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The Role of Land Reform in Ensuring the Survival and Expansion of the Chinese Communist Party between 1925 and 1937

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The Role of Land Reform in Ensuring the Survival and Expansion of the Chinese Communist Party between 1925 and 1937

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Abstract

This paper argues that land reform, perhaps the defining policy of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), was essential to its survival and expansion between 1925 and 1937. The state of the Chinese peasantry in the period made land reform invaluable in winning the peasant support on which the CCP's strategy of mass mobilisation would be based, and the implementation of land reform, when it began to take the form of 'equalisation' of land, was equally valuable in breaking the power of the landlords in Soviet territory and maintaining the support of both middle and poor peasants, such that land reform was indispensable in ensuring the survival and expansion of the CCP¹. However, the contribution of military strategy and anti-Japanese messaging should not be overlooked, and it would be unreasonable to suggest a campaign of mass mobilisation driven by land reform alone could have ensured the survival of the CCP.

Perhaps the foremost benefit of land reform was that, by appealing to peasant discontent at landlord exploitation, it secured the initial support of the peasantry during the earlier years of the period. The dire condition of the peasantry can hardly be denied. The dominance of the landlords had reached a particularly high ebb in the 1920s, as equal sharecropping arrangements, whereby the landlord and tenant each received 50% of the yield, began to give way to either arrangements in which the tenant might receive as little as 20% of the yield or fixed rents, which pushed a significant proportion of poor and middle peasant families into landlessness, as debt from fixed rents in years of poor harvest forced them to sell their

¹ The CCP considered there to be broadly four classes in rural areas; landlords, rich peasants, middle peasants and poor peasants.

remaining lands¹. Accordingly, by 1930, landlords in the Central-South region owned 9.81 times the average land holding, while landlords and rich peasants, despite comprising only 9.2% of the population, held 53.5% of all land². In Hunan, over 50% of all families relied upon farming as tenants, while in certain Northern *hsien* this figure was over 80%, and in every generation 8% of the peasantry would be killed by famine³. These dire conditions manifested themselves in the rise of ‘peasant associations’ under Peng Pai, which, as they far exceeded the popularity of the CCP (then urban focused under the ‘Li Lisan party line’), demonstrated the revolutionary potential of the peasantry which could be harnessed by land reform. The Hailufeng peasant association alone numbered 20,000 by 1925 (compared to a total CCP membership of 950), and by 1927 total peasant association membership across China had reached 4,517,140, while peasant associations were at the forefront of the 1927 Henan rebellions, which involved over 100,000 peasants⁴. This revolutionary potential was recognised by Mao (at that time Director of the United Front’s Peasant Training Institute), who commented in 1927 that “only by this [peasant action] can the revolution be benefitted”. Thus, there was evidently a huge base of peasant support which the CCP could harness through the promise of land reform in order to drive the rural expansion of the CCP⁵.

A radical land reform policy at the centre of the CCP agenda was vital to securing this support and consequently expanding the CCP’s power via mass mobilisation of the peasantry. It is hardly a coincidence that the period in which the CCP found it most difficult to secure stability and active peasant support (up to 1931) was the period in which their land reform policy was moderate, and generally side-lined, under the leadership of Li Lisan. The 1927 Fifth Party Congress, while stating that “the struggle against imperialism cannot develop without the struggle against the exploitation... of feudal forces”, proposed a land reform so moderate, confiscating land only from those landlords with over 500 *mou* of land (the average holding of landlords was 14 *mou*), that Phillip C.C. Huang has described it as an “exercise in double-talk”, while Li’s Provisional Land Law of 1930 stipulated that only rented land could be expropriated, which would necessarily allow inequality between rich peasants and middle and poor peasants to continue⁶. Indeed, one of the only areas over which the CCP succeeded in establishing control for a significant period between the end of the First United Front in 1927 and 1931, the Hunan-Jiangxi Border Region, saw a far more radical policy than was advocated by Li Lisan, with Mao’s Ching-Kang-Shan Land Law stipulating that all land would be confiscated by the Soviet and then distributed equally⁷. Though initial implementation was not particularly thorough, the point is that the policy was nonetheless important in appealing to the peasantry. This peasant support was vital in the formation of almost all of the Soviets of the period; to take just one example, the Gaoyang-Lixian Soviet (1932) drew heavily upon the support of unemployed peasant-weavers who had been pushed out of subsistence farming and into volatile

¹ Thaxton, R. (1982). Land Rent, Peasant Migration, and Political Power in Yao Cun, 1911-1937. *Modern Asian Studies*, 16(1), 101-122, pp. 106-113.

² Moïse, E. (2012). *Land Reform in China and North Vietnam: Consolidating the Revolution at the Village Level*, The University of North Carolina Press (First Published 1983), pp. 25-30.

³ *Ibid*, pp. 27-32.

⁴ Philip C. C. Huang. (1975). Mao Tse-Tung and the Middle Peasants, 1925-1928. *Modern China*, 1(3), 271-296, pp. 274-281; for the figure on the Henan Rebellions, see Thaxton, Yao Cun, pp. 115-118.

⁵ Mao, Z. (1927). Report of an investigation into the peasant movement in Hunan.

⁶ (1927) Declaration of the Fifth National Congress of the Communist Party of China (Authored by the Congress as a whole); Huang, *Middle Peasants*, pp. 284; Wong, J. (1973). *Land Reform in the People’s Republic of China: Institutional Transformation in Agriculture*, Praeger Publishers (First Edition), pp. 3-5.

⁷ Wong, *Institutional Transformation in Agriculture*, pp. 5-8.

wage labour in textiles, which was woefully inadequate to live on thanks to the Great Depression, demonstrating the value of land reform in driving the expansion of the CCP through mass mobilisation of the peasantry¹.

The argument has sometimes been put forward that the actions of the Kuomintang (and aligned warlords) motivated much of the peasantry's support for the CCP in this earlier period, rather than the prospect of land reform. For example, the tax burden could be crushing in certain regions controlled by Kuomintang-supported warlords – in Axian County, under Tian Songyao, the peasantry had been 'pre-taxed' for all years up to 1983². The Kuomintang further alienated the peasantry by, despite promising a "Land to the Tillers" program in 1926, failing even to intervene on behalf of the peasantry following the refusal of landlords to reduce rents during periods of famine, let alone implementing any redistributive policies³. This was despite the presence of Kuomintang magistrates in these areas with the authority to act – the Kuomintang failed to intervene even when physical punishments were used by landlords upon failure to pay rents⁴. Accordingly, one might be inclined to say that peasant support of the CCP was merely a reaction to the failures of the Kuomintang to curb the extortion of warlords and landlords in areas they nominally controlled. However, these failures can hardly explain peasant support for the CCP, since such resentment did not necessarily translate into support for the CCP; in fact it often manifested in the growth of groups such as 'Red Spear', which reacted to the failures of the Kuomintang by looking inwards, treating all outsiders as "equally unwelcome" whether they be communist, Kuomintang or warlord⁵. Land reform was required to capitalise on peasant discontent and resentment directed at the Kuomintang, and accordingly they were often identified as synonymous with landlords to ensure that land reform would be able to speak to these feelings, with Mao describing, as early as 1927, "Kuomintang right-wingers" as acting at the "landlord's request"⁶. Consequently, pivotal initial peasant support for the CCP was likely reliant on the prospect of land reform, even if land reform also harnessed antipathy towards the Kuomintang and warlords.

The actual implementation of land reform, however, did cause some problems regarding the resistance of landlords, rich peasants and even certain middle peasants to CCP rule in the earlier years of the period. The fundamental dilemma which the CCP faced was that, in order to retain the support of the peasantry, it was necessary to follow through on a radical program of land reform, yet to do so would inevitably result in significant resistance from certain classes. The dangers posed by an extreme policy can be seen in Mao's Ching-Kang-Shan Land Law, which although (as mentioned) was successful in winning the initial support of the peasantry, was not a sustainable policy as the intermediate classes began to turn against the CCP. Not only did they undermine CCP rule by attempting to persuade poor peasants to turn against the CCP, which in Ninggang County took the form of spreading the rumour that soon poor peasants would be killed, prompting many to flee to Kuomintang-controlled Yungxin, they also aided Kuomintang troops in their encirclement of Ching-Kang-Shan as, in Mao's own words in 1928,

¹ Grove, L. (1975). Creating a Northern Soviet. *Modern China*, 1(3), 243-270, pp. 243-246.

² Yang, B. (1990). *From Revolution to Politics: Chinese Communists on the Long March*, Westview Press (First Edition), pp. 290.

³ Thaxton, R. (1977). On Peasant Revolution and National Resistance: Toward a Theory of Peasant Mobilization and Revolutionary War with Special Reference to Modern China. *World Politics*, 30(1), 24-57, pp. 26-28.

⁴ *Ibid*, pp. 27-29

⁵ Perry, E. (1984). Collective Violence in China, 1880-1980. *Theory and Society*, 13(3), 427-454, pp. 439-441.

⁶ Mao, Z. (1927). Report on an Investigation of the Peasant Movement in Henan.

“they had received to heavy a blow from the revolution”¹. Accordingly, Mao was forced to adopt a more moderate posture in the following Hsing-Kuo Land Law, which stipulated that only “public land and the land of the landlord class” would be expropriated².

Yet a moderate policy encountered two equally destructive problems. Firstly, a failure to significantly improve the condition of the peasantry by considerable expropriation risked allowing the zeal of the peasantry to wane, as demonstrated in Jiangxi before 1933, where such a threat was faced thanks to the rather paltry nature of previous land reform (in Ning-tu hsien the largest individual land holding was still 1233% larger than the smallest by 1933), leading to the Land Investigation Movement, the express purpose of which was to “spur the broad peasant masses to participate... in the revolutionary war” via a “resolute class slogan”³. Secondly, a moderate implementation left the power of the landlords and rich peasants broadly intact, with, for example, many instances being recorded of landlords families being allowed to occupy top administrative roles in CCP bodies, such as the Jiang family in Jiangsu, many of whom (including the Jiang family) undermined and delayed execution of policies which threatened their interests⁴. Therefore, the actual implementation of land reform in the earlier years of the period was somewhat ineffectual, even if the prospect of land reform was crucial in terms of winning the initial support of the peasantry.

However, the CCP was able to resolve this dilemma with an equalisation policy from 1933 (or even earlier in certain Soviets), moving towards total equality in land ownership while no longer discriminating against landlords and rich peasants in redistribution, and abandoning the unneeded excesses of previous years promoted by the '28 Bolsheviks', such as forced labour implemented during the earlier years of the Jiangxi Soviet⁵. Accordingly, in the Land Investigation Movement a considerable amount of land was expropriated, around 317,539 *tan* overall, which served both to maintain the support of the poor and middle peasants and to reduce the economic power of the landlords, ensuring they were less able to resist the control of the CCP, something which was also helped by the identification of 13,526 ‘class alien elements’⁶. However, aimless violence was generally discouraged, with one Central Government order stating that the landlords and rich peasants should be targeted through “fines... and levies”, and rich peasants were to be allotted “land for them to toil on” (although of a “poor quality”), and Mao, the leader of the Investigation Movement, wrote that “we must under no circumstances allow any attempt to eliminate the rich peasantry”⁷. Mao’s assessment that his Investigation drive had eliminated all “feudalistic and semi-feudalistic” elements was,

¹ Huang, Mao and the Middle Peasants, pp. 291-292. Mao, Z. (1928). The Struggle in the Ching Kang Mountains.

² (1975). Selected Works of Mao Tse-Tung: Volume 1, Foreign Languages Press (First Published 1965, original documents authored by Mao, compilation and commentary by the People’s Publishing House), pp. 104. See also, Huang, Middle Peasants, pp. 291.

³ Wong, Institutional Transformation in Agriculture, pp. 13-15; Mao, Z. (1933). The Land Investigation Campaign is the Central Important Task in the Vast (Soviet) Areas.

⁴ Perry, E. (1984). Collective Violence in China, 1880-1980. Theory and Society, 13(3), 427-454, pp. 445.

⁵ Moise, Land Reform in China and North Vietnam, pp. 33-34.

⁶ ‘Class alien elements’ was the term used to describe either rich peasants or more commonly landlords claiming poor or middle peasant status.

⁷ Land expropriation figure is from; Wong, Institutional Transformation in Agriculture, pp. 11; ‘class alien elements’ figure is from; Womack, B. (1982). Foundations of Mao Zedong's Political Thought, 1917–1935, University of Hawai’i Press (First Edition), pp. 149. Remaining quotes from; (1933). D.51 Order of the Central Government of the Chinese Soviets and; Mao, Z. (1933). Preliminary Conclusions of the Land Investigation Campaign.

although exaggerated, a fairly accurate articulation of the benefits of the Investigation Movement¹. While the Jiangxi Soviet did not last much more than a year beyond the Investigation, this can hardly be said to diminish the significance or effectiveness of land reform, since the overwhelming military odds made its abandonment inevitable.

The efficacy of an ‘equalisation’ land policy was also seen in the Northern Soviets. What is particularly telling is the urgency with which land reform was promoted in these Soviets; Zhang Guotao (leader of the Fourth Front Army) began the dissemination of the pamphlet “How to Distribute Land” in Sichuan province 20 days before the Soviet government had even been established, and only one month after the army had begun to enter certain sections of Sichuan in December 1932². The fact that, at such a vulnerable point (the Fourth Front Army had no real permanent base before entering Sichuan), Zhang pursued land reform so hastily demonstrates its value in ensuring the survival of the CCP, particularly in these Northern Soviets in which traditional land distribution patterns resulted in only a 17% change in land ownership being required to achieve something close to equalisation by 1937³. Indeed, land reform was so essential to the survival of the Soviet Government in Sichuan that Benjamin Yang went as far to describe it as a “basic need” for survival⁴. Thus, the implementation of land reform policies built on equalisation was enormously valuable to the survival and expansion of the CCP from 1933, breaking the power of the landlords and maintaining the commitment of the peasantry.

However, to attribute popular support of the CCP solely to land reform would of course be foolish. Anti-Japanese sentiment was used to bolster support for the CCP, especially after the occupation of Manchuria in 1931, with Mao beginning his *Proclamation on the Northward March of the Chinese Worker's and Red Army to Fight Japan* with the warning that “the hateful Japanese imperialism... intends to transform China into its colony and turn the people of all China into slaves”, while the party was also able to cast Chiang Kai-shek as the “head of the national betrayers”, thanks to his capitulation in Manchuria, who had “sold... all China to Japanese imperialism”. In this way the CCP presented themselves as the “only anti-Japanese... government in all China” with their calls for a United Front from around 1935, and continuation of their state of war with Japan since their declaration in 1932⁵. The extent to which this messaging captured popular support is of course very hard to quantify, but Mao went as far to credit “the stand taken by the Communist Party for a national united front against Japan” as one of the driving forces behind the Xian Incident in December 1936, which, as it led to the creation of a Second United Front which eliminated the threat of annihilation by the Kuomintang, was certainly significant in the survival of the CCP⁶. However, although anti-Japanese messaging was not quite dependant on anti-landlord messaging, it was certainly linked with it, as the Kuomintang, landlords and Japanese were often identified as part of one imperialist group, seen in Mao's description of opposition to the CCP by landlords and the

¹ Mao, Z. (1934). Report to the 2nd National Congress of Worker's and Peasant's Representatives.

² Ibid, pp. 130-132.

³ Moïse, Land Reform in China and North Vietnam, pp. 16.

⁴ Yang, From Revolution to Politics, pp. 132-133.

⁵ First and last quotations from; Mao, Z. (1934). Proclamation on The Northward March of the Chinese Worker's and Red Army to Fight Japan. Second quotation from; (1936). Hongse zhonghua (29 January Issue, Unknown Author), as quoted in; Garver, J. (1988). The Origins of the Second United Front: The Comintern and the Chinese Communist Party. The China Quarterly, (113), 29-59, pp. 42.

⁶ Mao, Z. (1936). A Statement on Chiang Kai-shek's Statement.

Japanese as “all directed by the Imperialists to wreck the Chinese Soviet”¹. Nonetheless, despite the fact that anti-Japanese messaging did, to a certain extent, draw upon sentiments towards landlords, it was a fairly substantial component of the CCP’s strategy to win popular support and push for a Second United Front, which would materialise in 1937 and delay the threat of military defeat by the Kuomintang, thus diminishing, though perhaps only a little, the importance of land reform in ensuring the survival of the CCP.

Furthermore, the survival and expansion of the CCP should not be solely attributed to popular support; in particular, military successes were crucial in preventing the destruction of the CCP. There was certainly an imminent threat of annihilation by the Kuomintang in the years before the end of the Long March in 1935, as during the Encirclement Campaigns the CCP faced unfavourable military odds, particularly in the earlier campaigns. In the First (unsuccessful) Encirclement Campaign against the Jiangxi Soviet the 40,000 under Mao were far outnumbered by the 100,000 under Lu Diping alone, not even considering other ancillary forces of the Kuomintang, while in the Second and Third (also unsuccessful) Encirclements against Jiangxi, Kuomintang forces numbered 200,000 and 250,000 respectively, in comparison to the 30,000 available to the CCP in both campaigns; indeed, Chiang Kai-shek is generally considered to have regarded the destruction of the Jiangxi Soviet in the First Encirclement as a certainty². Accordingly, the success of the tactic termed “mobile warfare” by Benjamin Yang, which saw the CCP draw the Kuomintang into more favourable terrain by yielding considerable territory, was likely crucial in the early Encirclement Campaigns in ensuring the survival of the CCP, especially given that few of the Northern Soviets had been established at the time of the First Encirclement³. However, to a certain extent the military strategy of the CCP drew upon land reform, as during redistribution benefits were afforded to those in the Red Army; even “the Red Army man of landlord origin” was permitted to “share equally with the impoverished peasants... in distribution [of land]”, demonstrating the potential perceived by Mao and others in using the prospect of land reform to encourage recruitment⁴. The fervour of those in the Red Army, driven by land reform, was arguably particularly important in the Northern provinces, since early defeats, particularly up to 1932, led to a campaign of guerrilla warfare in which “staff personnel, political workers and even cooks all picked up rifles”, showing the value of an ideologically committed force (though it should be noted that guerrilla warfare was not a particularly important part of CCP military strategy, with early attempts to incite urban insurrection, such as the Canton Commune, failing, and the Fourth Army’s decision to relinquish most of the Eyuwan Soviet in order to pursue guerrilla warfare criticised by the Party Centre)⁵. Nevertheless, the military strategy of the CCP was essential to its survival, although supported by the contribution of land reform with regards to the zeal of the Red Army.

The Long March is a further testament to the fact that military strategy was essential to the survival of the CCP. While the evacuation of the Red Army from Jiangxi was perhaps not a great military success given that 75% of certain divisions were lost merely breaking out of the blockhouses of the Fifth Encirclement via the Xiang River in early 1935, the Long March did

¹ Mao, Z. (1934). Report to the 2nd National Congress of Worker's and Peasant's Representatives.

² Yang, From Revolution to Politics, pp. 41-46.

³ Ibid, pp. 42.

⁴ Mao, Z. (1933). Decision Concerning Some Problems Arising from the Agrarian Struggle.

⁵ Yang, From Revolution to Politics, pp. 51-57; last quote from Guotao, Z. (1982). Wode Huiyi, vol. 3, pp. 1034 (Translated in Yang, From Revolution to Politics, this was a retrospective account by the leader of the Fourth Front Army, Zhang Guotao).

lead to formation of the larger Northern Soviets such as the Sichuan-Shaanxi Soviet (founded in 1935), which provided a stable base for the CCP¹. Without this it is unlikely that the smaller Soviets established in previous years, such as the one in Eyuwan, would have survived, given that, despite being the second largest Soviet after Jiangxi, Red Army forces in Eyuwan numbered only around 6,000². The intricacies of the political and military decisions which led to the formation of the Sichuan-Shaanxi and other Soviets are well beyond the scope of this essay, so suffice it to say that the CCP's success in breaking out of the Fifth Encirclement and settling in the Sichuan-Shaanxi area relied heavily upon shrewd military planning seen, for example, in Mao's decision to take the 25th Army to Northern Shaanxi in mid-1935³. The strategy of the Long March once again shows that the survival of the CCP could not be ensured by the mass mobilisation of the peasantry alone. This is not to say that land reform was less significant than military strategy, as without land reform it is unlikely that any Soviet could have been established or sustained, merely that land reform cannot be solely credited for that survival.

Conclusion

Thus, while land reform was certainly central to the survival and expansion of the CCP, in both securing and maintaining the support of the peasantry, and in crippling the power of the landlords (at least after the 1933 Land Investigation Movement), one should be careful not to stretch its importance too far. The strategy of "mobile warfare" was essential in preventing the annihilation of the CCP by the Kuomintang in the earlier years of the Jiangxi Soviet, something which could hardly have been prevented by a mass peasant movement alone. Similarly, anti-Japanese sentiment not only contributed to popular support of the CCP, but also encouraged the creation of the Second United Front in December 1936 which eliminated the threat from the Kuomintang (though land reform was drawn upon to both encourage recruitment to the Red Army and to exploit anti-Japanese sentiments). Despite this, land reform was unequivocally vital for the CCP, being the very basis of its mass mobilisation of the peasantry, capitalising on resentment towards landlords, warlords and the Kuomintang to facilitate the creation of the various Soviets of the period, while an 'equalisation' line from 1933 allowed the CCP to retain the support of the intermediate classes while suppressing the influence of the landlords.

¹ Braun, O. (1982). *A Comintern Agent in China*, Stanford Press (First Published 1975), pp. 90.

² Yang, *From Revolution to Politics*, pp. 35.

³ See an account of both in Yang, *From Revolution to Politics*.

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