

AGRICULTURAL REFORM – SUCCESS OR FAILURE?

Mao Zedong was born a peasant, like some 94 per cent of the Chinese population in the late 19th century. So he knew from experience that most peasants lived in poverty and ignorance, at the mercy of natural disasters and their landlords. But after Mao had risen to greatness, did his grand schemes of land reform and collectivization really improve peasants' lives or even increase their crop yields? In other words, were they a success or a failure? Read both sides of the argument and the sources, then judge for yourself.

SUCCESS?

SOURCE 1

PEASANT TYPE	% OF RURAL POPULATION	% OF LAND OWNED
POOR	60	18
MIDDLE	30	33
RICH AND LANDLORDS	10	49

FIGURES ARE AN AVERAGE FOR CHINA'S RURAL AREAS IN 1936

SOURCE 2

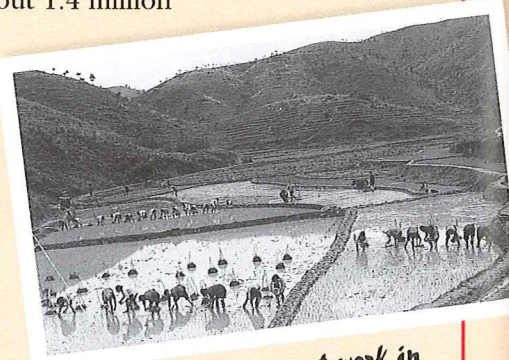
We are peasants, and so we want to unite with others who cultivate the land like we do... The interests of us who cultivate the land can only be protected by ourselves!... How do the landlords treat us? Are the rents and taxes heavy or light? Are our houses satisfactory or not? Are our bellies full or not? Is there enough land? Are there those in the village who have no land to cultivate? We must constantly seek answers to all these questions.
(EXTRACT FROM 'THE GREAT UNION OF THE POPULAR MASSES' ARTICLES IN THE XIANG RIVER REVIEW, JULY/AUGUST 1919)

PEASANT TYPES

In Mao's time, there were many types of peasant. The poorest owned no or very little land, middle peasants had enough land to grow their own food, while the richest had spare land they could rent out. There were also many absentee landlords, who owned 85 per cent of the land that the poor farmed. All over China, rich peasants and landlords were a small part of the rural population but owned most of the land (Source 1).

PEASANT PROBLEMS

Peasants faced many problems. The most obvious was a shortage of land. Although China covers about 9.6 million square kilometres, only about 1.4 million are suitable for farming. The good land had to be shared among a huge population – about 400 million at the time of Mao's birth. A typical southern farm covered less than half a hectare. Floods and droughts, as well as plagues of locusts, often devastated crops.



Rice farmers at work in southern China.

CHINA'S LANDLORDS

Poor peasants suffered at the hands of rich peasants and landlords, too. These men charged exorbitant rents. At times of famine, they also took crops from villages where people were starving, then sold them for high prices in nearby cities.

As a young man, Mao already knew of peasants' difficulties and urged them to unite to overcome them (Source 2).

LAND REFORM

Mao began to introduce land reform – the redistribution of land from landlords to poor peasants – in the 1920s. But the process did not start in earnest until the late 1940s, as the Communists swept into power (Source 3). Then, in 1950, the Agrarian Reform Law (see page 30) introduced a legal framework for the transfer of land from rich to poor (Source 4).

FARMING CO-OPERATIVES

Land reform was a success – after the new law had been implemented, poor peasants owned 46.8 per cent of the land and landlords just 2.1 per cent. Often, however, poor men still had to rent land from those who were richer. Mao



A cheery propaganda image of a women's Mutual Aid Team.

was determined to end this inequality, so in the first Five Year-Plan he introduced Mutual Aid Teams, then co-operatives. In this way, he hoped eventually to ensure that all land was commonly owned.

COMMUNE CULTURE

During the Great Leap Forward (see page 34), Mao turned his attention to agriculture. Peasants on the huge new communes were told to increase crop yields and build irrigation networks. Poor management, floods and droughts led to major problems, and many communes were subdivided. But the farming and building work of these years laid the foundations for eventual increases in both output and cultivable land (Source 5).

LONG-TERM SUCCESS

Mao's land reform policies transformed the pattern of land ownership in China. They also deprived landlords of their political power, allowing peasants to become a driving force for change. Mao's efforts to improve agriculture did not have the same instant success. However, despite the upheavals of the Great Leap Forward, the long-term trends were good.

SOURCE 3

Later, in the year 1949, everything was settled about my land in Liu Ling. I was given a stamped certificate and everything... It was the first land we had owned. No one had cultivated it before. We were very happy. Before that we never even dreamed of having our own land. Why should we? We didn't dream of anything... But now that we had got land of our own, Father came to me and said: "You should be grateful to the Communists. Without them you would never have got this land!"
(EXTRACT FROM REPORT FROM A CHINESE VILLAGE BY JAN MYRDAL)

SOURCE 4

Article 1. *The land ownership system of feudal exploitation by the landlord class shall be abolished and the system of peasant land ownership shall be carried into effect in order to set free the rural productive forces, develop agricultural production and pave the way for the industrialization of the new China.*
(EXTRACT FROM THE AGRARIAN REFORM LAW OF 30 JUNE 1950)

SOURCE 5

	1949	1974
CULTIVATED LANDS	100	127
	(MILLIONS OF HECTARES)	
IRRIGATED LANDS	20	40
	(MILLIONS OF HECTARES)	
PRODUCTION OF GRAINS AND CEREALS	108	275
	(MILLIONS OF TONNES)	

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FAILURE?

SOURCE 6

As the flames began to lick around his body Jin [a rich and powerful landlord] clenched his teeth, and did not utter even a moan until the fire surrounded his heart. The Communist officials sent to carry out the execution did not prevent the villagers from doing this. Although the Communists were opposed to torture in principle, officials were told that they should not intervene if the peasants wished to vent their anger in passionate acts of revenge.

(EXTRACT FROM THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY *WILD SWANS* BY JUNG CHANG)

SOURCE 7

A new upsurge in the socialist mass movement is imminent throughout the countryside. But some of our comrades are tottering along like a woman with bound feet and constantly complaining, "You're going too fast." Excessive criticism, inappropriate complaints, endless anxiety, and the erection of countless taboos – they believe this is the proper way to guide the socialist mass movement in the rural areas. No, this is not the right way; it is the wrong way.

(EXTRACT FROM 'ON THE QUESTION OF AGRICULTURAL CO-OPERATION' BY MAO ZEDONG, 31 JULY 1955)

VISION AND REALITY

Mao Zedong's commitment to transforming the lives of China's peasants through land reform and agricultural improvement cannot be doubted. However, his extreme methods served only to increase rural problems.

LAND REFORM

As Communist land reform began in the 1940s, mass violence broke out in villages and thousands of landlords were killed, some by burning (Source 6). The Agrarian Reform Law of 1950 tried to introduce a more orderly system of justice, but the brutality worsened. The law failed in other ways, too. Although landlords were dispossessed, rich peasants were allowed to keep some of their land. Soon they were renting land to the poor just as landlords had done before them.



Jung Chang, the author of *Wild Swans*, who now lives in London.

CO-OPERATIVE AGRICULTURE

In the first Five-Year Plan (see page 31), Mao set out to prevent the growth of another class system by introducing co-operative agriculture. Many peasants resisted this move towards common ownership. They did not want to lose their new land and had even begun to buy others' property. Mao condemned this 'spontaneous capitalism', as well as complaints about collectivization (Source 7), which he wanted to accelerate. There were practical as well as political reasons

for Mao's wish to advance collectivization. Farm profits were needed to fund industry (Source 4), but outputs were growing too slowly. Despite warnings about the dangers of bad planning, Mao decided the solution was to go faster.

THE GREAT LEAP FORWARD

Mao's determination led to the Great Leap Forward, which began in 1958 (see page 34). Central to this plan was the establishment of huge communes. However, they were blighted by poor management and unrealistic goals (Source 8). The withdrawal of Soviet aid in 1960, as well as floods and droughts, increased the problems of low output (Source 9) and famine.

AFTER THE GREAT LEAP

From 1959, many Great Leap policies were reversed. For example, between 1959 and 1960, average commune size was reduced by a third and much private land was restored to its original owners. Recovery was disrupted in the 1960s by the Mao-inspired Cultural Revolution, when political upheaval led to another slump in production (Source 9). But afterwards steady growth continued into the 1970s, when the Four Modernizations programme was announced (see page 40).

FARMING FAILURE

Mao pursued his political ideals in the countryside at the expense of China's peasants. The programmes he pushed through, often against opposition from both Party members and peasants themselves, led only to declining outputs and chaos. The Great Leap Forward in particular was a spectacular failure. It was only thanks to the intervention of less hard-line politicians that Chinese agriculture was able to recover. But even now, production figures are often exaggerated so that it remains difficult to assess the true situation (Source 10).



Peasants building a flood barrier in 1958 during the Great Leap Forward.

SOURCE 8

It was a time when telling fantasies to oneself as well as others, and believing them, was practised to an incredible degree. Peasants moved crops from several plots of land to one plot to show Party officials that they had produced a miracle harvest. Similar [fields] were shown off to gullible – or self-blinded – agricultural scientists, reporters, visitors from other regions, and foreigners... (SECOND EXTRACT FROM THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY *WILD SWANS* BY JUNG CHANG)

SOURCE 9

PRODUCTION OF GRAINS
(MILLIONS OF TONNES)

1957	295.05
1960	143.5
1967	190
1968	180

SOURCE 10

Many officials routinely make up production numbers to please their superiors, just as their predecessors did four decades ago during Chairman Mao Zedong's disastrous Great Leap Forward... In June [1999], reporters of the official Xinhua news agency found some nearby townships and villages had already compiled their month-by-month statistics for 1999, which added up neatly to 101 per cent of the planned target. (EXTRACT FROM 1999 INTERNET REPORT BY LATELINENEWS.COM)