Land Reform and Agricultural Collectivization 1950-1958

‘An upsurge in the new, socialist mass movement is imminent throughout the countryside. But some of our comrades, tottering along like a woman with bound feet, are complaining all the time, "You're going too fast, much too fast." Too much carping, unwarranted complaints, boundless anxiety and countless taboos -- all this they take as the right policy to guide the socialist mass movement in the rural areas. No, this is not the right policy, it is the wrong one.

The high tide of social transformation in the countryside, the high tide of co-operation, has already swept a number of places and will soon sweep the whole country. It is a vast socialist revolutionary movement involving a rural population of more than 500 million, and it has tremendous, world-wide, significance.’

--Mao Zedong ‘On the Cooperative Transformation of Agriculture’ July 1955

We turn our attention this week to China’s countryside, where sweeping changes began to take place after the founding of the People’s Republic in 1949. During the ‘New Democracy’ phase (1950-1953), agricultural policies were all about Land Reform—redistribution of land from the wealthy to the poor. This seemed simple in theory, but became difficult in practice: it involved pinning rigid class labels (landlord, rich peasant, middle peasant, poor peasant) onto individuals and families which would affect them for generations. Many people did well from this, along with the restoration of markets, people were given land deeds for additional land redistributed by the land reform process. However, as China shifted from New Democracy to Socialism, it became increasingly important for agricultural yields to increase to finance industrialization. This led CCP leaders and Mao to experiment with collective farming as a means of increasing output. What ensued was a systematic increase in collective farms, both in size and in terms of eliminating private property, resulting in the formation of massive ‘People’s Communes’, encompassing dozens of villages, with almost all private property falling into the hands of the commune.

Readings:
Ralph A. Thaxton, ‘The Ascent of the Vigilante Militia’ (Chapter 2) and ‘The Onset of Collectivization and Popular Dissatisfaction with Mao’s ‘Yellow Bomb’ Road’ (Chapter 3) in Catastrophe and Contention in Rural China pp. 51-117. Available as e-book:
Note: I know this is a lot of online reading, but try to get through it. This is a fascinating study of the village Da Fo, and we will read more of their experiences through the Great Leap famine next week. If you are pressed for time, skim chapter 2 and focus on chapter 3.

Questions:

What did Land reform look like in Da Fo village (chpt.2)?

How would you describe the local agents of the Chinese Communist Party here (chpt.2)? How did they operate? Why might this be important for understanding the experience of Collectivization that follows?

What is the difference between agricultural cooperatives and collectives?

How did Da Fo’s villagers react to collectivization?

Taking Da Fo as an example, what do villagers responses to collectivization reveal about state-society relations in the 1950s?