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## "LEARN FROM TACHAI": CHINA'S AGRICULTURAL MODEL

by

*Jonathan Unger*

The hamlet of Tachai is tucked into one of the numerous loess-encliffed ravines that scar the foothills of northern Shansi's Taihang Mountains. But travelers seeking Tachai no longer have to ask the way. A special bus route now accommodates the millions who come on pilgrimage. For Tachai is no ordinary village. It has become the agricultural Mecca for Mao's China.

Mao Tse-tung's instruction "In agriculture learn from Tachai" this past year has given rise to the largest "learn from Tachai" campaign to date. Though the campaign, like most rural campaigns, is now in seasonal lull, it can be expected to regain momentum once the autumn harvests are in.

Throughout the winter months, peasants in countless village meetings pondered ways to better acquire the "Tachai spirit," while provincial leaders convened conferences and study groups to analyze Tachai's remuneration methods and work style. Even the People's Liberation Army (PLA), a venerated national model in its own right, has been called upon to "learn from Tachai." The Chinese people have been studying a "rags-to-riches" story that dramatizes Maoist concepts of success and pinpoints not only the ideal toward which China's peasants are to strive but also the means to get there. Hence, in studying from Tachai one is able to examine a large slice of Mao's economic strategy and the manner in which it is implemented.

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## The Tachai Story

Following the collapse of the Great Leap Forward in the late 1950's, begins the official account of Tachai's rise to national prominence, "arch-renegade" Liu Shao-ch'i adopted a "capitalist-road" agrarian policy to rebuild China's battered economy. Liu is said to have fixed agricultural quotas on the household rather than the collective, allotted more plots for private use, promoted more free markets, and judged more businesses by their profitability.

While other Chinese villages reputedly hewed to the new official line, the Tachai production brigade stubbornly resisted, continuing to labor collectively in "Great Leap" style. Tachai embarked upon new labor-intensive capital projects, terracing the surrounding mountainsides by hand and carving from them an intricate irrigation system of channels and small reservoirs. From 1960 to 1962, while crop failures and malnutrition plagued most of China, the peasants of Tachai according to official accounts annually sold to the State double their assigned grain quota.<sup>1</sup>

In August 1963, continues the "Tachai" story, a week of flash floods demolished almost all the houses in the hamlet and washed away check-dams and scores of the laboriously-contrived hillside fields. The government sent funds and relief materials, which Tachai, thinking foremost of national needs, declined. The peasantry, armed with Mao Thought, raised up the flattened crops plant by plant, bringing in a good harvest.

Continuing to depend upon self-reliance, hard work, ingenuity and collective labor, Tachai's peasants reportedly have been able to wrest enormous increases from the soil. Production, it is said, has increased tenfold since the hamlet's "liberation" in the 1940's, with agricultural output continuing to climb at ever faster rates. The 1970 grain yield reportedly was a phenomenal 3,200 kilos per acre — 14 percent over that of the previous year.

That, at least, is the simple Tachai history known to the Chinese people. The rise of Tachai to the stature of a national model was closely tied to the sharp disagreements of the early 1960's among Chinese leaders over economic policies. Since both the Maoists and those who opposed them considered it vital to secure sufficient political leverage to pursue the programs they believed most practical for China, political confrontations played an increasingly prominent role in Party affairs at all levels. Tachai's role as a national agrarian model stems, in turn, from the tactical maneuvering that culminated in the Cultural Revolution.

### Production Claims Disputed

In the early 1960's, when China stepped back from the programs of the disastrous Great Leap Forward, the refusal of the Tachai production brigade to do likewise — and the successful alternative held forth by the Tachai production team — apparently provided sustenance to those in northern Shansi province who opposed the Party's retrenchment from socialist goals. The new Party Secretary of Hsiyang County, which includes Tachai, therefore set



Special buses bringing visitors to Tachai

out in 1961 to question Tachai's claims. The cadre work team he organized charged that the Tachai villagers were, among other things, failing to report the full amount of land under cultivation in order to claim high yields per mu. Though forced under protest to readjust its yield figures downward, Tachai nevertheless persisted in its radical production practices.<sup>2</sup>

Mao Tse-tung apparently had acceded to the initial cutbacks taken to salvage the Chinese economy, but soon afterwards began to signal his opposition to the "materialistic" policies China had slipped into. His partisans in Shansi grasped Tachai as a weapon to discredit the prevailing Party line, so that when the devastating floods swept the area

in 1963 cameramen were on hand to record in detail a Maoist collective's triumph of "self-reliance" over adversity. The floods raised Tachai to national stature as a Maoist agrarian model, though radical elements in Peking subsequently were to complain that the Party apparatus had hindered publication of the Tachai story.

In the fall of 1964, with the "Four Cleans" phase of the Socialist Education Campaign (1962-66) bogging down in the countryside, Peking instructed Party organizations to struggle against errant basic-level cadres. But Party conservatives apparently moved instead to quash grassroots Maoist elements, as in Shansi, where the Provincial Party Committee dispatched a cadre work

team to Tachai under the slogan "the places where work is more advanced should be looked at more skeptically."<sup>3</sup> The work team renewed the charge that Tachai worked more land than reported and accused the brigade of cheating on its records of grain output by weighing incompletely dried crops. Accordingly, Tachai was reclassified a "third-class brigade with serious problems."<sup>4</sup>

The Secretary of Tachai's Communist Party branch, Ch'en Yung-kuei (陳永貴), was selected to represent the hamlet at the Third National People's Congress as a model peasant cadre. In December 1964 he left for the Peking meeting amidst charges raised against him by the cadre work team. On arrival in Peking, according to Ch'en's own account, he requested and received a personal interview with Mao Tse-tung. The Chinese leader presumably agreed to support Tachai against the Party's attacks, perhaps in the belief that the thrust against Tachai was in fact a direct challenge both to his policy proposals and his position within the Party.

Ch'en was selected to serve on the Congress Presidium, and Premier Chou En-lai delivered a report to the Congress that singled out Tachai for praise. As a final touch, Ch'en himself addressed the Congress on his village's accomplishments. He returned triumphantly to Tachai in the company of a special delegation dispatched by the Central Committee to send the provincial Party work team scurrying.

In the last week of December, while the NPC was still in progress, Mao issued his famous directive to "learn from Tachai," presumably in an at-

tempt to keep Tachai above serious criticism. Three weeks later he moved decisively onto the offensive against the Party apparatus, pushing through the Politburo his "Twenty-three Points," which countermanded the Party campaign against grassroots cadres that had climaxed with the Tachai episode. Instead, the Party was to rectify "those persons in positions of authority within the Party who take the capitalist road." China was nearing the Cultural Revolution.

Despite these moves, Party authorities in Hsiyang County attempted again in 1965 and 1966 to sabotage the model village.<sup>5</sup> Not until Ch'en Yung-kuei helped mount a local coup against the county's Party machinery during the nationwide leftist "January Revolution" of 1967 was Tachai safe at last from political sniping.

There is evidence that Hsiyang County officials had good cause for persisting in their anti-Tachai campaign, inasmuch as their charges were apparently well founded. Whatever the reasons, after the 1964 showdown over Tachai the news media began unobtrusively to readjust the Tachai statistics. In February 1964, Tachai was reporting that the brigade's 1953 grain production had been a poor 760 pounds per acre, which made its later increases seem all the more impressive. However, by 1967 the 1953 yield figure had been revised upward to 1,300 pounds. And Tachai's 1961 acreage, which originally had been under-reported at 120 acres, seemingly in order to bolster the brigade's figures of per-acre output, in 1965 was retrospectively reset at 140 acres.<sup>6</sup>

### The Tachai Model

Tachai's apparent dishonesty does not, however, invalidate the many lessons that can be drawn from the Tachai model. Nor does it negate the brigade's actual production achievements. Through the prisms of the news media and guided tours, Tachai's prosperity brings home to villages throughout China — almost all better situated than Tachai's barren ravine — that they will also prosper if, like Tachai, they practice self-reliance, collective labor and Maoist precepts.



Ch'en Yung-kuei, Secretary of Tachai's Communist Party branch and member of the CCP Central Committee.

In Tachai "politics takes command," with Mao Study at the forefront. Peasants bowed down by poverty, ignorance, superstition and parochialism are assured by Mao's word that they themselves can overcome whatever obstacles may arise.

In a Miao minority group hamlet in Kweichow province, as the Party journal, *Red Flag* relates:

"Peasants said, 'Tachai can change its natural aspects. We also can change our poor natural conditions.' Thus we destroyed the erroneous idea of putting ourselves at the mercy of Heaven or relying on State relief, and established instead the revolutionary will to struggle and win."<sup>7</sup>

The theme is that the revolutionary energies pent up within historically downtrodden classes, once released from the bonds of "feudalistic thinking," will provide a creative force that can work spectacular economic advances.

A second *Red Flag* article notes:

"In learning from Tachai, we must tightly grasp this principle of Chairman Mao's: 'The serious problem is the education of the peasantry.'"<sup>8</sup>

Through "correct ideas" and an awakening of their "revolutionary" wills, the masses are to be persuaded to forego individual desires in favor of collective goals. China's leaders are attempting in a poor country to enlist mass labor spontaneously through inculcation of revolutionary fervor.

Through the long years of warfare prior to their assumption to power, China's leaders have come to believe that revolutionary fervor is in part maintained by exposing and re-exposing

alleged threats to the revolution. Accordingly, at Tachai peasants carry out repeated "class struggle" against the deposed Liu Shao-ch'i and former landlords. But precedence is given to struggle campaigns within the brigade against the "improper" ideologies of its members.

In 1970, some Tachai residents were criticized for "setting unity above persisting in principles. For the sake of unity they actually covered up contradictions, avoided struggle and abandoned principles."<sup>9</sup> If struggle was not followed through, they were told, disagreements within the brigade would rankle instead of being played out. But by rigorously upholding a "correct line" the brigade's solidarity, its revolutionary impetus, and hence its economic performance, would in the long run be strengthened. "Politics takes command" becomes an economic prescription. "Political work," says Mao Tse-tung, "is the lifeblood of all economic work."

Tachai peasants are quoted in the Chinese press as saying: "Once armed with Mao Tse-tung's Thought, we are full of energy and are able to find out many ways to solve problems. Everyone of us consciously sets his brains to work."<sup>10</sup> Hence, after intense Mao Study and careful inspection using "scientific methods," Tachai's cadres are said to have discovered their crops were too densely planted and that if the plants were thinned, output would rise. But in the spring of 1968, peasant tradition again prevailed, and close planting was reintroduced. Tachai's record of yearly increases in productivity was saved only with the help of a freak hailstorm that weeded out ex-

cessive stalks.<sup>11</sup> A lesson from Tachai to trust brains and "scientific" experiments more than tradition.

In the wake of the hailstorm, Tachai's peasants reportedly took the giant step of altering completely the agricultural cycle the village had always followed. After renewed Mao Study and numerous "step-by-step experiments," Tachai switched to two crops yearly (wheat in the spring, millet in the fall), averting onslaughts of hail by properly timing the periods for sowing.<sup>12</sup> When the result was an upward leap in production, peasants throughout China were urged to heed still another Tachai example.

### Policy Problems

In April 1970 it came to light that a serious dispute had broken out in Tachai over the use of cropland. Some brigade members wanted to concentrate on corn cultivation in order to produce the most impressive grain tonnage and the highest income. But the Party branch resisted this stratagem, citing Mao's advocacy of a "diversified economy" in the Chinese countryside plus the "error of putting profits in command."<sup>13</sup>

With the nation's eyes on the hamlet, some peasants also reportedly wanted to spur Tachai's output by increasing the inputs of nitrogenous chemical fertilizers. But with Tachai also the symbol of "self-reliance," the brigade leadership advocated instead increasing natural fertilizers by developing animal husbandry and, after new "scientific experiments," by interplant-

ing peas with maize to replenish the soil's nitrogen.

Tachai thus could report to the nation that the quantity of industrial chemical fertilizer annually used has been maintained at the 1961 level — a further lesson to be discussed by the Chinese peasantry. With China's industrial resources already stretched thin, localities are told they themselves must provide the inputs necessary for agricultural increases: through peasant ingenuity, indigenous methods, hard work and diversification of the local economy. In the name of self-reliance, Tachai's 440 inhabitants (a work force of 155) reportedly have developed an iron works, kiln, carpentry shop and electrically operated mill, while planting mountain slopes with extensive fruit orchards.

Back-breaking labor at Tachai, it is said, has been substantially reduced, with walking tractors plowing the fields, while an electrically operated cable system is used to haul construction materials and fertilizers up the hill. Chinese readers have been informed, moreover, that the pay at Tachai is the highest in Hsiyang County and that every Tachai family maintains bank savings and a store of surplus grain.<sup>14</sup>

### Remuneration Systems

What Mao Tse-tung and his followers oppose are not material rewards *per se* but rather the wage systems commonly used to distribute rewards. They claim these systems not only run counter to egalitarian principles but also give rise to self-serving materialistic attitudes incompatible with political mobilization.

The Maoists, searching for a method that maintains ideological enthusiasm and equitable wage distribution, while assuring efficient allocation of rural manpower, think they may have found their answer in Tachai. The brigade's only truly original accomplishment, its remuneration system, hence is the area in which Tachai attracts closest national attention.<sup>15</sup>

Until 1960, Tachai, like other Chinese villages, followed a complex and cumbersome method of contracting work under quota and of recording individual work points for piece labor. The system took in more than a hundred different work norms. Ch'en Yung-kuei subsequently admitted he and the other semi-literate peasant cadres "could never do well with that unrealistic quota system,"<sup>16</sup> while Chia Ch'eng-jang, the Chairman of the Tachai brigade, has argued that "quota management relies on a system to control the people and obliges a few cadres to manage the majority of the masses."<sup>17</sup>

In 1960 Tachai's peasants decided to devise a new remuneration system. Mao Study, it was said, revealed to them that the existing quota system encouraged selfishness and promoted wage inequities. The work point system, they contended, also created dissension between cadres and peasants and prompted cadres to "divorce themselves from productive labor."

Tachai experimented with at least six remuneration schemes before settling upon the present one. The villagers, for example, naively attempted at first to do farm work in rotation, which resulted in gross misallocation of labor,

with the physically weakest members occupied at times with the most arduous tasks. Tachai eventually hit upon a "pace-setter system," wherein all members of the brigade computed their own remuneration by comparing their endeavors with those of the brigade's most highly-skilled and productive worker. Such self-assessments were presented and readjusted by consensus at village meetings which were initially held every ten days, then once a month, later quarterly, and finally just one evening yearly.

The Tachai brigade eventually did away with the "pace-setter system" on the grounds that it was divisive, in that two or three men in a hundred, the "pace-setters," invariably received the greatest recompense. In its place the brigade adopted a complicated "standard work" system, wherein a job's difficulty — one of the criteria for remuneration — was judged in relation to the season's principal task: during the season for land-clearing, carrying stones was the "standard," with points assigned other tasks on a sliding scale in terms of the exertion required.

The "standard work" system was in turn abandoned. Skill and muscle still earned credit. But with each brigade member rewarded principally for laboring to the best of his ability, strong workers reputedly needed little encouragement to take on the heaviest jobs, while the infirm could select easier chores without substantial loss of income. Tachai reports that individual abilities now are allocated properly, allegedly without cadre controls. "Tachai's experience of labor management," says Chia Ch'eng-jang, the Bri-

gade Chairman, "allows the working people to manage their own affairs.... Since 1960 Tachai has never made...any special effort to inspect or examine the quality of farmwork done."<sup>18</sup>

Ch'en Yung-kuei claims the present system promotes greater labor flexibility. He writes that previously, due to the complexity of farm work, some tasks which one did not think of when going to the field were not allocated and therefore left undone." Individual peasants could now accomplish such tasks, if need be working alone. The present Tachai system, Ch'en stresses, "has given real expression to the rational use of labor power."<sup>19</sup>

According to Tachai pronouncements the new remuneration system has strengthened the sense of mutual responsibility among the people. Among other things, the villagers reportedly agreed to distribute grain, green vegetables and fruits according to need. Aged brigade members receive nearly the work points they used to receive when younger, provided they take part in collective labor to the best of their ability.<sup>20</sup> Tachai's cadres, eschewing special privileges, now stipulate that their own portions of the year-end imbursements never exceed the brigade's median.<sup>21</sup>

Freed of most of their paper work, cadres now reportedly spend some 300 days per year in the fields, expanding the workforce and "reuniting with the masses." The Tachai cadre work style is purportedly of the Yen-an "comrades-in-arms" mode, and Tachai members last year traveled to the Revolution's cradle to dramatize this linkage.



Tachai is the Maoists' vision come true, and Chinese authorities have been inclined to promote the Tachai remuneration scheme nationwide. But the catch is that the Tachai experience is not that readily transferable. For one, the high degree of altruism, integrity, and responsibility necessary for the system's success is difficult to sustain. The Chinese leaders themselves reason that the "advanced class viewpoints" of the Tachai villagers were shaped by the decade of conscientious trial-and-error remuneration experiments. Peking now advises that other communities follow Tachai's "orientation" and "spirit" but not necessarily its specific program. The essence of the message is that each brigade, while bearing in mind Tachai's experience, must discover its own solution within the framework provided by Maoist ideology.

Peking recently has been backpedaling somewhat, with warnings against excessive idealism lest production suffer. An article in *People's Daily* criticized one brigade for "not observing the principle of distribution according to labor, thus impairing the masses' activism." The article also berated a second brigade for "abolishing certain systems of reasonable assessment of work and recording of work points."<sup>22</sup>

### Ownership Debate

The "Tachai model" also has been on the losing end of this year's most heated agrarian debate. In many rural communities, the poorer production teams have been seeking a transfer in the ownership of arable land from the work team — China's most basic rural

unit — to the production brigade, 5-10 times larger. The poorer teams expect thereby to obtain a slice of the capital generated by the wealthier teams, which under the present system the wealthier teams can largely control and re-invest on their own lands. Many poorer teams are also urging that accounting be shifted upward from the team to the brigade, inasmuch as their own work points would rise if pooled with those of the wealthier teams. Since the Tachai brigade (which is, in fact, the size of a lowlands production team) practices brigade accounting and has eliminated production teams, poor production teams throughout China have been wielding in debate the "learn from Tachai" slogan.<sup>23</sup>

Peking apparently sides firmly with the wealthier production teams. Mao Tse-tung, pragmatic and experienced politician that he is, has consistently maintained that Party policies must never move so fast that the Party cannot pull most of the peasantry with it. Perhaps fearing that upward changes in ownership would serve only to exacerbate rural antagonisms, alienating the more productive teams, Mao and his advisers last autumn inserted into the draft State Constitution a guarantee of continued production team ownership. But debate has continued to rage at the grassroots. From all evidence, the wealthier teams and their Party backers have only in the last half year been defeating the poorer teams and their resettled leftist student supporters, whom the national press has taken to calling "sham Marxists." Again the official line has been that it is the Tachai "spirit" and "orientation" that must be followed — not the pure Tachai method.

- in Command in Running Its Socialist Economy," NCNA, September 29, 1968, in SCMP No. 4272; Chia Ch'eng-jang, "Let Mao Tsetung Thought Command Labor Management," Union Research Service, Volume 49, No. 16, November 24, 1967; and Martin King Whyte, "The Tachai Brigade and Incentives for the Peasant," *Current Scene*, Volume VII, No. 16, August 15, 1969.
16. Union Research Service, Volume 49, No. 16, p. 214.
  17. *Ibid.*, page 219.
  18. *Ibid.*, page 219.
  19. Survey of China Mainland Magazines, No. 600.
  20. Chia Ch'eng-jang, "Firmly Grasp the Struggle Between the Two Lines, Reform Irrational Systems of Management," *People's Daily*, November 24, 1968; in SCMP 4316.
  21. "In Agriculture Learn From Tachai (3): A Strong Proletarian Revolutionary Militant Leadership," NCNA, September 28, 1968; in SCMP 4271.
  22. "Conscientiously Implement Policies, Concretely Learn Well From Tachai," *People's Daily*, March 21, 1971; in SCMP 4871.
  23. See *Current Background*, No. 932, pp. 45-48, for an illuminating article on this controversy among production teams.