The Decollectivization of the Chinese Countryside: A Survey of Twenty-eight Villages

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China's recent move away from collective agriculture has affected very dramatically the lives of three-quarters of a billion people. It may well constitute the single most important policy shift in China since the introduction of collectives in the mid-1950s.

The restoration of family farming has been so recent, however, that a whole range of simple questions remain as yet unanswered. Did the peasantry play any role in deciding whether their village should de-collectivize? Did they help decide what new type of agricultural system should be implemented locally? Were any sizeable numbers of peasants opposed to the breakup of collective production and, if so, on what grounds? What were the immediate effects on the different types of peasant households? To what degree have different types of villages been differently affected by the changeover to family smallholdings?

In an attempt to answer such questions, a series of interviews was conducted in mid-1983 with twenty-eight emigrants from the Chinese countryside who were working in Hong Kong and who regularly returned to their home villages to visit their parents, spouses and children. Eighteen of them were from villages in Guangdong province; the remaining ten came from villages distributed in eight other provinces and regions.¹ All the twenty-eight had returned home on at least one extended visit, ranging from a week to several months in duration, during the year prior to the interviews.

Such interviewing from afar cannot guarantee a scientifically random sample of villages, nor can interviewees always be counted on to provide precise and accurate information about every aspect of their native communities. But if conducted with all due caution, such interviews can provide a considerable amount of information unobtainable through other means.² Though recent on-the-spot studies of decollectivization at

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¹ These ten interviewees came variously from Anhui, Fujian, Hubei, Jiangsu, Jiangxi, Shandong and Zhejiang provinces, and a suburban Tianjin farming district.

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particular locations have proved valuable, a survey project covering large numbers of widely dispersed villages provides more generalizable evidence. Such research, however, is well-nigh impossible to organize inside China today. Chinese officials see no advantage in providing foreigners with room to conduct a broad-based survey that might pose ticklish questions about current policies. Nor, in the absence of such on-the-spot surveys, does China's news media provide any sort of reliable substitute for interviews. In fact, it will be seen below that the Chinese press has deliberately and consistently distorted coverage of what occurred in the countryside.

Notably, the interviewees in Hong Kong did confirm one of the central claims trumpeted by the Chinese government: that in most rural districts living standards rose rapidly following the breakup of the agricultural collectives. But the picture painted in the Chinese press of how decollectivization occurred differs markedly from the accounts of interviewees, as does the picture of why some villages benefited far more than others and some households far more than their neighbors.

Decollectivization: How It Occurred

The Chinese press has conveyed the impression that villages throughout China were permitted, at their own discretion, to determine what type of “responsibility system” they would adopt. The slogan blazoned by the news media was Yin di zhi yi (Implement in accordance with local conditions), and detailed descriptions of all sorts of locally-determined solutions filled the journals. A 1981 handbook portrayed fifteen quite different systems reputedly being tried out simultaneously in the countryside, running the gamut from specialized large-scale work groups in villages where mechanization and irrigation networks were well developed, to near-total abandonment of collectives in China's poorest districts. There, said the news media, families were dividing up all the fields and farm equipment and each household was beginning to work its own allotment separately, almost as though the fields were private holdings. Initially, the Chinese press was claiming that only the 10 percent of China's villages which were the most impoverished and backward would ever adopt this least collectivist of all options. But

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3 Among the best of these reports are the papers by Steven Butler, Norma Diamond, Victor Nee, and David Zweig in William Parish, ed., Chinese Rural Development: The Great Transformation (Armonk, New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1985).

4 All the six papers that I have read which cover the nation-wide process of decollectivization essentially reiterate the misleading Chinese news-media scenario, with the notable exception of Thomas Bernstein's excellent forthcoming monograph, “Reforming China's Agriculture.”


6 Hong Qi (Red Flag), no. 20, 1980, pp. 11–15.
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garding to more recent Chinese publications, this system of independent family production (variously called bao gan dao hu [contracting management to the household] or, more commonly, da bao gan [big management contracting])\(^7\) was preferred eventually by the vast majority of China's peasantry. So, after trying out other methods, village after village, even in the wealthier districts, opted to break up the collective holdings. By early 1984, newspapers were declaring that more than 90 percent of China's agricultural production teams, by popular grassroots demand, had decided to decollectivize into the family-operated smallholdings of the da bao gan system.\(^8\)

Reports from interviewees suggest a rather different scenario of decollectivization. Fully twenty-six out of the twenty-eight villages\(^9\) in my sample had indeed decollectivized into family smallholdings by the end of 1982. But official proclamations to the contrary, twenty-four of the twenty-eight interviewees report that in their own villages the decision as to precisely what type of system would be adopted was made exclusively by officials at levels far above the village. In only two villages had the team cadres and peasants themselves taken the initiative—in both cases jumping the gun and swinging over to family smallholdings, correctly calculating that the instructions to do so would eventually come down from above.\(^10\) All the other twenty-six passively waited for upper levels to tell them what to do; and when the upper levels did move, in only two of these villages were the peasantry informed that they could choose for themselves whatever system of production they preferred. Of the remaining twenty-four, fully twenty-three were shifted, without choice, into the da bao gan system of family smallholdings. Only one village among the twenty-eight received orders not to adopt da bao gan—and this was a village of a rather uncommon type: one that specialized in sericulture. Presumably as a means of assuring state control of silk-cocoon sales, the instructions to the village stipulated that its silkworm rearing was to remain firmly in the collective sector.

Chinese journals report that many of the suburban vegetable-producing villages are similarly retaining a collective structure. Articles

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\(^7\) To avoid confusion, henceforth only the term da bao gan will be employed, since the phrase bao gan dao hu closely resembles the title of a different method of decentralized production, bao chan dao hu.

\(^8\) For example, Renmin Ribao (People's Daily), 18 January, 1984, p. 1.

\(^9\) In some cases the village of an interviewee comprised a production team or group of teams; in other cases the village comprised an entire production brigade. Since in all twenty-eight cases all the teams in a brigade ended up using exactly the same system of production, for the sake of convenience the word "village" is retained as a means of designating an interviewee's native community.

stress that the sophistication of the irrigation networks in such villages, the high degree of mechanization there, and complex marketing schedules all would preclude the fragmentation of land into tiny family-managed plots. In late 1982, I visited a suburban village of this type near Beijing that had indeed adopted a system of specialized work squads rather than moving to decollectivize. But that Beijing village may not be representative of vegetable-producing units. My sample of twenty-eight villages includes two that specialize in vegetable production for urban markets—one near Guangzhou and the other near Tianjin—and both villages followed instructions to divide all their fields into family small-holdings.

In short, interviews suggest that most of the Chinese countryside has been channelled from above into a single type of organizational structure, irrespective of the types of crops grown or the level of local economic development. Moreover, contrary to the repeated claims of the Chinese news media and top political leaders alike, very few villages were offered any choice in the matter.

**The Events Leading to Decollectivization**

How can we account for what had transpired? Had China's top leadership directed the news media to engage in deliberate and sustained distortion? Or were the leaders in Beijing themselves not entirely cognizant of the manner in which their programs for change in the countryside were being carried out at the grassroots? The evidence from the interviews and from Chinese publications, coupled with what we know of past campaigns in the People's Republic, strongly suggest that both factors simultaneously were at work.

To understand why this confusing scenario of half-conscious distortion occurred, it is necessary to look back to 1977, after Mao's death and the arrest of his closest cohorts. China's new leadership, in an attempt to revitalize the agricultural economy, had begun gingerly to dismantle the various "ultra-leftist" rural policies of the Cultural Revolution decade. Interviews confirm that, from the late 1960s through the mid 1970s, agricultural production in a great many of the rural districts had been stagnating, and that the peasantry's morale had been declining apace. Interviewee after interviewee complained that until Mao's death the peasantry had been required to experiment with agricultural techniques totally unsuited to local conditions; that they had been obliged to labor during the slack seasons for little pay on commune and county public works projects of no direct benefit to them; that they had repeatedly seen the size of their private plots and the numbers of their poultry and pigs reduced, to force them to concentrate on raising grain. They had been obliged to grow grain even on fields woefully unsuited to it, rather
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than plant other more profitable crops. As the final straw, the peasantry’s initiative had been sapped in many villages by a “Dazhai-style” remuneration system imposed by the state, that did not reward peasants on the basis of how much work they accomplished. “Since good or lousy work didn’t end up affecting your pay much,” relates one of the interviewees, “any folks who had continued to work hard felt they were being exploited.” Irritated and frustrated, most peasants had sloughed off in their work. In a downward spiral, the collective agriculture of a great many villages had been operating with ever-decreasing effectiveness.

To restore incentives, in 1977 some of the leadership in Beijing had begun pressing for China’s agricultural production teams to decentralize into the hands of smaller labor groupings. The idea was that the very size of the teams (some fifteen to fifty households) had too often inhibited peasants from seeing clearly the connections between their own work-contribution and their returns from the collective output. Under the new dispensation, accordingly, the team’s lands were to be distributed among these smaller labor squads, which were to hand in the yields at harvest’s end in exchange for payments from the team. In turn, the squad was supposed to apportion these payments among its membership on the basis of how much work each peasant individually had accomplished.

In my sample, eleven of the twenty-eight villages had experienced this program of decentralization between 1977 and 1980; and every one of these eleven simply had obeyed directives coming down to them, rather than being given leeway to take any initiative themselves. Just as significantly, the decision as to whether a given village should participate or not did not follow any discernible standards of economic logic.

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11 A detailed account of the effects on one village of all of these policies is contained in Anita Chan, Richard Madsen and Jonathan Unger, Chen Village: The Recent History of a Peasant Community in Mao’s China (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1984), ch. 9.

12 This was a mutual-appraisal system for apportioning wages, in which a peasant’s attitudes toward collective labor were supposed to count most, rather than the specific amount of work that he or she achieved. On the Dazhai wage scheme’s complicated effects, see Jonathan Unger, “Remuneration, Ideology and Personal Interests in a Chinese Village, 1960–1980” in Parish, ed., Chinese Rural Development, pp. 117–40.

13 During the same years, two other villages in the survey participated in a scheme called bao chan dao ren (contracting to the individual). Under this, the sowing and harvesting of the fields remained a collective endeavor, but each peasant was separately assigned responsibility for all of a given field’s weeding, etc., in exchange for team workpoints. In both the villages that temporarily tried this program, the decision to implement it was imposed from above. Why they were selected is unclear; the two did not differ significantly from other villages in the sample in terms of political history, income, crop types, etc.

14 For example, the eleven in the sample had not, as a group, been noticeably poorer or better off than the seventeen villages that did not participate, nor had their experiences with collective agriculture been discernibly less satisfactory.
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Villages had been selected in a seemingly arbitrary fashion by county- and commune-level officials who had concluded that it was politically expedient to demonstrate that villages under their own jurisdiction were shifting into the new program.

This decentralization into labor squads brought mixed results. In some of the villages surveyed, productivity improved; in others, peasants continued to exhibit a disinclination to labor. Some of the new leaders who were politically associated with Deng Xiaoping were convinced that these lingering problems could not entirely be blamed upon any residual peasant disaffection with the radicalism and bureaucratic interference of Mao’s final years. The persisting difficulties, they felt, stemmed from a more far-reaching problem of two-and-a-half decades’ duration: too large a dose of socialism had originally been imposed upon too backward a countryside.

A quarter of a century earlier, in the mid-1950s, a debate had taken place in the party’s top echelons. On the one side were prominent leaders like Liu Shaoqi, who had argued that collectivization should proceed slowly; so long as modern agricultural machinery was not widely available and farming remained labor-intensive, peasants should work their own relatively small plots of privately-owned land. Mao, championing the other side in this debate, had argued that China could not afford to wait until the era of extensive agricultural mechanization. He was convinced that collectivization should proceed quickly—that collectives would win the peasants’ support and that production would climb by means of a more efficient large-scale organization of land and labor. Mao’s opinion had prevailed, and in 1955-56 a high tide of collectivization had ensued. Now, in the late 1970s, part of the leadership was implying that the party’s agrarian line since the mid-1950s might have been misguided.

In keeping with this approach, in 1979 Wan Li and Zhao Ziyang, the reformist party secretaries of Anhui and Sichuan provinces, began promoting two rather more dramatic forms of decentralization in the poorer districts of those two provinces. Under the first of these experiments, bao chan dao hu (contracting production to the household), each family, under the supervision of its team, was allocated responsibility for cultivating given plots of land. The team provided the family with implements, seed, and fertilizer, and at harvest time the family delivered all the crops to the team, which paid the family in workpoints based on the size of the yields. The family, in short, was given the freedom to organize its own daily labor, but it could not decide for itself what to grow and it could not sell any of the crops on its own. Under the second experiment, da bao gan, the individual households could use the land that was allotted to them for any crops they liked, just so long as they helped meet the team’s crop-quota deliveries to the state. They could sell
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their remaining crops on their own, either to the state purchasing stations or on the free market. This da bao gan system would leave little role for the collective teams. To all intents and purposes, team members would be transformed into independent peasant smallholders.

Wan Li and Zhao Ziyang were among the most prominent of Deng Xiaoping’s backers, and their experiments in household cultivation gained enhanced political visibility as he rose in power. Since da bao gan, even more than bao chan dao hu, represented a repudiation of collective agriculture, it became a particular point of contention between Deng’s backers and those leaders in the party who saw Deng’s various proposals for economic reform as ideologically retrograde.

In response to such charges, Deng’s faction was pressing the point that it was necessary to abandon rigid dogma and “seek truth from facts.” But such a premise implied that the leadership’s legitimacy should be judged in terms of its pragmatic accomplishments. Anything less than rapid success for the controversial step away from collective production would provide opponents of the Deng faction with a strong case for bringing down Zhao Ziyang and Wan Li; that, in turn, would imperil the recent ascendancy of Deng Xiaoping. Very clearly, his faction had a major stake in the success of the da bao gan experiment. Party bureaucrats at county and lower levels who appeared opposed to letting poor villages turn toward the program were now attacked in the press for ultra-leftist thinking. Having learned from experience always to tack with the political winds, the rural officials soon were endeavoring to show that the leftist tag most certainly did not apply to themselves. They began to shift increasing numbers of villages into da bao gan, and reports both of peasant enthusiasm for the new measures and of rapidly rising harvest yields began percolating up from the provinces and into the national news media. The way had been cleared for Zhao Ziyang to be anointed China’s premier in 1980, and for Wan Li to become the deputy premier in charge of agriculture.

To be sure, the Deng faction had not called for a division of the land among households in all parts of China, nor would such calls be made publicly in the several years to come. The press continued throughout to stress that such divisions in team property would be of benefit largely to the poorest and most poorly-organized villages. In keeping with such proclamations, the early moves to da bao gan in 1979 do appear to have been confined largely to the poorer districts. But by 1980 that no

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15 As just one example, an agricultural technician whose job had taken him throughout Zhejiang province’s countryside told me: “In Zhejiang, da bao gan was implemented first in 1979 in the southern and western border prefectures. Those are the province’s poorer prefectures. Other places hadn’t yet. But by 1982, when I was last in China, Ningbo prefecture, Shaoxing, the Hangzhou district, and even Shanghai’s suburbs had largely divided up the fields.”

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longer was the case. The shift toward *da bao gan* had gradually taken on many of the bureaucratic features of the collectivization drive of 1956. In that earlier time, in reaction to pushes from Mao, provincial and county officials had competed to demonstrate their dedication and the progressive spirit of their districts by prodding rapidly-growing numbers of villages into socialism, supposedly voluntarily. Now, in the early 1980s, a similar yet contrary campaign was rippling across China. The officials this time were competing to show that they could outdo each other in re-introducing the peasant smallholding economy.

From 1980 onward, as this contest quietly gathered momentum, villages were being shifted into the *da bao gan* family smallholding system irrespective of whether they were poor or well-off. The survey data illustrate this clearly. Seven of the villages in my sample adopted *da bao gan* in 1980, another fourteen in 1981, and another four in 1982; and a computer analysis shows no significant differences among these three sets of villages. Nor, if we concentrate on just the eighteen villages in Guangdong province (so as to reduce the possibility of any statistical distortions caused by differing provincial policies) do we find any substantiating evidence for the claims of China’s news media that *da bao gan* was being tried out first among the poorer villages. The Guangdong villages in the sample which shifted to *da bao gan* in 1980 were no poorer on average than those that shifted in 1981, and the latter were no poorer than those in 1982; nor did the villages that shifted earlier tend to be situated in poorer counties or prefectures.

It is not clear whether the leadership in Beijing was altogether aware that the claims of the news media were false. After all, much as in the 1956 collectivization campaign, the various levels of the bureaucracy were apparently reporting upward precisely what the leadership was hinting it wanted to hear: in this case, that the villages in their jurisdiction were voluntarily choosing *da bao gan*. The lie would have been given to such an Emperor’s-Clothes arrangement had the peasantry in much of China resisted decollectivization. But quite to the contrary, the interview survey suggests that the great majority of the peasantry in most villages did in fact welcome the new developments (though we shall also see later that a minority of the peasant families were adamantly opposed). Most of the households were calculating that with *da bao gan* they would have the freedom to scramble for a living more efficiently. Before, the state had been regularly imposing irrational policies from above; now decollectivization into a myriad of family smallholdings promised to loosen the bureaucracy’s stranglehold on production. Before, brigade and team cadres had had the authority—and a daily need—to bring pressures to bear against ordinary peasants; now the system of near-independent family smallholdings would en-
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tirely eliminate the cadres’ daily supervision and, by pulling the land and
other resources out of their control, would severely curtail their powers
over the peasants. Under the collectives, the peasantry had been
required to devote most of their days to raising low-priced grain on the
collective fields; now many peasants foresaw that, by controlling the use
of their own time, they would be able to put their spare hours into
endeavors that paid better. One of the interviewees observes that when
da bao gan was initiated: “We felt like birds freed from a cage.” Within
party circles, the knowledge that the program was popular among the
peasants seems to have effectively obscured the issue of whether the
change was being implemented voluntarily or not.

Notwithstanding this popular support for the dissolution of collective
production, it is not at all certain whether, if the peasants had been given
a chance to select a new system on their own, most of the villages would
have adopted da bao gan as their first choice. To subsist as independent
agricultural households entailed palpable risks. In case of illness or a
failed crop, families no longer would be able to count on the team’s
pooled collective land and resources as a safety net against personal
disaster. The survey contains a clue that, had the decision been the
peasants’ to make, many communities might well have stopped short of
dividing the collective property to such an extent: of the only two villages
in my sample that were allowed to select a new system on their own, one
did opt for da bao gan, but the second of these villages decided to reject
da bao gan in favor of the more collectivist bao chan dao hu system.

In sum, the evidence suggests that a complex and unplanned
interplay between the top and bottom levels of the bureaucratic struc-
ture, involving ambiguous directives from the top and competitive
pressures among politically nervous lower-level officials, had culminated
in the countryside’s near-total abandonment of the collectives. There
had been no master plan, no deliberate effort from above to steer all of
rural China uniformly down a single path. Yet, due to the nature of
Chinese political organization, that is precisely what occurred.

This is not to say that the top leadership was at all displeased with the
outcome. The supposedly voluntary surge toward decollectivization
seemed to vindicate their view of what had gone wrong in the country-
side during the previous two-and-a-half decades; and the subsequent
very rapid gains in agricultural production have convinced even the
skeptics in China of the validity of that view. And yet, China’s history of
the past half-decade easily could have turned out differently. The
process was, after all, unplanned; whatever the leadership believed, in
very few villages was it voluntarily undertaken by the peasantry; and had
the choice been the peasants’ to make, not every village would have
completely decollectivized. By a peculiar concatenation of events, all of

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rural China has been launched into an entirely new agrarian order. And the enormity of the changes that have been wrought, described below, suggests that, irrespective of what a future political leadership might want or might not want, the shift may well be irreversible.

Dismantling Collective Property

In almost all cases it was the county officialdom, not higher or lower administrative levels, that took responsibility for pushing through the shift to da bao gan. The evidence on this is strong. Most interviewees report that all the villages in their own county were shifted to da bao gan at about the same time, whereas the villages of adjoining counties, even of counties that were in the same prefecture, normally adopted it at a different time. Within each county, moreover, almost every village used exactly the same criteria to determine how to divide up the land, whereas the villages of different counties employed slightly different mechanisms and standards.

To a striking degree, the county officialdom imposed inflexible procedures for decollectivization on the teams. It was partly that an imperious bureaucracy, in keeping with habit, still insisted upon dictating to China's peasantry what they must do. But in a more positive light, county officials probably also wanted to assure that the division of the collective's lands was accomplished fairly. If village-level cadres had controlled the process, they might have permitted some households, through special connections or corruption, to receive richer land than others. Among the twenty-four villages in the survey that were instructed from above to adopt da bao gan, in only two did the village cadres have a relatively free hand in the land distributions, and blatant favoritism did occur in one of these two villages. In a third village, in a generally over-crowded delta county where most of the peasants worked outside agriculture, the problem of potential favoritism was resolved by letting fields out to the highest bidders. As a precaution against local corruption, the other twenty-one villages were made to adhere to a set of complicated procedures that for most counties was broadly similar. First, each team graded all of its fields according to fertility—in most of the counties into two or three grades, but in one county into as many as nine grades. Next, for each grade of land a lottery was conducted to determine the specific plots each household was to receive. As a result, every family received several small scattered plots of different grades. The interviewees from all twenty-one villages agree that, to the best of their knowledge, both the lottery and the apportionment of land were accomplished in an entirely above-board and honest fashion.

Not just land was distributed, but also the essential tools of production, from shoulder poles to winnowing baskets, normally at no charge.
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In two-thirds of the surveyed teams, the draught animals were given or sold off to families or groups of families, through lotteries or auctions. Additionally, eleven out of the eighteen teams that owned tractors sold these into private hands, sometimes on installment plans so that the less well-endowed families could participate in the bidding. Thirteen of the fourteen villages with commercial fishponds auctioned off their use, usually in multi-year contracts to whichever families were willing to bid the highest annual rent. This pattern also applied to orchards. In some 60 percent of the surveyed villages, factories remained under brigade or team management, but in the other 40 percent of the villages the factories, too, were leased in multi-year contracts to rural entrepreneurs, who in some instances were not even village residents. As of 1982–83, these various shifts of property away from collective control, whether in regard to draught animals, tractors, ponds or factories, on average had advanced somewhat further in Guangdong than in the surveyed villages of other provinces, but the differences were of degree, not substance. Throughout rural China, the collective property holdings had in large measure been dismantled.

The Burden of Compulsory Grain Sales

From 1954 onward, China’s agricultural production teams had been obliged to sell an annual quota of crops at a fixed low price to the state. Such crop quotas compelled the countryside to provide the cities with stable supplies of cheap foodstuffs and industrial raw materials, enabling the government to industrialize at lower cost. With decollectivization, the government kept this quota system intact, with only one alteration. Up to the late 1970s, the size of each team’s compulsory delivery quotas had normally been readjusted upward every five years to take account of local increases in agricultural productivity. This regulation remained on the books, but concurrent with the drive to divide up the land, the authorities effectively froze the amount of the assessments. As of 1983, in none of the twenty-eight villages had these compulsory quotas been either raised or lowered since decollectivization.

When the land had been distributed to households, the teams had passed on to the individual families a fixed responsibility for the quota grain deliveries by attaching to each plot of grade-one land a quota determined by the plot’s recent record of productivity. For most families this was preferable to what had prevailed before, since any new gains in production would now be entirely theirs to keep. But giving every household full responsibility for a fixed quota also had a menacing potential. If a family could not grow enough to fulfill its portion of the

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quotas, it would be obliged either to buy expensive grain on the free market to resell to the state at a loss or, in some villages, would have to make up for the deficit grain in cash.

The fact that some families might face difficulties in meeting their delivery quota lent even greater importance to the question of how to apportion the fields equitably. It had to be decided whether the land should be distributed according to the size of households or according to the amount of labor they had available to work the fields, or by some combination of the two. In a heavily overcrowded village, fairness might best be served by granting the greater weight to household population, so that a family with two invalid grandparents and a number of small children would have an adequate share of land to support its own grain needs after meeting its compulsory grain sales quotas. On the other hand, in villages with relatively large amounts of land, where labor shortages were normal during the harvest busy season, it made sense to allot land more in accordance with labor power, in order to avoid saddling the families that had few hands and many mouths with more land than they could manage.

This reasoning was taken into account in the apportioning of land—but bureaucratic rigidity all too often subverted the intentions. From interview reports, it seems that the officials at county level normally estimated the situation of an entire county and concluded that, say, a preponderance of villages were overcrowded or, alternatively, that most of the villages experienced labor bottlenecks at peak seasons. On the basis of such a conjecture, a blanket decree was usually issued, covering every village in the county. The county officials were rigidly perpetuating the political campaign custom of “slicing with one stroke of the knife” (yi dao qie), imposing a single set of guidelines everywhere. As a result, decidedly inappropriate standards were imposed upon some 20 percent of the villages in the sample; and in these villages the households with too few hands or too many mouths to feed were placed in precarious circumstances.

The financial situation of such households was doubly threatened. Before, under the collectives, production team granaries had been required by state decree to lend such families sufficient grain for their consumption needs even when they did not have the money on hand to pay for it.17 But this grain guarantee had been a sore point with most of the other peasants; as one interviewee sourly told me: “We others in the team had had to raise those families’ kids for them.” He and the majority

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17 Such families went into long-term debt to their team. This accumulated debt gradually would be deducted from the family’s wages when the children grew old enough to begin earning incomes in the team. But such repayments were set so far in the future that other team members tended to consider the grain more as a gift from team coffers than a loan.
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of his team had wanted to divide the fields partly because they thought they could be more productive on their own but partly, too, because they saw decollectivization as a way to get out from under “raising those other families’ kids” at a cost to their own incomes.\(^{18}\)

The families with a large number of dependents were not the only ones initially worried about *da bao gan*; so also were the elderly without close relatives\(^{19}\) and the families headed by women or by weak or chronically ill men. According to a sympathetic interviewee, whereas “before, if they weren’t physically able-bodied they were given lighter work and still got their workpoints, now they’d have to take care of the entire agricultural process, including all the really heavy work.” However, the majority of the able-bodied peasantry were little concerned with the new difficulties that would be faced by their unfortunate neighbors. Each family, said the interviewee, simply looked to its own interests. How decollectivization promised to favor these divergent interests can be seen from the following figures: overall, in the surveyed villages something like three-quarters of the households were in favor of decollectivization and something like a quarter were opposed.

For the first year or two after decollectivization, many of these latter households did suffer noticeably. (In one of the villages in the sample, commune-level officials went so far as to impound the furnishings and household goods of families which were unable to fulfill their quota deliveries.) However, the crisis proved relatively short-lived. In half of the villages in the sample, grain yields soon shot up sufficiently, through a much more efficient application of labor and fertilizer than under the cumbersome prior management of the collective, to allow even households which were short of labor to meet all their grain needs easily. For most of the families in such villages, cash incomes from grain rose dramatically, since the government guaranteed to buy almost all of the over-quota grain at a price 50 percent higher than for quota grain. In the other half of the surveyed villages, as of late 1982/early 1983 (when most of my interviewees had last been home), the families with few hands and too many mouths were still suffering from the effects of

\(^{18}\) This interviewee notes that, as a means of clearing off the longstanding grain debts, when the fields and agricultural implements were distributed, the households with debts did not receive a full share. Another interviewee remarks that now, under the new system of agriculture, “there’s little relief grain available from the brigade or team; if someone suddenly falls sick in your family it’s your own tough luck.”

\(^{19}\) Welfare cases such as the childless elderly had good reason to be worried. They used to receive not just free grain but also, under the “five guarantees” system, free home repairs and a monthly pittance in cash from their production team. Once *da bao gan* was instituted, in some teams not only were their grain guarantees cut back or withdrawn, but so too were these other welfare provisions. One of the precipitating factors was a shrinkage of team financial resources. The survey evidence suggests that the welfare system was more severely curtailed in villages where the teams’ earnings today from the rental of ponds, orchards or factories amount to relatively little.
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decollectivization. But grain yields continued to climb throughout China in 1983–84, which apparently extricated a large number of these remaining families from their economic difficulties. In the summer of 1984, a series of interviews very similar to those analyzed here was conducted by Professor Jean Oi of Lehigh University, who discovered that far fewer of the households were any longer in dire trouble. Instead, her interviewees reported a contrary predicament. In many districts the bulk of the peasantry was now burdened by too much grain. Local government marketing agencies, short of storage and shipping facilities, were refusing to buy up all the surplus grain that the state technically was obliged to purchase.20

FRUITS OF DIVERSIFICATION

The increases in grain production were not the only or even the most important reason for the rising tide of rural prosperity. According to my interviews, incomes had begun rising appreciably even in those villages that showed no climb in grain productivity. A major reason was crop diversification. Until the late 1970s, in addition to the grain quotas strict designations had been imposed on land use, so that specific fields had to be put under grain or under other designated quota crops. These dogmatic specifications had all but strangled any possibilities for crop diversification. But practically simultaneous with the shift to da bao gan, teams were now relieved of these acreage requirements. So long as the households managed to hand in their grain quota, they were free to turn to whatever crop best suited the soil. “Before,” an interviewee reported, “we were forced to grow rice even on swampy land, with miserable results; today we raise water chestnuts there.”

The households with surplus labor power could now quickly plant and harvest sufficient grain on part of their fields and then use the remaining land for growing labor-intensive, high-priced commercial crops. Many of these families also found the time to grow animal feed on the hillsides and began raising large numbers of hogs and poultry for the market, or rented the village ponds and raised carp for urban consumption.

Diversification was not limited to agriculture. Some families with labor to spare became heavily involved in cottage industry, even during the growing seasons. Some men quit the village for much of the year to work at urban construction sites, where wages are very high by Chinese standards, leaving the off-season agricultural chores in the hands of their wives and teenage children. Through these diverse means, many of the entrepreneurial families that have had spare labor have tripled or

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20 I am obliged to Professor Oi for permitting me to cite this small part of her findings.

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quadrupled their incomes. They are competing to build larger homes and are buying TV sets and cassette recorders.

Chinese statistics for China as a whole show a rise of 67 percent in real per-capita peasant incomes between 1978 and the end of 1982. The author’s small survey for late 1982/early 1983 found a very similar overall gain in real incomes. My survey findings suggest, moreover, that the main gains came from the release of hitherto under-utilized labor that dogmatically had been tied to grain cultivation.

Leaving the Village

Thanks to the post-Mao reforms, in some (but only some) villages, work outside of the community now constitutes a very important source of income for a substantial part of the peasantry. During the previous several decades of socialism, while the rural economy had expanded very sizeably, essential services in rural commerce, transport, repair work and residential construction had not kept pace. A vacuum was created, and in the present climate of economic liberalization a surge of peasants has been rushing to fill it. In fact, as of 1982–83 a majority of the men from twenty-one of the surveyed villages had found ways to earn money outside their own community.

Peasants from some villages have done especially well at such enterprises. A large number of men from one village, for example, have turned successfully to ironmongering during slack seasons, drawing upon village traditions; most of the households of a second village drum up orders in Canton for hand-crafted quilts, a very profitable traditional village specialty; a considerable number of peasants from a third village manufacture and peddle beancurd delicacies in the urban areas, much as they had done in pre-revolution days. Several other villages have parlayed urban contacts into lucrative jobs in the building trades. In one case, a village official had, over the past couple of decades, developed special connections with the cadres of a large urban factory, which led to a growing number of semi-permanent jobs for men from the

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21 This figure was adjusted to account for inflation (Beijing Review, no. 20, 16 May 1983, p. 7). In 1983, according to Chinese government statistics, peasant incomes rose another 14.7 percent in real terms (Renmin Ribao, 2 May 1984, p. 1), and climbed yet again by exactly the same percentage in 1984 (Beijing Review, no. 16, 22 April 1985, p. iv).

22 Fei Xiaotong in 1957 wrote an essay (republished in Fei Xiaotong, Chinese Village Close-up (Beijing: New World Press, 1982) in which he argued that a great many peasants depended upon income earned outside the fields to supplement what could be obtained from grain. He implied that the new collectives, in cutting off such avenues, were inflicting needless hardships on the peasantry. For putting forth this observation, Fei was criticized in both the 1957 Anti-Rightist campaign and the Cultural Revolution. Now, long after the fact, he has been proven right: the reports of interviewees for late 1982/early 1983 reveal that the substantial recent gains in the incomes of most peasant families have been due largely to the same types of endeavors—crop diversification, cottage industry, rural transport, animal husbandry—that Fei Xiaotong had sought to protect.
village repairing factory buildings. In a second case, an entrepreneurial peasant has managed to hustle a subcontract in construction work, set himself up as a labor boss, and began hiring fellow villagers as his crew.

Unfortunately, the evidence from the sample suggests that the communities where peasants generally lack the necessary skills and ties and have been stuck at home in the village year-long are located disproportionately in the poorer districts. These tend to be among the same villages that are too remote from urban markets to diversify their cropping patterns.23

Gradually, however, peasants even from this type of village are developing new sources of income. Much as in pre-Liberation times, they are beginning to be hired as laborers in the villages of the more prosperous districts. Sometimes they have found employment with families which are short of labour and cannot afford to hire the farm help they need from within their own village; or they tend the fields full-time for households that have begun earning enough from non-agricultural endeavors to enable them to quit field labor altogether.

Hired laborers from the poor districts have also begun drifting into the richer villages through other means. In one village not far from Canton, for example, most peasants found they could harvest enough rice for the entire year in their first crop, but lacked the know-how to cultivate vegetables commercially as a second crop. They have contracted out their land to vegetable “specialists” (shifu) from north Guangdong’s impoverished Chaozhou (Swatow) district, who have brought in their own hired helpers with them. In a village in central Guangdong, a production-team head successfully bid for a small timber forest and imported rural laborers from a poor part of Hunan province as lumberjacks. In yet another Guangdong village, a brigade tile factory was leased out to an entrepreneur from the Chaozhou area, who brought with him a workforce of peasants from his own district. Overall, outside laborers were being hired in almost half of the villages surveyed, sometimes from quite a distance.

In some of these cases, ongoing links have quickly been erected between particular richer and particular poorer districts: Hakkas from Mei Xian, Guangdong, finding year-round work in a Hakka village in Jiangxi; eight peasants from a village in Guangdong’s overcrowded Chaozhou region contracting to rent for five years the unwanted marginal fields of a production team two hundred miles to the south and moving there with their families for the duration; peasants from a village in Sichuan province finding employment as farmhands in a

23 As was to be expected, in the survey almost three-quarters of the villages within close range of market outlets witnessed extensive crop diversification after decollectivization, compared to only a sixth of the villages not near major markets.
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prosperous village on the Guangdong seacoast, and, within a year of their arrival, forging more complex linkages between the two far-away communities by arranging the marriages of five women from their own village into households of the host village.

At first sight, the re-emergence of hired labor in the Chinese countryside seems perturbing. It might appear that economically and socially exploitative conditions reminiscent of pre-revolution times are in the process of being reproduced in China. But in reality the picture is more complex than that. For one thing, at least for the time being the laborers from the poor districts are, from their own perspective, doing well. The wages they earn are reasonably good by Chinese standards: in the villages in the sample they amount to some two to five yuan per day (the higher figure has been reported for the peak harvest seasons). Over time, as the channels between poor and richer districts improve and the numbers of migrant laborers increase, these wages are likely to decline. But even then, the situation might well be preferable to that of the past quarter-century: for when the hiring of labor was eliminated in the mid-1950s, the peasants from the poorest districts were forced back upon their own villages. Deprived of any means to escape from their community, they were consigned for two-and-a-half decades to a hopelessly meager livelihood. No socialist policies were devised to bring underemployed labor to where it was temporarily needed; instead, to the economic detriment of all sides, each village was left to fend for itself. This self-reliance most hurt the destitute areas, which generally lacked the climatic and soil conditions conducive to developing grain production. Over those two decades, consequently, per capita income differentials substantially widened between the better-off and poorer districts.\(^{24}\)

The restoration of geographic mobility for labor will help keep that income gap from further widening, which for now is what counts most for destitute families. Whatever the inequities inherent in the creation of a semi-permanent immigrant underclass of hired laborers, there does exist this compensating factor. The question is whether, over the long term, that factor will remain of sufficient weight to satisfy the rapidly growing numbers of imported laborers.\(^{25}\)


\(^{25}\) As of 1982, Chen Village, Guangdong, was already giving steady employment to a hundred such outsiders, comprising more than a quarter of the village’s labor force (Chan, Madsen and Unger, Chen Village, ch. 10). Under present Chinese law, such immigrants are denied any rights to permanent residence or to any direct share in the land.
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The Retreat from Cooperation

Peasants have preferred to hire the labor they need, whether from afar or from within their own village—even in circumstances where, alternatively, they could have become involved in cooperative labor efforts. A dozen interviewees cited isolated cases of relatives or friends who help each other temporarily during the agricultural rush seasons, but as of late 1982/early 1983 cooperation did not normally extend beyond that. Even though, as noted earlier, a fair number of the peasants would initially have preferred a system of agriculture that provided some pooling of resources against the risk of personal disasters, once da bao gan was instituted the peasantry showed a marked disinclination to organize any pooling of land on their own. In only four of the surveyed communities had any families banded together to work their fields together year-round, and the reports from two of these villages highlight the unusual nature of such a relationship. In one, the only families that chose to join their fields together as a cooperative venture were three brothers of Hakka descent; they were the only households of Hakka origin in the village and “there had always been a bit of discrimination against them.” 26 In the second and somewhat similar case, five cousins of bad-class political status not only pooled their land, but even determined each household’s earnings through a work-point system similar to what they had used under the collectives. The irony is that for three decades the government had repeatedly eulogized the majority population of good-class peasantry as altruistically stalwart supporters of socialism; yet two of the only four instances of full-time cooperation among a sample of twenty-eight villages involve groups of relatives who had been targets of discrimination under the collectives. As a defense they, and not the favored majority, had developed a strong sense of mutual help conducive to cooperative production. On the contrary, other peasants have declined to adapt their two decades of experience with socialism to fit present conditions, even where a pooling of resources might have proved profitable to them.

This reluctance to cooperate presents a problem for the future development of agriculture. Notwithstanding the impressive gains in agricultural production achieved since decollectivization, a number of predictable inefficiencies did result from the division of land and the dispersal of resources. The slivers of field that families received were often too small to be machine-plowed, and most tractors are being used instead by their new owners to haul heavy supplies on the roads. With cows and other draught animals sold into private hands, families without an animal have not always found it either affordable or easy to rent one

26 See Unger, “De-Collectivization in a Guangdong Village.”

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exactly when they needed it. Irrigation, too, became more difficult to coordinate once the large collective fields were carved up into smallholdings, especially when the cultivators of the various small plots were bent on growing different crops with different growing seasons. In three of the surveyed teams, it became necessary to re-dig irrigation channels or to re-divide the land; in two other teams, there was a need to create a new post to pay a person, out of collective funds, to determine and supervise a fair flow of water. Yet even such measures have not always effectively offset the new difficulties arising from land fragmentation.

Chinese newspapers have reported extensively on the spontaneous emergence of what the press grandiosely labels “new economic associations.” Households are supposedly banding together in these to apply insecticides or to buy and operate farm machinery, etc. But as of late 1982/early 1983 such ventures had been inaugurated in only four of the villages surveyed. In other villages the only evident co-ownership schemes involved the sharing of draught animals among groups of two or three households; and usually it had been officials who had organized this at the time of decollectivization. At least in the first couple of years of independent farming, there were no signs that economic pressures or economic opportunities were pushing families toward any greater co-ordination of resources.

Prognosis

A three-year period of transition, 1980–82, has been examined here, during which rural China swung wholesale from collective agriculture to near-independent smallholdings. In that relatively short time, an agrarian structure of a quarter-century’s duration was dissolved and an entirely different structure was firmly established in its place. Given the enormity of the change, it was only to be expected that problems would be encountered, that bureaucratic stupidities would be perpetrated and that inequities would occur. It becomes important here to distinguish between difficulties that were temporary carry-overs from the administrative system of the collective era, difficulties that occurred only during the period of economic transition, and difficulties that may be permanent fixtures of the new system.

The bureaucracy’s mindless requirement that all villages in a county should apportion land in precisely the same fashion clearly bore the imprint of the old agrarian administrative system. It was of a piece with the rigid bureaucratic “commandism” of the 1970s. As had become the custom during politically volatile times, county officials were angling only to keep safely on the good side of political superiors, oblivious to the circumstances and needs of the villages below them. But it was the
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final act of a passing era, because the command to dissolve the collective system has trimmed the rural bureaucracy’s powers. With the change-over to independent smallholdings and the strengthening of market-economy forces, the rural officials—from county headquarters down to village party committees—oversee far less, administratively, than they had previously, and thus have far fewer means at their disposal to impose their will. As one of the interviewees observed: “If those so-called cadres tell the peasants to do something today, the peasants don’t always carry it out. We peasants are practical: if we don’t depend on earning collective workpoints that you control, why listen so much to you?” In short, one of the beneficial consequences of decollectivization is that the arbitrary power of rural officials to exact cowed compliance from the peasantry has been weakened.

However, the rural officials still do hold some leverage over the peasants. Cadres continue to control the allocation of dozens of sorts of permits; they continue to control access to some of the village-held resources and property; they continue to serve as the local arm of the legal system. Through a myriad of discretionary acts, a cadre can favor some families and obstruct others. New types of patronage networks are emerging on this basis. Through respectful cordiality and persistent small gifts, entrepreneurial families are strategically currying the favor of the various minor officials who might be helpful to the operation and expansion of family enterprises. Under the collectives similar patron-client relationships between cadres and peasants had existed, but the range of patrons had been much more constricted. A very small group of brigade and team cadres had controlled all the village’s economic and political affairs; all patronage had, by necessity, flowed through them. Now a more pluralist structure of patronage is developing. For different sorts of favors, peasants can go to different patrons. For example, peasants who hope regularly to get preferential access to building materials or to special fertilizers have developed guanxi (connections) on their own account with different particular marketing bureau personnel. Such procurements need no longer be funneled through a single set of village cadres. This recent growth of diffuse patron-client networks provides the peasants with appreciably greater freedom to maneuver. Their autonomous building of patronage links is eroding the former rigid structuring of rural power.

However, it is clear that, while decollectivization alleviated some problems, other difficulties were created or exacerbated. Some of these problems, rather than being temporary, seem intrinsic to the new agrarian order and could worsen over time. In particular, the extensive fragmentation of land looks likely to crimp future gains in agricultural productivity. Though decollectivization into smallholdings has re-
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dressed some of the problems relating to labor incentives and inefficient crop management, future agricultural development will increasingly depend upon technological improvements—better strains of seeds, more mechanized irrigation systems, and so forth. Any new technological inputs will be expensive, and it is unclear whether small-scale cultivators can raise the necessary capital better than the unified production teams were able to. It is unclear, too, whether agricultural extension services, the local testing of new seed types, the expansion and refinement of irrigation systems, or new equipment utilization can be more efficiently implemented under a system of smallholdings.

While touting the so-called “new economic associations” of peasants, government declarations over the past couple of years have been edging progressively toward yet a different answer to the various problems caused by the fragmentation of property. On the ground that China’s vast rural population cannot continue to improve living standards on the tiny slivers of farm plots, Chinese planners are now openly advocating that the croplands eventually should be concentrated in the hands of 30 to 40 percent of the peasant households.\textsuperscript{27} Such a plan presupposes that sufficient employment for the other 60 to 70 percent of the peasantry will be generated both through a dramatic increase in rural industrialization and through an expansion in specialized pursuits, as some families focus exclusively on developing new orchards on the hillsides, or on raising chickens or pigs en masse, or on providing agricultural services. Chinese planners envision, for example, that some households, rather than raising their own crops, will own and handle specialized agricultural machinery for the farmsteads.

A large dose of wishful thinking was undoubtedly incorporated into this conception of the future. Given the technological backwardness of most of rural China, one cannot very well suppose that a division of labor on such a very wide scale will occur within the next decade or so. It is more likely that future concentrations of landholdings will result from the inability of some families to compete effectively in agriculture, driven off the land by debt. Yet the present system contains few provisions that even address the possibility of an accelerating economic polarization in the countryside. Current policy permits the unchecked private accumulation of investment capital by successful rural entrepreneurs, and it provides few welfare measures (fewer than under the collectives) to cushion the fall of the families and individuals who are ill-equipped to compete.

China’s leaders may well have to begin addressing such problems in the near future. But for the present, they can derive satisfaction from

\textsuperscript{27} \textit{Renmin Ribao}, 12 June 1983; \textit{Beijing Review}, no. 18, 30 April 1984, p. 20.
the fact that most peasant households have done well in the aftermath of decollectivization—whether through a more efficient use of hand-labor in cultivating grain, or through specialization in higher-priced crops, or through diversification into non-agricultural pursuits. Most of the interviewees report that with living standards rising, a clear majority of the peasants are quite satisfied with current policies. At least in the short term, the decollectivization of rural China has been a success, not just economically but also politically.

*Center for Chinese Studies, Berkeley, U.S.A., April 1985*