

philippine studies

Ateneo de Manila University • Loyola Heights, Quezon City • 1108 Philippines

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Philippine Studies vol. 16, no. 2 (1968): 348–370

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Fri June 30 13:30:20 2008

Special Report

China's Communes — What The Chinese Say

GEORGE MELIS, S.J.

A regime which is inspired by Leninist ideals bases its policies on the twofold assumption that human society is moving inevitably towards Communism, and that capitalist and bourgeois institutions, hindering the march of history, can be destroyed effectively only by a strong dictatorial government.

To be strong, the proletarian dictatorship needs a core of faithful adherents to the Communist creed. It also needs ubiquitous police and an army at its absolute disposal. Further, it needs economic power, in the form of large government income, plentiful supplies available for state-controlled foreign trade, and a well-developed heavy industry. Under these conditions its 'historic task' of constructing Communism at home and abroad can effectively be carried on.

In China, as she was at the time of the Communist takeover (1949) and as she is today, the main source of government money is agricultural produce. After the policy of self-reliance was proclaimed,¹ foreign trade was further developed and in some way it replaced Russian aid. However, foreign trade itself depended on agricultural production. The great bulk of goods exported are agricultural produce; industry as a whole is financed by revenues from agriculture. "The financing of industrialization must come from agriculture." Thus

¹ *Red Flag (RF)*, Aug. 16, 1960.

the relatively small fraction of industrial goods exported depends finally on agriculture.²

More money comes to the state treasury from the village, both in the form of agricultural taxation and, above all, from the profit made by the state purchasing and selling agencies. Foodstuffs and cotton are state monopolies. Their sale to the state is compulsory, and purchase prices are kept low while the selling price is high.³

This article will not deal with all aspects of the Peking government's agrarian policy. We shall limit our study to rural collectivization, and especially to the People's Communes. We shall try to put together a selection of comments on their experiment by the Chinese themselves. Our picture may not be complete, but it should offer sufficient evidence for some conclusions.

HOW COLLECTIVIZATION WAS CARRIED OUT

The villages: a source of state revenue.

That agricultural production must be self-supporting has been the consistent policy of the Peking regime, both in its earlier stage and through later modifications. In 1956 the guiding motto was: "Upon condition of preferential development of heavy industry, industry and agriculture are simultaneously to be raised."⁴ In 1960 this motto became: "Pre-

² *Economic Research*, No. 3, June-July 1957, p. 50. The latest figures published by Chinese sources tell us that one third of industrial output contained agrarian raw materials. Four fifths of industrial consumer goods were agricultural products. One half of the state revenue was in some way related to agrarian production, and 70 per cent of exports were processed agrarian products. See *RF*, Sept. 1, 1960.

³ "The farmers have a hold on us by foodstuff production; we must take our hold of them by cloth, salt, coal, oil, matches, insecticides, chemical, fertilizers, farm implements, and electricity." Liu Shao Ch'i, in *People's Daily (PD)*, No. 18, 1967, p. 3.

⁴ In "The Ten Great Relations," a speech delivered by Mao Tse-tung in April 1956 and revealed in a speech of Liu Shao Ch'i in May 1958, *PD*, May 5, 1958. 'Heavy industry' meant one thing: steel.

ferential development of heavy industry is to be combined with speedy development of agriculture.”⁵

The policy-motto was further modified later in that year: “The foundation of economic development is agriculture.”⁶ At this time some foreign observers were tempted to see in this shifted accent on agriculture, the announcement of a major change in the economic policy of Peking. But, as a matter of fact the fundamental attitude of the Party was not altered. It did not begin any massive financing of agriculture by the state through irrigation works supported by heavy machinery, or the like. It prompted only improvement of old-type implements, further mass-labor by hand on small-scale water conservancy works, half-mechanized implements, miniature engines, and primitive feeder roads constructed by the farmers themselves. Moreover, the peasants had to save and spend some money if they wished to avail themselves of implements, fertilizer, and selected seeds.⁷

The model farmers are those who never ask for a cent from the state, and who produce more for ‘socialist Construction’. Such were those of the much publicized Tachai Brigade, in Shansi province. In other words, industry must *also* serve agriculture by producing some farm implements, so that agrarian production will increase and “industry will have raw material and find a market in the villages. For only thus can more capital be accumulated for the construction of a strong heavy industry”.⁸

If the villages must contribute more to the state’s accumulation of capital, this can be realized only by keeping rural consumption low and by imposing accumulation by the farmers, while they are spurred on to work more. The Chinese Communist Party tried a number of ways to achieve this aim, and we may expect more such efforts as long as the regime goes on.

⁵ Article of Li-Fu-chun, in *PD*, January 1, 1960.

⁶ *RF*, Sept. 1, 1960.

⁷ See *PD*, Sept. 30, 1960.

⁸ Mao Tse-tung, see *PD*, Dec. 28, 1959, p. 7.

Collectivization

The agricultural policy of the People's Republic of China moved through three main stages, the land reform, the collectives, and the people's communes. The confiscation and redistribution of land (1949-1951) had mainly ideological and political purposes: to overthrow the ruling class in the rural areas, and to consolidate the Party's hold on the peasants. This 'class struggle' attained its goal, but it increased consumption and failed to cure one of the basic ills of Chinese agriculture, the excessive parceling of farmland into small plots.⁹

The second move involved the forming of collectives. On the basis of existing rural mutual-aid societies, the Party staged a regrouping of farmers with the aim of improving labor efficiency. Under this earlier form of collectivization, the owners retained the ownership of their lands. Farm animals and implements were simply pooled together in the style of a cooperative. Theoretically, moreover, the peasants could choose whether or not to join the collectives, or even to quit them, if they were able to resist the political pressure against their 'backward attitude'.

By 1956 it had become an obligation for every rural household to belong to a collective. Moreover, in the 'higher collectives' that were implemented in 1955 and especially in 1956, the peasant owners ceded to the collective property rights over their land, with the exception of a small plot, scattered trees, and the farmhouses. Compensation to the former owners for collectivized property was henceforth abolished, and the peasants were to be paid for their labor on the basis of work-points. Besides, these 'higher collectives' were usually

⁹ Close to 500 million peasants are concentrated in a cultivated area of 107 million hectares (or about 150 million hectares considering multiple cropping). A survey by J.L. Buck in 1929-1933 gave the average size of farms as 1.7 ha., the median as 1.3, and the mode as 1.6. Only seven per cent of 16,786 farms, surveyed by Buck in 22 provinces were family size farms. J. L. Buck, *Land Utilization in China* (Chicago University Press, 1937), pp. 222 and 268.

larger than the former cooperatives, normally including a whole village.¹⁰

We shall not enter into details of this process which went on through the first seven years of the regime. We would only remark one feature in the frame of mind of those who promoted it. They considered the collectives as a device almost sufficient of itself to improve agricultural production. They thought that farmers would work more and consume less; the collectives would have extra funds to buy selected seed, fertilizer, and eventually agricultural machinery. At the same time the state would have an easier task in implementing its planned policy, collecting taxes, and purchasing grain and other agricultural produce.¹¹

Towards the communes

All through these years the stress was on industrial development. But a sort of uncontrolled enthusiasm seemed to have gotten hold of the planners in 1956. Consequently, at the end of the year the state had to draw from all its reserve to keep the economy going.¹²

This drive towards capital investment had something to do with the speeding up of collectivization in 1956, in one of the periodical pushes that are typical of Mao's political line. However, the peasants were not in a good mood towards the end of the year.¹³ To appease them, a number of steps were taken by the Party, including a cutting down of the size of collectives, enlarging the private plots, increasing the price of pork, and the staging of a campaign against tyrant cadres.

¹⁰ *RF*, 1959, No. 1.

¹¹ Mao's speech on Aug. 31, 1955; decision of the Central Committee, Oct. 1955; Regulations for a Model Collective, June 1966.

¹² Investments in 1956 exceeded those of 1955 by 65 per cent. At the end of 1956 it was found that 12 to 13 per cent of investment was lost on unnecessary projects or on projects that could not be used for lack of raw materials. The year's deficit was six per cent of the annual budget. (See *Ta Kung Pao*, Peking, Feb. 9, 1957, editorial; *Hsinhua Fortnightly*, 1957, n. 14, pp. 16-18).

¹³ *PD*, Dec. 13, 1956, p. 3.

A free market was also tolerated; it was promised that there would be no further changes for the next ten years.¹⁴

These concessions, however, brought about an enlarging of the private sector in agricultural production, and evoked a reaction on the side of the Party. Together with the anti-rightist campaign which followed the 'Hundred Flowers' period,¹⁵ a series of measures were initiated, leading to the formation of the communes which were to be established in 1958-1959. Under the slogan "more, quicker, better, more thriftily," the Great Leap Forward was launched in 1958, and for the peasants this campaign meant more collective work, especially in irrigation projects. This resulted in a notable increase in grain production, and at the same time it grouped the peasants together much more than before.

The Communes were officially proclaimed on August 29, 1958 in order to institutionalize and bring to perfection the pooling of labor which had produced such wonderful results. The private plots, a stumbling block to labor mobilization, were abolished; women were 'freed' from housewife duties, mess halls were to provide food for all. Appropriate provisions were to be made for the care of children, the mending of clothes, and the like. By September 1958, 98 per cent of rural households were already absorbed into the communes.¹⁶

The people's communes

The commune was to be a comprehensive over-all unit, embracing industry, agriculture, commerce, education, and the local militia. It was to be the 'basic unit of the coming communist society', wherein the masses cared for themselves,

¹⁴ *Hsinhua Forthnightly*, Oct. 10, 1957, p. 137. Possibly some secret directive advised against the cutting down of the size of collectives. By January 1958 they had 170 households on the average (see *RF*, Jan. 1, 1959), contrary to the public directive limiting them to 20 households.

¹⁵ In the spring of 1957, the Party invited free criticism about the misbehavior of its cadres; but this aroused a nationwide vociferous opposition to all its policies.

¹⁶ *Statistical Work*, Oct. 29, 1958, p. 23.

masters of their own destiny, without privilege or interference allowed from any quarter. Thus the differences between industry and agriculture, between cities and villages, between mental and manual labor would disappear and the age of ownership by the whole people would come at last, with 'everyone required to contribute to production according to his forces, and entitled to receive according to his needs'.¹⁷ The withering away of the state and the days when work would be delight and pastime were drawing near.¹⁸

All these pronouncements created an atmosphere of unreality. The documents of the period in the official Chinese press tried to conceal that something was going wrong with the Great Leap and the Communes, but this was transparent enough to a careful reader. It is even more evident, when the documents are re-read in the light of later events.

In December 1958, the Chinese Communist Party Central Committee met in a Plenary Session and published a Decision regarding the Communes. The Decision tried to correct some ideas: it is wrong to say in the villages that we are entering immediately into the age of Communism; it is wrong to speak of abolishing commerce, money prices. But the exhilaration of the good harvest¹⁹ still brought a dream-like prospect into the Decision: We do not need to plant so much farmland to food crops. We can transfer one third of it to pastorage, forests, flowers and gardens. China was to become a dreamland.

The same Decision denounced certain abuses blamed on over-enthusiastic cadres: money sent from the cities to relatives in the villages should not be diverted to the communal fund; houses, clothes, home tools and utensils, money deposited in the bank by individuals should not be taken over, nor should private debts be declared dissolved; work should not

¹⁷ *PD*, Sept. 1, 1958; Dec. 12, 1958.

¹⁸ *RF*, Sept. 1, 1958; *PD*, Sept. 10, 1958.

¹⁹ As is widely known, the figures of foodgrain production of 1958 given originally as 375 million metric tons was officially revised as 250 million metric tons in 1959. (*PD*, Aug. 27, 1959.)

exceed 12 hours daily, nor should women be required to do heavy work.²⁰

The communes had taken over agriculture, industry and also commerce, so that the operation of the state commercial agencies was affected. Grain purchase by the state slowed down in the second-half of November. The government did not know how much foodstuff was stored in the communes, but was only aware that part of it had become spoiled.²¹

A kind of autocracy had developed, with each commune keeping the goods it produced. In December 1958, in order to revive the flow of products, the communes were told that they could exchange with others those goods which were not required by the state. However, they could only enter into bilateral contracts after the state agencies had bought everything they wanted. Later, in August 1959, village free markets were admitted for a number of items, since the flow of goods had stopped.²²

Transportation also had its problems, especially relative to the production of iron, coal, etc., which was widely scattered, since a number of small mines had been reactivated. Besides, the communes were not willing to release their members for the transportation of goods to the main roads and railways. The Government agencies did not know what to do.²³

The communes, too, were a big financial operation, from which the state and the individuals only partially derived any advantages at all. It was revealed that for the administration of the communes, the state paid out 100 million yuan (about 42 million US dollars) in 1958. At the same time the state bank doubled its deposits (perhaps absorbing all deposits in the 'credit unions'), mostly in rural areas. On the other hand, the communes were using agricultural loans in order to set up small industries (as they were told to do in the

²⁰ PD, Dec. 18, 1958.

²¹ PD, Oct. 17, 1958; Dec. 20, 1968; *Ta Kung Pao*, Peking, March 2, 1959.

²² PD, Dec. 23, 1958; *Ta Kung Pao*, Peking, Aug. 24, 1959.

²³ PD, Jan. 22, 1959; March 3, 1959

Charter of the Commune). Consequently the bank did not get any turnover.²⁴

A dubious way to heaven

From the sample quotations above, it can be seen that the functioning of the communes was neither smooth nor well-planned. Whether they could have been conducted better is not a question we shall treat here, for we are dealing only with facts as they were presented in the official Chinese press. There we find admissions of failure in one field or another, while the ideal of the communes was kept high: "Communism is heaven, and the Communes are the way to it."²⁵ But by piecing together these partial confessions, one sees clearly that none of the major sectors of the economy escaped a partial disruption, with no definite new feature coming up to replace the usual patterns.

The Communes were to have been comprehensive economic units, mapping out their own policies in all fields of economy. This would have required a large number of trained personnel, and an exhaustive knowledge of local economic possibilities, much more than China had at that time. For this very reason, the communes grew much too large.²⁶ Thus, many communes did not correspond to the natural economic districts centered on the market towns.²⁷

There could have been, of course, a progressive adjustment in this traditional arrangement, but the rush pressed on

²⁴ PD, Dec. 18, 1958; *Ta Kung Pao*, Peking, Feb. 5, 1959.

²⁵ PD, May 3, 1959, p. 11.

²⁶ In August 1958, there were in China 120 million peasant households. They were to be grouped into 80,000 communes, roughly corresponding to the counties (hsien). Instead, by September 1958 there were only 26,400 communes with an average of three counties to a commune. In 1959, despite an official call for subdivision of the existing communal units, their number dropped further to 24,000 with an average of 64,000 mou of land each. PD, Oct. 17, 1959; April 7, 1959; April 7, 1960. *Statistical Work*, Oct. 29, 1958, p. 43.

²⁷ An estimate by G.W. Skimmer puts at 58,000 the number of traditional market towns. cf *Journal of Asiatic Studies*, November 1964; Feb. 1965; March 1965.

everyone by the policy of the Great Leap Forward led to an anti-climax of unreality. Following the anti-rightist campaign in 1957, the Party had taken over directly the civil administration of the country. Local cadres wanted Party policies implemented by all means, as though ideological enthusiasm could make up for lack of professional skill. Reports on economic conditions and achievements were blurred. The central authorities could not possibly know where the country's economy stood.

When the year 1960-1961 witnessed a shortage of food and basic consumer goods, the Party had to retreat to pre-Great Leap political positions. The backyard furnaces, so much publicized at the beginning of the Communes as an evidence that farmers could be skilled workers as well, were closed down in 1959. Agriculture itself did not profit much: "In the past there was a universal promotion of deep ploughing, of exploitation of virgin lands and of water conservancy, with the aim of increasing production." But "during the last year or two (Great Leap Communes) there was an increased alkalization of the soil, especially in North China," due to unplanned widespread small-scale irrigation works.²⁸ In May 1959, the farmers had to be given back the use of their private plots. This was an extreme measure, contrary to the very tenets of the communes,²⁹ but needed to ease the shortage of vegetables and minor crops.

"In some places manpower and fuel are wasted, not saved," the youth were told in June 1959. *The People's Daily* during these months ordered a reduction in the industrial enterprises of the communes and the re-establishment of handicraft production. Later, in 1960, the Party paper in Hupei province confessed that: "The reorganization of manpower was not well done. . . . The return in work done was not high."³⁰

²⁸ *PD*, Nov. 12, 1960; Oct. 25, 1959.

²⁹ *PD*, May 20, 1959.

³⁰ *Chinese Youth*, June 16, 1959, p. 56; *PD*, June 14, 1959; June 30, 1959; *Hupei Daily*, July 18, 1960. "The people's he-agencies have become she-agencies." This pun is often charged against purged leaders, and refers to the fact that often only the women folk were

No wonder that, as early as the end of 1958, a legal journal of the Party spoke of "increased seditious speech, misrepresentation of the policy of the Party, theft and robbery, disturbance and poisoning of food at the communal kitchens, bribery of Party cadres, rebellious temper and speech, damage to common property." It prescribed tough and swift handling of such cases on the spot, with court sessions in the fields and with summary punishment.³¹ The youth magazine just quoted admitted that "in the communal mess-hall there is corruption and favoritism, some saying: 'The food is now free.'"³²

A Party writer, Feng Ting, dared early in 1959 to hint at a major mistake of policy in the Party line: "The source of 'leftist' deviation or adventurism is the neglect of the function of objective laws";³³ in other words, there is unrealistic planning.

Liu Shao-ch'i wrote on Oct. 1, 1959 in *The People's Daily*: "Some say that the communes were introduced too early, and made a mess." Perhaps Liu was himself one of those critics, as in 1967 the Red Guards accused him of having been. He is charged with having led an all-out drive against the Communes. Whether he did so or not, the words attributed to him and other Party leaders purged during the Cultural Revolution, are worth quoting in full, since they represent a

left behind to care for the fields, while the men were sent to work in water-conservancy projects. In Chinese, "Ren-min kung-she pien-ch'eng ren-min-mu-she." *Kung* means common, but also 'male' when contrasted with *mu* meaning female. *Kung* and *mu* usually refer, in this sense, to animals.

³¹ *Political Legal Research*, 1958, no. 6, pp. 53 ff.

³² *Chinese Youth*, June 16, 1959. The *PD* candidly confessed (or was it a slip of the tongue?): "Peasants normally eat some melon seeds in order to save grain; on rainy days or when they do not work, they eat some soup, and get some more substantial food when they are working hard. At times they ask to be served the same food as the (Party) cadres are served in their dining rooms." This was printed in the *PD* on August 25, 1958. Could the communes' dining hall afford such a privileged treatment for everybody?

³³ *New Construction*, Feb. 1959.

genuine Chinese evaluation of this pet policy of Mao's. We shall deal with them in the second part of this article.

CHINESE CRITICISM OF THE COMMUNES.

During the last two years both the Chinese official press and radio and hundreds of tabloids born of the cultural revolution have been publishing a number of statements, attributed to purged party leaders, and referring to the people's communes. These leaders may or may not have said what is attributed to them. Perhaps they said it, but in a context which would somewhat attenuate their negative judgment. The Maoists who bring up such quotations in the midst of a heated debate are definitely biased, for they want to discredit the fallen leaders. "Beat the dog fallen into the water," they say, "in order to prevent it from coming ashore and biting people once more."

However, to our purpose it is of second importance to verify whether or not every such utterance is genuine. What matters is the issue itself: that controversy rages within the high ranks of the Chinese Communist Party about the validity of the communes. Even if the Maoists were merely slandering their rivals, the opinions attributed to them have an intrinsic value, by revealing what the Maoists think their opponents would say about such pet policies of Mao as the People's communes.

Too early and too rough.

Liu Shao-ch'i is accused of having in 1962 made the comments: "We may have given cause for the people to doubt about the three flags for many years to come." "Our economy is on the brink of collapse." "Only 30 per cent of our losses are due to natural calamities; the rest is damage done by man".³⁴

Teng Hsiao-p'ing, since 1965 Central Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party, and now purged, was reported as having said:

³⁴ PD, August 15, 1967; *Kuang Ming Daily*, August 9, 1967.

"We went too fast, faster than the conditions allowed, and consequently we did not follow objective laws." "The communes were too large, too badly directed; productivity was lower than the middle peasants' productivity before collectivization. The farmers lost their confidence in the collective economy".³⁵ He also said: "The communes in towns and cities were established even much too early. We fought our battle unprepared; all sorts of tactics were improvised, but no one really knew what ought to be done."³⁶

P'eng Chen, a politburo member, allegedly said: "The Great Leap wasted the forces of the masses; it was a great mistake. We do better not even to mention the Great Leap. The people welcomed the cooperatives, but they were not so happy even with the collectives. We should have started the communes some years later."³⁷

"The Great Leap was a fraud and ended in disaster. It destroyed the wealth of the people and left them with only boiled water to drink; we have emerged from it with bloody noses. . . . The communes were a product of subjective wishes; they disregarded the principle of respecting the degree of political consciousness and the initiative of the masses. They were carried on through coercion and commandism."³⁸ These lines are attributed to Teng T'o, a Deputy Mayor of Peking city, and former editor of *The People's Daily*.

Liu Jen, a Peking Party official, reportedly said: "The Great Leap went too far to the left; the backyard furnaces wasted the good iron we had." Liu Jen was also of the opinion that the Party was a bad employer: "We did not care for production in the proper way; the people are starving. In some places the commune members do not get a cent even

³⁵ *PD*, Nov. 24, 1967; Nov. 27, 1967.

³⁶ "The East is Red." April 20, 1967. One could read in an article of the *PD*, Dec. 24, 1958 that the organization of the party and government in the communes posed "a new question which still remains to be studied." This uncertainty prevailed after 500 millions of the farmer population had already been organized into communes.

³⁷ "The East is Red" in *Sing Tao*, Hong Kong, Nov. 22, 1967.

³⁸ *KM*, May 8, 1966.

after one or two years of labor. If we go on like this, nobody will like to work." He further commented on the food situation. "Every year gets worse; the women are concerned over food. Oil and vegetables are scarce; sickness is rampant."³⁹

Ch'in Mu, a prominent script-writer of Canton city, is charged with a more explicit condemnation: "During the Leap, sick people perished for lack of treatment, and children have died neglected because no kindergarten was provided for them. . . . Bleached bones are scattered everywhere; men are starving, cattle show their ribs, food is rotten and meager. People have a miserable life; the hills are upset and the rivers overflow. Such are the human miseries of our times."⁴⁰

The Party's Remonstrances to Mao

Behind the facade of Party unity, some Party leaders voiced their opposition to the communes. Old Marshal Chu Teh, a veteran leader of the Red army and Mao's companion before he took control of the Party, made a survey in Manchuria in 1959. On his return he wrote in his report: "The Communes were put up too early and too roughly. We ought to speak out our mind. If the few of us do not, who will?"⁴¹

By far the most outspoken was Defense Minister P'eng Te-huai. He submitted a memorandum to Mao Tse-tung on July 14, 1959, when the Central Committee met at Lushan to analyze the situation created by the communes. After praising the achievements of 1958, P'eng writes: "It now seems to me that some projects for capital construction in 1958 were too hasty or excessive, with the result that a portion of capital was tied up and some essential projects were delayed."

³⁹ Quoted by "Battle Report," Feb. 24, 1967; re-printed in *Ming Pao*, Hong Kong, April 1967.

⁴⁰ By these words, Ch'in Mu is said to have referred to the famine of 1960-61. *Yang Ch'eng Evening Paper*, Canton, June 19 and 26, 1966. In 1960 about 20,000 people starved to death in Teh-tsing County, Chekiang Province, according to the T'ien-an Men tabloid, March 1967 (SMM 578).

⁴¹ *Combat Bulletin*, Feb. 24, 1967, printed in *Ming Pao*, Hong Kong, June 26, 1967.

This P'eng attributes to inexperience and to the excessive push or forcing in 1959.

"There are still a number of people who do not have enough to eat." "Last year we had an average of only 18 feet of cotton cloth per person, enough for a shirt and two pairs of trousers. The people demand a change from present conditions."

"The habit of exaggeration bred and spread rather universally. Last year at the Peitaho Conference we had no proper plans to cope with the situation. These faults were caused by our failure to seek the truth widely from the facts. Some unbelievable miracles were also reported in the press." "Extravagance and waste developed." "We considered ourselves as rich, while actually we were still poor."

"For a long period of time it was not easy to get a true picture of the situation." "Such a habit of exaggeration is born of our usual way of setting only tasks and targets with no definite methodology."⁴²

P'eng, a senior general of the Red army, who led the Chinese troops during the Korean War, was then one of the top men in the Central Committee. But when his memorandum was discussed at the Lushan meeting, Mao was not at all pleased and had him dismissed and replaced by Lin Piao, who was to be the main actor in the cultural revolution started in 1966.⁴³

⁴² P'eng Te-huai's memorandum was not published by the official press but its content is found in Red Guard tabloid. Cross references testify in favor of its authenticity. It is a long document from which we can quote only a few significant passages. The full text was published, for instance, in *Selections of China Mainland Press* (U.S. Consulate, Hong Kong), No. 4032.

⁴³ Mao's victory, however, was not complete. Some months earlier he had resigned from the presidency of the Chinese People's Republic, and was replaced by Liu Shao-ch'i. After the Central Committee meeting, he "retreated to a second line," a euphemism indicating that he thought it good tactics to yield to the mounting criticism. He had to leave his subordinates the conduct of the country's daily affairs, while he would concern himself with "the main line of policies."

The Blame on Mao

Mao's rage could not change the trend of events. Agriculture was doing badly and people were unhappy. The party started a tactical retreat, and the communes were practically dismantled for a time at least. In November 1960, a *People's Daily* editorial announced a new policy. Much more authority had to be given in agricultural policy to each "small production brigade."⁴⁴ The small production brigade corresponds roughly to the size of the cooperatives before 1956. The communes "became pure names",⁴⁵ as the angry words of the Red Guards put it.

T'ao Chu, the Party boss in South China, was quite explicit, according to a radio broadcast, in stating that, "There are surely a number of people who lack confidence in socialist revolution and construction, who are doubtful whether we can build as quick as possible a highly developed socialist society in a country such as ours. Their doubts have mainly been expressed in their views on the general line, the Great Leap and the People's Communes."⁴⁶

During the following year the Party bosses made a series of moves, in order to put the economy on its feet again. Liu Shao-ch'i, the first Vice-Chairman of the Party and heir apparent of Mao, went to Hunan Province to get a first hand knowledge of local conditions. Teng Hsiao-P'ing and P'eng Che'en, the mayor of Peking city and in charge of the legal bureau of the Party's Central Committee, did the same in the outskirts of Peking. P'eng sent out a secret circular seeking for comments on a number of documents issued by the Central Committee and on Mao's speeches. There followed a nine days secret meeting at the Mirador Palace: 110 problems were discussed and 29 major mistakes in the Party policies were singled out.

"During the recent years," it was said at the meeting "the policies of the Central Committee have changed too much

⁴⁴ *PD*, Nov. 20, 1960.

⁴⁵ "Protect the East" surveying team in Honan, in *Sing Tao*, Oct. 27, 1967

⁴⁶ Kwangtung People's Broadcasting Station, August 9, 1967.

and too often. The lower cadres are unable to understand what we are after; we carried on a number of initiatives, without testing them by experiment beforehand; we went against objective laws. The natural disasters have some part in bringing about the hardships we are in; nevertheless the heated heads and unsure policies were important reasons too. Chairman Mao takes a Great Leap in agriculture and industry to be that easy! He is too eager to see achievements." "He's getting old now." "The Chairman has been swindled by so-and-so. Nobody dares to utter a word."⁴⁷

They blamed Mao⁴⁸ for the way the Communes were put up. "He became proud, his victory made him lose his head; he wanted to grab the initiative in international communism." "We are faced by a nationwide problem; Chairman Mao and the Central Committee were wrong," Li Chi, a Peking city official who attended the meeting, is supposed to have said. Liu Shao-Ch'i is reported as saying: "To oppose Chairman Mao is just to oppose an individual." "In 1959 something unimportant was inflated to a question of principles." "P'eng Te-huai's Memorandum had a number of remarks that were pointing at real facts." And Teng Hsiao-p'ing concluded: "We have to change a policy when it is impossible to carry it on, no matter who originated it."⁴⁹

Ch'en Yün, another member of the Politburo, in charge of Economic policy, commented: "It is very difficult to convince the farmers that the policies of the Party are in themselves a hundred per cent good and mistakes are only the responsibility of the local cadres who implement them." "The only way to distinguish right and wrong and to win the peasants' confidence is to admit that we are wrong." "If they have some hope of eating a little more of the products, the peasants perhaps will be willing to work for us."⁵⁰

⁴⁷ "The East is Red," *Red Guard Journal*, April 20, 1967. Was so-and-so, Lin Piao himself?

⁴⁸ According to the national *Kuang Ming Daily*, August 9, 1967, which reprinted a long article from the *Peking Daily*.

⁴⁹ *KM*, April 8, 10, 1967.

⁵⁰ See note 39.

There was another way

In the same period, T'ao Chu, the party boss in Canton, in a speech to the intellectuals of his South-Central Bureau, remarked: "In our ways of transforming the system of ownership, we have been rather too rough. When in 1958 we carried on the people's Communes, our political objectives were basically correct, but because we lacked experience, our steps towards them were not correct. The Communes, I should say, have a few fundamental degrees: at first the cooperatives, next the communal system of ownership, and lastly the ownership by the whole people." "Thinking back, in 1958, the collectives could have been left in their status of collectives; and we should have established the communes just as a higher form of agricultural unit, allotting to them a share of income, and putting them in charge of a number of large scale agricultural construction works. This way would have responded to the actual standard of our production forces and its requirements for development. Unluckily we proceeded too quickly, but now we have gained our experience and we take a step back in some points: We carried on too quickly."⁵¹

Liu Shao-ch'i is credited with a similar analysis: "In saying that the situation is very favorable, Chairman Mao refers to the political situation, because the economic situation cannot be described as healthy; on the contrary it is very unfavorable." "During recent years the Central Committee underestimated the seriousness of the situation. The loss of man-power, of land fertility and of financial resources has been so heavy that it would be difficult to pull them around in seven or eight years. We are unwilling to admit our hardships or we tend to discount them, for fear that by presenting the true picture our cadres will be downcast. But obviously this is no bravery; it is definitely not the attitude of a revolutionary, of a real Leninist. In this conjunction, any method conducive to stir up enough goodwill among the peasants and make them work will be acceptable through the period of transition. No particular method should be regarded as best

⁵¹ Revolutionary Rebel Troop of the *Red Guard Bulletin*, Jan. 21, 1967 in *Ming Pao*, March 13, 1967.

and to be applied exclusively. The construction of projects which cannot make money or yield economic results at once, should be halted."⁵²

The official line of the Party from 1961 on insisted in fact on some ways to gain back the goodwill of the peasants, and the leaders seem to have accepted openly, in inner party meetings, their share of responsibility for the mess.

Dismantling the Communes

The main problem was to increase production. To this purpose, as "the peasants had lost their confidence in the collectives," even allowing private production to develop could be tolerated.

Teng Hsiao-p'ing is claimed to have said: "Black cats and white cats are equally good, as long as they catch mice." "The problem of agriculture must be solved on the basis of the relations of production (that is, the fitness of a system of ownership to the requirements of efficient labor). Now we have in our country the system of ownership by the communes, by great brigade and by small brigade. We also have as in Anhui province the 'responsibility fields', that are actually a system of household production. The point is for us to use in each place such a system as can better mitigate difficulties and increase production. We should legalize what could be regarded in theory as unlawful."⁵³

T'ao Chu exhorted his subordinates in Honan Province to go ahead with allowing the peasants to go it alone. "Letting out fields to the peasant does not bring any danger, this is not a change in the system of property" (i.e., the farmland still belongs to the collectives). "A bit of land should be rented out to the farmers, a hoe, and some seeds too."⁵⁴

The private plots were given back "legally" to the peasants, in various provinces of China. In Kueihow, "according

⁵² "Ching Kang Shan Ping T'uan," of the 4th Hospital, Peking. May, 1967; *Ta Kung Pao*, Hong Kong, August 16, 1967.

⁵³ *PD*, Nov. 24, 27, 1967.

⁵⁴ "The East is Red," quoted in *Sing Tao*, Oct. 27, 1967.

to the experience that the smaller the Communes the better was the production, a number of Communes were changed back into high grade collectives." In Szechuan, all barren land, outside the Commune land, and by the sites of streams, roads, and rivers were declared free.⁵⁵

The Hupei province Party boss, Wang Jen-chung, reassured the cadres: "Private plots give a better yield than collective fields. This is not something to be feared. We should not restrict cultivation in the private sectors, but rather extend it a little. What matters is that both private and collective agriculture must develop." Wang also had something to say about free markets. "If you try to clamp down on a free market, there is nothing on sale. What is better, to have the market-place empty or to tolerate a bit of free business?"⁵⁶ Old General Chu-teh is said to have held the same opinion: "Free market can bring some life to market transactions. Let prices correspond to product values. Otherwise the peasants who go marketing will not even get a bowl of rice."⁵⁷

Speak out your mind!

This went along as an encouragement to a sort of "democracy" which the Red Guards of the cultural revolution find outrageous. On November 13, 1967 Li-Pao-hua, the son of Li-Ta-chao, Mao's first teacher of Marxism, encouraged democracy such as this, and did so, reputedly, on an old directive of Liu Shao-ch'i: "In the interior of the Central Committee even the general line and the three flags can be discussed;" "Let everybody speak out his grievances freely,

⁵⁵ Kueichow People's Broadcasting Station, June 3, 1967, Szechuan People's Broadcasting Station, Sept. 7, 1967. These directives, aimed at easing the shortage of food, cotton and other products of the farms needed by light industry, are found in the national press in 1961: "Private plots are essential to collective economy; are a needed complement... They do not have an anti-socialist character." *TKP*, June 12, 1961.

⁵⁶ Hupei People's Broadcasting Station, Nov. 6, 1967

⁵⁷ *Battle Bulletin*, Feb. 24, 1967, reprinted in *Ming Pao*, April 24, 1967.

and contribute suggestions without restraint. With an empty stomach such as we have, of course everyone is angry."⁵⁸

Apparently they did speak. So softly however, that only in 1966 did the world at large come to know that many of the Peking Red leaders did not think the Communes were a success.

The Resurgence of Private Interest

The People's Republic witnessed first the land reform, then the mutual-aid teams, the rural cooperatives, the higher collectives, and finally the People's Communes, with their modifications in later years. In each of these phases, the Party succeeded in destroying some of the obstacles to "collective economy," but at the end it was faced with a resurgence of private interests, or "bourgeois trends," according to the orthodox terminology.

The requisition and redistribution of land in 1949-51 eliminated the landlords and rich peasants, but stirred up and intensified the activities of the higher-middle peasant, of the new rich, and of a number of party officials privileged by the reform.

The cooperatives were a vain attempt to clamp down on this trend. They brought the Party apparatus full force into rural economy, thus opening a new avenue to individual achievement, or else to despotism, by the village cadres.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ Anhui People's Broadcasting Station, November 13, 1967; see also *PD*, Nov. 11, 1967.

⁵⁹ "Before the collectivization, when the peasants were still working independently, the tyranny of local cadres could only take the form of political pressure. But now that the majority of the peasants are in collectives, the local cadres can terrorize the people not only by political, but also by economic means. They say that 'since the land is owned by the collectives, they now hold the peasants by their queue of hair; the peasants have to move as they wish.' Many village cadres are acting illegally, searching houses, arresting and torturing, forcing people to marry, and embezzling common property. They also suspend peasants from work, as they will, and thus deprive them of the only source of income." *PD*, June 27, 1956; July 1, 1956; *PD*, Nov. 28, 1956.

The condemnation of cadres' misbehavior by the official press could not alter the hard facts. The Party had substituted itself as a new landlord, whether or not the farm land was said to belong to the collectives themselves and not to the state.

The Commune produced this resurgence of private interests rather as an aftermath. Its adverse effects on the national economy led the Party to resort to material incentives in order to keep things going, and consequently the little man reverted to his old individualistic ways. The great enemy of the collectivist ideals of the Peking regime, one would say, is not the individualistic mentality of the peasants alone⁶⁰ but this mentality coupled with the landlord-attitude of the Party⁶¹ which so far has spent very little money to finance agriculture. If collectives have to function at all, they have to be supplied with capital so that the peasant is not tempted to find side alleys in order to come out from the common distress.

Instead, the Party periodically resorts to indoctrination, trying to eradicate "the evil roots of bourgeois thoughts." The Party believes it can succeed in transforming the peasant into an idealist. The Party is confident that in China's villages it will create a new man, who lives for the revolution and not so much for grandpa, wife, and children.

This confidence in the power of education might be a heritage from Confucianism, but it is simply not equal to the requirements of Chinese farmland. Collectivization might or

⁶⁰ "Individualism," as condemned by the Party, often means "basic human feelings" deprived of "class content." During the communes, peasants used to say: "If the children are sent to nurseries, then to kindergarten and to school, and afterward they are assigned to some work by the state, will they still recognize their parents?" *PD*, Dec. 16, 1958.

⁶¹ It is not unfair to remark that the "People's Democracy" makes money in a typical bourgeois way. Money gets into the state coffers from resale of farm products, bought from the peasants at arbitrarily low prices. More money comes from the state-owned factories and mechanized farms. Foreign trade adds to them in enriching the state, with capital to be used as it will. The Messianic outlook of the Party may perhaps excuse its methods in the eyes of Marxist believers. Nevertheless, the fact of a business-minded "proletarian" state is not to be gainsaid.

might not have been needed in China; but common ownership alone with the investment only of bare hands and ingenuity cannot work miracles. During the cultural Revolution we have been hearing, "A mighty hidden material force is put into action whenever a man's mind grasps the thoughts of Mao Tse-tung." Perhaps that is so, but it is a material force far from sufficient for healthy rural progress.