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COMMUNES AND THE AGRICULTURAL CRISIS IN COMMUNIST CHINA

> *Apart from their other characteristics, China's 600 million people are, first of all, poor, and secondly, "blank." That may seem like a bad thing, but it is really a good thing. Poor people want change, want to do things, want revolution. A clean sheet of paper has no blotches and so the newest and most beautiful words can be written on it, the newest and most beautiful pictures can be painted on it.*
>
> —MAO TSE-TUNG (June 1958)

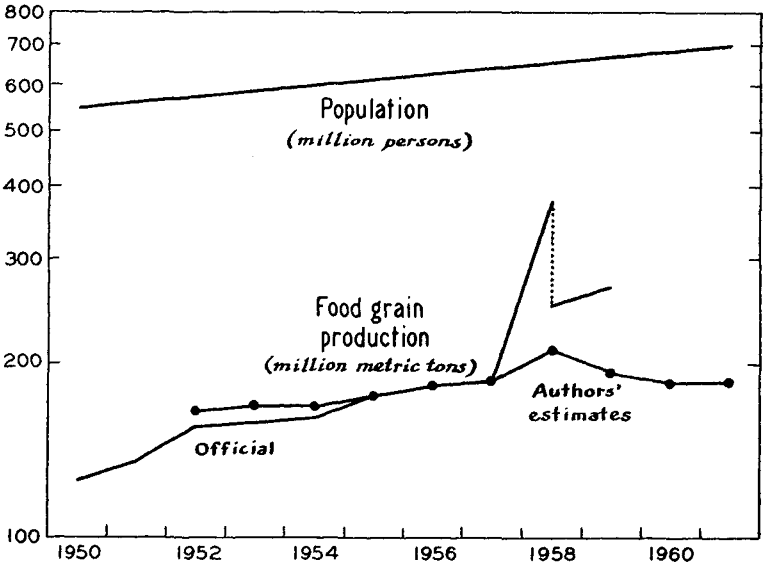
With these words Mao Tse-tung set the stage for one of the most ambitious and, in terms of the sheer number of people involved, staggering social experiments to be undertaken in modern times: the drive to bring the entire rural population of China into huge monolithic units called People's Communes. As initially introduced, these communes attempted to exercise incredibly tight control over nearly every aspect of their members' lives, thereby creating an Orwellian atmosphere that attracted world-wide attention. This revolutionary institution was to be one of the main props of a new program for achieving extraordinarily rapid economic progress. "Twenty years are being concentrated in one day," the people were told, and that utopia, the state of pure communism, was now within reach "in the not distant future."

What of the situation today? After three and a half years of backbreaking effort, is the earthly paradise any nearer? The answer of course is no. That the Chinese mainland today is in the grips of a serious agricultural crisis is no longer news. Food production has lagged to the point where, since late 1960, the government has not only been obliged to suspend its long-standing policy of exporting agricultural products for machinery but has been forced to contract for massive grain imports from Canada and Australia. And the commune system, in an attempt to stimulate output, has all but been abandoned. The original concept of the commune was daring, but equally spectacular have been its failures and its nearly total eclipse.

Chart 1 presents the statistical background. Although we have no official production data to guide us—the patently inflated "Leap Forward" figures claimed for 1958 and 1959 have never been fully corrected, and silence has prevailed regarding 1960 and 1961—there can be little doubt that the three harvests following 1958 were poor. All in all, the evidence points to a grain outturn in both 1960 and 1961 (and perhaps 1959) that was little, if any, above the 1957 level of 185 million metric tons. The rub, of course, is the growing population.

CHART 1.—MAINLAND CHINA: POPULATION *vs.* FOOD GRAIN PRODUCTION, 1950–1961*

(*Logarithmic vertical scale*)



* Population estimates for 1950–58 from John S. Aird, *The Size, Composition, and Growth of the Population of Mainland China* (U.S. Dept. Commerce, Bureau of the Census, International Population Reports, Series P-90, No. 15, 1961), p. 84; 1959–61 estimates assume a 2.4 per cent annual increase. Official grain production estimates for 1950–58 from People's Republic of China, State Statistical Bureau, *Ten Great Years* (Peking, 1960), p. 119; for 1959 from Li Fu-chun, "Report on the Draft 1960 Economic Plan," New China News Agency, Mar. 30, 1960 (American Consulate General, Hong Kong, *Current Background*, No. 615, Apr. 5, 1960), p. 3. Original 1958 estimate from Chou En-lai, "Report on the Work of the Government," *Peking Review*, Apr. 21, 1959, p. 17. Authors' estimates of grain output are intended to be suggestive of general levels, not precise magnitudes.

Following the official Chinese usage, food grains are taken here to include tubers converted to grain equivalents at a ratio of four to one. So defined, the grains are thought to contribute between 80 and 90 per cent of the food calories available to the Chinese people.

Following are the data used in the chart:

	Mid-year population (*million*)	Grain production (*million metric tons*)	
		Official series	Authors' estimates
1950	546.5	124.7	—
1951	557.8	135.0	—
1952	569.8	154.4	165
1953	582.6	156.9	168
1954	595.9	160.4	168
1955	609.8	174.8	174.8
1956	624.2	182.5	182.5
1957	639.1	185.0	185
1958	654.6	375.0[a]; 250.0[b]	210
1959	670.3	270.0	192
1960	686.4	—	185
1961	702.9	—	185

[a] Original. [b] Revised.

Between 1957 and 1961 the population of China is thought to have increased by at least 60 million persons, to over 700 million. When we consider that the Chinese were faced with at least a 10 per cent reduction in output per capita from the already low, "normal" level prevailing in 1957, the wonder is not that the government was forced to import grain in 1961, but that the five to six million tons brought in were sufficient to prevent widespread public disaffection.

The question obviously arises: to what extent may China's agricultural difficulties be attributed to the communalization drive? Were the dislocations attendant on this stupendous movement chiefly to blame; or, as the government claims, is the weather the prime culprit? In all likelihood we shall never know with certainty. For, though it is an undeniable fact that much of North China has recently suffered from prolonged drought, without reliable estimates of both national and regional production, it is impossible to determine its effects.

Yet our path is not completely blocked. Even the most totalitarian regime must have a means of communicating with subordinate echelons. The "line" must be expounded, twists and quirks explained, successes highlighted. In China today this need usually is met by the Party press. And from this press, tightly controlled though it may be, much can be deduced. Indeed, it is possible to piece together not only a fairly comprehensive picture of the development and subsequent demise of the rural communes, but also to infer much regarding their economic effectiveness. Quantification, no; but a trustworthy framework, yes.

BACKGROUND

In 1956 and 1957 the Chinese Communists, looking back on the results of their previous agricultural policies, had reason to feel satisfied. Profiting by the mistakes of their Soviet mentors, they had from the start (1949) proceeded cautiously toward socialization. First, a majority of the peasantry was won over by promises of land reform and the abolition of landlordism; then followed a period of private farming. Only after the countryside had been conditioned by several intermediate stages of cooperative farming was the collectivization push of the winter of 1955/56 attempted.

Throughout this period agriculture was viewed primarily as a holding operation, and, following orthodox Marxist-Leninist-Stalinist doctrine, emphasis was placed on rapid development of a heavy industrial base. Even so, steady gains in farm output were registered. Though not so large as officially claimed, these gains were sufficient to keep pace with the growth in population and to enable China to establish itself as a net exporter of agricultural commodities. This is not to imply that problems were not encountered; to be sure, the rate of agricultural expansion fell far behind that of industry. But never was the performance of the agricultural sector so poor as to jeopardize the industrialization program or to create a politically dangerous degree of peasant discontent.

The Chinese collective[1] of 1956 and 1957 was closely patterned on the Soviet *kolkhoz*. The land was owned and worked collectively, and income was shared according to the amount of labor performed. The peasant was allowed, however, a substantial measure of personal identity. As in the Soviet system, each member was permitted to retain his house, to raise livestock and vegetables on a small garden plot, and to sell his private produce in free markets.

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[1] The Chinese themselves use the term "agricultural producers' cooperative" (APC) rather than "collective." During the transition to socialism a "higher" and a "lower" APC were distinguished. The lower form was intended to be less offensive to wealthier peasants; under it, each member's income depended not only on his labor but also on the land, tools, and draft animals he contributed for cooperative use. In the higher form, income was shared solely on the basis of labor performed. By the end of 1956 nearly all APC's were of the higher type.

There is every indication that throughout most of 1956 and 1957 the leadership was generally satisfied with the collectives. Significant interruptions to production were apparently avoided during their establishment, and when, despite weather conditions reportedly less favorable than in 1955, production increases were recorded in both succeeding years, full credit was given the new organization. In fact, the principal official misgiving expressed about the collective was that it might be too big. Chou En-lai told a group of visiting Indian agriculturists in mid-1956 that the new units, which averaged about 150 households, were slightly too large and unwieldy; and in September 1957, the Party Central Committee ordered that the collectives be reduced to an average of 100 households and be stabilized at that size for at least ten years (*1*, p. 38; *2*, pp. 24–25).

To understand why this seemingly promising agricultural policy was suddenly abandoned in favor of something totally new and unprecedented, it is necessary to recall the mood of the Chinese leadership during the winter of 1957/58. This was a heady period for world Communism. The launching of the first Sputnik was greeted as incontestable proof of the superiority of "socialism." Almost overnight the Hungarian uprising and other recent setbacks were forgotten. It was proclaimed that a new historical stage had been reached in the U.S.S.R.: "communism within our generation" was now the Soviet goal. This wave of optimism clearly infected Mao Tse-tung during his visit to Moscow in November. "The East Wind is prevailing over the West Wind," he was moved to pronounce, and soon after his return to Peking it became evident that Mao and his colleagues were growing impatient with China's rate of economic expansion, particularly in agriculture. No longer would a 7–9 per cent[2] annual increase in gross domestic product suffice. What was needed was an altogether new approach—a "Great Leap Forward"—which would within a few years completely reshape the face of China.

The central premise underlying the Leap Forward philosophy was that China's huge and rapidly growing population should be treated as an economic asset rather than as a liability. Under the First Five Year Plan, when the Soviet model of heavy industrialization was being followed, it was not so regarded; indeed, in late 1956 and early 1957 concern over the population problem led to tentative espousal of birth control. But China, it was now argued, was by no means analogous to the Russia of three decades earlier. In China the contrast between a scarcity of capital and an abundance of underemployed manpower was far more extreme than it had ever been in the Soviet Union. If the hoped-for breakthrough was to be achieved, it could only be done by making full use of this enormous reserve of human energy.

The new program therefore visualized a vast number of labor-intensive projects that would exploit more fully the underemployed labor force of the countryside. Henceforth China would "walk on two legs": one, the program of modern industrialization, the other a thoroughgoing mobilization of the peasantry and its employment at a greatly accelerated tempo.

THE COMMUNE UNVEILED (WINTER 1957/58 TO NOVEMBER 1958)

The economic *raison d'être* for the commune was the need for a system to direct and manage the multiplicity of rural activities that sprang up under the aegis of the Leap Forward. From the outset it was recognized that a program which emphasized small-scale and primitive methods was not suited to administration by the central government, and during the winter of 1957/58 steps were taken to widen considerably the responsibilities of the provincial and county authorities. But it quickly became apparent that this would not be enough. The competing demands for labor were posing monumental administrative problems for the collectives, the *hsiang*[3] governments, and the various state agencies operating at the local level. Further consolidation at the local level was clearly in order.

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[2] The estimated average rate of increase attained between 1952 and 1957 under the First Five Year Plan (*3*, p. 2).

In casting about for an institution to meet this need, the Chinese Communists did not immediately settle on the commune. Instead, slowly, and, for the times, rather cautiously, they began experimenting in the spring in Honan and Liaoning provinces with a prototype called the "large amalgamated cooperative." This organization, formed by merging twenty to thirty existing collectives, had in rudimentary form certain of the features of the forthcoming commune. But, unlike the commune, its size was its only really radical aspect, and what the leadership seeemed to be groping for was a truly revolutionary institution—one that would lead to ideological as well as economic advances.

Not until July did Mao Tse-tung for the first time give an inkling of the organization he wanted. In an article in the Party journal, *Red Flag*, he was quoted as saying that the general course of the Chinese people should be to organize "industry, agriculture, commerce, education, [and the militia] into a big commune [which should form the] basic unit of the society" (*4*, p. 13). Soon thereafter, a campaign to form communes began receiving publicity in a few provinces. The campaign gained momentum during late August and reached nationwide proportions on August 29, when the Central Committee adopted its resolution: "On the Establishment of People's Communes in Rural Areas" (*5*, pp. 21–23). Following wide dissemination of this resolution, a whirlwind movement that appears to have gone even beyond the Committee's recommendations developed, and by the end of October it was claimed that some 26,000 communes had been set up. In all, 122 million households were reported involved, 98 per cent of all peasant households in China (*6*, p. 40).

So much has been written about the nature of the early commune (cf. *1*, *7*) that there is no need here for great detail. Suffice it to say that this was the extreme period of the commune movement: the time of almost total subjugation of the individual—when mess halls bloomed and the antlike armies marched submissively to their tasks to the accompaniment of flowing banners and beating drums.

Theatrics aside, what the commune really did was to bring under one centralized authority all economic and administrative activities within a given area. Typically the *hsiang* was taken as the starting point, and the chief officer of that unit usually was "elected" chairman of the commune. But now, in addition to routine administrative functions, he and his staff exercised direct control over the area's entire economy. The collectives were merged, and together with the various industrial enterprises, retailing activities, tax units, and banking and credit organizations previously falling under state jurisdiction, they became no more than arms of a single entity.

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[3] The *hsiang* was the lowest level of formalized government in China. Subordinate to the *hsien* (county) but above the village level, its closest American counterpart would be the township.

With communalization, all vestiges of private property vanished from the countryside. As the collectives were merged, garden plots and livestock were confiscated, and in some cases even dwellings were taken over. The peasant himself was completely detached from his land, becoming an input of labor to be shifted from field work to canal digging, from iron smelting to road building, as local conditions and national objectives required.

From the point of view of Communist ideology, the most revolutionary feature of the early commune was the so-called "free supply" system, heralded as the first step toward the Marxian ideal of "to each according to his need." Under this system half or more of the peasant's income was paid in the form of "free" food and welfare services. This remuneration bore no relation to the peasant's individual productive efforts, and it was generally administered as part of the "seven guarantees" pertaining to food, clothing, medical care, education, housing, childbirth, and marriage and funeral (*1*, p. 22). The food, of course, was supplied through the mess halls, which were set up in order to free women from the "drudgery of housework" and make them available for the more emancipated and glorious tasks of hoeing and dam building. To these free supplies were added fixed cash wages, scaled according to assigned grade levels. Although the peasant was told that he benefited from this shift from the former system of payment by piecework—and it does seem true that for a month or so the mess halls dispensed fairly generous food rations—a major practical effect was to relieve the commune of any obligation to pay for overtime work.

Above all, the commune was intended to be a highly efficient device for mobilizing and making productive use of every able-bodied adult in the countryside, and once communalization was completed, the already relentless work pace was stepped up. In agriculture the guideposts were a number of superintensive (and generally untested) farming practices that came to be known as Mao's "Eight-Point Charter."[4] During the summer of 1958, deep plowing was the aim principally stressed—the "central technical measure for increasing agricultural output" (*9*, p. 24). According to the flamboyant propaganda of the day, up to fivefold increases in yield could be had with this practice alone. Instead of the customary depth of five to six inches, deep plowing generally was ordered to a depth of a foot or more; in some cases even to ten feet (*9*, p. 24). Vast quantities of fertilizer were then added. The amount of fertilizer—primarily night soil, compost, and pond mud—applied in 1958 is said to have averaged 60 tons per acre, or ten times more than in 1957 (*10*, p. 21). These are average figures; even greater efforts were apparently made by some communes. In Ankuo county near Peking, for instance, it was reported that 66,000 acres of winter wheat were prepared by being plowed—or rather dug, for the work was accomplished chiefly by peasants wielding spades—to a depth of 1.2 to 1.5 feet, and then fertilized at a rate of 150 tons per acre. These efforts, it was claimed, would result in a yield of 15 tons per acre in 1959, or "about ten times the average yield in Denmark, which leads the world in wheat yield per unit area" (*11*, p. 8).

In addition to greatly accelerating the pace and lengthening the hours of agricultural work, the communes set up literally millions of "industrial" enterprises, including coal diggings, farm-implement shops, cement works, and the now famous backyard blast furnaces. At first the emphasis was on producing iron and steel; the fall of 1958 was the era of the great steel campaign, and in the last four months of the year primitive furnaces reportedly turned out four million tons of pig iron and three million tons of steel. At its peak, this campaign alone is said to have directly or indirectly employed 100 million people (*12*, p. 5).

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[4] The eight points were: deep plowing, fertilizing, irrigation, close planting, pest control, field management, the use of improved seeds, and the use of improved implements (*8*, p. 7).

A report by the First Secretary of the Party in the province of Kwangtung is suggestive of the relentless tempo at which the successive work drives of this period were carried out. Immediately after the communes were formed, he proudly reported, some seven million peasants, fully half of Kwangtung's rural labor force, were rushed to the mountains to collect iron ore and coal for the steel effort. This done, they were hurried back home to complete the autumn harvesting and to prepare their land for the next crop. Finally, during the normally slack winter season they were mobilized for work on irrigation and flood-control projects (*13*, p. 37). Stories told by refugees arriving in neighboring Hong Kong indicate that a twelve- to fifteen-hour workday was the rule, with only two days off a month.

At first, the commune system and the new rural policies seemed to be fantastically successful. A startled world was told late in 1958 that the grain harvest had reached 375 million tons, double the 1957 level, and that the spectre of famine had been ended forever in China. For a brief moment even the leadership apparently became mesmerized by such politically inspired production figures,[5] actually believing that they had found the solution to China's problems. Indeed, so optimistic were they that the top agricultural planners ordered a reduction in the area planted to fall-sown grains. "With yield per *mou*[6] rising sharply," went the official pronouncement, "China will gradually reduce the area of land planted to food crops . . . In a few years' time, it will be possible to plant food crops on one-third of the land, afforest another third, and let the rest lie fallow" (*15*, p. 12).

It soon became evident, however, that many of the commune's successes were pure illusion. Thus in the case of the iron and steel drive it was found that little of the product was of any value in modern industry. This shortcoming was tacitly acknowledged the following August, when, in an important speech of recantation made before the Eighth Plenary Session of the Eighth Central Committee (*16*, pp. 11–19), Chou En-lai admitted that the government had decided to exclude backyard steel from the production claims for 1958.

Although the steel campaign was short-lived, it seems clear that it resulted in colossal waste. If the employment figure of 100 million is to be credited, some 40 per cent of China's rural work force[7] was diverted away from the fields during the height of the harvest season. Crop losses at this stage must have been huge; as the Communists themselves were to admit in 1959: "the labor power allocated for the bumper autumn harvest was inadequate, with the result that reaping, threshing and storing were all done in a somewhat hurried manner" (*17,* p. 5). Teng Tzu-hui, head of the Party's Rural Work Department, described the experience as the lesson of "high production without a bumper harvest" (*18,* p. 4). Food shortages developed in many areas during the winter and spring of 1959. In his recantation, Chou En-lai excused the phenomenon of shortage amidst apparent plenty by explaining that the 1958 production figures had been overestimated—a "recount" showed that only 250 million tons,[8] not 375 million, had been harvested—and that the peasants had eaten more than usual immediately after the harvest. Chou attributed this extravagance to poor management by the mess halls, but it is also probable that the individual communes were forced to allow their members more food to give them enough energy to maintain the driving work pace.

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[5] For a description of the disintegration of the agricultural statistical system under the Leap Forward, see *14*. In essence, what happened was that, in order to avoid the serious charge of "rightist opportunism," local officials reported whatever they felt the top levels wanted to hear, whether or not it bore any relation to reality. And during the all-pervasive drive that was the Leap Forward, what the Party wanted was reports of enormous accomplishments.

[6] A *mou* is equal to one-fifteenth of a hectare.

[7] A reasonable estimate of the size of China's rural labor force would be of the order of 230–250 million people.

"TIDYING UP" (DECEMBER 1958 TO AUGUST 1959)

As year-end approached, the excesses of the commune system were becoming increasingly obvious, and its more revolutionary features were incurring mounting criticism from rank-and-file Party officials as well as from the exhausted peasantry. Nor was Moscow impressed; from the beginning the Soviets had made no secret of their distaste for the system. In the face of these pressures, the leadership abruptly changed tack. The decision was made to ease up. From the Sixth Plenary Session of the Eighth Central Committee, held at Wuhan in December, came instructions that the commune's entire character be moderated, and from then until August 1959 the system underwent a process described as "tidying up."[9]

Documents issued in connection with the Central Committee's December and August Plenary Sessions indicate that the reorganization that took place during this period actually was far more drastic than implied by the term "tidying up" (*16, 17, 19, 20, 21*). The commune, although remaining a strong ideological force, was deprived of much of its monolithic character, becoming instead little more than a federation of collectives.

The basic organizational structure in the countryside, stabilized during the tidying-up period, is still in effect today. Now, as then, the commune is organized on three levels: the commune itself, or the "top level"; the production brigade (*sheng-chan ta-tui*); and the production team (*sheng-chan tui*). It was officially reported that as of August 1959 there were about 24,000 communes averaging around 5,000 households each, 500,000 brigades with about 240 households apiece, and some 3,000,000 teams with an average membership of around 40 households (*22,* p. 21). The size of individual units varies widely, however, chiefly with the local density of population. Thus in heavily populated Kwangtung the typical commune contains about 7,000 households, and the brigade 300 to 500 (*23,* p. 4).

Of the many changes introduced during the tidying-up period the most important was a sharp diminution in the powers and operating responsibilities of the top level. Ownership of the land, draft animals, and implements was transferred from it to the brigades. The right of the top level to conscript labor and siphon off brigade income was also curtailed, and the state (usually the county government) reasserted control over tax collecting, banking, and retail activities within the commune. Deprived of its most important functions, the top level was relegated to a vague supervisory role in which it exercised the comparatively minor functions of the former *hsiang* government. It remained the seat of the local Party committee, some handicraft and industrial enterprises, and perhaps a clinic, junior middle school, and an agricultural research institute, but otherwise exerted little authority.

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[8] Still a substantial overstatement; see Chart 1. Even so, it cannot be denied that 1958 was an excellent year for Chinese agriculture. But exceptionally favorable weather, not the communes, deserves most of the credit.

[9] There has been some speculation that the Wuhan decision was made at the expense of a sharp split in the Party leadership. For a discussion of this point, see *1,* pp. 37–41.

In place of the top level, the production brigade—roughly comparable in size and function to the former collective—emerged as the key unit for directing economic activity. Not only was it given prime responsibility for organizing agricultural work; following the Marxist dictum of "whoever owns the means of production distributes the products," it received important financial responsibilities as well (*24*, p. 4). It became the basic accounting unit, paying taxes, controlling the food ration, and distributing income. To it the teams—the operating units—looked for sowing assignments and working capital, and to it the harvest was delivered.

As the structure of the commune was reverting to a form closely resembling the pre-commune pattern, significant changes also occurred in operating policies. The attempt to produce large quantities of iron and steel and other heavy industrial items in the countryside was abandoned. More important to the long-suffering peasantry, it was decreed that the household would continue to exist as a basic social unit, living and working together, and that the head of the household would be responsible for the care of dependents. The scope of the celebrated free supply system was curtailed: brigades began cutting back free supply to less than 30 per cent of income; fixed wages were dropped; and the pre-commune system of workpoints[10] was reinstated. To increase incentives, various "small freedoms" were also reintroduced, including the right once again to have tiny garden plots and to engage in minor side activities.

Important as these reforms were, however, they did not represent a full return to pre-commune conditions. Material incentives for the revived private sector were kept too low to encourage the peasant to produce much on his own; in Honan Province, for instance, it was reported that only 4.5 per cent of total peasant income in 1959 was earned privately, as opposed to about 20 per cent under the collectives (*25*, p. 2). And although the work pace was somewhat less furious than in 1958, planning for the collective sector was still colored by Leap Forward thinking. In any event, the respite was brief. In August there occurred another of the sudden policy shifts that characterized the commune era.

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[10] The workpoint in China is similar to the Soviet *trudoden* except that it is based on the labor of an hour rather than a day. Usually a peasant earns a predetermined number of workpoints for satisfactorily completing each task. His performance is checked daily or every few days by an official of his production team, who credits the number of earned workpoints against the individual's name in an account book. The value of the workpoint is determined after the harvest by dividing distributable income (gross income, less taxes and the amounts reserved for feed, seed, and other production costs and for investment) by the total number of workpoints earned by members of the collective unit.

RESURGENCE UNDER THE BRIGADE (AUGUST 1959 TO SUMMER 1960)

Although the Plenary Session of the Central Committee held in August 1959 was partly one of recantation, its primary purpose was not to plead *mea culpa,* but to spark a new surge in the economy. Ranking Party leaders were told by Premier Chou En-lai that, although "some excesses" had occurred early in the commune movement, these had been corrected in good time, that the communes had been tidied up, and that conditions were ripe for a resumption of the Leap Forward. Party "cadres" at all levels were instructed to unite behind the new effort. Conservatives among them, "rightist opportunists" in the official lexicon, were denounced for having said that the communes were "in an awful mess" and were told either to correct their thinking or step aside (*16,* pp. 13–14).

At first it was not clear just what kind of resurgence this was to be. During the months immediately following the August meeting the leadership seemed to exercise considerable restraint in its rural policies. Many of the mistakes of 1958 were consciously avoided. Peasants were told that plowing need not be so deep as in the previous year, and it was ordered that close attention be paid to reaping and storing the fall harvest. When a ten-year plan for modernizing agriculture was announced in October (*26,* pp. 1–9), it appeared that crash programs might be giving way to more deliberate efforts. It developed shortly, however, that Mao and his colleagues were unwilling to await the results of any such prolonged program. Soon after the fall crop was collected, a new drive was instituted, and from then until the summer of 1960 off-field campaigns and super-intensive farming practices were once again emphasized.

Except that the brigade, not the commune, was now the key organization, these drives were similar to those of 1958. Again their scale was staggering. By mid-winter, more than 70 million peasants were reportedly engaged in flood-control and irrigation projects, and another 40–60 million in gathering compost, pond mud, and other organic fertilizers (*27,* p. 12; *28,* p. 16). Nor did the tempo of the drives slacken with the arrival of the spring planting season. Although many peasants returned to field work in the spring, many others remained behind at the work sites. Figures released in March indicate that the new policies had drastically altered the whole pattern of rural employment; instead of the traditional (and current) 80 per cent during the busy season (*29,* p. 7), only 55 per cent of the peasant labor force was to be available for actual field work in the spring of 1960.[11]

If the leadership had any misgivings about the effect this shift might have on crop production, they gave no indication of them. Indeed, additional off-field projects were ordered during the late spring and early summer. Employment in side-line agricultural activities (over 30 million in March) continued to swell as a result of a new campaign for the collective raising of hogs; by May collective hog farms were employing 10 million fulltime workers (*31,* p. 23). And 3 million

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[11] As published in the authoritative *Red Flag,* the breakdown in "full manpower units" was as follows (*30,* pp. 8–9):

Construction	40 million
Off-field agricultural activities	30 million
"Group welfare undertakings"	15 million
Industry	5 million
Field work	110 million
Total	200 million

more persons were assigned to industrial programs, increasing the total to over 8 million (*32*, p. 14).

Rural industry during this period differed somewhat from that emphasized in 1958. Instead of attempting to turn out products for heavy industry, the goal was new and improved farm implements. The results were disappointing. Reliance was placed on "the conscientious efforts of the peasant masses, on their wisdom and creative skill" (*33*, p. 7). One of their principal achievements was a simple rice transplanter, hailed as the long-sought device to ease the back-breaking job of transplanting rice shoots. Few of these transplanters seem to have been used; but 4.5 million were apparently made and distributed before their impracticality became evident (*34*, p. 17). Another product of the creative skill of the masses during this period was the reported success, by the Golden Dragon People's Commune, in crossing a Holstein bull with a Yorkshire sow. The litter was said to be thriving, and unusually active and large (*35*, p. 14).[12]

It was in this atmosphere of less than total objectivity that the campaign to raise hogs developed—and shortly got out of hand. According to official data, which on this point are particularly suspect, the hog population in 1957, when most swine were raised in small numbers by individual households, was 146 million. The number is said to have reached 160 million by the end of 1958 and 180 million in late 1959, by which time roughly two-thirds were raised collectively (*37*, p. 1). No totals have been released since then, but by any measure the goal set in 1960 staggers the imagination: "one pig for each person or even one pig per *mou* of land"; that is, 600 or 1,500 million animals (*38*, p. 13). In mid-May it was announced that more than 70 million piglings had been born in the previous two months and that "several score of millions" more were expected in May and June. Large tracts of crop land were set aside for growing the forage needed to feed them (*31*, pp. 23–24).

So far as can be determined, every off-field agricultural campaign of the commune era, such as the 1960 drive for the collective raising of hogs, eventually was curtailed after its high cost and ineffectiveness could no longer be ignored. The question of why these activities were ordered in the first place may be explained in part by the driving ambition of the Chinese Communists. But much of the answer also lies in the grossly inflated production figures that were reported for 1958 and 1959. These clearly led the leadership to overestimate the success of their policies and to misjudge the thin margin by which agricultural production actually exceeded the minimum requirements of the peasantry.

Western observers generally agree that by 1957 the Chinese Communists had built up a fairly reliable system for reporting agricultural statistics. Local officials were under no particular pressure to overstate output, and statistical personnel in the county governments were allowed considerable freedom to check on suspicious figures. In 1958, however, the system became hopelessly disrupted. Checkups were discontinued and tremendous political pressure was put on local cadres to report exorbitantly exaggerated yields. A common device was to report as average for all crop land the yield attained on special "Sputnik" demonstration plots.

Although by its recantation in August 1959 the leadership seemed more willing than in 1958 to face reality, it failed to take effective action to restore objectivity in agricultural reporting. The grain production claimed for 1959—270 million tons—simply is not credible. This figure is 8 per cent above the revised claim for 1958 (250 million tons) and 46 per cent above the estimate for 1957 (185 million tons). Because sown area was lower and the weather considerably less favorable in 1959 than in 1958, a drop must have occurred; that a reduction *did* occur has since been admitted (*39,* p. 6). At the time, however, the leadership seems not to have realized this, and plans for 1960 were apparently developed on the supposition that there was a bumper crop to be drawn upon. It must be presumed, for example, that the ill-starred campaign to expand hog production was initiated in the belief that grain stocks held by the brigades were large enough to allow substantially greater quantities to be fed.

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[12] A three-layered plant yielding potatoes, tomatoes, and eggplant was also reported during this period, as was "a hybrid which bears big sunflowers above ground and ginger at its root" (*36*, p. 15).

In the history of the Soviet and Chinese Communist movements, a forceful line in agriculture is typically accompanied by suppression of individual freedoms, and the period of resurgence after August 1959 was no exception. Strong controls over the life and work of the peasantry were reasserted. Mess halls that had been disbanded by "rightist opportunists" in some brigades in the spring of 1959 were ordered reopened, and the mess hall as an institution was given a new, almost mystical importance. The "spirit of voluntary discipline and noble-mindedness" they fostered was to be encouraged (*40,* p. 12). Mess halls were directed to acquire a measure of economic independence by growing their own vegetables and livestock; toward this end many private plots—which in any event were no longer of much use to the peasants because they had little spare time to work them—were recollectivized (*41,* p. 23). Free rural markets were again closed down. By early 1960 the small quantities of poultry, eggs, and vegetables that were still produced by individuals for sale could be sold only to the state, and at low, fixed prices.

RETREAT (SUMMER 1960 TO SPRING 1961)

As the summer of 1960 progressed, signs began to appear that the various campaigns of the resurgence were not having the desired effect on agricultural output, and a sense of uneasiness seems to have come over the leadership. The first clue to the new feeling was the admission, in mid-July, that the hog campaign was in severe straits (*42,* p. 1). No longer could there be any illusions about the level of grain stocks; piglings were dying in huge numbers, chiefly from a shortage of feed, but also from cholera epidemics which swept the large breeding farms. On August 6 defeat was acknowledged. "The superiority of developing hog raising on a large scale is still restricted by certain unfavorable conditions," confessed the *People's Daily* (*43,* p. 3). As suddenly as it began, emphasis on collective hog raising ceased.

Other rural institutions and policies began coming under scrutiny at about the same time. It was noted, for example, that the mess halls were not without shortcomings: because they enabled poor peasants and their families to eat as much as richer peasants, they caused an increase in grain consumption. Similarly, the very heavy cost of the labor drives in terms of extra food rations was conceded (*44,* p. 13). And the campaign for the peasants to invent, manufacture, and somehow use millions of new tools was allowed to die quietly. The rice transplanter had been nowhere in evidence when the second and third rice crops of the summer were transplanted. In September it was admitted that the types of "farm machines we need . . . are not to be found in our country for the moment" (*45,* p. 9).

The uncertainty and misgivings of the summer heightened during the fall, to the point where even the leadership began questioning the Party's ability to direct agricultural production. "Plants and animals are animate," wrote the Minister of Agriculture in September. "This is a characteristic which marks the fundamental difference between agriculture and industry . . . [Regarding crops and livestock] the factors affecting their growth and development are complicated and many-sided. Some still cannot be controlled, or fully controlled, by man; others have not yet been understood or fully understood" (*46,* pp. 34–35). From an inordinately proud and confident group of men, this was indeed a major confession.

The ultimate decision to retreat was apparently brought on by reports of what had happened to grain production. For the first time since 1957, the leadership now had a reasonably good chance of finding out the actual size of the harvest. In the fall of 1960 the entire Party apparatus was mobilized to reappraise the agricultural situation. Hundreds of thousands of cadres at the provincial, district, and county levels were reassigned to the production brigades and teams, ostensibly to "strengthen leadership," but in reality to determine what was going on. Their instructions were specific: to weigh the harvest carefully and to report the results honestly (*47,* pp. 8–11). The early returns evidently indicated that on a per capita basis 1960 would be one of the most disastrous years on record.

Faced with the possibility of widespread famine, Mao and his colleagues could equivocate no longer. Swift and sweeping action was taken in November and December to conserve food and to reduce the energy expended by the population. Trade policy was reversed: food exports were drastically curtailed, and arrangements were made to import between five and six million tons of grain from Western countries during the coming year.[18] In agriculture, there was a wholesale suspension of the construction and special production units that had proliferated during the resurgence, and superintensive farming practices were discontinued. The vast numbers of peasants so released were transferred from brigade responsibility to the production teams, where they either worked in the fields in the traditional manner, engaged in private side-line activities, or did nothing. Over much of China, wrote the Minister of Agriculture in midwinter, many peasants "are nursing their strength" as they "tide over the famine" (*49,* p. 2).

That this retreat was sweeping there can be no doubt; but the leadership was understandably sensitive about admitting it. Indeed, the winter of 1960/61 saw no letup in the number of lengthy pronouncements extolling the advantages of the commune system; and although it is reasonably certain that a Central Committee directive outlining the new agricultural policy was issued in the fall, no

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[18] The principal purchases for delivery in 1961 were as follows (*48,* p. 644):

Australia	Wheat	2.2 million metric tons
	Barley	.4 " " "
Canada	Wheat	1.7 " " "
	Barley	.6 " " "
France	Wheat	.3 " " "

comprehensive description of it appeared in the press. Nevertheless, a fairly complete picture of the shifts that took place may be reconstructed from such policy statements as did appear.

The core of the new policy was a wholesale retreat from the principle of mass labor drives and crash production programs. To man the numerous special production units that sprang up during the resurgence, the brigades had frequently conscripted team workers and shifted them arbitrarily from one task to the next. The new directives made this impossible. The brigade and commune levels were ordered to employ directly no more than 5 per cent of the available work force, leaving at least 95 per cent under team jurisdiction. In addition, the teams were told to restrict their off-field activities to ensure that 80 per cent of the rural work force was assigned to fieldwork during the busy season (*50,* p. 1). The cutbacks in construction work were also reinforced by financial restrictions; new rules on the distribution of collectively earned income prescribed that at most 5 per cent be reserved for investment, as compared with 10 per cent or more in previous years (*51,* p. 26).

The new regulations also gave the team level considerable autonomy for making production decisions—apparently in an attempt to safeguard agriculture from the mistakes of overzealous cadres at higher echelons. Teams, it was pointed out, usually understood local conditions far better than did the brigades. In turn, team officials—often strangers to the locality—were told to swallow their pride and heed the advice of old, experienced farmers (*52,* p. 17).

The principal step taken to decentralize responsibility was the enforcement of the so-called "three guarantees and one reward" contract (*53,* p. 10). This contract, which governed the relationship between each team and its brigade, was supposed to have been put into effect early in 1960, but was in fact then generally ignored. This time it was combined with an action called the "four fixes," which stabilized the manpower, land, draft animals, and implements assigned to each team. Under the contract, each team agreed to "guarantee production, manpower, and costs," and the brigade agreed to reward it with a bonus if it exceeded its quota. In effect, the contract forbade the brigades to pull manpower out of the teams and also obligated them to supply in pre-set amounts the funds and materials needed for production.[14]

A final important element of the retreat was the decision to return private plots and to encourage a major revival of private peasant activity. The rationale behind this move was stated with refreshing brevity and frankness. "Rural production is complicated," said the *People's Daily.* "A part of it is best undertaken collectively, another part is best undertaken individually" (*54,* p. 10). The peasants were allowed ample spare time to work their plots and were actually encouraged to grow vegetables and sweet potatoes both for their own use and for sale at the newly reopened village markets. It was recommended that as a general rule each peasant should privately earn about 20 per cent of his income; toward this end the collective units were ordered to turn over to individual

[14] It should be noted that the new regulations decentralized responsibility only with respect to production decisions. The "four fixes" gave the teams the right of use but not of ownership, which continued to rest at the brigade level. The brigade, being the owner of the principal means of production, continued to receive the entire harvest (up to the targeted amount) and remained obligated to finance the repair, upkeep, and replacement of most large implements and work animals.

households at least 5 per cent of their cultivated acreage (*55,* p. 7). If this was done—and the evidence suggests that it was—the average household now has a plot of about one-eighth of an acre. As attention is lavished on these plots, they probably now account for most of the country's pork, poultry, and vegetable production.

ECLIPSE? (SUMMER 1961 TO WINTER 1961/62)

Substantial as it was, the retreat of the winter of 1960/61 does not appear to have resulted in any immediate improvement in the food situation. On the contrary, for the second consecutive year a decline was recorded in the early summer harvest of wheat and other fall-sown grains. This setback seems to have further shaken the confidence of the leadership, for after June 1961 no effort appears to have been made to salvage any important feature of the original commune system save its name. So far as can be determined, the months that followed saw virtually a complete return to the rural organization, operating procedures, and way of life that prevailed in 1957.

This conclusion must necessarily be tentative. It is based primarily on published statements of policy, and the experience of recent years has taught that it is hazardous to draw firm conclusions before a given policy has been in effect for at least one farming season. Published directives frequently either have turned out to mean something quite different from what they originally seemed to say, or have been implemented with greater or less vigor than seemed to be warranted. The evidence is strong, nonetheless, that since last summer the mess halls have been closed, the free supply system dropped, and a determined effort begun to stimulate collective as well as private production by granting increased material incentives to the peasants.

The mess hall and the related institution of free supply were the chief distinguishing features of the original commune that remained in early 1961, and it must have been difficult for the more doctrinaire members of the leadership to see them go. In fact, the retreat on this point may possibly be regarded as a temporary expedient; although the demise of the mess hall has been widely reported by refugees reaching Hong Kong, no mention of the fact has appeared in the Communist press. There can be little doubt, however, that both the mess halls and free supply have been suspended. Neither institution has been mentioned in the press since June 1961. Discussions of grain distribution have hinted at a new, but unspecified, system that has developed "new measures and new content" (*56,* p. 21). An article in the September 16 issue of *Red Flag* all but precluded the existence of free supply. "Consumer goods can *only* be distributed according to the amount and quality of one's labor," it said (*57,* p. 1, italics supplied).

The decision to permit the peasants to manage their own food supplies and to eat at home was undoubtedly influenced by the acute shortage of grain; the obligation of the mess halls to feed regularly every man, woman, and child in the countryside must have become an impossible task in early 1961. Possibly more significant, however, was the fact that free supply stood squarely in the way of efforts to provide the peasants with greater material incentives. The need for such incentives had received scant attention after 1957, when their place was taken by exhortation and coercion. During the latter half of 1961 the failure of this policy was tacitly conceded. "More pay for more work" was the new theme stressed, as was the necessity for having a rational (piecework) system for assessing wagepoints.

This emphasis on individual initiative was further strengthened by instructions calling on the production teams to delegate as much authority as possible to individuals or small work groups called "squads" (*hsiao-tsu*). As set down in the August 29 issue of the *People's Daily,* the overwhelming portion of farm tasks should be carried out by squads of ten or so persons each.[15] The teams, the article said, should plan in advance and make definite assignments—on a piecework, seasonal, or even annual basis—to individuals and squads so that everyone would understand exactly what was expected of him (*59,* pp. 16–19). All this was hailed as something new and revolutionary; but actually it was nothing but a variant of the "production responsibility system" practiced by the collectives in 1957.[16] After four years of experimentation and untold hardship, the cycle was seemingly completed.

As of the winter of 1961/62, then, the situation appears to be this:

1. The commune itself, despite continued pronouncements regarding its ideological strength, is a rather unimportant level of local government.
2. The production brigade is the key collective unit. But like its predecessor, the collective, it has virtually no powers to conscript workers for massive labor drives.
3. The team—the actual operating unit—once again exercises considerable autonomy in deciding how to use the land, labor, and other productive factors at its disposal. In turn, it may delegate some of its discretionary powers to small squads or individuals.
4. For the peasants themselves, the winter is again the slack season. A few engage in off-season collective work (such as repairing the walls of paddy fields); some find temporary employment with nearby mines or road-construction crews; others work their private plots and tend poultry. But most peasants, now that they have some freedom of choice, probably choose to remain near home, doing little and husbanding their strength for the busy season that lies ahead. They know that the dwindling stores of grain—now partially under their control—must last until the next harvest is distributed. In most parts of China relief will not come until June or July.

POST-MORTEM

In appraising the Chinese commune it is necessary at the outset to distinguish between its economic performance and its operational structure. In its original form, the commune lasted only a few months; thereafter its structure underwent a series of radical alterations. For two full years, however, the basic economic mission of the system remained unchanged. We have pointed out that the Chinese Communists in early 1958 were casting about for an institution that would enable the country to "walk on two legs"—that is, to carry out labor-intensive as well as capital-intensive development projects. The resulting commune was given a dual role: (1) to mobilize the great underemployed labor potential of the countryside, and (2) to direct it into useful agricultural and industrial tasks.

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[15] That field work was in fact decentralized was confirmed by a Swiss newsman who revisited the Mainland during mid-1961. No longer, he reported, were the huge work groups in evidence (*58,* p. 71).

[16] According to a directive issued in September 1957, teams (then averaging about 20 households) were instructed to "institute a collective and individual production responsibility system in managing production." The teams were to "guarantee the work down to the squad" (*hsiao-tsu*) and "guarantee odd jobs down to households" (*2,* p. 24).

To many observers in 1958 the commune seemed a logical and practical economic device. Given the Party's demonstrated ability to organize urban production, could it not be expected to achieve at least some success with its new rural tactics? That success did not follow must be attributed to a managerial failure at all levels. Seemingly mesmerized by their past accomplishments, the leadership ordered overambitious (in some cases foolish) targets, and the rural cadres proved unable to direct the new programs competently. The rural officials were not "red and expert" as their leaders liked to think, but merely "red." Fanatically loyal, they were willing to undertake any task; but most of them were ill-equipped to modify and adjust their instructions to suit local conditions.

Burdened by these managerial shortcomings, for two incredible years the communes initiated and, after failure, abandoned a succession of extraordinary work programs. Some of the blunders that occurred have already been alluded to. Others include the loss of millions of tons of grain through experiments with close planting, the destruction of the clay floors of paddy fields as the result of deep plowing, the alkalization of soil in North China through reckless irrigation schemes, and the disruption of the rotation patterns required to maintain soil fertility. Taken together, there can be no doubt that errors such as these contributed significantly to the present production crisis.

The experience of the commune movement from 1958 to 1960 suggests that the second of its two objectives—putting all idle peasants to useful work—simply could not be attained under the conditions then prevailing. The supply of trained managers was too meager and the educational level of the population too low. Although the Chinese Communists seem finally to have realized this in late 1960, the awakening was long overdue. For true believers, the notion that Marxian precepts are as applicable in the countryside as in the city—that all that is needed to solve underemployment is proper social organization—dies hard.

AUTHORS' NOTE

March 13, 1962

At the time this article went to press, it was only "reasonably certain" that the Party Central Committee issued a major directive on commune and agricultural policy in the fall of 1960. Since then it has become a certainty. Over the last year there have been a number of reports referring to a 12-point directive issued in November 1960 and to an amplifying 60-point set of "Draft Regulations for Work in Rural People's Communes" issued in the spring of 1961. Although not published in journals intended for dissemination abroad, these documents were evidently circulated widely in China; a copy of the 60-point regulation has recently come to our attention. It confirms the elements of the "Retreat" noted here. It also provided for the delegation of some production responsibilities to the "squad," an aspect we erroneously identified as having occurred during the summer of 1961, when it was first reported in the *People's Daily*.

A second late development deserving comment is the surprising statement in the 1962 New Year's Day editorial of the *People's Daily* to the effect that the production team, not the brigade, is the "basic accounting unit." This change was totally unheralded, and it is by no means certain what practical significance it will have. Conceivably, the team may become the key collective entity, taking over from the brigade full responsibility for financing operating costs and making major production decisions; then again it may be intended that the team will merely be the collective unit for determining the value of the workpoint; or perhaps it is but another exercise in Communist semantics. Time alone will tell, but this much is certain: he who regards the institutions of the Chinese countryside as stabilized could not be wider of the mark.

CITATIONS

The principal original sources for important statements of Chinese Communist policy are the authoritative *People's Daily* and the fortnightly *Red Flag.* Both are organs of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party. Most of the more significant statements appearing in these and other publications may be found in the series of translations regularly prepared by the American Consulate General in Hong Kong. Important pronouncements also may be disseminated in Chinese or English by the New China News Agency. In addition, official translations of major documents frequently appear in the weekly *Peking Review,* published in English for distribution abroad.

The following abbreviations are used in the citations:

SCMP	American Consulate General, Hong Kong, *Survey of China Mainland Press*
ECMM	American Consulate General, Honk Kong, *Extracts from China Mainland Magazines*
SCMM	American Consulate General, Hong Kong, *Selections from China Mainland Magazines*
CB	American Consulate General, Hong Kong, *Current Background*
NCNA	New China News Agency

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