



Inequality of land tenure and revolutionary outcome: An economic analysis of China's land reform of 1946–1952[☆]

James Kai-sing Kung^{a,*}, Xiaogang Wu^a, Yuxiao Wu^b

^a Division of Social Science, The Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, Hong Kong

^b Department of Sociology, Shandong University, China

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 9 September 2011

Available online 13 July 2012

Keywords:

Tenure inequality

Revolutionary outcome

Land reform

China

ABSTRACT

A paradoxical feature of China's land reform of 1946–1952 is that it was conducted far more radically in the north, where land tenure relations were far less unequal, than in the south where inequality of land tenure was distinctly more acute. That landlords could only be identified in south China was attributable to the sharply more active land rental market there, and the “single-cut” policy of defining the landlords narrowly as a *rentier* class. We attribute the predominance of an active land rental market in south China to three socioeconomic characteristics: 1) a sharply higher inequality in land distribution, 2) an organization of agriculture whose efficiency required the “unsupervised initiatives” of family labor, and 3) a distinctly higher proportion of “absentee landlords”. Our hypothesis of land rentals being the only variable distinguishing the landlords from the rich peasants and only in south China is strongly supported by empirical evidence.

© 2012 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

In agrarian societies, land is not merely the most important factor of production (given its non-substitutable nature), it also serves as the “last resort” to which an ill-fated peasant could turn for insurance in times of crop failure. This exceptional significance of land has led Huntington (1968) to conclude that inequality of land tenure is the “bedrock of revolution” (p. 375). In this vein, inequality in land distribution (or “relative deprivation” more generally) is considered by some as “the most useful predictor” of revolutions and violent upheavals (Prosterman and Riedinger, 1987, p. 7; see also Scott, 1977).

China's recent history provides a classic example of this intimate connection between land inequality on the one hand and the potential for revolution on the other. Indeed, the first significant endeavor that the Communists undertook as soon as they came to power was to reduce this inequality by implementing a thoroughgoing land reform (*tudi gaige*).¹ Its significance is reflected by the official statistics that up to 90% of the rural populace was affected in this land reform, with some 700 million Chinese *mu* (or 115 million acres) or 44% of the arable land redistributed (Du, 1996). But while China's land reform—as with virtually all land reforms—violated the principles of private property, it severed, paradoxically, the presumed

[☆] We thank two anonymous referees and the editor for helpful comments, Shuo Chen, Qin Jiang, Xiulin Sun for competent research assistance, and the financial support of the Hong Kong Research Grants Council (GRF642711 and GRF644208). The remaining errors are the sole responsibility of the authors.

* Corresponding author at: Division of Social Science, The Hong Kong University of Science & Technology, Clear Water Bay, Hong Kong. Fax: +852 2334 0015.

E-mail addresses: sojk@ust.hk (J.K. Kung), sowu@ust.hk (X. Wu), ywu2008@sdu.edu.cn (Y. Wu).

¹ Lippit (1974), Moise (1983), Roll (1974), Shue (1980), and Wong (1973), among others, have all given useful accounts of China's land reform. China's land reform is considered among the “five great civil conflicts” in the twentieth century (Prosterman and Riedinger, 1987, p. 15). In fact, the “moral economy” thesis propounded by Scott (1977), which explicitly links peasant rebellion to a “subsistence ethic” (a set of shared community norms over food availability, the prices of subsistence commodities, the proper administration of taxation, and so forth), was to some degree inspired by Tawney's (1966) characterization of the plight of the Chinese peasants.

positive correlation between land inequality and political radicalism. Specifically, it was conducted far more radically in that part of China—the north—where land tenure relations were far less unequal, than in areas where inequality of land tenure was distinctly more acute and land rental markets far more active. For example, the dearth of households qualified for classification as landlords in the north had resulted in the misclassification of some rich peasant households (Friedman et al., 1991).² Likewise, the highly equal distribution of land ownership in the north in an overall context of abject poverty meant that there was a limited amount of land available for redistribution, which allegedly led to the repeated land reforms (Hinton, 1966).

Conventional wisdom attempts to account for this paradox on grounds of shifting political exigencies of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Since the land reform began in the north during the Civil War (circa. 1946–49),³ a period when political legitimacy was of key concern to the Communist Party, the need to satisfy the demands of the poor for more land allegedly led the Communists to sacrifice the material interests of those who had wealth well above the village mean—the middle peasants included. But after defeating the Nationalists—their political opponent, political circumstances permitted the Communists to focus on reviving the ailing, war-torn agricultural economy; this led them to adopt a more tolerant policy towards peasants, especially the rich ones as they were judged to be the most productive group in the farm populace at the time.

While this narrative may be able to explain why the CCP shifted the reform goal from solely satisfying the needs of the poor to benefiting the poor while protecting the rich peasants at the same time, it is reticent about what enabled them to redistribute less from the “haves” to the “have-nots” without potentially frustrating the poorer social strata, given the zero-sum nature of land reforms. We attempt to provide an *economic* explanation to account for this historical paradox. We begin with the observation that the rural households, which made up roughly 90 percent of the country's population then, had all received a *class* label from the CCP based on criteria deeply rooted in the Marxian concept of “exploitation”. And while there could be many sources/forms of alleged exploitation such as land renting, labor hiring and usurious money lending, land renting was the single-most important criterion that the CCP employed in delineating the landlord class in pre-revolutionary China. The “Middle Kingdom”, however, is a country characterized by enormous variations in factor endowments. Differences in population density, cropping patterns and land productivity, for instance, may all have conceivably given rise to sharp differences in the distribution of land tenure, the extent of factor markets development, and so forth. To the extent that “exploiting” others was equated with the particular behavior of renting (out) land, the incidence of “landlordism” must be sharply higher in areas characterized by an active land rental market (presumably premised on a higher physical productivity of land) and a distinctly sharper inequality in land tenure and other forms of wealth.⁴

Indeed, our interpretation based on this fresh analytical perspective suggests that the self-sufficient owner-cultivators tended to make up the majority of the rural population in areas where both land inequality and land productivity were lower, and that an agriculture of dry farming permitted greater economies of scale in labor organization than an agriculture of wet-rice farming. In the north, the land rental market was inactive relative to the farm labor market and there were accordingly fewer landlords. But political pressure must have been so intense for those who were put in charge of the reform that they were obligated to enumerate a minimum list of households qualified for the “exploited” class label and to have their assets redistributed. These reformers did so by, for example, shifting the criterion of “exploitation” from land renting to labor hiring. But when even that failed to produce a long enough list, the reformers simply put the next tier(s)—namely the rich and middle peasants—to task (Shue, 1980; Hinton, 1966; Qin, 1993). Conversely, in areas where a much sharper inequality of land tenure prevailed it was much easier for the Communists to identify a sufficient number of landlords. In particular, as some of these privileged households—many of whom did not even reside in the villages (the so-called “absentee landlords”)—possessed vastly more land than did the average household, the reformers were able to transfer land and other assets from them to the poor.

Drawing upon a nationally representative survey in China in which retrospective information on families' designated class background, including a range of socioeconomic characteristics and even factor market (land and labor) participation, is uniquely available, we show how “ascriptive” class labels affixed to the rural households, particularly the landlords and rich peasants, were actually

² Landlords and rich peasants were differentiated on the basis of how they “exploited” the other social classes. Put simply, the landlords relied primarily on land rents for an income, whereas the rich peasants hired laborers to help work their surplus land. See the next section for further details.

³ The majority of provinces in north China belonged to the so-called “old liberated areas” (OLA), a concept referring to the political status of a province at the time of the Communists' nationwide victory at the end of China's Civil War. Broadly speaking, provinces already occupied by the CCP during the Civil War belonged to the OLA, whereas those governed by the Nationalist Government were classified as “newly liberated areas” (NLA). Fig. 1 shows the distribution of China's provinces according to these categories. With the exception of Inner Mongolia (Neimenggu), Xinjiang, and Qinghai, virtually all provinces lying to the north of the Yangzi River fell into the OLA category, whereas those to the south belonged to the NLA. With the southern provinces governed by the Nationalist Government and the north occupied by the CCP, Jiangsu represented a unique case as the Yangzi River runs right through it (the red line in Fig. 1), splitting it into the “old” and the “new”. Southern Jiangsu, or more commonly known as *Sunan*, lies to the south of the Yangzi River, whereas its northern counterpart, *Subei*, lies to the north. A similar situation applies to Anhui province. Since the geographic distribution of this political categorization almost completely coincides with the north–south divide, in the remainder of the paper we simply employ the latter to denote the regional differences in resource endowments, economic organization of agricultural production and factor market activities and their impact on class delineation. In addition, we exclude the three northeastern provinces—Heilongjiang, Jilin, and Liaoning—for analysis because their unique histories render them somewhat outlying cases. In a nutshell, these three provinces were gradually opened up as frontier settlements by the Qing Government in the mid-nineteenth century when millions of farmers flocked to these frontier lands after 1860. Those who migrated first obtained land easily compared to those who came later and were thus forced to work as tenant farmers (see Gottschang, 1987; Kung and Li, 2011; Wang, 2005; Wu et al., 1990). It is this unique situation that rendered the degree of land inequality in the Manchurian provinces exceptionally high by north China standards.

⁴ The bearing of factor endowments or “initial conditions” on the organizational characteristics of production and the resulting distributive and long-run growth consequences to which they are likely to give rise is well rehearsed by Sokoloff and Engerman (2000).

متن کامل مقاله

دریافت فوری ←

ISIArticles

مرجع مقالات تخصصی ایران

- ✓ امکان دانلود نسخه تمام متن مقالات انگلیسی
- ✓ امکان دانلود نسخه ترجمه شده مقالات
- ✓ پذیرش سفارش ترجمه تخصصی
- ✓ امکان جستجو در آرشیو جامعی از صدها موضوع و هزاران مقاله
- ✓ امکان دانلود رایگان ۲ صفحه اول هر مقاله
- ✓ امکان پرداخت اینترنتی با کلیه کارت های عضو شتاب
- ✓ دانلود فوری مقاله پس از پرداخت آنلاین
- ✓ پشتیبانی کامل خرید با بهره مندی از سیستم هوشمند رهگیری سفارشات