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Bread, Rice, and Freedom

The Peasantry and Agriculture in the USSR and China

Miriam and Ivan D. London and Ta-ling Lee

The avowed promise of totalitarian socialism is a material one, not of pie in the sky, but of bread here on earth, more abundantly provided and more equitably shared. The price of this bounty is a temporary diminution of personal freedom, or so a great number of intelligent people have said—arguing besides that freedom from want might well have precedence over freedom to starve.

That promise has been tested, to an extent and on a "sample" unmatched in history, in the largest countries of the world. For more than sixty-five years in Russia and thirty years in China, more than a quarter of the earth's population has undergone the totalitarian socialist experiment. In each country, the subjects of most drastic experimentation have been the peasantry, upon whose labor the earth's cornucopia ultimately depends.

The evidence is all in—indeed, it gathers dust. What is surprising, however, is how little this evidence seems to have mattered, how lightly it still weighs on the minds of some of the cleverest people in the West. It is only recently, for example, that many Western specialists have stopped blaming Soviet harvest failures on the weather, that continued huge Soviet grain imports and empty shelves in the citadel of privilege, Moscow, have finally ended this sad joke and permitted more informed opinion to surface. But many who now accept vaguely that the System, not Heaven, has somehow blighted Soviet agriculture still turn with blind assurance to China: There, at least, the collective system has "worked." Whatever else one can say, China seems to have "solved the food problem."

Behind the shifting notions of a "failed" Soviet system and a "successful" Chinese one lies a very old delusion—the realizability of a perfect social plan. For some Russian reason, it is thought, a perfect system in theory was undermined in Soviet practice. In fact, this is not true. As an honored Soviet scientist, A. P. Fedoseev, has pointed out, "The [Soviet] system cannot be perfected, if only because it is already perfect, and to adapt it to human needs and rationality means to destroy it. . . ." Unfortunately, human life on earth requires an *imperfect* system, one that permits rough self-regulation to deal with the uncertainties and unexpected demands of the real world.

The delusion owes its lasting power, however, to myth—the modern, scholarly fairy tales wrought by Western intellectuals who make their dreams come true in safely remote lands, like China—or Samoa. As the myth becomes more plausible, reality becomes more strange and unacceptable. But it is to this strange Soviet and

Chinese reality that we now propose—with the stubbornness of our own imperfect natures—once again to turn.

A recent spare but pithy work by a Soviet analyst, Lev Timofeev,² published unofficially within the USSR and abroad, sums up the conclusions of many other close observers of the native rural scene. The Soviet *kolkhoznik's* labor in the collective field constitutes a form of *corvée* rendered to the state in return for which he is granted certain rights, primarily the right to keep and tend a small private plot. His work on the private plot represents a *second* job on off hours, which is, however, essential to his survival, because his main job in the collective field supplies no more than 50 percent of his basic needs.³ Since not only the time, but the endurance of an able-bodied *kolkhoznik* is naturally limited, he must rely upon the elderly and infirm members and the children of his household to perform many of the chores on the private plot. He is permitted to sell the excess produce from the private plot on a "free" market, better described as an officially approved but strictly regulated black market.

The astonishing fact is that such private plots, which comprise less than 3 percent of the total arable land and are cultivated by a disadvantaged work force using the most primitive agricultural tools, not only feed the peasantry, but, according to recent official figures, account for about one-third of the vegetables, meat, milk, and eggs and two-thirds of the potatoes produced in the entire country.⁴

Economic wall/black market

These few statistics, which the Soviet authorities would have ideological cause to minimize rather than to inflate, deliver an overwhelming message. In Timofeev's words, the Soviet black market is not merely a "chink," a "secret pass-through" in the economic wall—"it is both the chink and the wall itself." Indeed, Soviet socialism "lives at the expense of black-market 'microcapitalism'," made possible by the *kolkhoznik* who performs on his second, spare-time job as a "micromodel" of the master farmer he might have become if his land and livestock had not been taken

We regret that Ivan D. London, professor of psychology at Brooklyn College of the City of New York, and a contributor to this magazine for many years, died on April 12, just as the present article neared publication. His wife, Miriam London, is a researcher in Soviet and Chinese studies. Ta-ling Lee is professor of history at Southern Connecticut State University.

from him more than fifty years ago, "leaving him a toy-sized private plot."

It is thus noteworthy that in 1976 in the People's Republic of China, shortly after the coup that removed Mao Zedong's immediate, loyal successors, the *People's Daily* disclosed that the peasantry's private plots—elsewhere estimated at 6.4 percent of the arable land—produced more than 25 percent of all vegetables, fruit, and sugar cane and 70 percent of all agricultural raw materials in China.⁵ Under the agricultural commune system still in force at that time, the peasantry's legitimate market outlets were far more restricted than in the Soviet Union. Since then, however, a number of fundamental changes have taken place in the Chinese countryside, particularly within the last three years, requiring that a new picture be drawn.

The *de facto* retreat

In accordance with central policy, the Chinese peasantry is now in *de facto* retreat from collectivized agriculture and increasingly adopting a so-called "responsibility system," whereby production is assigned under contract to small groups, households, and, more rarely, individuals. In return for a guaranteed fixed quota of production to the state, these units are to varying degrees granted freedom to manage their own enterprise and to use as they see fit any surplus beyond the quota. In the case of the peasant household, the quota seems to amount to 55-65 percent of the crops—only "a little more," as the German expert Jürgen Domes points out, "than the rents usually paid by tenants before the establishment of the People's Republic of China."⁶ Such rents paid by the prerevolutionary peasant to his landlord have been described in the past as "atrociously high."⁷ Yet there is little doubt that Chinese peasants today generally have welcomed this tenant-farming system as "progress," especially since it has been accompanied by a permissible expansion of the private plot ranging from 7 percent to 25 percent of the arable land and by the legitimation and spread of free markets.

The implementation of this liberal policy has not, of course, been smooth sailing. Some local cadres, sniffing ideological heresy and the erosion of their own power, have dragged their feet, and many peasants themselves, schooled by the erratic policy swings of the last three decades, remain wary of change, often wondering aloud how long this "good" policy will last. The Central Politburo member in charge of the State Agricultural Commission, Vice-Premier Wan Li himself, spoke candidly in November 1982 of the peasants' continuing fear that "the 'tendencies to practice communism' will come again."⁸ The authorities have, in fact, shown ambivalence in this regard; on the one hand, issuing reassuring statements on the stability of the new course and, on the other, disclaiming the abandonment of the collectivist ideal, which, it is hinted, one day later, when the time is ripe, will with historical inevitability be realized. Thus, it is an uneasy peasantry which now responds to Peking's siren call to

prosper, for none has had time to forget the cruel lot of the former so-called "rich peasants" and the persecution of their descendants as a despised hereditary caste under Maoist rule. Still, in spite of these and many other difficulties, the responsibility system has brought rapid, marked improvement in the agricultural economy and particularly in the livelihood of peasants on good lands with easy access to large towns, where they can sell the excess produce from their assigned farmland and private plots on the free market. As a result, food availability in the cities and towns has greatly increased.

Here we must note the striking similarity between the Chinese responsibility system and the ill-fated Soviet "link" (*zveno*) system, which was first endorsed in 1939 by a member of Stalin's Politburo and appeared to have a promising future until it was suddenly repudiated in 1950. The *zveno* idea re-emerged in the sixties, was actually pushed by a number of reform-bent economists and journalists, and culminated in 1972 in an enormously successful new experiment. The initiator of this experiment, Ivan Khudenko, a former director of a state farm in Kazakhstan, seemed about to be hailed, but was suddenly turned upon, framed, and sent to a labor camp, where he died in 1974. Since then only a few watered-down versions of the *zveno*—lately called an "akkord" (contract) system—survive in token form.

Soviet waste and shortage

An obvious, but intriguing question arises: Why have the Soviet authorities for almost half a century rejected an idea of agricultural reform that the Chinese are now applying in their own way on a large scale? Severe shortages of meat, fruit, vegetables, and dairy products throughout the USSR, especially outside the few privileged cities generally seen by foreign tourists, are no longer a secret to the rest of the world. The Soviet government must now annually import about one-fourth of its total grain, more than 40 million metric tons, supposedly intended mainly for cattle feed. Yet this grain, which is paid for in gold and hard currency, amounts to considerably less than the homegrown grain lost annually through waste and inefficiency. At least one-third of the native crops is generally left to rot in the collective fields—not to mention further loss incurred in transit and in storage through theft and spoilage. It is sometimes ignored by Western observers that Soviet statistics on grain production, which in any case tend to inflate "collective" achievements, refer only to the ungathered yield, not to the grain that actually reaches the elevators. Indeed, eyewitnesses have also reported seeing part of the expensive imported grain spoiling in the open in the port of Odessa, which has been taxed to the limits of its import capacity. Still, the shortage of cattle feed mysteriously persists. As a result, and because of the costliness of whatever grain is occasionally available, it is now common practice for Soviet farmers to feed store-bought loaves of bread to their private

livestock. This remarkable circumstance has caused one Soviet *tamizdat* analyst, Igor Efimov, to see "as in a terrifying dream hogs standing at the troughs in their dark sheds and gobbling up green dollar bills."¹¹

This irrational waste-and-shortage system, moreover, devours annually 27 percent of the total government investment. All the costly efforts of the last two decades to increase the gross harvest by the ploughing of virgin soil and by massive land reclamation projects (*melioratsiia*) have succumbed to the same disease that afflicts the system they were meant to salvage. For example, the technicians actually engaged in land reclamation have exhibited no more personal responsibility toward these lands than kolkhozniks to their collective fields, or, for that matter, than industrial workers to their product. The technicians can scarcely be blamed. They would not have been rewarded for the slow, carefully differentiated approach required by expertise. On the contrary. As a Soviet soil scientist has indicated, their tempo has characteristically been geared to the pursuit of inflated statistical indicators, the "sacred figures of the plan," whatever the ecological consequences. Hence, the current anecdote about a slogan allegedly put out by the land reclaimers: "Let us transform all swamps into deserts!"¹²

Why then have the Soviet authorities thus far not only clung to a discredited agricultural model, but, with seeming perversity, to its most irrational features, by creating ever larger overcontrolled operational units and attempting to transform the peasantry into "agroworkers" divorced from the land? The primary answer to this question has long been obvious and frequently expressed. As Timofeev sums it up, the Soviet party bureaucracy can do without an "abundance of bread," but not without an "unlimited abundance of power." Under the Khudenko system the peasant would have acquired the relative independence of a "partner in trade" with the ruling caste—that is, of an actual person who must be dealt with, not moved about at will like a peg on a planning board. The Soviet authorities appear to have avoided any move that might lead to the emergence of an economically independent stratum of the populace, for—in the words of a Soviet emigré writer—"if such a stratum should appear, then tomorrow they would come up against an organization of independent trade unions, and after that, before you know it, against something else even more terrifying."¹³

The dreaded peasantry

The case for official dread of an independent peasantry gains even more credence against the background of the early history of the regime, with its record of both spontaneous peasant rebellion and fierce locally organized resistance to collectivization, particularly in the Ukraine. Stalin's 1929 campaign to "liquidate the kulaks as a class" was actually a war directed against the entire peasantry, with the particular aim of annihilating its most enterprising, able, and industrious segment. Millions of peasants were evicted in entire families from their homesteads and

exiled like vagrants to the far north and Siberia—an ordeal that many failed to survive. The peasantry was finally decimated by the punitive famine of 1932-33, during which it is conservatively estimated that 5 to 7 million people starved to death in the Ukraine and the adjacent Don and Kuban regions.¹⁴

Peasant resistance to collectivization in the Soviet Union was not only concerted in character, but involved an added peculiar danger—linkage with a possible break-away Ukrainian nationalism. A disproportionate number of the deported kulaks were Ukrainian. Despite Soviet persecution of Ukrainian intellectuals and the deliberate Russification of large cities in the Ukraine over the years, nationalist sentiments still exist; and the surrounding countryside remains overwhelmingly Ukrainian.¹⁵

The Soviet authorities have had reason, indeed, to stick to the collectivist agricultural system, beyond simple inertia and the often noted passion for bigness—the gigantomania—which in the totalitarian mind is connected with progress and modernity and seems also pleasurably to feed the illusion of vast power. At the same time a crude but important fact should not be overlooked—the authorities have kept the system because they have been able so far to get away with it. They have done so by plundering the country's ample natural wealth—a kind of ecological rapine for short-term benefit, by the sale of non-renewable resources like gold and oil, and by taking advantage of the generous trade policies of the West. How long this can go on has become a matter of conjecture, especially since a more immediate demographic problem threatens the countryside. Since 1959 about 25 million of the farming population, mainly young people, have abandoned the rural areas for the cities.¹⁶ The main work force in the kolkhoz now consists of women between the ages of thirty-five and forty-five. If the trend continues, by 1990, according to one specialist, "two-thirds of the kolkhozniks will not be within the age range for able-bodied labor."¹⁷ At present, harvest time has already become a period of crisis. City students, factory and office workers, and even scientific personnel are commandeered to help bring in the harvest, with what skill and care can well be imagined.

The communist leaders in Peking manifest no less determination than those in Moscow to secure their power against erosion. Yet they have proceeded with the liberalization of the agricultural system, a measure affecting about 80 percent of the population. Some Western observers credit the Chinese leaders with placing "benefits for their people" over "bureaucratic self-interest."¹⁸ Perhaps. Deng Xiaoping and his economic advisors have had a long time to learn the lessons of the commune system initiated by Mao Zedong. In the mid-seventies an anecdote circulated in China about a return visit by Deng to his native province, Sichuan—famine-stricken in 1976—where he wept publicly at the misery he witnessed and begged the inhabitants' forgiveness for having been unable to alleviate their suffering.¹⁹

The “no choice” decision

We suggest, however, that a plainer reason for the change of policy exists: *there was no choice*. Unlike their Soviet counterparts, Deng and his men could no longer “get away with it.” In 1976 China was on the brink. In a sense, the current agricultural policy represents a sort of Chinese NEP—reminiscent of the New Economic Policy initiated by Lenin in 1921 in the Soviet Union as a measure of expediency to spur economic recovery from the ruin and famine that marked the preceding years of “war communism.”

In 1955 Richard Walker wrote, “In China, where the level of subsistence allows practically no margin such as Russia had, the cost [of collectivization] in terms of starvation and further bloodshed is likely to be even greater.”²⁴ His prophecy was overfulfilled. By the end of the initial phase of land reform in early 1953, according to the most cautious present estimate, 5 million agrarian landlords and so-called rich peasants had been killed.²¹ But it was Mao’s abrupt takeoff from the Stalinist model in 1958, his attempted “Great Leap” into the utopia of communist dreams through crash transformation of the countryside, that led to an unprecedented nationwide disaster. During 1960-62, famine gripped every province of China with ascending severity from south to north.²² The most informed current estimates of the death toll from hunger and related disease during that period suggest a range of 25 to 40 million victims.²³ It must be stressed, however, that this famine, unlike that of 1932-33 in the Ukraine, was not deliberately or punitively intended, nor was it due to natural disaster alone. It resulted mainly from the massive intervention of ignorant zealots in the agricultural process and from the tendency of the Central Plan itself to become an inexorable trap. The false inflation of harvest statistics by local cadres at the time served to intensify the famine in the countryside, since the state requisitioned grain on the basis of the falsified figures.

After Mao’s experiment

This dread aftermath of Mao’s mistaken experiment translated into contemporary officialese as the “three years of temporary difficulties”—a euphemism unfathomed by a number of Western intellectuals. In the very midst of the famine, in 1961, François Mitterrand visited China and later that year commented in a published account (*La Chine au Défi*):²⁴ “It would be inconceivable that in the large cities and overpopulated countryside of [China’s] east coast there could be no sign betraying the existence of a deadly famine devastating the hinterland. As powerful as the Communist Party might be, it is not up to shutting off starving populations behind a great modern wall, in order to delude its guests . . . Now, if nowhere did I ascertain prosperity or euphoria, neither did I encounter anywhere physiological want and the horrible stigmata of hunger.” Concerning those travelers to the People’s Republic who complained of finding no trace of the “precious freedoms without which, according

to them, there is no human civilization,” Mitterrand wrote, “they quite simply forget that the freedom not to die of hunger overrides all others.”

Although emergency modifications of the commune system instituted in the early sixties by Head of State Liu Shaoqi—especially the restoration of private plots—rescued the nation from the agony of widespread starvation, much of the countryside remained desperately poor and afflicted as in the past by periodic, regional natural disasters and famine. On May 22, 1978, almost two years after Mao’s death, Peking’s *Guang Ming Daily* stated: “The problem of feeding hundreds of millions of people has not yet been solved.” Subsequent admissions in the Chinese press revealed not only that per capita food availability failed to increase in China from 1956 to 1976, but that in vast areas of the northwest “the production level and living standard of the masses to the present are lower than those of pre-liberation days [before 1949] or the time of the War of Resistance against Japan [1937-45].” In 1979 Li Xiannian, a deputy chairman of the Communist Party, reportedly estimated the number of people still living in serious want as 100 million. In 1981, the *Chinese Journal of Agricultural Economics* (No. 1) published the results of a survey showing that 200 million people were still living well below the level of minimal subsistence during 1977-79. More recently, Wan Li in his previously noted speech of November 5, 1982, referred to 150 million peasants without enough to eat “for many years past.” (The differences in estimates reflect the unreliability of statistics in China.)

The beggars’ permit

An inkling of what “not having enough to eat” means for the peasantry in practice may be gathered from the *Guang Ming Daily* of February 23, 1981, which revealed that during 1966-76, in one county alone of Henan Province, about 30,000 peasants—or every seventh person in the county—were forced each winter and spring to apply for permits to go begging elsewhere. (It will be recalled that the “nonexistence” of beggars was one of the happy signs of material progress reported by a long series of distinguished visitors to the People’s Republic during the last decade.)

The Deng regime inherited, therefore, a dangerously impoverished agricultural economy. At the same time it had to reckon with the ecological consequences of former key Maoist policies. Mao’s indiscriminate far-flung experiments in farming, irrigation, and land reclamation, implemented with grand scorn for soil science, and his undue emphasis over the years on grain production, had contributed to serious soil erosion and damage in a country already marked by a precarious land-population ratio. Between 1957 and 1977, according to the specialist Vaclav Smil, China lost “an incredible 30 percent . . . of its 1957 farmland,” mostly in “fine arable soils.” It is not surprising that the present regime has undertaken, along with systemic reform, draconian measures for population con-

trol, measures which in their turn entail an array of negative consequences.

The Chinese "NEP" of the last three years has not only reversed the policy of "the bigger and the more socialist the better"—a policy still doggedly pursued in the USSR—but has increased the autonomy of many peasants, who have escaped their former entrapment as collective farm hands at the mercy of the local cadres. The positive results of this change thus far have led Wan Li to claim overoptimistically that "except for a few difficult areas in the northwest and southwest," China's food problem has now "on the whole been basically solved." However, as this high official further indicates, and as the internal media daily make evident, many intractable problems remain.

The euphemistic phrase "a few difficult areas" covers a lot of ground in China. The impoverishment of 150-200 million people cannot have diminished appreciably since 1979, especially in view of the ecological ruin visited upon the north- and southwest—desertification and massive erosion. In these and other areas periodic desperate hunger continues much as in the past, rarely glimpsed by tourists and never by important foreign guests at the great banquet tables in Peking.

The continuing hunger

Proof of continued regional hunger emerges from a mosaic of evidence. For example, in 1979, in Lanzhou, the capital of the northwestern province of Gansu, American tourists were shocked to encounter food-snatching by emaciated and ragged beggars in a restaurant not usually frequented by foreigners. One of these tourists, a member of the New York-based Asia Society, was quoted afterward by Linda Mathews of the *Los Angeles Times* as having seen "small children and teen-agers with running sores begging on street corners," many of whom "appeared to be on the margin of survival."²⁷ On June 21, 1982, a Gansu radio broadcast reported recurrent incidents of train robberies by peasants on the Lanzhou-Xinjiang railway line.²⁸ Early in 1983, a well-informed Chinese who had emigrated from Lanzhou at the end of the previous year, confirmed and explained these peasant robberies to us during a personal interview. "The northwest is a vast, poor place," he said; "it can't change overnight." In drought-ridden Gansu "even the drinking water problem is still unsolved." The main source of potable water for peasants in blighted areas is "snow collected in pits during the winter." In times of bad harvest, peasants receive "only three taels [5.28 oz.] of relief grain a day—not enough." As a result, hungry peasants sometimes gang up to rob the trains of "grain, vegetables, fruit, even coal—anything to do with their livelihood." Generally, however, they obtain permits from the commune to abandon their villages in order to beg. "Sometimes, the production team head himself leads the begging team into the city. So many beggars! They even

knock on the door—you don't dare open. They beg by day and steal by night. It's a disturbance to public safety."

Difficulties of another nature also beset Chinese agriculture. In the view of some Western economists, the easy gains of the reforms have already been made.²⁹ Further progress will bump against the limits of the centralized economy as a whole, with its waste-and-shortage syndrome, its administrative pricing without regard to real costs, and its tangled failures in transportation, storage, marketing, energy, fertilizer production, etc.; in sum, the familiar mess created by the Soviet economic model. Other limits to growth peculiar to China include the lack of expertise and resources to counter the steady diminution in area and fertility of the arable land supporting a population that continues to expand. Even as these problems are faced, there is no guarantee that the Chinese NEP will be permitted to take its rational economic course or that it can survive any decisive shift to the left on the political scene.

The following is by way of epilogue, but it may mean more than all that has preceded it. Twenty-two years ago we received a series of letters from a Russian peasant who had recently emigrated from his second "homeland," China, to Brazil, to begin a new life in harsh, unfamiliar conditions. He had taken a pseudonym for common use, Perezhivalin, or "One-who-has-suffered-through-much." He told us his story.

His father had been a peasant in the Maritime Territory of the Soviet Far East, who had owned "twenty desiatines [fifty acres] of land, a twenty-horsepower water mill, and thirty beehives." In the beginning of 1929, when Mr. Perezhivalin was seven years old, his father was "dispossessed as a kulak" and jailed, and his mother and her six children were driven from their house "with only the clothes on their backs." With the village head's permission, they found shelter for a while in a neighbor's small calf-shed and were issued as nourishment "flour that had been prepared for the pigs."

Rumor from a neighboring village of mass executions of dispossessed kulaks stirred his mother to use all her wits to save her husband, and after many trials she managed to have him set free "for a few days." The very night of his release, his imprisoned fellow villagers were shot.

Mr. Perezhivalin's father then became a fugitive, finally going off to the Iman lumber concession, where he obtained work under a false name. His failure to return, however, affected his family: Early in March, mother and children were turned out of the calf-shed, deprived of a food ration, and given a so-called "wolf passport," or outcast status, which permitted them to stay no longer than ten days in any one village. For two years, until the spring of 1931, Mr. Perezhivalin's mother wandered with her children from place to place earning their food by doing day labor. By that time, "almost all who could offer day labor had been dispossessed and shot, while day

laborers like our family had become very many.” Collectivization was, moreover, under way and verification of identity papers had begun in the lumber concession. Mr. Perezhivalin’s father now faced certain execution, the rest of the family—death by starvation. The parents then reunited and decided to flee across the Ussuri River to China. In a fork in the river, strong currents capsized their frail boat, sweeping away Mr. Perezhivalin’s three-year-old brother—“something that my mother cannot forget to this day.” When they finally stood on the Chinese shore, half-naked and barefoot, his mother broke into bitter tears, saying, “Verily, we are now wanderers.”

Twenty years later the Chinese communist revolution reached the family’s second thriving peasant household in western Heilungjiang. Initial moves to dispossess Russian emigrants in the area, inspired by the Soviet consulate-general—moves that were halted soon afterward—caused the family sharply to reduce its property and journey on horseback to a neighboring region. On this journey, they saw daily incidents of “how the Chinese authorities dealt out cruel summary justice to their kulaks.”

In one settlement, after witnessing the merciless public torture of several “bourgeois” (possibly rural landlords), they were lodged for the night with a Chinese peasant who had been dispossessed as a kulak a few days before. Alone together in the house, they started a conversation with their “hosts”:

“Little by little we began to put questions to the former owners [of the peasant household], who did not even have the right to ask us to sit down on the *kang* [the Chinese heated brick bed]. The master of the house looked at us suspiciously, as if holding us guilty for all that had hap-

pened, not believing that we were starting up a conversation with sympathy and trepidation. When we told him that in Russia we had also been beaten and dispossessed as kulaks and had run away to China and had lived here a long time, then he, after looking about him, began slowly and softly to tell what had happened.

“I’m still terribly sick from the beating and can’t talk,” he began, breathing with great difficulty and often spitting out bloody phlegm. “You see, we have nothing in the *fangzi* [house]. They’ve taken all our clothes away, our bedding also. Instead of [hulled] grain they give us bean dregs and even so not enough to eat one’s fill.”

“What did you own before?” I asked.

“Five *shang* [12.5 acres] of land, two pairs of horses and a pair of oxen, and I worked day and night and for that I almost got death. It’s a good thing I didn’t hire workers besides, but did all the work myself with my wife. Take my neighbor—he was a little better off and had hired hands—they beat him to death on the very first day. His whole family suffered torture and humiliation. . . .”

Sun Yefang, the famous Chinese economist who was imprisoned for his heretical views in the time of Mao, wrote not long ago that the method of “murdering the rich in order to relieve the poor” obviously destroys the productive forces of society.³⁰

The obvious comes too late for Russia and China—and still eludes our century. □

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