

Deng Zihui and the Issue of Rural Social Classes in the Chinese Revolution

Yuan Gao*

邓子恢与中国革命中的农村阶级问题

高原

Abstract

This article studies the evolution of Deng Zihui's attitude toward different rural social classes and the shaping of his conclusions about rural class politics in the Communist revolution before the founding of the People's Republic. The core of his political practice of rural class struggle was based on his observation that poor peasants and agricultural laborers were the most determined supporters of the revolution, much more reliable than rich peasants and middle peasants, especially in times of crisis. Always based on this observation, Deng's class politics emphasized especially the agency of poor peasants and agricultural laborers, the establishment of their political dominance in rural areas, and the satisfaction of their economic interests, even at the expense of sacrificing the rich peasants and the landlords.

Keywords

Deng Zihui, rural class politics, rural class struggles, land reform, the Chinese Revolution, decision making of the Communist Party, agency and structure

摘要

本文研究的是在人民共和国成立之前的中共革命时期，邓子恢对待不同农村阶级的态度以及他对于农村阶级政治的认识的演变。邓子恢农村阶级政治实践的核心是一个他本人形成的观察：贫雇农是革命最坚定的支持者，尤其是在危机时刻，他们比富农和中农要可资依靠的多。邓子恢围绕这样一个观察所形成的阶级政治，特别强

* gaoyuanhighland@gmail.com; School of Agricultural Economics and Rural Development, and Institute of Advanced Historical and Social Research, Renmin University of China; 中国人民大学农业与农村发展学院，历史与社会高等研究所

调贫雇农的主体性，强调要在农村确立贫雇农的政治优势，强调要满足贫雇农的经济利益，即使是以牺牲富农和地主为代价。

关键词

邓子恢、农村阶级政治、农村阶级斗争、土地改革、中国革命、中共的决策形成、主体与结构

Background and Methodology

Deng Zihui is a crucial figure in the history of the Chinese Revolution. He was famous for leading grassroots peasant movements in the National Revolution (1924-1927) and the Land Revolution (1927-1937), and he was well aware of the logic of rural politics and the importance of rural struggles for the victory of the revolution. After the People's Republic was founded, he still played the important role of leading the country's rural work. Deng's revolutionary career shows an implicit understanding of the entire process of the Communist Party's rural struggles. Besides Mao Zedong, a man with experience of this kind was rare in the history of the Party. Deng's opinion about what should be the center of gravity of the new government's rural work was very different from Mao's, though both held firmly to the ideal of communism, and both were familiar with the practices of peasant movements.

After land reform was accomplished, Deng's attitude toward the subsequent movement of rural cooperativization was a conservative one, in sharp contrast to Mao's radical approach. Deng argued that the movement should advance slowly and steadily, while Mao insisted that it should be pushed rapidly. In July 1955, Mao coined the term "woman with bound feet" to severely criticize Deng and the Central Rural Works Department under his leadership; he felt that Deng had made the mistake of giving in to rightist tendencies (see Mao, 1955). However, just five years earlier, in 1950, when Deng was in charge of land reform in the Zhongnan (Central and South China) Bureau, he had shown a rather radical face on the issue of how to deal with rich peasants' land; Deng had insisted that the land rented out by rich peasants be confiscated and redistributed to poor peasants. On the same issue, however, Mao was quite conservative; he argued that it was better not to redistribute the land rented out by rich peasants. Liu Shaoqi, another key figure in the Party Central, shared Mao's opinion. Besides Mao and Liu, some local leaders of the Party, such as Rao Shushi, who was in charge of the land reform of the Huadong (East China) Bureau, clearly opposed Deng's idea of redistributing rich peasants' rented-out land and argued that the rich peasant economy should be preserved as

much as possible.¹ Besides the land policy, the Zhongnan Bureau under Deng's leadership was also quite radical in mobilizing people and in fighting against landlords and rich peasants (see Yang Kuisong, 2008).

This episode in modern Chinese history is interesting. Why was a conservative expert on rural work in the movement of rural cooperativization radical on the issue of rich peasants in land reform shortly before? The rich-peasant issue is in fact part of the general theme of rural class politics. So we should ask, how was Deng's understanding of rural politics based on class relations developed and formed during his long experience in the Chinese Revolution? The article focuses on answering this question.

This study will supplement two traditions of scholarship. First are the studies on Deng Zihui in the field of Party history. First of all, many efforts in this field were devoted to recovering Deng's life and revolutionary experiences, and the most important work is *Deng Zihui's Biography* published by the People's Publishing House in 1996; this book provided the most detailed history of Deng's life.² Other works in this field were focused on the reappraisal of Deng's work during rural cooperativization. In contrast to Mao's criticism of Deng, current studies considered Deng's prudent attitude toward cooperativization more suitable to China's realities than Mao's radicalness, and these authors praised him as a model of "seeking truth from facts" (for example, Wang, 2005a, 2005b; Gao Jun, 1995; Yang Jilong, 1996). This reappraisal is closely related to the dramatic transformation of China's rural policy from cooperativization and collectivization to the household contract system, and to the Party's overall introspection of its first thirty years of policies after 1949, during the period of Reform and Opening.³ However, there are still no systematic analyses of the evolution and shaping of Deng's understanding of rural class politics in the revolutionary period. And this aspect is one of the main investigations of this article.⁴

¹ For these different opinions on the rich peasant issue, see Li Liangyu (2011).

² Besides this book, Jiang Boying (2004) was particularly focused on Deng's experiences in the peasant movement and in rural work after 1949.

³ This attitude can be seen from some inner-Party figures' appraisal of Deng. See Du Runsheng (1995) and Bo Yibo (1996).

⁴ Studies involving Deng Zihui in English-language scholarship are very rare. We only saw one relevant book, *The Politics of Agricultural Cooperativization in China: Mao, Deng Zihui, and the "High Tide" of 1955*, edited by Teiwes and Sun (1995). The main contents of this book are translations of original Chinese materials on rural cooperativization, among them two of Deng's documents. Systematic studies on Deng's revolutionary career before 1949 are still absent in the English-speaking world.

The second tradition is the scholarship on the issue of rural classes in the Chinese Revolution. A large part of the literature in this field was focused on the reality of the class structure of rural China, according to the criterion of classical Marxist theory—the possession of the means of production. China's territory is vast, and given its variety of natural conditions and agricultural patterns, different rural areas have quite different class structures. This objectively existing variety accounts for scholars' different opinions on whether rural China had severe class differentiation, and the divergence of opinion on this issue usually led to different judgments on the rationality of the rural revolution led by the Communist Party. Some scholars thought severe class differentiation did exist in rural China and recognized the rationality of the rural revolution based on class theory, while others insisted on the absence of rural China's class differentiation and denied the necessity of rural revolution. The theoretical constructions of the Communist Party itself obviously belonged to the first camp, which believed that rural China had endured severe class differentiation before the revolution, and viewed this situation to be the structural basis of the rural revolution. The arguments can be seen from the revolutionary theorists' works, such as Mao (1933) as well as from the work of the leftist economists and sociologists, such as Chen Hansheng (1937), Qian Junrui (1934), and Xue Muqiao (1943). This opinion has also been the mainstream of scholarship in China, and received some support from Western scholars, such as Mark Selden (1995). However, after the 1980s, this opinion has been facing more and more challenges from scholars of the second camp, which believed that rural class differentiation was not as severe as the Communists had thought and questioned the rationality of the Communist rural revolution based on class struggle (see Qin Hui and Su Wen, 1996: 48-57, Gao Wangling, 2005; and Yang Kuisong, 2008).

Another branch of scholarship on rural classes has tried to avoid a superficial “white or black” judgment of the rural revolution, and endeavored to find an analytical approach that could better encompass the complexity and variation of history. Philip Huang's article gave a clear methodological interpretation of this approach. In his article, Huang used two distinctions, “structure and agency” and “objective and representational,” to divide the complexity of history into four dimensions: objective structure, objective agency, representational structure, and representational agency (Huang, 1995). Within this framework, the above mentioned arguments of the rationality of the rural revolution were in fact focused on and trapped in only one dimension of the four, objective structure, and neglected the other three. This sort of narrowness prevents

a comprehensive understanding of history. A more proper approach should give enough consideration to all four dimensions and on this basis examine the choices and limitations of the participants in the revolution.⁵

The starting point of this article is close to the second approach mentioned above. We do not focus on the objective class structure of China's rural society to discuss whether or not severe class differentiation existed. Rather, we analyze the formation and evolution of the revolutionary's decision in concrete historical environments, which accords with Huang's methodology. However, this article has its own particular analytical method. We believe that "structure and agency" remains too rough a distinction to analyze historical events. There is a significant gap between either objective social-economic structures or representational structures and the revolutionary's concrete political actions. To understand these actions, we need an intermediate concept between structure and agency. A useful concept, in our view, could be Niklas Luhmann's "decision premise" (see Luhmann, 2009: chapter 8; Seidl and Becker, 2006: 41-42). Originally this concept refers to those special decisions of an organization that will function as binding constraints on further decisions. An organization makes many decisions in its history, and most of them exist only as temporary events and are forgotten quickly. However, the organization frequently goes back to its decision premises for reference in making further decisions. We will not use this concept strictly with its definition in Luhmann's sociology but as a necessary intermediary to connect structure and agency, in order to have a more reliable understanding of rural revolutionary practices. The article's main concern is to highlight the formation of Deng Zihui's premise that directly shaped his practice. After the National Revolution failed in 1927, the Communist Party had to move a substantial part of its force from urban centers to the countryside. For the Party's survival, Deng Zihui as a grassroots revolutionary had to find the most determined rural supporters for the revolution. Through a long journey of revolutionary practice, he finally formulated an observation: in an extremely difficult political environment, poor peasants and agricultural laborers were more likely to insist on fighting for the revolution, middle peasants would usually be wavering, and rich peasants were prone to surrender and become counter-revolutionaries. Deng's experiences during the extremely hard three years' guerilla war in South China after the Central Soviet Area was occupied further confirmed his observation. Deng finally took the

⁵ Some works have been influenced by this approach, see Zhang Xiaojun (2004) and Li Fangchun (2010), which underlined participants' practices in the representational dimensions of the revolution.

observation as the core of his understanding of class politics, and it became a crucial premise for his later decisions on rural class issues.⁶

The Land Revolution in West Fujian: From the General Concept of “Peasant” to a Detailed Division of Rural Classes

As is well known, Marxist class theory is a crucial foundation for the Communist Party. Theoretically, the Party is the vanguard of the proletariat. It must lead the proletariat into overthrowing the rule of the bourgeoisie and building the proletarian regime. Early Chinese Communists, both in inner party discussions and in public political statements, were consciously using the concepts of class theory to discuss and criticize current politics. During the period of the National Revolution, the Communists who were collaborating with the Guomindang were also using those concepts to discuss and analyze the factional contradictions within the Guomindang. For example, they felt that the Guomindang rightists actually represented the interests of the big bourgeoisie, while the leftists stood for those of the petty bourgeoisie. Consequently, in such a setting, the Communist Party, which represents the interests of the proletariat, should unite with the Guomindang leftists and fight against the rightists, to achieve the aim of the National Revolution—overthrowing imperialism and warlordism and building an independent, democratic new government. At that time, the Communist Party was mainly focusing on urban political movements and paid much less attention to peasants and rural politics. The Party had not formed a clear understanding of the role and function of the peasant in the revolution. The object of Marx’s abstract theory is a society constituted of industrial proletariats and bourgeoisies, while the principal segment of Chinese society was made up of peasants. The insufficiency and vagueness of Marx’s theoretical consideration of the peasantry had a twofold effect. On one hand, it did make the Chinese Communists apt to overlook the role and function of the peasantry in the revolution. On the other hand, once the party finally saw the importance of the peasantry and decided to dive substantially into peasant movements, the lack of a systematic Marxist theory of the peasant revolution

⁶ A work related to our concern is Li Liangyu (2011), which compared the different opinions on the rich peasant issue of Rao Shushi of the Huadong Bureau and Deng Zihui of the Zhongnan Bureau. In Li’s view, Rao argued for preserving the rich-peasant economy as a way of improving industry and commerce, while Deng argued for a sterner treatment of rich peasants because he intended to mobilize poor peasants and agricultural laborers. This difference of opinion in fact involved a comparison between different decision premises.

would unexpectedly give the Chinese Communists a great degree of freedom to develop their own theory of the peasant revolution. Those Communists sensitive to real political practice, such as Mao Zedong, had begun to think about the class structure of the whole peasant society and to consider and evaluate the revolutionary potential of different peasant classes. However, those theoretical considerations had not been closely connected to large-scale peasant movements. The Chinese Communists' theory of peasant revolution was still in its infancy.

Deng Zihui was born into a low-level gentry family in Longyan, Fujian, in 1896. After graduating from high school, he was a primary-school teacher for a short time. In 1917, he went to Japan for further study and returned home the following year. In 1918, he went to Chongyi in Jiangxi to become a clerk in a grocery store owned by his cousin (Deng, 1956: 3). Deng joined the Communist Party at Chongyi in December 1926 (Deng, 1956: 5). After joining the Party, Deng became involved in the mass movements. His methods of work at that time were rather simple—he engaged in public speaking on the streets and had private talks with peasants in the teahouses to introduce them to revolutionary aims. He began to organize peasant associations, clerical unions, and merchant associations (Editorial Committee, *Deng Zihui's Biography*, 1996: 40). Obviously, Deng's tactics at that time were to form a union of revolutionary classes, a plan similar to the Party's overall strategy during the National Revolution. "Peasants" in Deng's conception was still a general category and represented an indifferent group of people who did agricultural work and lived in the countryside. "Peasants," along with the same general categories of "workers" and "merchants" (商民), were all reliable powers of the National Revolution, and they had the same political enemies—"local tyrants and evil gentry" and reactionary warlord rulers. These people with revolutionary potential could be aroused to fight against their common enemies by the proper propaganda approaches. On May 1, 1927, Deng led the members of outskirt peasant associations as they entered the county seat of Chongyi. Along with the members of the clerks' and handicrafts unions, they marched toward the county government, rushed into the office building, and captured the head of the county, Cai Shu, a reactionary bureaucrat. That same day, a special court, constituted of four representatives—one each to represent the peasants, the workers, the students and soldiers, and the merchants—was organized to conduct a trial against Cai. Deng was named the representative of the merchants (Editorial Committee, *Deng Zihui's Biography* 1996: 43-45). The make-up of this special court precisely symbolized the class-alliance characteristic of the National Revolution. Equally notably, Deng participated in the special

court as a clerk who represented the merchants rather than as a professional revolutionary.

Though the peasantry was involved, the political aim of the revolution in Chongyi was still to overthrow the urban government, and the climax of the movement was the symbolic moment of the occupation of the county government and the capture of the head of the county.

However, the success of this revolution, which was based on an emotional mass movement, was fragile and unstable. Only ten days later, the temporary revolutionary government collapsed as soon as Chiang Kai-shek's "purging army" marched into southern Jiangxi. Deng Zihui was forced to flee in disguise. In July 1927, after many twists and turns, he returned to his hometown, Longyan in Fujian (Deng, 1956: 6).

The Communist-Party branch of Longyan was founded in January 1927. On April 15, 1927, three days after Chiang Kai-shek initiated the purge of Communists in Shanghai, a similar purge occurred in Longyan, and the "white terror" there lasted until July and August. The purge totally destroyed the "alliance of classes" formed in the National Revolution. The Communist Party now became an illegal organization, and numerous Communists were killed or arrested.

The attacks on the Communist Party mainly occurred in urban centers, which both the Communist Party and the Guomindang viewed as the core of Chinese politics. In the rural areas of Longyan, after the purge, the political environment seemed less desperate for the Communists, as Deng recalled later:

Because peasant associations had not promoted the reduction of rent and interest during the previous period, and the confrontations between rural classes were still not obvious, the reactionary authority could tyrannically abuse its power only in the cities. The only reactionaries in rural areas were the local tyrants and evil gentry who formerly belonged to Du's faction [Du Lianru was a local tyrant in Longyan] and a few local ruffians. During the past ten years and more, these men had done countless bad things to the people and so had a notorious reputation from early on. Nobody was allied with them. Consequently, though the reactionary authority was extremely powerful in the cities, rural reactionaries dared not do whatever they liked. Furthermore, the revolutionaries' secret peasant associations were still active, and therefore many areas were still secretly in the control of the Party (Deng, 1961: 6).

Deng's description shows that after the purge, rural areas of Longyan were a political vacuum. Thus, though it was heavily damaged in the cities, the Communist Party could still turn to rural areas and re-establish its power there, relying on peasant associations. This transfer from urban centers to rural areas was, in fact, a natural choice of real political tactics. The emergence of this

kind of spontaneous practice, however, cannot immediately be equated to the maturity of a new political epistemology which consciously denies the existing political legitimacy imposed by the counter-revolutionary power in the cities and articulates the necessity of building a brand new political system in rural areas. The formation of this new systematic political thought would, as history has shown, arise much later than did grassroots Communists' spontaneous practice of retreating from the cities to rural areas.

Meanwhile, Deng's narrative also shows that class consciousness and class struggle in the rural areas of Longyan were far from being solidified. Even the moderate policy of reducing rent and interest had not been applied. Peasants were still considered to be an integral class, all fighting against a few evil tyrants and ruffians. The elaborate division of classes within peasant society and the political confrontations between these classes were still far from reality.

After Deng Zihui arrived in Longyan, he threw himself into the peasant movement again, the first step being recovery of peasant associations. He was still hoping to unite all the forces in rural Longyan. When there was fighting against the extra taxes imposed by a local warlord, Chen Guohui, Deng therefore proposed a moderate slogan of "rational burden," which advocated apportioning the additional taxes according to farmland area or ancestral properties rather than by household. This slogan received wide support from middle and small landlords and from merchants, as well as from the common peasants (Deng, 1956: 7). From September to November, peasant associations were founded in most of the rural areas of Longyan. Their main political aims included reducing rents and interest, advocating rational burdens, and abandoning opium and gambling (Editorial Committee, *Deng Zihui's Biography*, 1996: 61). These policies contained an obvious feature of reconciliation, aiming to ally all the factions in rural areas, and did not specifically select a particular class of peasants as their major support.

Under Deng's leadership, the peasant movement in Longyan developed rapidly. In November 1927, an army of Cai Tingkai, a Guomindang-Left officer, stopped at Longyan on its march to Guangdong and drove Chen Guohui's forces out of Longyan. Seizing this opportunity, Deng and his colleagues went to negotiate with Cai's army and finally "borrowed" a battalion of troops. Meanwhile, Deng organized a peasant rebellion. With the help of Cai's army, the county seat of Longyan was captured by the revolutionaries. However, this victory was as short-lived as the temporary victory in Chongyi had been. Only two days later, when Cai's army left Longyan, Chen's troops attacked the revolutionaries and took back the county. Most of the peasant associations in Longyan collapsed, and only the peasant movement in the Dongxiao District of

Longyan survived. Deng and his colleagues retreated to the Dongxiao District and tried to regain revolutionary power there (Editorial Committee, *Deng Zihui's Biography*, 1996: 63-64).

Many years later, when Deng Zihui looked back on his early experiences in Longyan, he attributed the frustration to their inadequate understanding of class theory:

The major defect was that we lacked a clear class viewpoint. We knew only that we should rely on the peasants to fight against despotic gentry, landlords, and warlords, but we did not know that, within the peasantry, we should rely on poor peasants and agricultural laborers, unite with middle peasants, and neutralize rich peasants. Thus, when the peasant movement surged to a climax, many peasant associations were led by rich or middle peasants. This was precisely the reason why some peasant associations collapsed when the new white terror came. (Deng, 1956: 8)

However, if we examine the approach more closely, the claim that “we lacked a clear class viewpoint” was in fact closely related to the Communist Party’s overall strategy of the alliance of classes during the National Revolution. In the transitional period, when, the National Revolution had failed, and the clear strategy of the Land Revolution had not yet emerged, the tactics of grassroots Communists were likely to be similar to the former policy of the alliance of classes. The only difference was that the Guomindang-Right at the time had become a new enemy, whom the alliance of classes would fight. This tactic was what Deng used after the National Revolution failed. He still tried to draw all peasants, rather than only a certain class among them, to the Communist camp to fight against the reactionary power in the cities.

The purge of Communists initiated by Chiang Kai-shek, and the complete break-down of relations between the Communist Party and the Guomindang, put an end to the Communists’ aim of a successful national democratic revolution. The idea of the alliance of classes dissipated, and the former collaborators now became enemies. In this situation, the Communist Party’s aim and conception of the Chinese revolution began to undergo an enormous transformation. And this transformation in thinking would initiate a change of practical tactics in deed. The grassroots Communists who survived the Guomindang’s slaughter and retreated to rural areas would soon find that, when the villages they controlled came under attack, the seemingly integrated peasant society would split and become differentiated, thus undermining their basic political foundation. The situation therefore called for a more subtle analysis, which would carefully evaluate which classes among the peasants were most likely to support the revolution, and to what degree each class was able to devote itself

and to sacrifice. This investigation would be the center of gravity of grassroots Communists' political practice. Only when they were thrown into that harsh reality would Deng Zihui and his colleagues begin to look into the general category of "the peasantry" to find the classes that had the greatest revolutionary potential. It was not the lack of class viewpoint that made the revolutions of Chongyi and Longyan fail; rather, it was the frustration of the revolution that made the grassroots Communists begin to consciously divide the peasantry into classes.

After the defeat in Longyan in November 1927, Deng Zihui quickly turned to armed struggle. He participated in the Houtian rebellion in March 1928, and the following June, he joined the Yongding rebellion. The Houtian rebellion still had a tinge of adventurism, revealing the impatient mood of urgently trying to find a new way after the failure of the National Revolution. The measures of the rebellion were superficial, such as shooting ruffians, burning land-contract papers and account books, and confiscating and redistributing grain. In the Yongding Rebellion, however, armed struggle was combined with the redistribution of land (Deng, 1956: 9). This combination marked the beginning of the Land Revolution. Compared with the National Revolution, which emphasized the alliance of classes, the Land Revolution did not try to reconcile all the rural classes to fight for a common goal. The Communists were now clearly showing that they represented the interests of landless poor peasants and agricultural laborers. And the highest goal in securing their interests was to distribute land to them. From June to August 1928, Deng Zihui was in charge of land redistribution in Xinanli in Yongding. This was the first effort to redistribute land in southern Fujian, and the experiment was implemented by the grassroots Communists alone, without instructions from the Central or Provincial Party Committee. In 1956, Deng recalled, "At that time I had no experience of the Land Revolution. The Party Central had not released any outlines for land policy. The Provincial Committee had given no instructions as well. All I knew was only one principle, that the economic requirements of those impoverished peasants must be satisfied. Only this principle could help to win over the majority of the people" (Deng, 1956: 10). Under Deng's charge, the main objectives of the land policy in Xinanli were that "all the land should be redistributed, except for the few additional parcels owned by middle peasants." "[T]he land should be distributed equally among the population; landlords, rich, middle, and poor peasants should all receive an equal share of land," and "according to the land areas which people formerly cultivated, take land from the land-abundant ones and give it to the landless ones, take good land from the ones who have more

good land and give it to the ones whose land is poor, and do not disorganize all the land and then redistribute it" (Deng, 1956: 10).

Obviously, the Land Revolution, which denied the legitimacy of former land ownership, would heavily impact the existing economic and social structures of rural areas and intensify the confrontation between different rural classes. This impact and these confrontations would, of course, upset rural society, but they would also make clear the attitudes of those classes toward the Communist Party. This clear-cut stand on the Land Revolution was a political reaction to the Guomindang's purge as well as a way for the Communist Party to find its determined supporters and to identify wavering participants.

In July 1927, a crucial document, the Political Resolution of the First Congress of the Chinese Communist Party of West Fujian, drafted by Deng Zihui and revised by Mao Zedong, was released. The Resolution not only used skilled class concepts to analyze the high-level political situation (the fierce conflicts between the Guomindang and other warlords), but also began to use the tools of class analysis to evaluate the revolutionary potential of different rural classes. The Resolution stated:

The main force of the revolution in West Fujian is the vast number of poor peasants (75 percent) and the urban handicraft workers. The middle peasants can help the revolution.... Among the rural petty bourgeoisies, the rich peasants and the petty landlords—except some bankrupted petty landlords, who could to some degree be revolutionary—are generally counter-revolutionary. At the climax of the revolution, they will sneak into the revolutionary ranks to seek private gain. However, when the White Terror comes, they will immediately demonstrate their counter-revolutionary nature. This is because their interests will be damaged during and after the revolution. (The poor peasants will have confiscated their surplus land and attacked them politically.) Among the rural petty bourgeoisies, only the middle peasants can be revolutionary. (Deng, 1929: 11)

The Resolution was revised by Mao Zedong, and Mao had developed his own logic of analyzing rural classes as early as 1926 (Mao, 1926). Thus, the analysis of rural classes in the Resolution may have been influenced by Mao's thought.⁷ However, the assertion of the counter-revolutionary nature of rich peasants and petty landlords was not mentioned in Mao's earlier class analysis. It originated with Deng and other grassroots revolutionaries' real political practices.

⁷ On the relation between Mao and the First Congress of West Fujian, see Huang Guodang (1995).

The issue of rich peasants and petty landlords pushed the political logic of the Land Revolution to a more complicated situation. On the one hand, Deng thought that poor peasants were the most determined supporters of the revolution, and the National Revolution had failed precisely because the Communist Party had not clearly built its foundation upon the revolutionary potential of poor peasants. Petty landlords and rich peasants had a wavering nature; their participation would undermine the foundation of the revolutionary force when facing the attack of enemies. If petty landlords and rich peasants became the leaders of the revolution, the situation would be even worse—the revolutionary force was very likely to collapse rapidly under the pressure of its enemies. Given this consideration, the Land Revolution had definitely to rely on poor peasants and satisfy their need for land.

On the other hand, once the Communist Party carried out the policy of confiscating the surplus land of rich peasants and petty landlords, these would be pushed toward the counter-side of the revolution. They would no longer be wavering participants of the revolution but rather clear-cut opponents. Thus, the strategy of the Land Revolution would not only shape the class of poor peasants to be the determined main force on which the Communists could rely but would also create new enemies and intensify the confrontation between different rural classes. This would be the first “paradox” the Communists encountered when they dove into grassroots political practice in the countryside.

Deng Zihui himself personally experienced the paradox. In June 1930, the Party Central, which at that time was dominated by the “Lisan Line” (a radical adventurist strategy advocated by Li Lisan, who was the leader of the Party for a brief time in 1930), ordered the Red Army in West Fujian to leave the base area to attack Chaozhou and Shantou in Guangdong. The adventurist military actions failed in succession, and the morale of the Red Army was deeply undermined. Consequently, the newly founded West Fujian Base Area was equally shaken. Brigands and armed bands organized by landlords rebelled against the Communist government. That occurred precisely at the time of the summer harvest, when a huge amount of peasant grain was flowing into the market, and grain prices were falling.

Rich peasants bought and stored cheap grain for sale later when prices rose, and they could make much more money by hoarding than they could by farming. On the contrary, the interests of poor peasants, who had to sell their grain just to survive, were damaged by the decrease in grain prices (Deng, 1956: 12). Deng Zihui and his colleagues tried to use administrative methods to freeze grain prices, but the attempt did not succeed. As a result, they adopted a series

of “anti-rich peasant” policies to protect poor peasants’ interests. For example, aware that rich peasants usually needed to hire wage laborers to do farm work, they organized associations of agricultural laborers to increase their wages. They took the fertile land of the rich peasants and gave it to the poor peasants, whose land was of inferior quality. They asked the rich peasants to contribute money to organize the Grain Regulation Bureau, which would use cash to buy grain at the regulation price, expecting to stabilize falling grain prices. Meanwhile, they established the Peasants and Workers’ Bank of West Fujian to issue its own currency and provide low-interest loans, hoping to crowd out rich peasants’ usury. Those policies aroused rich peasants’ discontent and undermined middle peasants’ confidence in the Communist government. Social unrest rose in the Base Area, the counter-revolutionary forces became active, and the Communists initiated an ill-conceived movement to “eliminate counter-revolutionaries” (Deng, 1956: 13). Finally, in late 1930, Longyan was occupied by the counter-revolutionary forces.

In his 1956 autobiography, Deng recalls his experience in the Land Revolution in West Fujian:

To sum up, in this period, we were just turning from secret activities to open work, and the people's struggles were changing from small-scale struggles to armed rebellion, to the Land Revolution, to overthrowing landlords, and to seizing political power. . . . However, we were still not very clear about the policy of “neutralizing rich peasants.” Thus, we were too leftist on anti-rich peasant policies. As to cadre policies, we were not vigilant enough of those intellectuals who came from landlord and rich peasant families, and we were using them too casually. (Deng, 1956: 13)

Though Deng admitted the mistake of having been too leftist on anti-rich peasant policies, he still firmly believed that rich peasants were unreliable, and that cadres coming from landlord and rich peasant families were a dangerous ingredient of the revolution. He harbored distrust of rich peasants ever since that time.

Deng left Longyan in September 1930. He was appointed inspector of the Provincial Committee and went to work in Putian, Fuan, Lianjiang, and Zhangzhou successively. The revolution was in a state of depression after the failure of the “Lisan Line.” Working as an inspector in various areas gave Deng a much more comprehensive understanding of the survivability of Communist grassroots policies that were based on the peasant movement. Wherever he went, he saw that “the rich Communists were usually depressed and shrank from struggle. Only when poor intellectuals had organized poor peasants and agricultural laborers could the struggle against enemies be launched and the

Party's organizations be developed." And he believed that "these phenomena enlightened me greatly in my class viewpoint" (Deng, 1956: 15).

The vacillating nature of rich peasants determined that the Communist grassroots political force must be built upon peasant organizations based on poor peasants and agricultural laborers. When the base areas were under higher and higher pressures from outside attacks, not only were the vacillating rich peasants considered to be counter-revolutionary enemies like the landlords, even the middle peasants' role and status would be reevaluated.

In 1934, the Central Soviet Area fell under the attack of Chiang's army. Deng did not take part in the Long March but remained in the South and fought as a guerilla. The Communist force at that time sank to new lows. Consolidated base areas were nonexistent in the South, and the existence of the local Party organizations and Communist regimes relied entirely on guerilla war. In this situation, the Party's grassroots organizations needed to be firmly held in the hands of poor peasants and agricultural laborers, the most devoted supporters of the revolution. During the guerilla years, Deng finally formulated a confirmed observation: "In this period, every middle peasant Communist and every Party branch led by middle peasants all compromised and shrank away and dared not struggle; every poor peasant Communist and every Party branch led by poor peasants were struggling determinedly, and the guerrilla groups and troops were continuously emerging from them" (Deng, 1956: 18).

Some scholars stress that the Communist Party's attitude toward the rich peasants was mainly determined by the influence of the Comintern.⁸ Indeed, the concept of the "rich peasant" was imported from the Soviet Union and gradually became an indispensable element in the terminology of the Chinese Revolution. And the change of the Comintern's position from "neutralizing" to "countering" rich peasants influenced the Party Central's attitude toward rich peasants in 1928-1929. However, as we can conclude from Deng Zihui's experience from the National to the Land Revolution, grassroots Communists' attitudes toward the rich peasants were, in fact, mainly shaped by the practical need to increase Communist political strength. Real practice taught them that, in a revolution that would change the existing social-economic structure, poor peasants and agricultural laborers had a much stronger will to fight for the revolution than did richer peasants, and they were the only force that would support the revolution when crises came and the survival of the Communist Party was in danger, for "their families were impoverished, and the only way that

⁸ For a particularly detailed study on this issue, see Huang Wenzhi (2010).

they could survive was to participate in the revolution" (Deng, 1961: 22). This fact was very important to the Communist Party, which at that time was being harshly suppressed and was eager to find loyal supporters. Consequently, what was most enlightening to Deng as he shaped his view of rural classes was not Marxist classical theory on the exploitative relationship, but the tremendous contrast between poor and rich peasants' support of the revolution. To grass-roots Communists like Deng, it was not the ideology imported from the Soviet Union that formed their attitude toward rich peasants; rather, it was the "survive or perish" reality of the practical political struggle after the Guomindang's purge that forced them to firmly grasp the poor peasants and the agricultural laborers as the main force of the revolution and to be vigilant of the rich peasants and the petty landlords. They would protect the poor peasants and the agricultural laborers' interests even at the expense of undermining the rich peasants and the petty landlords' interests. This kind of "enemy or friend" opinion on the issues of rural classes not only endured throughout the Land Revolution, the Sino-Japanese War, and the Civil War from 1946 to 1949, but also exerted its influence after the People's Republic was founded. In fact, this attitude was one of the most important political ideas of the entire Chinese Revolution. And this idea in fact originated with the break-down of the alliance of classes of the National Revolution and intensified with the struggle against the Guomindang's violent purge. The transformation of class struggle in the Chinese Revolution from theory to real practice was to a large extent shaped by the history of practical "survive or perish" struggles.

Land Reform After the Sino-Japanese War: The Formation of Deng Zihui's Paradigm of Class Politics

During the Sino-Japanese War from 1937 to 1945, the Communist Party adopted the strategy of a "united front" and advocated a moderate policy of reducing rent and interest in the countryside instead of the radical policy of land redistribution implemented during the Land Revolution. Communist power was greatly strengthened during the eight years of war. Seen from the national level, the Communist Party established its political legitimacy and stable social control in vast areas, in sharp contrast to its situation of surviving in the cracks between Guomindang and warlord forces during the Land Revolution.

As indicated by the Party Central's release of the May Fourth Instruction on May 4, 1946, land reform was put back on the agenda. However, there were differences of opinion on whether to use peaceful means to redistribute land,

such as issuing government land bonds to purchase the surplus land of landlords in the Shaan-Gan-Ning Border Region, or to rouse the poor peasants and the agricultural laborers to fight against landlords and take the land directly.

The May Fourth Instruction was more inclined toward peaceful land reform. Indeed, the Instruction showed the Communist Party's strong determination to carry out land reform and to implement the principle of "land to the tiller." However, in advocating methods to accomplish that principle, the Instruction did not encourage the use of violent class struggle as the basic way to expropriate the landlords' land. Rather, it encouraged local Communists to use peaceful means to redistribute land. Article Eleven of the Instruction, which focused on concrete approaches of land reform, suggested four methods of land redistribution:

To resolve the land issue, the people have created many different methods. Such as: (A) Confiscate and redistribute the land of big traitors. (B) After rent reductions, the landlords sell their land willingly, and the tenant peasants have first rights to buy that land. (C) Because the tenant peasants' tenancy rights have been secured after the rents have been reduced, the landlords are willing to give 70 to 80 percent of their land to the tenant peasants and reserve 20 to 30 percent to farm by themselves. (D) In settling rent and interest, appropriations, burdens, and other unreasonable exploitations, the landlords sell their land to the peasants in order to pay their debts. (Liu, 1946: 380)

Of these four methods, three were peaceful and concentrated on resolving the land problem through the market exchange of land between landless peasants and landed landlords. Only the land of major traitors should be directly confiscated through political power. The Party Central at that time obviously did not want to mobilize a movement of rural class struggle to encourage the peasants to appropriate the landlords' land directly and violently. Meanwhile, the Instruction specifically mentioned that it would be advantageous for the peasants to obtain land contracts written by the landlords after they acquired the land:

The peasants can use these methods to obtain land, and most of them can also receive land contracts written by landlords. Thus, the rural land problem will generally be resolved in a way that differs sharply from that used in the Civil War. Using these methods to resolve the land problem will place peasants in a legal and reasonable position. Local governments can choose the proper methods according to their different objectives. (Liu, 1946: 381)

This suggestion in fact took the legitimacy of the existing land ownership as a premise for land reform and emphasized making land reform "legal" through

the market exchange of land. These principles for the methods of land redistribution were in sharp contrast to those advocated in the Land Revolution. On May 13, shortly after the May Fourth Instruction was released, the Party Central sent another instruction to local Party branches, requiring that "local newspapers should not propagate peasants' need for land, the actions of land reform, and the fundamental changes in land relations in the liberated areas" (Central Committee, 1946: 159). This new instruction made the guiding principle of land reform even more moderate. An important reason that the Communist Party could try to implement peaceful land reform was the significant strengthening of its political power and the establishment of the base areas' political legitimacy during the Sino-Japanese War. The Party's control of base area society and its military security was also much more consolidated than it had been during the Soviet period before the War. All these facts accounted for the Party Central's consideration of resolving the land problem through means other than violent class struggle.

At the time the May Fourth Instruction was released, Deng Zihui was the secretary of the Huazhong Branch Bureau of the Communist Party, administering the Huazhong Liberated Area with a population of 30 million, which was much larger than the West Fujian Base Area, where Deng had begun to formulate his political paradigm. Though Deng had been to Yan'an to participate in the discussions for drafting the May Fourth Instruction, he did not agree with the Party Central's moderate attitude toward land reform. In an article published on July 1, 1946, which he wrote for *Central China Newsletter*, a local publication of the Su-Wan Border Region, to introduce the experience of land reform in Eqian village, Deng ignored the Party Central's suggestion not to publicize land reform and announced that "the principal purpose of China's New Democratic Revolution is to resolve the land problem and to achieve the aim of land to the tiller" (Deng, 1946: 147). He also tried to rouse the cadres' and the people's enthusiasm for land reform: "Whoever does not agree with the land reform movement, whoever is slack in the movement, and whoever obstructs or harms the movement violates the interests of the New Democratic Revolution and impedes China's move to independence, liberty, peace and democracy and is an enemy of the revolution" (Deng, 1946: 147).

In contrast to the May Fourth Instruction, which tried to weaken the class struggle and advocate a conciliatory method of market transactions to achieve the goal of land reform, Deng emphasized the importance of class struggle as an indispensable approach to land reform. He underlined the agency of poor peasants and agricultural laborers and their confrontation with rich peasants, seeing these as crucial active factors to advance land reform. All these factors

were absent from the May Fourth Instruction. He praised the land reform in Eqian village, in which “the agricultural laborers and the poor peasants, who are the main force of the revolution in the countryside, were mobilized and the people not only dared to fight the landlords and evil tyrants but also dared to fight the rich peasants face to face” (Deng, 1946: 147). He believed that land reform must rely on poor peasants and agricultural laborers: “In rural struggles, the Party must rely on peasants, not landlords, must rely on farm laborers and poor peasants, not rich peasants or middle peasants (of course middle peasants should become united with the Party)” (Deng, 1946: 149). The political strategy of firm reliance on poor peasants and agricultural laborers was similar to that used in West Fujian. The reason to choose such a strategy, as Deng explained it, was also closely related to his observation, formed long ago in West Fujian, that different rural classes had a different fighting spirit and gave different degrees of support to the revolution:

[The reason why we should rely on poor peasants and agricultural laborers] is not only because poor peasants and agricultural laborers constitute the majority of the rural population, but also because they are the most impoverished, suffering people, because they need land most, and because they have nothing to lose. Thus they are the most determined, active, and committed main force in the struggle. In the New Democratic Revolution and in land reform, if we do not rely on the poor peasants and the agricultural laborers but on the rich peasants, land reform definitely cannot be carried on, and the revolution will definitely fail. When you have power, the rich peasants will take part in the revolution for private ends and seize the gains of the revolution; when you lose your power, they will immediately change their mind and turn back. If we rely only on middle peasants and not on poor peasants and the agricultural laborers, and if the Party’s village branches and leading cadres are based on middle peasants, it is certain that the branches will be compromised, and they will not dare to struggle and to advance land reform, or they will play the trick of just pretending to redistribute the land. (Deng, 1946: 150)

The widely used method of class struggle in land reform in Huazhong made many local cadres criticize the mass movement as having gone to extremes. But Deng was not shaken and insisted on his opinion. And land reform in Huazhong was quickly accomplished in two months, from June to the end of July 1946.

After the Central Land Meeting held from July to September 1947, the moderate May Fourth Instruction was replaced by the radical Outline Land Law of China. Deng Zihui did not attend this meeting, and we can see his understanding of the rural class issue at that time from a letter he wrote to Liu Shaoqi and the Party Central. He firmly opposed the opinion and the practice

of giving preferential treatment to landlords and rich peasants and insisted that the land requirements of poor peasants and agricultural laborers be satisfied first; only then should the interests of landlords and rich peasants be considered. He argued that "all land belonging to landlords should be taken and redistributed, landlords should receive a share of land equal to that accorded to poor peasants and agricultural laborers. (In land-scarce areas, we could even give landlords less land.)" (Deng, 1947: 160). This harsh treatment of landlords, in Deng's view, should even involve "anti-Japanese landlords" and "landlord cadres," without any concession (Deng, 1947: 160). Deng's attitude toward rich peasants was equally radical. He suggested that not only the land rented out by the rich peasants, but also their self-cultivated land should be redistributed (Deng, 1947: 161). Deng also implicitly criticized the May Fourth Instruction for not placing the interests of poor peasants and agricultural laborers at the top: "The Party Central's May Fourth Instruction of last year did not clearly state that the land requirements of poor peasants and agricultural laborers should be satisfied. I think it should be clearly put forward in this meeting" (Deng, 1947: 160).

Another idea Deng set forth in his letter was that land reform should be promoted through the mass movement of class struggle. In his conception, the mass movement never involved reconciliation between different rural classes. On the contrary, it must be based on the exertion of the agency of poor peasants and agricultural laborers. All confrontation between poor peasants and agricultural laborers and landlords and rich peasants should be put on the table. Those confrontations could, in fact, serve as a necessary medium to initiate the release of the agency of poor peasants and agricultural laborers. During the mass movement, the Party should stand alongside the poor peasants and the agricultural laborers and help them build their political dominance in rural areas. On this point, Deng wrote clearly: "Our policy of the mass line should center on poor peasants and agricultural laborers rather than on the rich or middle peasants" (Deng, 1947: 162). Deng proposed two concrete methods to establish the political dominance of poor peasants and agricultural laborers in land reform. First, the peasant associations should be organized mainly by poor peasants and agricultural laborers, with the help of middle peasants, and exclude every rich peasant. Second, more poor peasants and agricultural laborers should be accepted as Party members, to reverse the situation whereby the majority of members in grass-roots Party organizations were usually rich peasants and middle peasants (Deng, 1947: 162-163).

It was during the period of the Land Revolution in West Fujian that Deng Zihui formulated the observation that different rural classes had very different

revolutionary potential. More than a decade later, during land reform after the Sino-Japanese War, he used this insight as a fundamental reference point to formulate an operative paradigm of rural class politics. In this paradigm, poor peasants and agricultural laborers were considered to be the most determined supporters of the Communist Party in rural areas. The Party should firmly establish the dominant position of these classes in rural politics and rely on them as the vanguard in the process of implementing various revolutionary policies. The Party should unite with, rather than fight against, middle peasants, but it should not rely entirely on them to promote the revolution. As to rich peasants and landlords, they should be carefully watched, to make sure that they will not harm the revolution. In practice, the Party's policies should first protect the interests of poor peasants and agricultural laborers, even at the expense of landlords' and rich peasants' economic and political interests; rural mass organizations and Party branches should mainly be constituted by poor peasants and agricultural laborers, with middle peasants as supporters, and should exclude rich peasants and landlords from participation.

Conclusion

Deng Zihui's experience of rural revolution showed him that what directly influences the revolutionary's practice is usually not the social structure, which is far removed from his activity, but the premise that grew out of his past practice. According to Deng's rural political practice, a crucial premise was his observation that different rural classes had different revolutionary potential and different degrees of support for the Communist Party: Poor peasants and agricultural laborers had the strongest fighting spirit and were the most determined supporters of the Communist revolution; middle peasants were inclined to compromise and were easily discouraged when the revolution suffered setbacks; rich peasants would take part in the revolution for private gain and would very likely surrender during times of crisis. This observation originated in his practical experience of the Land Revolution in West Fujian, matured in the period of guerilla war in South China after the Central Soviet Area had fallen, and deeply affected Deng's beliefs about many issues concerning land reform and the rural class struggle. Based on this observation, Deng formulated a systematic paradigm of rural class politics. At the core of this paradigm is the insight that the leadership of rural grassroots Party branches should be in the hands of poor peasants and farm laborers; that the dominance of poor peasants and farm laborers in rural politics should be firmly established; and that their

economic interests, especially the need for land, should be satisfied preferentially. In Deng's view, the "united front" with and the "taking care" of landlords and rich peasants cannot be given priority and must not violate the political dominance and the economic interests of poor peasants and agricultural laborers.

Deng's paradigm of class politics was at the heart of his arguments with other Party members. During land reform after the Sino-Japanese War, the Party Central once tried to weaken the intensity of class struggle, and Deng disagreed with this policy of reconciliation. During land reform of the newly liberated areas after the People's Republic was founded, Deng's stern attitude toward rich peasants and landlords was also quite radical within the spectrum of the Party. All these differences were related to his paradigm of establishing the political dominance and agency of poor peasants and agricultural laborers in rural political life. Notably, the agency of poor peasants and agricultural laborers, in Deng's conception, was not only significant in the political sense of winning the Chinese Revolution, but also important in the economic sense of increasing agricultural production. In his 1947 letter to Liu Shaoqi and the Party Central, Deng wrote, "If we want to advance the productive forces in rural areas, we should adopt determined policies to first of all satisfy poor peasants and agricultural laborers' land requirements and let them have enough farmland. We should also do our best to let them have enough draft animals, farm implements, houses, furniture, and food grains and enable them to labor on their own land, in order to enhance their willingness to increase production. Consequently, their labor and fertilizer input will be increased, their farming technique will be advanced, their farmland will be improved, and agricultural output will be enhanced. In the current situation, they are the main power in improving China's agricultural production in the present situation" (Deng, 1947: 159). This opinion also foreshadowed his later conservative stand in rural cooperativization and his confrontation with Mao Zedong.

Acknowledgement

I thank Philip C.C. Huang, Zhang Jiayan, and two anonymous reviewers for their helpful criticisms and suggestions on the framework and the arguments of the article. I would also like to acknowledge my debt to Ruth Hein and Kathryn Bernhardt for their help in improving my English writing.

Funding

The work is supported by 中国人民大学新教师启动金项目 (the "New Teachers' Starting Fund Project of Renmin University of China") 项目批准号 13XNF048 (with Grant No. 13XNF048)

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