Maoists tend to interpret the situation not as a class struggle between peasantry and state bureaucracy over the amount of surplus-value extracted, but as an ideological struggle between "collectivism" and "individualism."** Now that the extraction of surplus-value has shifted to mechanisms other than the former communes and production teams (and arguably the flow of value has even reversed or "反哺"), we find increasing numbers of peasants going against great odds (including negative experiences with collective farming during the Mao era and the propagation of misleading interpretations of such memories, the flight of most able-bodied peasants from farming and the countryside, disillusion of rural communities and disappearance of mechanisms facilitating cooperation, local state pressures against independent peasant organization) to pool their resources and undertake all manner of group endeavors, including the recollectivization of land usage in some villages, along with countless new cooperatives and associations that have formed over the past few years. (On recollectivization etc., see [the first issue of China Left Review](#)).

⁴⁰ In addition to Gao's Chinese book and Wemheuer's article (cited in previous note), other sources on this subject are *Catastrophe and contention in rural China: Mao's Great Leap forward famine and the origins of righteous resistance in Da Fo Village* by Ralph Thaxton (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), and *Village China under socialism and*

reform: a micro history, 1948-2008 by Huaiyin Li (Stanford University Press, 2009). An English translation of a chapter of Gao's book will be published this year in *Eating Bitterness: New Perspectives on the Great Leap Forward and the Great Famine*, edited by Kimberly Manning and Felix Wemheuer (University Press of British Columbia, 2010).

⁴¹ On rising peasant resistance since the 1980s, see Kathy Le Mons Walker, "'Gangster Capitalism' and Peasant Protest in China: The Last Twenty Years," *Journal of Peasant Studies*, vol 33, no. 1 (2006), 1-33.

⁴² Here I'm drawing on Yiching Wu's analysis of China's marketization as not a "restoration" of the pre-1950s bourgeoisie (as Maoists tend to frame the issue), but as primarily a "privatization of political power" of the Mao-era state bureaucracy ("[Rethinking 'Capitalist Restoration' in China](#)," *Monthly Review*, November 2005, page 8). Wu's analysis might be improved by more engagement with the literature theorizing similarities and differences between capitalism and the mode of production in the USSR, summarized in *Western Marxism and the Soviet Union: A Survey of Critical Theories and Debates since 1917* by Marcel van der Linden (Leiden: Brill, 2007).

⁴³ On the transmission of ideas about rapid state-led modernization in countries peripheralized by the global development of capitalism centered in western Europe, from Alexander Hamilton (via Friedrich List) to Bismarck's Germany to both (1) late Tsarist and "socialist" Russia and (2) Meiji and early 20th century Japan, and thence to republican and "socialist" China as well as Korea under Park Chung-hee, and on how these experiences shaped the Third International's particular version of Marxism, see "[General Perspectives on the Capitalist Development State and Class Struggle in East Asia](#)" by Loren Goldner.

⁴⁴ It may be useful to think of Tibet and Xinjiang as "internal colonies," but if so they have been such for several centuries – the PRC did not conquer them but inherited them from previous regimes. It's true that nationalist movements for the independence of both territories grew and achieved some power during the decades of civil war and Japanese invasion from the 1920s to 1940s, but the CCP naturally regarded these movements as akin to the many warlords who attempted to set up independent kingdoms throughout China at the time.

⁴⁵ On the need to abolish entire sectors such as the military, marketing, finance, insurance and real estate, see, for example, "[Fictitious Capital and the Transition Out of Capitalism](#)" by Loren Goldner. On the need to abandon or modify certain technologies and modes of organization developed for capitalist purposes, some classic texts from the Marxist tradition are "[The Capitalist Use of Machinery: Marx Versus the Objectivists](#)" by Raniero Panzieri, *The Wandering of Humanity* by Jacques Camatte, and *Society of the Spectacle* by Guy Debord. (Karl Marx's writings on this question are ambiguous – for example, [chapter 15 of Capital volume one](#) and "[Results of the Direct Production Process](#).") The ecofeminist tradition also emphasizes these issues – see, for example, *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Development* by Vandana Shiva. Numerous works deal with the question of which agricultural technologies should be abandoned, kept, or invented; one classic text is *The One-Straw Revolution* by Masanobu Fukuoka.

⁴⁶ For some analyses of traditional communistic arrangements, see *People without Government* by Harold Barclay; *Governing the Commons* by Elinor Ostrom; [Communalism](#) by Kenneth Rexroth; *Stone Age Economics* by Marshall Sahlins; *Community, Anarchy and Liberty* by Michael Taylor; and *Europe and the People without History* by Eric Wolf. For a theory of how socialism might do better to collectivize agriculture "vertically" (through the integration of certain steps in the production process on the basis of family farming) than "horizontally" (the collectivization of farming itself), see A.V. Chayanov, *The Theory of Peasant Cooperatives* (Ohio State University Press, 1991). For a literary vision of such an agrarian socialism, see his *The Journey of My Brother Alexei to the Land of Peasant Utopia* (in *The Russian Peasant, 1920 and 1984*, edited by R.E.F Smith, London: Frank Cass, 1977; the novella was written under the penname Ivan Kremnev to avoid persecution by the Stalinist censor – rightly so, since Chayanov was eventually executed for his criticism of forced collectivization). Admittedly Chayanov's vision is not communist, pointing to a form of "market socialism" that would seem to leave intact some of the same problems as any market-based system, tending to degenerate into capitalism as such. But such "vertical integration" (like traditional federal, rhizomatic and segmentary lineage forms of organization) may still be useful for thinking about how communism might work on larger scales.

⁴⁷ One reader commented that the "inevitably" in this sentence implies the class struggle was already determined. What I mean is that the formation of a bureaucracy more or less antagonistic to the peasantry and proletariat is inevitable in such a process of state-building and industrialization – it was not inevitable that the bureaucracy would win. On the other hand, the only way I can imagine a mass victory over the bureaucracy (a distant possibility that was put on the table from late 1966 to 1969 and again from 1976 to 1979) succeeding and possibly enabling China's communist seedlings to blossom, would be if the imperialist threat of the major capitalist states disappeared from the picture. This is not to express support for the decision of Mao and his followers to suppress the Shanghai general strike of December 1966 and arrest "ultra-left" groups such as Shengwulian and Beijueyang, which called for a "People's Commune of China" to replace the bureaucracy and military with an armed citizenry of workers and peasants exercising democratic control over production and administration. (See Wang Shaoguang, "['New Trends of Thought' on the Cultural Revolution](#)," *Journal of Contemporary China*, 1999, vol. 8 no. 21, 197-217. Unfortunately Wang – like some other commentators – clumps communist perspectives together with contradictory ones and theorizes them all as proto-liberal.) If the Maoist leaders had not suppressed them, it might have been possible for such practical and theoretical tendencies to have grown and combined with the communist tendencies growing throughout the world at the time – including the major capitalist states – eventually undermining the imperialist

threat. For several Chinese texts of the 1967-1969 “ultra-left” (lumped together with other “heterodox” texts even more haphazardly than in Wang Shaoguang’s article), see 宋永毅、孙大进编，《文化大革命中的异端思潮》，香港：田园书屋 1997.

⁴⁸ This situation could be compared to the Spanish Civil War, when the Stalinist Comintern, reformist Social Democrats and bourgeois liberals united in their decision to effectively suppress the popular revolution (the thus-far successful efforts of workers and peasants to create a post-capitalist order through the coordination of distribution among occupied and collectively-run factories and farms by the federation of anarchist labor unions) in a bid to unify the various classes and political orientations against Franco’s fascist movement as a common enemy. The problem, according to participants such as the Friends of Durrutti and George Orwell, was that the suppression turned many workers and peasants against the anti-fascist war (since it demonstrated that the Stalinists and liberals were just as counter-revolutionary as the fascists), whereas allowing the revolution to continue and spread would likely have encouraged more workers and peasants – including those in fascist territory and other countries – to join the revolution, thus rendering anti-fascist unity unnecessary. This analysis cannot be exactly transposed to China, but it could likewise be argued that the Chinese communists may have better promoted the international communist movement by attempting a truly communist revolution unsullied by nationalist aspirations. On the other hand, as with option (1) above, the chances of success for such a strategy seem extremely slim, and considering that most Chinese communists were also nationalists in some sense, it is easy to understand why they chose strategies 3 or 4. See [Homage to Catalonia](#) by George Orwell, “[Towards a Fresh Revolution](#)” by the Friends of Durrutti, and “[When Insurrections Die](#)” by Gilles Dauvé.