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The Peasant Economy and Social Change in North China,



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Preface

For empirical information, I am indebted above all to the researchers of the Japanese South Manchurian Railway Company (Mantetsu), who managed to compile possibly the best ethnographic data available on any peasant society of the early decades of the twentieth century, despite their ambiguous and suspect scholarly status as agents of a conquering power. The nature of those materials and the issues raised by the context in which they were gathered are discussed in detail in Chapter Two; readers with questions about those studies should begin there, although a real sense of their richness can probably only be gained by reading some of the material itself. In 1980, almost a decade after I first began working with the Mantetsu reports and when I was nearly finished with the book as it was originally conceived, I had the opportunity to do a year of research in China under the Senior Scholar Program of the Committee for Scholarly Communication with the People's Republic of China. That year gave me the chance to revisit two of the Mantetsu-studied sites for some oral history research to check and augment the Japanese materials, and to add a two-centuries' time depth to the book with the help of the Qing Board of Punishment archives and a nineteenthcentury county government archive. I have of course been aided greatly throughout my research by the past studies of Chinese, Japanese, and Western scholars.

For theoretical concepts, I have drawn widely from the three major traditions of peasant studies and China scholarship, the mainly Marxist works of postrevolutionary China, the mainly "formalist" and "substantivist" (as I call them in this book) studies of the West, and the mainly Marxist and substantivist studies of Japan. Much space has been devoted to a dialogue with all three bodies of theory and research. (A Chinese version of this book will be published by Zhonghua shuju in Beijing.)

In working with both empirical information and theoretical con-

structs, I have chosen to proceed from historical reality to theory and back to reality, rather than the reverse, as is sometimes the practice in contemporary social science. I have tried to look to the most down-to-earth information for the largest ideas, and then to return once more to empirical material—to avoid the tendencies of starting with a given model and then seeking only facts that would support the model or of attempting to build abstract models independent of historical context.

This book could not have been finished without the luxury for uninterrupted research and writing provided by a year's fellowship from the National Endowment for the Humanities in 1978 and sabbatical leaves, in addition to the year of research in China. I benefited greatly from discussions with many Chinese historians and economists, especially Li Wenzhi and Liu Yongcheng. Outside China, I did much of the research for this book at the Hoover Institution, where curator Ramon Myers and the staff of the East Asian Collection were always most helpful. In the final stages of the work, friends and colleagues in several disciplines read different versions of the manuscript and gave me much appreciated encouragement and advice: Eugene Anderson, Norma Diamond, Arif Dirlik, Mark Elvin, Albert Feuerwerker, Linda Grove, Harold Kahn, Nikki Keddie, Diana Lary, James Lee, Eric Monkonnen, Gary Nash, James Palais, Charles Tilly, Frederic Wakeman, Alexander Woodside, and Ye Xian'en. Joseph Esherick, Michael Gasster, Victor Lippit, Elizabeth Perry, Andrew Walder, and Ernest Young, especially, gave enormous amounts of their time and helped shape the book in substantial ways. I also benefited from discussions with and comments from a number of my graduate students: Lynda Bell, Andrew Frankel, Kathy Walker, Phil S. Yang, and, especially, Honming Yip, Two undergraduate seminar papers on my manuscript, by Jewel Chung and Maurya Hogan, were helpful in my efforts to make this book more accessible to students. Noel Diaz, cartographer of UCLA's Geography Department, turned my rough sketches into real maps. Stanford University Press's Editor J. G. Bell placed me in the Press's debt by his considerate and efficient handling of the manuscript, as did Barbara Mnookin. whose rigorous editing greatly improved and tightened the book. Finally, Kate Peterson Huang, despite the rigors imposed by her return to graduate school, gave me the warmth of home and spirit that made this work possible.

Los Angeles, California December 1983 P. H.

Note on Place-Names

The most common suffixes for villages in North China are cun and zhuang (both words mean village). Also common are ying (or "camp," suggesting that the community might have grown up around a military encampment) and zhai (or "fortress," suggesting that the community might have originated as an armed settlement). In referring to villages, the people of the North China plain seem always to include as part of the name the suffixes zhuang, ying, and zhai. They often drop the suffix cun, however, especially where a name denotes some entity in addition to the village, as for example Dabeiguan (or "big north gate" of the walled county seat) and Wangquansi (or "temple overlooking fountain"), and I have followed their lead, referring for example to Shajing village, not Shajingcun. The only exception to this practice is where the village's name would be reduced to just one syllable without the suffix (e.g., Macun), a problem similar to that presented by county names like Dingxian. All village and county names are rendered in full in the Character List.

This book is concerned primarily with the area of the North China plain encompassed by present-day Hebei province and the northwest portion of Shandong. Except for parts of Daming prefecture, Henan, that area substantially overlaps the Qing Zhili and Republican Zhili and Hebei portions of the North China plain (compare Maps 2.1 and 6.1). Thus, even where precision would require Zhili, I have preferred to use Hebei through all periods, reverting to the proper historical name only on rare occasion for clarity.

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BACKGROUND

.

The Issues

THE CHINESE PEASANT

The peasant in prerevolutionary China had three different faces. He was first of all someone who to some degree produced directly for household consumption; his production decisions were accordingly shaped in part by considerations of household needs. In this respect, he was very different from contemporary urban residents, for whom the activities of production and consumption, of workplace and home, are generally distinct and separate. Second, he was also something of an entrepreneur, for most peasants produced in part for a market, and had to base production decisions on considerations of prices, supply and demand, and costs and returns. In this respect, the peasant farm possessed some characteristics we usually associate with a capitalist enterprise. Finally, we can think of the peasant as a member of a stratified society under a state system, whose surplus supported the consumption needs of the nonagricultural sectors.

Three Traditions of Peasant Studies

Each of these different dimensions of the peasant has been illuminated by a major tradition of scholarship. The peasant as entrepreneur has been well studied by economists of the Western world, most importantly in Nobel Laureate Theodore Schultz's now-classic study *Transforming Traditional Agriculture* (1964). Schultz argued powerfully in this book that the peasant, far from being lazy, inept, or irrational in his economic behavior, as popular conception might make him out to be, was in fact an enterprising and optimizing user of resources, within the constraints of "traditional agriculture" (before the coming of modern inputs like mechanical power and chemical fertilizer). Traditional agriculture might have been poor, but it was highly efficient. It in fact tended toward an "equilibrium" level in which "there are comparatively few significant inefficiencies in

the allocation of factors of production" (p. 37). Schultz's peasant is "Economic Man" no less than any capitalist entrepreneur (see esp. his Chaps. 2 and 3). Consequently, in Schultz's view, the way to transform traditional agriculture is to leave the small family farm structure of productive organization intact, rather than tampering with it as was done in the Soviet Union, and to provide modern "factors of production" at prices within the economic reach of the small peasant. Once proper economic incentives for innovation are present, the entrepreneurial family farmer will innovate to modernize agriculture, in much the same manner as had happened in American agriculture (ibid., Chaps. 7 and 8).*

More recently, Samuel Popkin has elaborated on the implications of Schultz's type of analysis for our comprehension of peasant political behavior. For Popkin, the peasant farm is best described with the analogy of a capitalist firm, and the peasant as political actor, by extension, with the analogy of an investor in the political marketplace. In his view, peasants act to maximize gains by rationalizing production and balancing short- and long-term interest, in the same ways that a capitalist firm or investor does, hence the title of his book: The Rational Peasant (1979).†

Critics of this peasant-as-capitalist-entrepreneur analysis have stressed the subsistence producer—consumer dimension of the peasant. The classic theoretical analysis is presented by A. V. Chayanov in his studies of the Russian peasants in the 1920's (1966a, b). Chayanov argued convincingly that peasant economies cannot be understood in the conventional terms of a discipline developed for the study of capitalist economies. Capitalist profit accounting cannot be applied to a peasant family farm on which there is little or no wage

*The American family farm has in fact been the economists' favorite illustration of a near-pure capitalist enterprise (see, for example, such textbooks as Mansfield 1980). The multitude of small producers makes for an ideal model of competition in an open market (as opposed to the oligopolistic situation in automobiles, for example). A wheat farmer's decisions illustrate well the relationship between prices and supply and demand. And the wheat farmer's choice of how best to combine different quantities of inputs of land, labor, and capital illustrate well the principles of optimizing the use of scarce resources for the purpose of minimizing costs and maximizing returns.

†Popkin does attempt to improve on Schultz's analysis by taking into account the element of risk in peasant agriculture. Here he borrows heavily from Milton Friedman's class analysis (1948) of consumer choice under conditions of risk (in which "utility maximizing" carries with it calculated "gambles" and "insurance"). He also borrows from Michael Lipton's analysis (1968) of the nature of "rational" behavior when sheer survival, not profit, is the paramount consideration. In criticizing James Scott's substantivist analysis (1976), Popkin draws also on Marxist ideas. But his argument is at bottom a formalist one.

labor, where the family's own labor input cannot be readily disaggregated into unit labor costs, and where the farm's annual yield is a single "labor product" that cannot be readily disaggregated into units of income. Most of all, the peasant family farm produced for the satisfaction of the family's consumption wants, not for profit maximization.

Some 30 years later, the argument against the use of conventional economics to study peasant economies was joined, from a different angle, by Karl Polanyi. To Polanyi and his associates at Columbia University, the analytical concepts and methods of conventional economics are predicated above all on the existence of "price-making markets." The application of such concepts to premarket economies is in fact nothing more than the universalizing of "utilitarian rationalism," of the view of man as "utilitarian atom" out to "economize." In place of this kind of "formal" economics, which presupposes choice and the ready marketability of land, labor, and capital (all quantifiable in terms of money). Polanyi suggested the use of a "substantive" economics that would stress the social relationships in which economic behavior in premarket societies was "embedded." Relationships of "reciprocity" (as of mutual aid and obligation among kinship groupings) shaped economic behavior in the ancient world, not market relations and profit maximization. A separate and different approach to economics as "instituted process" was required for studying precapitalist economies (Polanyi et al. 1957; esp. Chaps. 12 and 13).

Polanyi's views found support among many economic anthropologists studying premarket subsistence communities and partly commercialized peasant communities. These "substantivists" (as they are sometimes called) have challenged the "formalists" (like Raymond Firth and Melville Herskovits), who led in advocating the application of the categories and analytical tools of conventional economics to the study of non-Western and preindustrial communities. The debates on just how and the extent to which conventional economics may or may not be applicable continue. (See Dalton 1969 and the accompanying commentaries for the range of issues involved.)

James Scott has elaborated on the implications of Chayanov's and Polanyi's analyses for our understanding of peasant mentality and political behavior. In *The Moral Economy of the Peasant: Rebellion and Subsistence in Southeast Asia* (1976), Scott argues that peasant economic behavior is guided by the principles of "risk avoidance" and "safety first," and by a "subsistence ethic" involving. "reciprocity" between "patron and client" of the same moral community.