China's rural development challenges
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Chapter 2  China’s land reform 1368-1960s: Inequality and peasant-state struggles

Abstract:

As China has reached a critical stage of development marked by rising inequality, it is useful to reassess the trajectory of its reform to understand the lessons learnt from its past. Land reform is pivotal to social and political changes. It has been initiated by successive regimes whose wishes to cope with peasant rebellions and continue their reigns proved futile prior to the Communist rule. The failures of consecutive rulers had much to do with their inability to address the fundamental issues of social structures and organizations that put the poor peasants on the margins of development. The stronghold of local power enmeshed in complex social and political relations was largely reversed by the land revolution led by the Communists at great costs in mobilizing mass support, which led to the use of radical measures to gain political control in the context of rural destitution and inequality. Land reform by the regimes took different forms in the pursuit of hegemonic control rather than meeting the interests of the peasantry. This chapter discusses the underlying challenges of China’s land reform and the issues of poverty, power and institutions that continue to constrain peasant choice over the reform trajectory. It posits that the creation of genuine peasant-centred land institutions would be indispensable to tackle the needed changes in poverty and inequality in the Chinese history.

1. Introduction

A government which permits exploitation of the mass of its fellow citizens... may make a brave show, but it is digging its own grave. A government which grapples boldly with the land question will have little to fear either from foreign imperialism or from domestic disorder. It will have as its ally the confidence and good will of half-a-million villages (Tawney, 1939, cited in Wong, 1973: xxiv).

Tawney’s thought-provoking standpoint on China’s reform has far-reaching implications for understanding the role of the land in China’s arduous history.
underpinned by social, economic and political inequality and its associated mass struggles for economic and political transformation. Indeed, as Tawney rightly predicted, only the Chinese Communist Party was successful in instituting land reform as the feudal land exploitative relations were dismantled to a large extent (see Wong, 1973). In defeating the Nationalist government, the Party-led land reform played an essential role in social and political mobilization characterized by unprecedented land redistribution, which stood in huge contrast to the land reforms undertaken by previous regimes.

Yet, the Party-led land reform, according to historical facts, was a rather mild programme in general, contradictory to many claims of its radical features (Wolf, 1969). This means that land reform has always been inextricably linked with social and political relations structured by complex vested interests of different actors, which can either facilitate or constrain any reform agenda. In other words, the revolutionary land reform aimed at equal land distribution might not achieve outcomes as envisaged by the reformers, since it was hard to crush the then social fabric of the Chinese countryside. Understanding land and society relations from historical perspectives in this chapter can help “demystify” the social and political underpinnings of the China’s historical land reform measures and assess the extent to which they have served the interests of the Chinese peasantry. This can be useful in the explication of the changing land policies and institutions in contemporary China. As Perry (2008) contends, few of us now take a renewed look at the past reforms in relation to today’s problems.

The grand victory of the communist revolution, as the next chapter shows, has not led to rapid rural development in the vast Chinese countryside. As China has reached a critical stage of development whereby land tenure reform is being contested by policy-makers and researchers, there is little attention paid to the past. Despite some degree of accomplishment, land reform has never been a completed mission for the Chinese state. The system of land tenure has not become a major impetus for sound solutions to chronic poverty of the country, despite the fact that it is crucial to rural development, governance and social equity. The waves of reforms have not enabled the poor peasants to efficiently organize themselves to optimize their land use.

It is impossible to provide a detailed account of China’s land reform history in this chapter. Yet, it is useful to throw light on the major issues concerning the history that spans from the Ming Dynasty to the early communist reign. For the first time in Chinese history, the Ming and Qing dynasties saw the sprouts of capitalism whereby land was the crux matter. In fact, throughout Chinese history prior to the
Communists’ rule, land had been private property that could be easily transacted. Distinct from the rest of the world, the Chinese peasants’ access to land was mobile, which means that they could climb up the higher social stratum, for instance, to become scholar-gentry through the examination system. Moreover, gentry and peasantry were often linked through kinship, which added complexity to the rural social structure (Wolf, 1973). Thus, a renewed look at this period of land and society relations can reveal the linkages of varying land reform agenda designed by successive regimes, which all had to deal with the complex social and political structures and relations inherited from previous states.

Starting from this angle it would be interesting to discuss the multi-faceted land relations, peasant struggles and their linkages with the economic and political pressures on the land. Land distribution, utilization, agricultural production and peasant livelihoods are inextricably linked with unequal land relations and small-scale farming practices. The study of land tenure reform in the Ming and Qing is an attempt to explore the complex relationships and struggles among different actors—landlords, peasants and the state. It seeks to demonstrate the complex land relations and the social and political meanings and implications of the reforms. The stronghold of land tenure is attributed to an incomplete economic transformation as the so-called feudalism had predominated the Chinese society and economy. This approach would provide a context for the study of the logic and continuum of land reform in contemporary China. And it helps understand the contradictions of the land reforms by the Nationalist and Communist governments.

This chapter aims at stimulating a re-thinking of the China’s land reform history pertaining to the rationale and the institutions needed for the state to gain its legitimacy over the masses. It concludes that land reform is not to be exaggerated for its alleviation of chronic rural poverty. Rather, it is the inequality between the Chinese peasantry and the dominant rural land elites and the state that perpetuates the constraints to the pursuit of more meaningful peasant-centred land tenure reform, which is further compounded by the mounting social and economic pressures on the peasants who rely on tiny land plots for subsistence. Although the start of the communist revolution was marked by land redistribution for an all-round equitable and democratic society, it had far more to accomplish in order to cultivate genuine peasant-centred initiatives to address those fundamental constraints to sustainable rural development. Overall, land reform serves the state’s need of political control and social stability rather than meeting the increasing economic, social and political demands of the peasantry.
2. Land reform in the Ming (1368-1644) and Qing (1644-1911) Dynasties

China has been predominantly agrarian especially prior to 1949. Land tenure reforms in China dating back to a few centuries prior to the Ming Dynasty explain a critical fact that land and labour had been extremely important to peasant livelihoods and the rural economy. Since the Ming, the land-labour ratio tended to decrease dramatically, which indicates that with population increase, land had become a scarce resource for man to rely on. The population grew from 65-80 million at the beginning of the Ming to 540 million by the middle of the twentieth century (Perkins, 1969: 16, cited in Lardy, 1983). The incompatible land and labour relations can be seen as an underlying factor for land policy changes throughout Chinese history. In particular, by the end of the Ming, the per capita acreage of farmland dropped substantially, and to a new record low in the 19th century.

Increased population pressures on the land caused land shortages and land fragmentation. It is argued that land fragmentation had much to do with the process of buying and selling land. At the beginning of the 18th century, royal and government land accounted for 27 percent of the total land, temple land 14 percent, military colonization land 9 percent, and the rest was in the hands of private holders—individuals or clan corporations. Rights to private land could be bought and sold. Most peasants had access to the land either through inheritance or through a complex set of leases and rents (Wolf, 1973: 106). Due to serious shortages of land, demand was much stronger than supply, resulting in a sellers' market in China. In the Ming and Qing, land fragmentation became severer than in the past (Chao, 1986). It appeared that it mattered more to the poor smallholders and tenants; whereas to the landlords, it was not a major issue, for they managed to enlarge their land holdings by amalgamating those of the smallholders. The latter, in many cases, had to give up their land due to various economic pressures including the burden of paying taxes. As a result, land fragmentation for the poor and land concentration in the hands of the mighty few including the landlords appear to be a major factor for peasant-landlordism or peasant-state struggles. Internal rifts among the gentry, rich and poor peasants invoked by the changing economic conditions, for instance, the injection of capital into the countryside, was a major trigger for repeated peasant rebellions and periods of social and geo-political disintegration followed by new cycles of consolidation and integration (Wolf, 1973).
2.1 Basic land relations

In the Ming and Qing dynasties, as previous feudalist regimes, land was the economic core of society, which had much to do with ownership and leasehold rights between landowners and their subordinates. There were diverse types of landownership patterns. Land could be owned by landlords, smallholders, soldiers and gentry. The land of the gentry was allocated by the emperor and increasingly turned into private land. The landlord group consisted of empire officials or gentry and ordinary peasant landlords; the former having more political power and better social status than the latter. This type of land tenure was coupled by land reallocations by the emperor, whereby the royal family and favoured officials had the privilege of direct enclosure of large parcels of land. After them, came the officials and soldiers who were granted land of varying sizes according to their rank (Li, 2007; Lin & Chen, 1995). The definitions of the terms concerning land tenure in late imperial China are provided in Box 2.1:

Box 2.1 Definitions on land tenure pattern in late imperial China

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Managerial landlords</td>
<td>Employed 3 or more long-term labourers and directly managed part of their estate and sold part of surplus product for profit. Also engaged in rural business enterprises, and most of them lent money at high interest rates. Many of them rented out parts of their estate.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rentier landlords</td>
<td>Managed none of their estate directly and rented out at least 50 mu to tenants.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rich peasants</td>
<td>Employed wage labourers and engaged in commerce, handicrafts and usury, but employed fewer labourers and farmed less land than the managerial landlords.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gentry</td>
<td>An important state group in the scholar-official category. Referred to those who had qualified for office in the imperial bureaucracy by passing imperial examinations. They formed the core of the local elite in each district. They were often absentee landlords, but not all were large landowners. And not all landowners were gentry. By the end of the 19th century, together with their families, they comprised an estimated 7.5 million people or 2% of the total population of the country.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Long-term labourers</td>
<td>Employed by the landlords to work from one month up to one year. They frequently owned small plots of land, but sometimes owned nothing at all. Wage was their main income—half paid in cash, the other half in the form of meals.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Short-term labourers</td>
<td>Employed during the busy seasons in special rural labour markets, usually in the local market town. They owned small plots of land, and income was derived from their land and wages as well as from secondary occupations such as being peddlers, stone-cutters and mat-weavers, etc.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

There were complex land relationships among different groups. The landlords especially those with close links with the empire had more economic and political privileges over the others as they were levied fewer taxes and required to contribute little labour to the state. In many cases, these burdens were transferred to the poor peasants. The latter were forced to give up their land to the landlord in order to avoid the heavy taxes imposed on them. In cases of being indebted to the landlord in terms of unpaid loans, they were more likely to become tenants. This even started in the pre-Ming era. During the mid-Ming period, the landlord managed to profit from amalgamating the land of poor peasants, which had actually adversely affected land sales, although land sales had started on a small scale. Those smallholders were also affected as they could not sustainably maintain their land and property.

According to Chao (1986), population growth caused more and more peasants to become tenants in view of scarce economic opportunities. This means that it was not difficult for the landlords to absorb a bigger number of tenants. The tenants’ rights and social status gradually gained legal recognition. As a result, the leasehold system became less unfavourable to the tenants, whereby the landlords increasingly lost strong control over their tenants who had gained more freedom to move in and out of the land and thus some became relatively free hired labourers. To a certain extent, the tenants’ freedom gained was conducive for the sprouting of capitalism because of the possibility for them to invest in land for their own interests. Being wage labourers meant more savings for their own investments (Li, 2007).

### 2.2 Circularity of peasant struggles and land reforms

However, one should not underestimate the harsh land relations and struggles and take for granted that economy could do the justice for the disadvantaged. The Chinese social structures underpinned by the predominance of the state and its associated landlordism and gentry over the masses can be seen as a major factor in peasant struggles. The trajectory of land tenure reform from the founding of the Chinese empire right through the demise of the Qing Dynasty clearly shows that social inequality and injustice between the two major groups posed a threat to social and political stability and economic development.

This argument contradicts the claims that land tax systems in both dynasties were exploitive oppressive forces against the peasantry, which constituted the primary causes for peasant rebellions. China has long been an agrarian society marked by intensive farming carried out largely by the peasantry. As the population grew, it was extremely difficult for the Chinese peasants to feed themselves on their tiny plots of
land. As a result, they had to expand their cultivated land and enhance grain yields substantially at the same time in order to meet their basic needs (Wang, 1973: 6-8). As the expansion of land acreage reached a limit and the asymmetry between land and population growth persisted, land struggles for subsistence needs became more pressing in rural China.

It is important to note that the Chinese imperial regimes’ land tenure reforms were partly to compromise peasant appeals for equal land redistribution and exemption of varied duties and partly to maintain their power and control over the local landlordism and peasantry. Strikingly, all these reforms had one thing in common—redressing social and economic inequality through so-called egalitarian principles and methods, which were highlighted by streamlining tax and labour obligations of the tenants and small-scale land redistribution. To a certain extent, these measures were useful in curtaining the exploitive power of the landlords. During Ming’s rule, for instance, the “One Whip Law” was a major instrument in synergizing varied taxes and obligations and converting them to land-based obligations to the empire. As a result, peasants gained more freedom of choice in land investment and business activities (Chinese History Textbook Net, 2009)

The outcomes of peasant struggles were prominent, but with the downside that the land was left by the landlord unattended. To address this issue, the early Qing Dynasty promulgated relevant measures to redistribute these lands among the peasants with the aim of ensuring tax collection and consolidating its control in the countryside. It even issued land certificates to the people who were encouraged to till the land on a permanent basis. On the other hand, the land forcefully taken by the landlord was now returned to the original owners who were obliged to pay land taxes and their landownership was recognized by law. Interestingly again, in order to guarantee income from tax collection, the empire did not have the intention or it was simply impossible to abolish landlordism. Instead, it recognized their legal privileges, while punishing and restricting their illegal behaviour. Moreover, the regime was directly involved in enclosures of the land under their direct jurisdiction and forged new privileged landlordism.

When peasant struggles resurfaced, in 1712 the regime promulgated a considerably more relaxed rural taxation system aimed at reducing the taxes based on the number of household members. This meant that in spite of an increase in the number of household members, the household was no longer required to pay more taxes. This policy further led to a combined land and labour taxation system that stipulated the levying of land tax that subsumed poll tax and labour corvée. To many poor households with little land, it was a relaxation of their burden as they would not
need to pay more taxes on additional household members. Consequently, they gained more freedom and time to spend on other economic activities. This policy was seen as a major reform that abolished the population tax imposed by previous regimes, which to a certain extent liberated the poor. On the other hand, it put more pressure on the landlords to pay land taxes, which set limits to land concentration and thus eased social tensions. In a nutshell, it was a further improvement to the “One Whip Law” implemented during the mid-Ming period. It is also noted that the two systems resulted in the inability of the empires to collect sufficient taxes from the landlords and the peasants whose struggles had a negative impact on the national economy and land utilization.

Nevertheless, the limited success of the land reforms did not trigger a rapid development of more equitable land relations. Prior to the demise of the dynasties, land became re-concentrated in the hands of the mighty few, whose exploitation of the tenants further deepened their conflicts, obstructed the development of a market economy and moreover, weakened the state’s control of the local landlords. History repeated itself—no matter what measures were undertaken in the land reforms to redress inequality in land relations, initial successes always ended up with the reappearance of social and economic inequality. To a certain extent, the massive protests and the deposition of the Ming were coupled with agricultural development as demonstrated by the increases in food production and commercialization. This made land reappear as a major form of property, which was sought by those seeking to make profits from it. Land sales involved business investors who hardly existed in the past. In times of aggravated poverty and natural disasters, they provided high-interest loans to the peasants who mortgaged their land and had to sell it at lower prices when they could not repay the loans. Some of the investors eventually became new tenants. As a result, land titles frequently changed hands, and ownership gradually concentrated among the big buyers who were found to use force to obtain the land at times (Li, 2007). This means that the series of land reforms did not bring about desired changes to the peasants who became even more impoverished.

The Qing Dynasty also saw the re-accumulation of land by the landlords. The latter especially represented by the royal family members and the gentry made many peasants their tenants in the mid-19th century. Once again, the high tributes paid to the landlords by these tenants caused their deep discontent with and hatred for their masters. The peasants desired a better life based on equalization of land rights distribution and its associated economic obligations within the entire social stratum. As a result, it was also during this period that the state encountered the harshest peasant protest known as the Heavenly Kingdom Revolutionary Movement or the
Taiping Rebellion (1850-64). This movement promulgated the most comprehensive
land reform agenda in Chinese history—the Heavenly Kingdom Land Law featuring
land equity for the peasantry including women in 1853. Agriculture was to be
organized around units of public and private farms cultivated by the peasants.
Moreover, it envisioned a new social order against the rule of the Chinese gentry and
their ideology and Confucianism. Some of its doctrines were even developed by the
Chinese Communists. Thus, the Taiping Rebellion is regarded as the forerunner of
modern movements. However, the movement itself paid less attention in improving
the lot of the peasantry than organizing it to suit the needs of the new social order, in
which the peasants would remain as the main burden-bearer of the envisaged
society. As a result, the agrarian reform programme was not realized, for it could not
count on the loyalty of the peasants (Michael, 1966). Despite the failure of the
uprising which was brutally suppressed, the recognition of the system’s resistance to
the feudalist land relations was far-reaching. With a call for comprehensive equitable
land redistribution, it aimed at building a better society based on egalitarianism. This
ideology suited the best interests of the peasants at that time. However, it also
received considerable criticism on its idealistic and unrealistic approach to
development and social justice. But for Lenin, feudalism was the largest barrier to
capitalism; thus, dismantling the feudalist land relations was seen as the most crucial
step towards capitalism (Chinese History Textbook Net, 2009).

Therefore, land reforms were implemented by each regime in a cycle of
reinforcement rather than separate and irrelevant initiatives. Although population
pressure and the rule of economy did count, more attention should be paid to the
formation of land relations itself and the state reaction to it. It is very difficult to
delineate land relations due to the lack of systematic analysis based on sound
historical facts. Yet, it can be argued that peasant land struggles and state-led land
tenure reforms had always been circular, as history repeated itself. The vortex of
enmeshed struggles and reforms explains the failure of the two dynasties to adjust
imbalanced land relations through land distribution and taxation reform, among other
measures, primarily due to their inclination to economic measures rather than social
and political mobilization of the peasantry.

2.3 Changes in land relations

The preceding account of land relations, struggles and reforms illustrates a crucial
fact—limited land concentration and social fragmentation in the two dynasties.
Furthermore, households and their descent groups as social organizations
developed their own rules governing land use embedded in the institution of clans
and provided support and protection for its members. They divided their lands equally among all sons, so their lands were constantly broken up, and family status fell rapidly. In addition, traditional Chinese society was fluid. It was difficult for large landowners to consolidate their estates over many generations. Land concentration was actually a slow and hazardous process. For instance, to accumulate a few hundred mu of land could take a household no less than one hundred or a few hundred years over many generations. And even big landowners in the process could return to the status of small owner-peasants in the face of a rapid succession of household divisions coupled with poor land management. By the end of the 19th century, few landlords owned more than 10,000 mu (1,700 acres) (Wilkinson, 1978: 17; Menzies, 1994). This relatively low level of land accumulation was a further indication of the nature of land fragmentation and small-scale farming in general in the Chinese countryside as already discussed. For the imperial state, it was easier to impose taxes on the small peasant holders than the gentry. The formation of large landholdings had always been seen as a potential challenge to state domination in the Chinese countryside (Huang, 1985).

Land reforms and economic development had a profound impact on the changes in land relations. The collisions between land policy changes and traditional or customary land relations occurred and sometimes, rural communities' resistance to change was prominent. The Qing regime saw the customary land laws resting on kinship relations as barriers to the development of land markets. Since they gave preferences to priority parties—relatives, neighbours and other close affiliates over third parties, this meant that third parties were only allowed to buy the land not wanted by the other two groups. This was seen as an impediment to smooth market-oriented land transfers and a major contributor to land conflicts. As land sales increased, their abolishment was put on the empire's reform agenda. On the one hand, the removal of customary laws was aimed at protecting the interests of sellers to ensure that they could sell the land at favourable prices. On the other hand, it made it easier for landlords to buy the land. But it was seen as a move to make way for free land trading. However, the reform also met difficulties as it directly confronted the custom which held land as a symbol of close social affinities (Li, 2007). In addition, as traditional household or lineage-based groups became larger and larger, more and more divisions and resentments over inequitable distribution of land-related benefits further undermined the usefulness of these institutions and the role of customary law in community unity and development. Gradually, in many localities, these institutions disappeared (Menzies, 1994). The withering of customary law and institutions further disaggregated social bondage and mutual help.
Moreover, with the intensification of land commercialization, customary land laws had ceased to play an essential role in land transfers. The overall development of commercial agriculture and manufacturing contributed to the emergence of free labour and the transition to agricultural commercialization. However, during the Qing, the landlordism associated with the empire had not retreated, although it had less power than in the Ming in terms of its ability to seize land from the peasants and avoid land taxes. Extensive land was often accumulated in their hands and became a major source of their wealth. In addition, they gained lucrative profits through high-interest loan schemes. Although their relationships with their tenants were not as harsh as those found in the Ming, landlords maintained political and economic privileges as compared with the ordinary small landholders, and thus they controlled local politics (Li, 2007).

Land commercialization was firmly entrenched since the late 1700s as was evident in the inter-regional land sales. In the 1840s, it was additionally accumulated by the merchants who issued high-interest loans to poor peasants. In times of insolvency, the latter had no choice but to give up their land. The incentives of the merchants to do so also lay in land-induced investments in agriculture. This phenomenon did not indicate that individual peasants were worse off. In fact, many peasants became rich, so did the landlords. And some landlords even became gentry. With the advent of commercialization of foodstuff and development of cash crops, further group divisions among the peasants took place. Those poor small landholders became tenants, while some rich peasants and small landholders gained more development opportunities than the others. However, it is important to note that most small landholders were not able to get rich and were unable to keep even tiny plots of land in their hands (Li, 2007).

As some small landholders gained more land and managed to make continuous profits from their land, even in early Qing, the changes in agricultural production relationships between landlords and tenants took place. The social status of tenants improved in the Ming and Qing. More and more tenants had become wage labourers on the farm. In other words, the landlords had begun to realize that it would be more profitable to hire labour directly for agricultural production than having their land rented to tenants. With the growth in population and its associated improved labour availability, the tenants did not have to tie themselves to the land. At the same time, many gentry and landlords associated with the rulers would only consider how to expand their land area to increase their rents rather than improve agricultural efficiency and harvests. Many of them became absentee landlords as they left the countryside for the cities. Written contracts between the absentee landlords and the tenants began to provide the tenure security for the tenants. In many cases, the
latter even became the owner of the surface of the land he worked and could sell or mortgage it at will (Beattie, 1979).

In sum, the changed land relations in the Ming and Qing dynasties reflected the fact that the land tenure system gradually shifted from the predominant role of the feudal landlords to the increasing control of the peasantry over the land through tenancy and wage labour. As a result, agriculture had developed and contributed to the economic prosperity especially during the early Qing. Of course, this progress was also due to the improved policies of the regimes to give more power to the peasantry. However, they did not actually address the fundamental issue of landownership. Although the majority of the peasants had gained more political freedom and land rights than ever before, land was still controlled by the imperial state and landlordism. As the Qing regime represented the minority “Man” ethnic group, its policy measures to weaken the majority “Han” were seen as a strategy to restore order and strengthen their own control systems. Thus, it had contributed to the restoration and strengthening of the embedded feudal relations.

Change in land relations and the nature of landlordism and the stronghold of feudalist productive relations disarrayed the development of land markets and the agricultural economy. Although the overall trajectory of capitalist production was inevitable and even grew stronger, feudalist landlordism was continuously reproduced, which further slowed down agricultural development. The other important factor was the role of the state in safeguarding the interests of landlords and their power over the peasantry. The nature of feudalist production or landlordism had determined that China did not enter the normal phase of agricultural capitalism as in the West. As earlier mentioned, the reinstatement of the power of the landlords, gentry and the imperial state over the Chinese peasantry after peasant struggles and new land policies put in place further verified the stronghold of the rural social structure and relations in controlling the masses.

To contain rising conflicts between landlordism and the peasantry as well as the growing power of the former, the empire, as seen in all dynasties, tried to adjust land taxes and other related obligations of the landlords to undermine their power in order to help peasants gain certain equity in land rights. This made it difficult for the landlords to acquire more land and invest in it. The state managed to retain the status quo of the landlords in order to limit the power of the land gentry. The latter, however, had no interest in investing in land but gaining power from the land in their dealings with the state. In the Qing dynasty, the landed gentry never cared about how they could maximize land production. On the contrary, they just leased it to the tenants who tilled the land and paid their rents. Neither were they interested in
organizational and technological agricultural production. Although wage labour appeared, it played a minor role in land tenure arrangements. This is a major reason for the existence of the small landholding system in China. The institution of small landholding made the peasants extremely vulnerable to land-induced natural and economic risks. This may explain the often frequent peasant protests in Chinese history. All these factors further indicate the complex land relations and their associated slow agricultural development.

2.4 Land relations as class struggle?

Although the Ming and Qing dynasties saw landlordism as a major threat to political and social stability, the extent to which landlordism exerted its leverage is questionable. For many historians especially those with the inclination to the Marxist view on economic development, unequal social relations as a consequence of intensified class relations were the primary causes for peasant rebellions, which gathered the greatest momentum during the Qing. This claim is based on the identification of some primary landlords during that period (Chao, 1986). However, others disagree. The ruling class was claimed to be represented by the Chinese gentry, which was a tiny and mobile group. This group gained its wealth and influence entirely through its possession of formal educational qualifications and office, thus their status was not based on the holding of large landed estates (Beattie, 1979). As Chiang (1982) contends, according to the records of land registration in several localities\(^{12}\), most land was owned by peasants, and since the mid-Ming, there had been a trend towards diversification of landownership. This finding is further verified by Wilkinson (1978: 9), whose calculation of 200 villages in Shandong Province in 1900 shows that owner-peasants counted for 55 percent of the surveyed population, followed by 17.1 percent wage labourers, 16.9 percent tenants, 4.6 percent rich peasants, and only 3.8 percent landlords.

If the landlord group only constituted a small group in the Chinese countryside, one wonders about the factors that accounted for changes in land tenure. Concentration of landownership had much to do with the system of government taxes during this period. Land taxes, poll tax and labour corvée services were levied on the smallholders whose incomes from their tiny land plots made it extremely hard to meet the government’s demands. Instead, they would rather seek tax shelter from other large landowners by even donating their lands to the latter. But as already discussed, land taxation reforms had a major impact on land concentration, which

\(^{12}\) Farmland was required to be registered in Qing Dynasty. Each landowner had to register his land with the local government for tax assessment and ownership identification. A registration serial number was assigned to each plot and a survey map was included. See Kang Chao 1986.
was less important for land distribution after the 15th century. Economic factors mattered. During the Ming and Qing, the growing commercial activities in urban China and low economic returns in farm production had caused many wealthy land owners to become less interested in land investments. Many large landlords left their homes for cities and left their lands to smallholders. By the early 19th century, the Chinese countryside had become predominated by smallholders—peasant owners and petty landlords, who owned a little more land than well-off peasants (Elvin, 1973).

Coupled with the exodus of the landlords to the cities was the injection of capital into the countryside by the merchants who began to purchase land for their investments. The land sellers were those smallholders who failed to earn enough income from their lands. Many argue that this phenomenon led to the concentration of land in the hands of the merchants. However, some hold that the growth of commerce virtually caused many disincentives in landownership among merchants. There was also a diversion of capital from rural land markets to the urban sector (Elvin, 1973). There is a lack of consensus on whether this trend would have facilitated land concentration. But given the nature of land fragmentation and the degree of land smallholdings, it can be seen that both commercialization and the inflow of capital into the rural areas tended to disperse what would otherwise have been concentrated landownership. Farmland in traditional China was gradually owned by increasing numbers of small- and medium-sized holders. Furthermore, as land was so dispersed and fragmented, direct investment might not be too conducive for the landlords, some of whom would rather reserve plots of land for their own purposes and lease the rest to others. As a result, tenant farming was prevalent in the 16th century. Chao provides a sample case illustrating the fact that landlordism was not a major issue. In his study of two villages, in 1862 13.4% of the households had no land; 56.7% had less than 3 mu and might have to rent some land to earn an income. About 25% of the households that owned 3-15 mu may have been self-sufficient. And only 5.7% had properties exceeding 40 mu. None of Chao’s surveyed households was deemed as landlords (Chao, 1986: 117).

In short, many claim that over a thousand years or so, the demise of extensive landownership by natural forces as already described without much influence from various land equalization policies imposed by successive governments. It is incorrect to state that the remaining groups could constitute a social class. In fact, those who were called landlords in the early 20th century in the Republic era were small- and medium-sized holders. Political reasons accounted for that classification. Peasant rebellions were never the exclusive work of any one social class or group in Chinese society because the peasants were not the only actors in the movements. Other groups like the intelligentsia played a key role in organizing the struggles. Although
they might represent peasant interests, most of the movements were not initiated by the peasants themselves. Rather, the organizers could be from other social groups, who had broader interests than the immediate needs of the peasantry. Thus, it is simplistic to view these movements as articulate class struggles. According to Hsiao (1967: 511), ordinary Chinese peasants have just one dominant desire--sufficient means to keep their families alive by possessing a piece of land and all that it yields. Whenever a movement promised them land redistribution, they followed. This salient argument refers to the politicized nature of past peasant rebellions. As Hsiao (1967) argues, “the phrase ‘peasant revolution’ that has gained favour in some quarters may be useful or indispensable to propaganda purposes but it can hardly withstand objective historical analysis” (also see Wolf, 1973; Michael, 1966).

The overestimated role of landlords as a social class is further evident in the land relations. Although tension and animosity did exist between the landlords and their tenants and farm labourers, again such a relationship cannot be exaggerated. Since mid-Ming, more and more peasants became tenant-servants and wage labourers (many of them were slaves before), whose rights were actually protected by the government. Moreover, many were willing to beg the landlords to accept them sometimes even without payment. As many landlords were gentry themselves, the phenomenon whereby peasants submitted themselves to the gentry was called “commendation”. The following description is noteworthy:

“There is a common practice nowadays among elite families in the Kiangnan area. As soon as one has been appointed to an official position, commoners would rush to his door, a practice known as tou kao. Sometimes the number of persons can reach several thousands. The same was true in Honan: In Kuang-shan county, as soon as someone passed the provincial examination (for the civil service), people, in tens and hundreds would come to commend their land and ask to be taken as slaves” (Chao, 1986: 155).

This interesting case further underlines the fact that population increase in the Ming and Qing contributed to the formation of changing land relations. As more and more people entered the labour market, an oversupply of labour could lead to deterioration in both wages and legal rights of the farm tenants and workers. With increasing population and rural poverty, it was not uncommon that collection of taxes by landlords became difficult, which was worsened by rent seeking, corrupt local officials. Chinese rulers and law simply perceived this as an economic phenomenon rather than class struggle. Their policy changes, as seen in the aforementioned sections, mainly were reflections of the use of economic tools to address the wider
social, political and development issues. Although the measures were effective to some degree, they might not touch on the root problems of social and economic inequalities in land relations. Here, the issue of class struggle needs some clarification. Nevertheless, due to a lack of solid and consistent data, it is hard to ascertain the extent to which Chinese society was structured on class relations.

Furthermore, Tawney (1966) cautions the use of the term class. As he points out, the Chinese history of peasant riots was not the consequence of the so-called mal-distribution of landed property. China did not have a powerful landed aristocracy with *de facto* control over the lion’s share of the land; nor was there a huge landless peasantry. Rather the basis of their contradictions and conflicts was the fact that the peasants had nothing more than tiny land plots to cultivate. In this sense, they should be called propertyed proletariat. Their impoverishment was further complicated by rising population, a lack of alternative opportunities and the exploitation of the landlords, usurers and speculators as well as the state. All these factors contributed to peasant rebellions.

However, Fei (1980) argues that the concept of class is still relevant with the gentry and peasantry constituting two distinct classes. The former 20% of the population was maintained by owning land and having political access to officialdom. Mobility between the two classes was rather limited, as the existence of kinship groups of the gentry provided mutual security and protection (also see Ho, 1962). Irrespective of whether this finding is true, it can be seen that the formation of a local elite with the exclusion of poor peasants had a profound impact on the livelihoods and land relations in particular. Land was still perceived by the local elite as an essential form of security for wealth accumulation and social mobility (Beattie, 1979). As the rural population was stratified into diverse groups with unequal political, social and economic status, understanding the discrepancies of interests between the rulers and the masses and thus tackling these fundamental rural development problems were not dealt with effectively by the Qing. Failure to do so had contributed partially to its demise (Hsiao, 1967). As a result, the patterns of land tenure could only survive to the next stage of the Chinese history—the Republic era.

3. **Landed poverty and failure of land reform in the Nationalist era**

In the aftermath of the demise of the Qing Dynasty brought about by the Chinese Revolutionary Army in 1911 when Sun Yat-Sen was elected the first President of the Republic of China, rural China was in a state of destitution. Agricultural development
was impossible due to a lack of capital and the overt reliance on traditional farming techniques. For instance, in 1918, about 50% of the peasants were occupying owners, 30% were tenants and 20% owned part of their land while renting the rest. Land fragmentation and small-scale farming continued. Farming was virtually a kind of gardening (Tawney, 1966: 34, 46). Those wealthy landowners might possess enough means to provide the capital, but their interests mainly fell within the domain of rent collection and tax evasion. When they had extra capital, they used it to acquire more land rather than spending it to improve farm conditions and the livelihoods of the tenants (Hsiao, 1967). Population pressures further deteriorated the stagnating agriculture, which was struggling to feed the burgeoning population. The Nationalist government realized these problems and passed measures for the creation of agricultural banks, credit societies and other cooperative organizations. These institutions were deemed necessary to help the peasantry, but they did not succeed due to various economic and political constraints (Tawney, 1966).

By the 1930s private ownership was the dominant feature of land tenure and inequality in landownership was prominent. It is estimated that 70% of the households owned less than 15 mu, which constituted less than 30% of the cultivated land. The households that owned more than 50 mu only accounted for 5%, which is 34% of the cultivated land. Only 1.75% of the cultivated land was owned by households with 1000 mu or more. Large regional variations in landownership distribution and tenancy were also seen as a stumbling block to balanced development. Central and southern China had more prevalent land concentration and tenancy than the north. In particular, high-level of land tenancy was mostly found in the south—the Lower Yangzi and Pearl River Delta, which had the most fertile land and commercial areas (Riskin, 1987: 26-29). Simply put, in 1936 in north China, landlords who formed 3 to 4% of the population and owned 20-30% of the land. Poor peasants formed 60 to 70% of the population and owned less than 20 to 30% of the land. This inequality was magnified in south China (Wolf, 1973: 134). For many peasants, land tenancy was a better choice than private holding. Many rich peasants obtained their land by renting from others and then subletting it. However, as land tenancy often involved money lending, the poorer tenants had to pay very high interest rates. As banks and credit institutions were scarce in the countryside, their income from the land became insufficient to sustain their livelihoods as only the minority managed (Douw, 1991). In addition, it was also in central and southern China that the number of absentee landlords grew. They lived in rural townships or in district towns and left their land to those bursaries who managed the land for them. The absentee landlords charged their tenants fixed rents and did not care much for their tenants’ livelihoods, which might have triggered discontentment among the tenants (Eastman, 1988).
By the 1930s, the extent of land concentration, tenancy and rural poverty was severer than several decades earlier. Small peasant farming constituted the overall rural economy characterized by a low level of labour productivity and agricultural technology and declining farm size (Riskin, 1987; Feuerwerker, 1983). Population growth made poorer households increasingly rely on their land for subsistence, and at the same time they had to hire themselves out as part-time farm workers and others engaged in other means of survival. Only a few rich peasants could effectively diversify their production and hire poorer labourers. The existence of poor labourers might have triggered low investment in technological improvements. Managerial landlords preferred to invest in landlordism, commercial and other business opportunities. The small peasant owners were extremely vulnerable to fluctuating market prices, which further exacerbated their production and livelihoods. Thus, all these factors were closely related to social inequality in the Chinese countryside and had different effects on different social groups (Huang, 1985).

Thus, it can be seen that rural Chinese society in the 1930s was structured into two major groups—the rich group of landlords, merchants and usurers, and the poor group of tenants, hired farm hands and coolies. It was not dominated by hired labour, but the land-holding peasantry. The latter, however, struggled to maintain its grip on the land, whilst bearing the threats of commercialization from above and the likelihood of destitution from below (Wolf, 1973).

The uncertain and complex rural land relations were also complicated by state and rural society relations. It is claimed that the latter was caused by heavy state taxes imposed on the rural landowners more than landowner-tenant relations. The taxes were seen as a way of power expansion of the state into the countryside, which negatively affected state-landowner relations. The antagonism between the state and local elite has been claimed as a major cause of rural rebellion (Bianco, 1986; Huang, 1985). As a result, the central government had gradually lost effective control over the countryside, which was more in the hands of the gentry and warlords, who represented an administrative force that could not be ignored by the centre. The central government had to depend on them more than in the past in order to contain social unrest and maintain peace and order. Gradually, the centre spent the land taxes locally to a large extent to appease them and cover the costs of mounting local administration (Douw, 1991).

In the 1930s, the Chinese rural economy was hit by the world economic crisis coupled with its inherent constraints, which caused massive rural poverty and unbalanced rural-urban development. Unemployment in the urban sector denied rural labourers of any prospects. The impoverishment of the peasantry was also
exacerbated by the effects of natural disasters, increased banditry, harassment of warlord troops and the exploitation of the state in exacting taxes. Many poor peasants sold their land, which marked a complex process of land redistribution (Eastman, 1988).

The Nationalist government faced daunting challenges of poverty and inequality interwoven with other land-related issues. It struggled to find a viable solution to the roots of these social illnesses that had been carried over from previous imperial regimes in order to avoid the path of entrapped capitalism exemplified by the USA or the highly concentrated landownership as seen in the UK (Schiffrin, 1957). President Sun was even approached by Lenin for political cooperation shortly after World War I. Their cooperation led to the conclusion that communism was unsuitable for China. However, the principle of “equalization of land use rights” and Sun's hope for a free democratic China and realization of land reform came to an end as a result of his death in 1925 and the war with Japan. The latter brought the government administration to a standstill. Some measures were taken to lessen the burden of farm tenants who were forced to pay excessive rents to their landlords, far from realizing Sun’s reform agenda. Research has revealed that his agenda focused on land value taxation rather than the more aggressive means carried out by the Communists in their land reform later on. Sun saw this measure as being more suitable to the temperament of the Chinese people, which would avoid bloodshed (Wu, 1955).

4. Revolutionary land reform

It was under the Communist Party led by Mao that most land revolutionary reform activities took place in their controlled areas as characterized by forceful confiscation of land and redistribution among the landless. It is important to note that Mao’s ideas on land equity was no difference from Sun and other ancient regimes, for Mao himself even remarked that it was the ideology of all revolutionary democrats and that it was not solely owned by the Communist Party. However, Mao’s land revolution carried its own implications for social and political movements in China.

Gao (2007) provides a portrayal of the revolution marked by severe political fighting. Since its inception in 1921, the Communist Party had set its goal of reforming Chinese society, attaching great importance to uniting and organizing the peasants in the revolution. This was reflected in the well-known strategy of “encircling the cities from the rural areas”. In 1926, the party-led peasant movement started in Guangdong and quickly spread into Hunan, Hubei and Jiangxi provinces. Its initial
mandate was changed from reducing land rents to more rigorously addressing the nature of China’s land problems. In the centre of this movement—Hunan Province—overthrowing landlordism was put on top of the agenda. Land reform was recognized as the key to restoring social order which was in disarray as a consequence of war and conflicts between the Nationalist and Communist parties and chronic poverty. Peasant associations and armies were organized and engaged in all activities targeted at landlords to punish them in various ways. Many of the landlords including small landlords and petty bourgeoisie were severely beaten and killed. The Communist Party, however, criticized the peasants for taking the law into their own hands and causing violence to these groups and other innocent farmers. But later on, this criticism was reversed by Mao who saw violence as the only true revolution. In 1927, the Communist claimed that it had a totally different ideology from the Nationalists and put the representation of the interests of the poor—peasants and industrial workers—on top of its political agenda.

From 1927-1937, the movement reached a new stage of harsher punishment of landlords and expropriation of their land. And this was exacerbated by the shift to complete confiscation of all land and turning it into state property through land nationalization. Violence against the landlords took place on a large scale with their houses and land deeds burnt into ashes, and many lives were lost. At the same time, the movement against the bourgeoisie was launched. This was in close connection with land violence, as land privatization was targeted to stop land transfers and hiring of labour. It called for the establishment of collective landownership and production in order to implement the most comprehensive socialist policy. This had led to further violence as looting and torching houses became rampant, for instance, in Guangdong. In 1928 the policy of expropriation of all land shifted to expropriation of the land owned by the landlords. However, the policy of land nationalization and killing of landlords continued. Under the influence of the Soviet revolution, the activists started to target the rich peasants and even called for their downfall (Gao, 2007).

However, during 1930-1931, the policy was modified and the ban on land transfers was lifted to allow for land leasing. It also extended to the formalization of the peasant land titles. A major reason for this change was the need to appease the peasants who had been concerned about land tenure insecurity caused by radical land expropriations. This did not last long, as in 1931, the leftists gained more momentum in land reform. This time, they put more emphasis on eradication of landlordism and attacking the rich and middle peasants. For instance, as the new land law disallowed landlords from owning any piece of land, many landlords’ land were confiscated and they themselves were sent to the hard labour camp and some
of them were killed. The land of the rich peasants was also largely confiscated together with other properties and in turn they were allocated land of poor quality. This also had spillover effects on the middle peasants who were treated as the rich peasants in many cases under the slogan of equal redistribution of land. These cases show that there were no fixed benchmarks for the classification of different classes. As a result, the boundaries of the landlords, rich and middle peasants were blurred. Inevitably, many were also harshly affected (Gao, 2007).

When the war against Japan broke out after the Long March, the Party reassessed its land reform process and acknowledged that it was not a complete success given its cruelty against all classes of the peasantry and the severe damage done to the Chinese countryside. It decided to change its policy of land revolution and forceful deposition of the Nationalist regime into joining forces with the Nationalist Party to defend the country against the Japanese invasion. Subsequently, the policy shifted from confiscation of landlords’ land to reduction of land rents and taxes. Confiscation of rich peasants’ land was reversed except for the land that had been leased out. And they were allowed to hire labourers and keep their properties intact. Reduction of their land rents and taxes became the basic agricultural policy. This was actually written in the 1930 Land Law of the Republic of China, but it was the communists who managed to implement it (Gao, 2007).

Nevertheless, the implementation of this policy quickly fell into a vicious circle of violence. Widespread conflicts among the landlords, rich and middle peasants took place. These groups were severely punished with some of their lands confiscated. This situation worsened after the defeat of Japan in 1945 and the revival of new conflicts between the two political parties. This time, any use of violence to take land from the landlords was even encouraged and the protection of their landed property rights became non-existent (Gao, 2007).

As Hinton (1983) clearly pointed out based on his fieldwork in the revolutionary bases, the land reform movement had the sole purpose of stopping any possibility for the Nationalist Party to form alliance with the landlords and aristocracy. The conflicts were so harsh that the peasants of all income levels were afraid of physical and mental abuse. Facing chronic poverty, the poorer seemed to show their dissatisfaction with the movement. This led to the Party’s decision to assess the effectiveness of the land reform. Through “speaking bitterness to the landlord”, the

13 The Communist Party had for a long time been under the influence of the Soviets. The Long March enabled the Chinese Communists to free themselves from the Soviet influence to a certain extent. As a result, the Party started to rethink about the goal and strategy of the revolution, which ought to be country-specific rather than being dictated by the Soviets.
latter’s land, properties and even personal lives were more brutally taken. In 1947, the Outline Land Law of China was passed by the Land Conference of the Communist Party that highlighted the need to emphasize equal redistribution of land to win the civil war, for this was deemed as necessary to meet the demands of the poor and thus organize them in the combat. For instance, some of this law’s mandates are shown in Table 2.1.

Table 2.1  1947 Outline Land Law of China

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Article</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Article 1</td>
<td>To abolish the land system based on feudal and semi-feudal exploitation, and to realize the land system of “land to the tillers”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Article 2</td>
<td>To abolish the landownership rights of all landlords</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Article 3</td>
<td>To abolish the landownership rights of all ancestral spirits, temples, monasteries, schools, institutions and organizations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Article 4</td>
<td>To cancel all debts in the countryside incurred prior to the reform</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Author’s compilation based on John Wong 1973, p 282.

Consequently, land was once again redistributed among many peasants. Yet, land redistribution during the civil war was not full-scale equal distribution as many unexpected. In fact, it proved to be a partial reshuffle of agricultural resources—a mere over 40% of the land was involved in redistribution. Furthermore, confiscated resources were not equally but differentially distributed among the beneficiaries who constituted approximately half the rural population, which means that the redistribution agenda had to compromise with the political and economic reality and avoid radicalization tendencies. It is important to note that the reform movement encountered huge difficulties in mobilizing the peasants especially in the south, where there was a high rate of land tenancy. As conventionally conceived, there should be a causal relationship between land tenancy and rural unrest. Yet, in south China, it was the opposite. The reasons lie in the fact that successive reforms since the Ming and Qing dynasties had done little to alter the structure of local power embedded in the hands of local gentry, local bandits and their associates—all tied together in close clan relations. In this context, it was extremely difficult for the peasantry to play an independent political role (Michael, 1966). Thus, this reform met obstacles in balancing the political and social costs of land expropriation and the requirements of redistribution for economic efficiency (Wong, 1973). This also explains the fact that the revolutionary strategy of the Communists went through several distinct phases from radical land reform to one that was mild and aimed at winning the support of the middle and rich peasantry.

To understand the success of the massive communist-led land movement throughout the country, the Nationalist Party is often claimed to be ineffective in reforming the Chinese countryside. Yet, according to Gao (2007), it was not that
simple. He sees the traditional social structure and organizations as the main obstacle to the reform that could not be transformed at both bottom and top societal and political levels. This means that one had to seek irrational ways to launch the reform, which was exactly what the Communists did. Also it was a process in which they managed to learn from the reform practices and gained renewed support of the masses. For instance, Hinton (1983) provides an insightful account of the reformed villages by the Party. The Party quickly realized after its radical reform that land distribution itself was not sufficient at all to build firm support among the peasantry. To address this problem, the Communists managed to establish poor peasant units, based on which peasant associations and village cooperatives were formed to fill in the political vacuum in the countryside. Through these organizations, the Party consolidated its control at the lowest level of the society, which makes it the largest political party in the world up to today. The violence used in peasant rebellions mentioned earlier further proved the power of mass organization to change the village society—everyone, even the Party members, had to be brainwashed to gain a place in the process of social transformation.

The revolution reversed the structure of Chinese society at the expense of agricultural productivity. In the beginning of the movement, many people opposed the idea of land redistribution for demographic reasons, for this could lead to further fragmentation of the farmland. As a result, it could create inequality between the capable and incapable labourers. Not only was this opposition unable to withstand the mainstream political force underpinned by the call for mobilization of the masses, but also it was unable to offer alternatives for agricultural development. For instance, in the northeastern region, in the aftermath of the revolution, land productivity decreased as compared with the past because of three factors. First, landlords and rich peasants were severely affected and lost their land to the poorer peasants who were allocated the land through redistribution, but the latter group of peasants was inexperienced in self-organization and production. Second, as elsewhere, a large number of affected rich and middle peasants lacked the incentives to till the land, because they were afraid of personal abuse and did not dare to invest more in their land. Third, the reform led to the reduction of the labour force as well as livestock. Soon after this, the Party realized that it would be important again to reintroduce economic incentives for the poor by emphasizing their private land rights, allowing for the existence of hired labour and land leasing. As Mao pointed out later on, the key task for the Party after the revolution would be the restoration of social order and development of agricultural production. This was also driven by the realization of the need for collectivization as it was believed that land production by individual households could not lead to the maximization of economies of scales.
After the Community Party took power in 1949, about 700 million mu of land were redistributed from landlords to landless peasants and tenants, who totaled more than 300 million. The state then took the surpluses held by landlords for rural social welfare and urban industrial development (Esherick, 1981). At that time, Mao called for a peaceful solution to China’s land problems by taking a cautious approach in dealing with the landlords in order to stabilize the countryside. He even decided not to touch them and leave them alone for some time. However, in reality it proved to be the opposite. In northeastern regions, land reform was more peaceful than the rest of China. Overall, rich peasants were not brought under protection (Gao, 2007).

From 1953 onwards, Mao initiated the land collectivization programme that reversed individual landownership and reinforced Party micro-management (Spence, 1999). Under collective management, there was a lack of economic incentives and motivation for the masses as well as for the local bureaucrats, who had no resources to improve agricultural efficiency (Wu and Reynolds, 1988). This situation was exacerbated by the Great Leap Forward 1958-1961. Aimed at boosting economic growth, it created huge centrally managed projects that involved up to 100 million peasants to open farmland, create people’s communes and develop industrial capacity. With very limited success, it had devastating effects on the livelihoods of the poor. It caused a severe decrease in agricultural output, which led to almost 30 million causalities among peasants who died from starvation. It is widely claimed that this movement was driven by economic incentives in terms of prioritizing industrial development, and more importantly, the wish to forge a new identity for the Chinese. By doing so, the state exerted more political and ideological control of its subjects. This was seen as a way to keep the Marxist-Leninist doctrine intact (Spence, 1999).

Huang (2001) argues that the land revolution solved the Party’s concern about mass mobilization, and the Party had found a way to extract unlimited human and physical resources needed for the war against the Nationalists. It can be seen that the reforms after the revolutionary victory were also the political tactics used to control the masses and establish a solid social and political bases of national unity. Through the reform, the Party realized its goal of overthrowing the old regime and reorganization of the grass-root society, which lay the foundation for modernization. According to Mao, China’s revolution has only one form—through struggles to unite the peasants and create a united new nation (Gao, 2007). However, it is far too simple to judge the extent to which the reforms catered for the peasants’ best interests, which may explain the failure of the People’s Commune in 1960s and its replacement by the Household Responsibility System (HRS) in the late 1970s. Esherick (1995) argues that the Chinese revolution was not liberation but the replacement of one form of hegemony with another. It had more to do with the
alienation of Chinese society from an increasingly authoritarian state (Friedman et al., 2005, cited in Perry, 2008). Nonetheless, Mao’s revolutionary path had its far-reaching implications for the Chinese government’s current reform. As Chinese society is marked by haves and have-nots, few people accepted any assessment of Mao’s class struggle as a lasting solution to growing inequalities prevalent in the pre-revolutionary era but which once again is entrenched in today’s society (Perry, 2008).

5. Conclusions

The study of Chinese land reform history especially since the Ming and Qing dynasties period is instrumental to understand the dilemma facing China’s land reform of today. History tells us that the trajectory of land reform is the result of long-term struggle of the state and the peasantry. Land has always been the driver for social and political changes. A common political agenda shared by the Ming, Qing and Nationalist regimes shared one political agenda—incremental change with focus on economic resolutions to poverty—ended with certain failure to reorganize the rural society for the poor. In comparison, the road taken by the Communists was more radical or complete, but also ended with the failure to generate peasant incentives to develop the rural economy.

Social structures and organizations may explain the dilemma of China’s land reform and the constraints in peasant-centred land policy changes. This chapter demonstrates that land reform in Chinese history is inextricably linked with poverty and social inequality embedded in the persistent dominance of state and local elites over the mass peasantry. However, it also shows that the social, economic and natural determinants of land tenure should be given more attention rather than the tenure system itself. This further pinpoints the need for political redressing of the fundamental issues concerning the lack of alternatives to sustainable rural development and agriculture in particular. This has been ignored by all the regimes, although Mao’s People’s Commune model seemed to mark a watershed from the past.

Land has never become a catalyst for the creation of social space for poor peasants (Zhang, 2005). Rather, it is used by the state to exert stronger control over the sluggish economy and increased threat from the local elite. This resulted in the loose social structure and organization that cannot foster the collective force that would otherwise have been needed. The majority of the peasants continued to feel isolated from the mainstream economic and social organization while cultivating their tiny plots of land for survival. Furthermore, state-society relations are complicated by the interactions of various economic and political actors who pursue their own interests.
This further complicates the way in which peasant interests can be safeguarded and relevant policy measures can be engaged.

The overview of the land reform history reveals the indispensable exploration of economic and political reforms especially those undertaken by Mao. The demise of the Ming and Qing dynasties and the failure of Mao’s commune policy indicate, as Hinton convincingly puts it, that the Chinese society still maintains as a realm of landlordism. That is why land continues to be controlled by the rural elites and state functionaries dynasty after dynasty. Although Mao tried to dismantle this rural social fabric by putting communes in place, the commune itself readjusted to the control of those in power. The latter, however, embodied the nature of traditional bureaucratic centralization, all-powerful and responsible to no one outside its ranks (Hinton, 1983).

Individual peasants’ vulnerabilities to natural resource constraints, market fluctuations and elite domination would require concerted efforts to fight social inequality and poverty. This could be achieved through agricultural cooperation as Tawney puts it (Tawney, 1966). Yet, the drive to create efficient peasant organizations can be hindered by the power relationships between classes and interest groups. As North (1990) warns, efficient institutions do not come to the fore automatically. Instead, it is determined by the development path created in the previous stage. Hinton’s concern over peasants’ lack of collective power in participating in economic development calls into question the trajectory of land reform and rural development as a whole.

In essence, China’s land reform from a historical perspective has failed to create genuine institutions to counter the forces of local bureaucracy and political control. The latter has managed to take the institutions into its own hands to reestablish something very close to traditional rule. It is doubtful “whether the breakup of cooperative production, the fragmentation of the fields and the individual contracting of all the scattered fragments—abandoning in the process of all economies of scale—is a viable solution to the problems these failure posed” (Hinton, 1983: 763).

China’s land reform history reveals a crucial truth—land tenure or inequitable land distribution was critical for peasant struggle and Mao’s revolution. However, land concentration was not as high as research has shown especially not in the same order as Mao contended. They were not the only factors for social and political changes. Other dimensions of inequality, that is, the non-landownership inequality factors such as high land rentals, interest rates, debts and biophysical constraints aggravated the tensions between different social groups and played a more important role in social and political struggles. The role of poverty in all these
struggles was critical to the understanding of the structural nature of the Mao’s revolutionary success (Tang, 2006).

The demise of each dynasty and even the failure of the People’s Commune underlines the problem of tackling the roots of poverty, which remains a challenge to all. This means that land reform is a part of the picture, but not the whole picture itself. When other causes of poverty were not well defined and tackled by Mao and previous regimes, land became a relatively easy subject to be tackled and used as a medium for political gain. They all understood that they would not gain effective control had the land not have brought under their control. Mao’s grass-roots-oriented strategy of “putting politics in command” worked to serve his own politics, but did not stand the test of overcoming the persistent challenges of poverty and inequality—it was not just the land (see Burkett & Hart-Landsberg, 2005: 436). This argument might also explain why others interpret the revolution as irrational (Tsou, 2000), because to them probably better deals could have been struck between the revolutionaries and the rulers. However, to Mao, land revolution was the quickest way on the road to political control. This may also explain why the Ming’s, Qing’s and the Nationalist’s relatively “soft” approaches did not accomplish what Mao had. But in short, peasants have been agents of revolution only in the sense of being used as political machine to effectuate preconceived political goals of the operators (Moore, 1967).

As land reform continues, it is important to enshrine the rights of the peasants whose organization and economic independence play critical role in social and political changes. It is the challenge confronting Chinese society to create institutional alternatives that address the relations of production, society and development that benefit the disadvantaged groups. The lessons from Chinese history reveal that any change in political ideologies and actual political actions could turn futile if the local constituencies are not given choice and power to engage in the reform process. It remains crucial to organize collective action to arrive at an accepted definition of the situation and a formulated programme for rural development, which has not been the case in past reforms (Fei, 1980). Mao’s failure to turn the communes into effective instruments of rural development, however, should not preclude the search for more peasant-oriented solutions to land tenure reforms.

References


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