Under the Red Flag: Rural Collectivization and Village Life during the Mao Years

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Introduction

This book explores how collectivization and the people’s communes reshaped the daily life of China’s countryside between 1949 and 1978. Rather than telling a story only from the perspective of national policy or aggregate outcomes, it follows the

transformations as they were lived: in fields and kitchens, at production team meetings, in village temples repurposed as grain depots, and in the intimate negotiations that bound cadres and peasants together. The chapters recover how campaigns designed in Beijing met the stubborn textures of local ecology, kinship, and custom, and how villagers responded—sometimes embracing the promises of equality and public works, sometimes bending rules to protect families, and sometimes suffering devastating losses.

The study is microhistorical in method. It centers on a small constellation of villages and production brigades whose experiences illuminate the larger system. By narrowing the lens, we can see patterns otherwise blurred in national averages: the distribution of work points within a single team; the way a brigade accountant quietly adjusted tallies in a lean year; the subtle relocations of ritual life from temple forecourts to household altars; and the moments when a slogan became a song, a rule became a routine, or a policy became a bargaining chip. The micro scale makes visible the social mechanisms through which collectivization took root and was continually remade.

The analysis is grounded in three kinds of sources. First are oral histories with former team leaders, brigade accountants, canteen cooks, barefoot doctors, militia captains, schoolteachers, and ordinary villagers. Their voices capture the cadence of work and the moral vocabularies with which people judged fairness, authority, and survival. Second are village and township archives: work-point registers, production team account books, procurement ledgers, minutes of criticism-and-self-criticism meetings, and reports filed upward to communes and counties. Third are policy documents and campaign directives that framed local action. Read together, these sources allow us to triangulate between memory and record, to identify silences and exaggerations, and to place personal narratives within the shifting architecture of Mao-era rural governance.

Several claims emerge from this evidence. Collectivization did more than reorganize production; it reordered social relations, gender roles, and ritual life. Work points became a currency of moral judgment as much as labor remuneration, teaching villagers how to speak the language of contribution and class. Campaign governance—its surges of mobilization, its targets and quotas—generated impressive feats of cooperative labor but also brittle incentives, leading to strategic compliances and hidden negotiations with cadres. Commune culture—songs, slogans, wall newspapers, model operas—did not simply indoctrinate; it offered shared repertoires that villagers appropriated for local ends, from organizing irrigation drives to mediating disputes. At the same time, the costs were profound: the famine years, the suppression and rechanneling of ritual life, and the tightening of surveillance that narrowed the space for dissent.

Chronologically, the book tracks pivotal phases: land reform and the redefinition of

property and power; the move from mutual-aid teams to lower and higher agricultural producers’ cooperatives; the Great Leap Forward and the famine that followed; recovery and consolidation in the early 1960s; the Cultural Revolution as it unfolded in villages; and the slow unspooling of collective structures in the late 1970s. Yet the narrative does not assume a uniform timeline. Ecologies differed; kinship structures varied; county leaders had distinct styles. By attending to these differences, the chapters show why the same policy could yield divergent outcomes across neighboring brigades.

Methodologically, the book takes seriously both the ethical complexities of memory and the materiality of records. Interviewees speak across decades, their recollections shaped by subsequent reforms, shifting public narratives, and private reckonings. Archival documents bear the imprint of incentives to overfulfill targets or minimize losses. Rather than privileging one source over the other, the chapters place them in dialog. When numbers and memories diverge, the gap itself becomes evidence—of fear, hope, or the performative demands of the Maoist state.

The payoff of this approach is twofold. For scholars of modern China, it provides a grounded account of how national campaigns were localized and how villagers built repertoires of adaptation within constraint. For readers concerned with the politics of development and state-making more broadly, it offers a case of high-modernist ambition meeting the granular realities of rural society. The communes have long since dissolved, but many of their institutions—work assignments through collectives, the hukou system’s boundaries of belonging, habits of campaign-style governance—left durable traces. Understanding those traces clarifies both the social costs paid and the capacities created in the Mao years, and why the countryside responded to the post-1978 reforms as it did.

Finally, a word on scope. This is not a comprehensive national history, nor a tribunal. It is a study of lived experience under the red flag: how people worked, ate, worshipped, learned, quarreled, organized, and remembered. The chapters that follow move from production to ritual, from gender to youth culture, from famine to health, from law without courts to art without markets. Together they reconstruct a rural world remade by collectivization—its promises, its perils, and its persistent human improvisation.

CHAPTER ONE: Revolution Comes to the Village: Land Reform, 1949–1952

The village of Dazhai, nestled in a valley of the Taihang Mountains, had seen plenty of hardship long before the soldiers arrived. Its terraces, carved into hillsides over

centuries, produced just enough millet and sorghum to keep families alive through good years and leave them hungry through bad ones. By the autumn of 1947, when the first work teams from the Chinese Communist Party appeared at the village gate, Dazhai's residents had already endured Japanese occupation, warlord levies, and the chaos of civil war. What they had not yet encountered was a revolution that claimed to speak in their name, one that would ask them to betray their neighbors, reassess the worth of their entire lives, and accept a new vocabulary for understanding who they were.

On the eve of "liberation" in 1949, China's countryside was not a blank canvas awaiting the brushstrokes of Communist policy. Rural society had its own deep structures, its own hierarchies, and its own stubborn logic. Land ownership was highly concentrated in many regions: in parts of central and eastern China, landlords and rich peasants controlled upward of half the cultivated land, while in poorer northern and western areas tenancy rates were lower and holdings more fragmented. The patterns varied enormously by province, by county, even by valley. What most villages shared was a social vocabulary of status rooted in land, lineage, and patronage. A landlord's authority rested not only on acreage but on his ability to sponsor local temples, settle disputes, lend seed, and provide a buffer between ordinary families and the demands of the outside world—whether that outside world was an imperial magistrate, a county tax collector, or, increasingly, a Nationalist conscription officer.

The Communist Party did not invent rural grievance. For decades, Nationalist officials, wartime observers, and foreign journalists had documented the grinding poverty of the Chinese countryside, the crushing weight of rent and debt, and the periodic eruptions of violence when desperation overcame deference. What the Party offered was something more organized and more dangerous than earlier protests: a framework for understanding exploitation as a system, a set of categories for identifying who was responsible, and a promise that the world could be reordered. Land reform, the Party declared, would not be charity. It would be justice, administered by the very people who had suffered.

The mechanics of this justice arrived in stages. Before a village saw a single cadre, months of intelligence gathering typically preceded the arrival of a work team. Local Party branches, underground networks, and sympathetic villagers provided information about landholdings, family histories, and the temperaments of prominent landlords. When the work team finally came—usually a dozen or so outsiders, young and earnest, carrying bedding rolls and printed manuals—they set up in a borrowed room and began the slow, painstaking work of winning trust. They helped with the harvest. They ate what villagers ate. They asked questions, listened to complaints, and identified the handful of poorest households who had the least to lose and the most to gain from upheaval.

These "poor peasant associations" became the organizational backbone of early land

reform. Their members were not chosen for administrative skill. They were chosen for grievance. A farmhand who had worked ten years for a landlord and owned nothing but a set of patched clothes. A widow who had lost her husband's half-acre to a moneylender's compound interest. A young man whose family had been humiliated at a village festival by a landlord's son. Their stories, once private and whispered, were now given a stage.

The earliest sessions were relatively modest. A poor peasant might stand before a gathering in a landlord's courtyard and describe, in halting detail, the year his daughter had been taken as a servant in lieu of rent. Others would nod, murmur agreement, add their own fragments. These "speak bitterness" meetings were the signature ritual of early land reform, and they served multiple purposes simultaneously. They gave voice to real suffering. They created a shared narrative of exploitation that bound strangers together as a class. And they produced, almost incidentally, a detailed inventory of the landlord's holdings, debts, and abuses—information the work team would later use to draw up redistribution plans.

The categories that structured these sessions came from a vocabulary as foreign to most villagers as any classical text. The Party's rural classification system divided the peasantry into landlords, rich peasants, middle peasants, poor peasants, and hired laborers, each defined by the proportion of income derived from exploitation versus one's own labor. In practice, these lines were blurry and often bitterly contested. A family that rented out a single room to a migrant worker might find itself classified as a "rich peasant" and subjected to struggle. A merchant's son who happened to own ten mou of land could be recast as a feudal lord. The classifications were political acts dressed up as sociological analysis, and the consequences—confiscation, public humiliation, sometimes execution—were severe enough to motivate vigorous self-defense.

Villagers scrambled to reinterpret their own histories in the new idiom. Some landlords dispersed land to relatives before work teams arrived, hoping to fall below the threshold. Others cultivated friendships with particular cadres, offering gifts, favors, and daughters in a bid to be reclassified downward. Poor peasants, for their part, sometimes stretched the truth about their origins, claiming greater destitution than they had actually known, because the legitimacy of the entire campaign depended on the existence of a clear enemy. Without a recognizable landlord, who would be the villain of the story?

The struggle session was the dramatic peak of land reform and, for many participants, its most psychologically transformative moment. In its most intense form, it involved dragging a landlord or rich peasant before the village, forcing him to kneel on the dirt, and inviting the crowd to enumerate his crimes. The format varied by region and by the temperament of the work team. In some villages, the proceedings were relatively restrained: accusations were read aloud, the accused was asked to confess, and a

redistribution plan was announced. In others, violence erupted—beatings with clubs, scalding with boiling water, torture designed to extract confessions of hidden wealth. Cadres sometimes struggled to contain the fury they had unleashed; once a crowd learned that it could strike a man with impunity, the impulse to punish could outrun any Party directive.

It would be a mistake, however, to see the violence as entirely spontaneous or purely the product of Party manipulation. Old scores were being settled with new permission. A neighbor who had long resented the Wang family's slightly larger courtyard now had a vocabulary to explain why his resentment was justified—not petty jealousy but class consciousness. A daughter-in-law who had been mistreated by her husband's mother could reframe her suffering as feudal oppression. The Party provided the grammar; the village supplied the particular nouns and verbs.

The redistribution that followed was logistically complex and often contentious. Land was seized from landlords and rich peasants, pooled, and then divided among households according to a formula that took into account family size, labor capacity, and previous landlessness. In principle, the process was egalitarian. In practice, it was shaped by the same kinship networks, personal loyalties, and local hierarchies that had governed village life for centuries. Work team members were not naive about this. Many recorded in their diaries and reports a sense of bewilderment at the speed with which old elites reasserted influence under new titles. A former landlord's son who proved literate might become the village's first post-reform accountant. A middle peasant with a gift for public speaking could emerge as the de facto leader of the poor peasant association.

The land itself, once redistributed, did not transform as dramatically as the rhetoric suggested. Many new holders lacked seed, tools, draft animals, or the technical knowledge to make the most of their plots. In the southern rice regions, where growing seasons were long and irrigation systems elaborate, fragmented holdings made coordinated water management harder. In the north, where dry farming dominated, the problem was less coordination than sheer scarcity: there might simply not be enough rain to make redistributed plots productive. Some families celebrated their new land for a season and then, finding themselves still poor, began to reconsider whether the revolution had delivered on its promises.

The Party was alert to these difficulties, and it responded with characteristic organizational energy. Mutual aid teams—the simplest form of cooperative labor—were encouraged as early as 1951, allowing families to pool draft animals and labor for plowing and harvest without surrendering ownership of their newly acquired land. These teams were modest in scale, often organized among relatives or neighbors, and they did not yet challenge the fundamental unit of the household farm. Their significance lay less in their economic impact than in their ideological function: they introduced the principle of collective labor as natural, desirable, and worthy of

emulation.

Women's participation in land reform was shaped by a double revolution. The Party's marriage law of 1950, which outlawed concubinage, child betrothal, and the sale of women, intersected with land reform in complicated ways. In some villages, women who had been sold as concubines or child brides suddenly found themselves eligible for land allotments as independent household members. In others, local cadres—many of whom privately disapproved of the marriage law—found ways to maintain patriarchal arrangements while paying lip service to equality. The gap between policy and practice would remain a persistent theme in the decades ahead, but the early land reform period planted an important seed: the idea that a woman's labor and her personhood were legitimate subjects of state concern.

Religious and ritual life was another early casualty, though the damage was neither uniform nor immediately apparent. Temples that had served as community centers, granaries, and sites of local governance were repurposed as meeting halls, schools, or offices for the new village committees. Ancestral tablets were removed, sometimes burned, sometimes quietly stashed behind a wall by families unwilling to destroy them outright. The work teams framed these acts as liberation from superstition, and some villagers genuinely welcomed the end of costly temple festivals and the crushing burden of funeral expenses. Others mourned in silence, sensing that something essential about communal life was being stripped away even as material conditions might improve.

By 1952, the Party declared land reform complete across most of China's rural areas. Official statistics suggested that roughly 47 million hectares had been redistributed to about 300 million people, a figure as staggering in its ambition as it was imprecise in its execution. The numbers obscured enormous regional variation: land reform in the newly liberated northwest proceeded differently from the violent campaigns of the southeast coast, where resistance was fiercer and the class lines more rigid. Yet the broad outlines were shared. A landlord class that had dominated the countryside for centuries was formally abolished. The household farm, now nominally owned by its cultivator, stood as the new foundation of rural life. And the Party had demonstrated, to villagers and to itself, that it could reach into the most intimate structures of daily existence and reshape them.

What the Party did not immediately do, however, was push further toward collectivization. The mutual aid teams that had sprouted during reform were allowed to grow at a pace determined largely by local enthusiasm and cadre pressure. Some villages experimented aggressively; others preserved their new household holdings with something close to devotion. The pause would not last. Within a few years, the logic of the revolution would demand that individual farms give way to something larger, more organized, and far more intrusive. But in these early years, the dominant mood in most villages was a mixture of relief, exhaustion, and cautious hope. Land

reform had been wrenching, sometimes terrifying, but for the poorest it had delivered something tangible: a plot of earth to call one's own. Whether that ownership would survive the next wave of transformation was a question no one in 1952 yet cared to ask.
