

NEGOTIATING SOCIALISM IN RURAL CHINA

Mao, Peasants, and Local Cadres
in Shanxi, 1949–1953

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base area and who had served as interim secretary of Shanxi when Lai Ruoyu went on sick leave, was pushed out of Shanxi. In his place, Tao Lujia, head of the Propaganda Department under Lai Ruoyu, served as first secretary of Shanxi between 1953 and 1960, and was then appointed director of the North China Bureau. He had certainly learned his lessons well. In the 1960s, Tao was the first to draw Mao Zedong's attention to the experience of Dazhai village, where the village heads had mobilized the peasants to carry out massive public projects to restore damage to the environment and to raise agricultural productivity. As a result, Mao launched a nationwide campaign, Learning from Dazhai in Agriculture, which carried on until his death in 1976.

Wang Qian, head of Changzhi prefecture in Shanxi, became a well-known figure and continued to build his reputation as a specialist on the peasant economy. He was rapidly appointed head of the Policy Research Center of the North China Bureau and subsequently vice-minister of the bureau's Rural Work Department. Between 1954 and 1956 Wang worked as vice-secretary of the Central Rural Work Department, a crucial post in terms of formulating the CCP's rural policies. In 1956 he became vice-secretary of the Shanxi provincial branch of the CCP, and in the 1970s he was the party's first secretary in Shanxi.

The success in 1951 was only the beginning of Shanxi's long journey for rural socialist transformation. Wang Qian and his colleagues found they still had to defend their zone of influence, and further battles between Shanxi and the North China Bureau would follow.

In 1952 Mao handpicked Lai Ruoyu to lead the National Labor Union, an institution that had hitherto been controlled by Liu Shaoqi. At the time, Lai Ruoyu had just finished consolidating his governance of Shanxi and knew little about labor unions. After seeking advice from his former superior Bo Yibo—whom he had no doubt alienated during Lai's conflict with Liu Shaoqi—Bo told him coldly that as Mao had chosen him, Lai would have to leave; if he knew nothing about labor unions, then he should learn. In his new—and probably lesser—position as secretary of the National Labor Union in Beijing, Lai Ruoyu became embroiled in a controversy over the principles underlying the Labor Union, a debate that once again involved Liu Shaoqi. Lai Ruoyu was purged in 1958 and died of cancer the same year. Li Guiren, *Lai Ruoyu Zhuan*.

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Peasants Outmaneuvering the Party

The masses are like pecan nuts—you have to smash them so you can eat them.

—motto for some CCP cadres in Changzhi¹

Get organized to accumulate the family fortune.

—peasant saying, April 1952²

(Mutual aid teams were) formed in the spring, came undone in the summer, collapsed in the fall. [This pattern] will repeat itself next year.

—peasant saying, Changzhi, June 1952³

In March 1951, Lai Ruoyu set out a proposal for establishing experimental agricultural producers' cooperatives in Shanxi. In these organizations, members would pool their land as shares and farm collectively, and distribute the net profits according to both labor input and land shares. In addition, the

1. *Neihu cankao*, February 28, 1951.

2. *Neihu cankao*, April 29, 1952.

3. "Changzhi diwei guanyu bannian lai nongcun shengchan huzhu hezuo yundong zonghe baogao" (Changzhi prefecture's report on the Mutual Aid and Cooperation movement during the last six months) (June 30, 1952), JMA, 92.1.1.

cooperatives would collect community funds and accumulate public assets.⁴ Lai Ruoyu was confident about his plan, arguing that it was grounded in the fact that peasant farmers already had experience of accumulating such assets in mutual aid teams. But, as we saw in Chapter 3, this "fact" had substance only because it had been imposed by the party.

Once experimental agricultural producers' cooperatives were initiated and established in Shanxi, the decision to approve them and make them universal was evidently made from the top down. Lai Ruoyu and Wang Qian made no attempt to disguise their direct involvement in the initiation of the policy. Following Lai Ruoyu's proposal, on March 27, Wang Qian convened a mobilization meeting in Changzhi prefecture with the heads of mutual aid teams and "discussed" the details involved in creating and operating the new organizations. Wang made a passionate appeal to his audience by outlining the ultimate goals of collectivization and modernization. The joint purchase of farm implements would advance collectivization and the acquisition of community funds would accumulate assets. In order to facilitate the transition to collectivization, he not only drew up the blueprint for the new cooperatives, but he also spelled out some specific rules. He recommended that peasants pool at least two-thirds of their land to form the cooperatives and farm collectively. In Wang Qian's estimation, each experimental cooperative should consist of approximately twenty households. The distribution of profits according to land input should be lower than land rents, which were about 30 percent of land output. Landowners would be responsible for the cost of supplying seed and fertilizers and would cover agricultural taxes. At least half the profits would be distributed according to labor input, and 20 percent would go into community funds. If members withdraw from the cooperative, they would not be entitled to a share of the community funds. To improve the chances of success, Wang Qian set some ground rules: the experimental cooperatives should be led by experienced party cadres and model laborers; they must be located in areas with good soils and convenient access to resources, and close to party headquarters.⁵ Wang Qian promised state loans and reduced agricultural taxes as financial

incentives. In his closing remarks, he nonetheless warned attendees not to spread news of new ventures in order to avoid unnecessary disruption.⁶

As mentioned in Chapter 3, the North China Bureau sent a work team as its representative at the meeting and to check any hasty decisions. The work team immediately raised concerns and disagreements with Wang Qian's plans. First, it pointed out that the timing was bad. The farmers had had no advance warning, and local mutual aid teams had made no material preparations. The spring sowing season had already begun. Thus it was both premature and imprudent to begin the trial immediately.

The work team certainly had a point. There was a Catch-22 element in the CCP's principles to mobilize the peasants. While the party could launch political and agricultural campaigns during the off-season (usually the winter, when work on the land was suspended), it needed to withdraw with the start of the spring sowing season and to let the peasants farm their land undisturbed. Failure of the spring sowing would condemn that year's crop and damage the following year's as well. However, Lai Ruoyu and Wang Qian were so zealous in pressing their case that they completely disregarded these considerations. In their estimation, the political stakes were too high to let such things stand in their way. Another contentious issue concerned the proposed community fund. The work team thought it would unfairly impact the well-off peasants and it strongly opposed Wang Qian's proposal for retaining monies paid into the fund when members left. The work team believed that this proposal violated the principle of protecting private ownership. In addition, deciding how the funds were to be used was likely to generate conflict among members.⁷

In face of these criticisms, Lai Ruoyu and Wang Qian refused to back down.⁸ They filed a report with the North China Bureau defending their proposals, which eventually triggered the conference held in April, "On Mutual Aid and Cooperatives in Five Provinces and Cities in North China," as

6. "Wang Qian tongzhi san'yue 29 ri zai huzhu daibiaohui shang de zongjie baogao" (Wang Qian's report on a Mutual Aid and Cooperation conference of heads of mutual aid teams) (March 29, 1951), SPA, C77.4.5.

7. "Chungeng gongzuodui Shanxi xiaozu guanyu Changzhi zhuangu huzhu daibiaohui huiyi qingkuang de baogao" (The Shanxi branch of the spring planting work team on the Mutual Aid and Cooperation conference of heads of mutual aid teams in Changzhi prefecture) (March 30, 1951), SPA, C54.2003.47.

8. Ibid.

4. "Zhonggong shanxi shengwei shuji Lai Ruoyu guanyu sheng dierci dang daibiaohui zhuyao neirong xiang Huabei jubing Mao zhuxi de baogao," 63-64.

5. Wang Qian, "Zai changzhi qu huzhu daibiaohui shang guanyu shiban nongye shengchan hezuoshu de baogao," 274-276.

discussed in Chapter 3. At the same time, Wang Qian continued to work on the scheme.

According to the official records, following the March mobilization meeting the attendees unanimously agreed that agricultural producers' cooperatives would increase rural productivity and many signed up for the venture. Opting for quality over quantity, Wang Qian decided to limit the scope of the trial to ten cooperatives, ensuring that Changzhi prefecture could allocate adequate resources to the experiment and so make it a dazzling success.⁹ It was interesting that Changzhi officials declined a request from the region's most celebrated model laborer, Li Shunda, for fear that any failure on Li's part would draw unwelcome attention to the scheme and put a damper on the whole experiment.¹⁰

Changzhi's Experimental Cooperatives: The Success Stories

In April 1951, China's first experimental agricultural producers' cooperatives were established in Changzhi prefecture. Wuxiang County, not surprisingly, was chosen as a major site for the trial. Five days after the mobilization meeting, Wuxiang County officials put out a call for volunteers. Two weeks later, four experimental cooperatives had been established in three villages, each based on a former mutual aid team. It was an enormous task. In the words of one cadre, "We put in a massive effort consolidating the cooperatives."¹¹ Within this brief time span, eighty-seven households—all middle-ranking peasants—had joined the four cooperatives in Wuxiang, pooling 77.9 percent of their land into the venture. Of the eighty-seven households involved, thirty-five included party members and twelve had communist youth league members. With respect to potential income distribution, 50 percent of total farming production would be credited according

to labor input, 30 percent to land shares, and 20 percent would go into community funds. As for the income gained through sidelines, 20 percent would be collected as community funds, and the remainder distributed solely according to labor input. Meanwhile, landowners were to take responsibility for taxes, seeds, and fertilizers. In each cooperative, one head and one deputy head (or sometimes two) were selected, plus an accountant. (This distribution complied precisely with Wang Qian's suggestions.)

According to the above formula, the share of land contributed by farmers bore little relationship to the profits they accrued. A rough calculation tells us that the common land share would receive only 30 percent of total agricultural output. Taxes—a combination of state agricultural tax and local surcharges—would account for between 15 and 25 percent of land output. The cost of seed, animal fodder, and fertilizers would easily account for 20 percent of total profits. Local farmers were suspicious that the costs incurred by landowners would exceed returns.¹² The great majority of older peasants in Wuxiang harbored grave doubts that these experimental cooperatives would succeed. The father of a deputy head in Jianzhang village openly questioned the formula. He calculated that land inputs would be such that they would deliver no net income, sidelines would require large financial input, and loans would need to be repaid. He saw no benefits for peasants to participate in the experiment. In addition, a cooperative would need to support three or four "leaders" who did not farm full time. How could it possibly be done? Not to mention the common sense reasoning that even if family members were to be divided up (*fenjia*), how could twenty or thirty households work together? Trouble was on the way, this critic predicted.¹³ Nevertheless, dozens of peasants signed themselves up for the scheme. Did they not know how to add?

While farmers certainly knew how to do their sums, each made a different set of calculations. A series of surveys taken in Wuxiang found that peasants joined these experimental cooperatives for a variety of reasons.

9. "Guanyu nongye shengchan hezuoshe chunji shenchuan diwei xiang shengwei baogao" (October 4, 1951) (The prefect's report to the province on the spring production figures from agricultural producers' cooperatives), SPA, C77.4.5.

10. Tao Lujia, "Mao Zhuxi zhichi shanxi sheng shiban hezuoshe."

11. "Guanyu shijian nongye shengchan hezuoshe gongzuo de zongjie baogao" (A review of the establishment of experimental agricultural producers' cooperatives) (April 30, 1951), SPA, C77.4.5.

12. In the case of Yaoshanggou cooperative, expenditure on seed, fodder, and fertilizer amounted to 106 dan out of a total land output of 501 dan. "Wuxiang Yaoshanggou 1951 nian shi ban nongye shengchan hezuoshe de zuitou baogao" (The final report from Yaoshanggou village of Wuxiang County on the establishment of experimental agricultural producers' cooperatives in 1951) (October 23, 1951), JMA, 50.1.1.

13. "Guanyu shijian nongye shengchan hezuoshe gongzuo de zongjie baogao."

Political ambition was the spur for forty-five households, mainly party members and activists, to join the cooperatives. Their political aspirations and ambitions for the future convinced them to follow the party's call. For this group, financial returns were not the whole story. Another group of fifteen households was less progressive politically but did not want to be left behind. Seven households vacillated: while they expected to suffer some economic loss, they were afraid of being considered politically backward, which may have proved even more damaging. In the end, after "being inspired and educated" by party members, they decided to participate, even though it was a painful decision.¹⁴

A third group consisted of villagers who were either relatives or close friends of the cooperative heads and were easily "persuaded" to join the scheme. Thirteen households fell into this category. The fourth group adopted a different approach. These households were well known by locals for their shrewdness—after carefully accounting for every detail, they calculated that they would benefit economically by joining the trial. Households with extra laborers but little land counted on benefiting from the cooperatives' distribution formula. Others were pure opportunists. Their past experience had convinced them that when the CCP called for volunteers, joining at the first call would doubtless result in handsome profits as the party could be counted on to ensure that any experimental schemes it initiated were successes.¹⁵ Thus, based on a variety of motives, eighty-seven households in Wuxiang County formed four cooperatives, all expecting solid rewards one way or another and of one kind or another.

However, the majority of peasants in Changzhi were not optimistic about the trials; indeed, they were dismayed by the prospect. Most village activists were faced with a dilemma—while their superiors urged them to join the scheme, they knew they would suffer economic loss if they did. They feared that they would be forced to join in any case. Those with extensive landholdings or land of good quality did not want to be part of any cooperative venture. Peasant farmers had long feared the advent of communism, and now it seemed that their fears were coming true: private property was to be collectivized. In response, some peasants immediately stopped

investing in their land. Villages earmarked for trial cooperatives, as well as neighboring villages, followed developments with trepidation.¹⁶

Confronted with sharp critiques from the North China Bureau and serious doubts from below, those advocating Wuxiang's ten experimental cooperatives were playing for high stakes. Wuxiang county officials did all they could to aid the four experimental cooperatives under their jurisdiction. They helped draw up production plans designed to double outputs. They placed strict constraints on the members' ability to withdraw from the scheme: while the principle of volunteerism was honored and members were allowed to withdraw, if someone left the cooperative, he could not take out his land for the current year. Wuxiang officials also published regulations designed to monitor farmers' work habits.¹⁷

In May 1951, Wuxiang County submitted a follow-up report to Changzhi prefecture emphasizing the success of its four cooperatives. In just one month, the four schemes had successfully devised methods allowing them to substantially increase their output. The most efficient of these was planting additional cash crops. Another technique was to increase investment in sideline work. All four cooperatives had doubled or tripled the area of land sown in cash crops, primarily cotton and tobacco.

However, there were some clouds on the horizon. Surplus labor had become the most pressing issue for the peasants themselves, if not yet for the party. Yaoshanggou village cooperative, led by Wang Jinyun, offered a good illustration of the problem. The cooperative consisted of twenty-eight full-time laborers and 367 mu of sown land. As only ten laborers were needed to work the land, the cooperative assigned the remaining eighteen to raise pigs, make terrines, produce vinegar, sell eggs, and even planned to send some to work in nearby cities.¹⁸ Aid from the state was crucial to underpin these ambitious plans. In April, Wuxiang officials promised strong support for the cooperative. Within a month, two loans totaling 12,000,000 RMB (old currency) were granted to Yaoshanggou.¹⁹

16. *Ibid.*

17. *Ibid.*

18. "Guanyu nongye shengchan hezuoshu gonggu gongzuo de zongjie baogao" (Consolidating agricultural producers' cooperatives—a review) (June 1, 1951), SPA, C77.4.5.

19. *Ibid.*

14. *Ibid.*

15. *Ibid.*

By October 1951, the party's efforts had paid off, at least on paper. Local reports showed that the Yaoshanggou cooperative's average unit yield was 1.8 dan per mu—25.5 percent higher than the figure for 1950 and 12 percent more than the highest unit yield achieved by mutual aid teams in the same village. Profit from sideline ventures was even higher. Overall, yield per capita was 1485 catties (sideline products were converted into grain), 73.4 percent higher than that in 1950, and 33 percent more than the results achieved by mutual aid teams in 1951. However, while these results appeared impressive, they failed to meet the original production targets set by Wuxiang County.²⁰

Perhaps surprisingly, on the question of net income distribution, the formula developed by Wang Qian was amended by the peasants themselves. After many rounds of discussion among cooperative members, a more flexible solution was adopted. The new formula substantially reduced the share allocated to community funds, which were now to be levied progressively, starting at 2 and rising to 15 percent.²¹ Members were to be allowed to take most of their community fund contribution with them if they withdrew from the cooperative. Income distribution based on land input was to vary from 37 to 42 percent of land output, while remuneration based on labor accounted for no more than 56 but not less than 48 percent. Landowners were to be compensated by the cooperative for what they spent on seeds, fodder, and fertilizers.

In Yaoshanggou cooperative, the final distribution was worked out as follows: total income (from agricultural and sideline sources) for 1951 was 693 dan of grain. Of this, 328 dan was apportioned to labor input, 136 dan to land input, 106 dan was allocated to the cost of cattle, fodder, seeds, and fertilizers, 51 dan was collected for the community funds, and 70 dan was used to repay state loans.²² Although all households in the cooperative

earned more than they had in 1950, the extent of the increase varied. Those with less land but more laborers doubled their incomes, while those with more land received only slightly more remuneration.²³

This outcome was promising. The Yaoshanggou report listed ten reasons why cooperatives could do better than mutual aid teams or individual farmers, mostly because of the advantages of large-scale cultivation and additional opportunities for sideline work. At the theoretical level, there was an impressive case to be made. By pooling land, uneconomic strips were abolished, scattered land was consolidated, and additional acreage was obtained. At the same time, more rational cropping patterns could be introduced and surplus laborers could work on sideline projects. (In the future, such theoretical advantages would be repeatedly presented as accomplished facts.) The report also attributed the trials' success to the assistance from local party leaders—which indeed was indispensable, as discussed below.

In addition, the report outlined suggestions for further developing the cooperatives. It alleged that the unit yield from land that members kept as their private portion (*ziliudi*) was lower than that from collectively held land and that conflicts between members over the time and energy to be expended on each type of tillage were frequent. Following a democratic decision, it was agreed that the private portion should henceforth be reduced to 5 percent per household and limited to the least fertile land.²⁴ The report also conceded that approximately half the cooperative's surplus laborers had not been used, and a more scientific way of allocating surplus labor needed to be found. Finally, the report urged that given the immense contribution made by the cooperative's heads, their workload should be assessed on a separate scale and they should be better compensated.²⁵

According to official accounts, most of the other nine experimental producers' cooperatives in Changzhi prefecture were just as successful as

20. "Wuxiang Yaoshanggou 1951 nian shi ban nongye shengchan hezuoshe de zuihou baogao."

21. The formula was calculated as follows: where the unit yield was approximately equal to the village's average yield, 2 percent of output was collected as community funds; where the unit yield was 25 percent higher than the village average, 5 percent of output was collected; where the unit yield was 50 percent higher, a rate ranging between 10 and 15 percent was set. "Wuxiang Yaoshanggou 1951 nian shi ban nongye shengchan hezuoshe de zuihou baogao."

22. The figures add up to 691, not 693, but these are the numbers the report

provides.

23. "Wuxiang Yaoshanggou 1951 nian shi ban nongye shengchan hezuoshe de zuihou baogao."

24. This finding contradicted common sense. As data from the late 1950s and 1960s shows, unit yields from farmers' "private portion" were consistently much higher than yields from the pooled area. See Gao Wangling, *Renmin gongshe shiqi Zhongguo nongmin jianxingwei tiaocha*.

25. "Wuxiang Yaoshanggou 1951 nian shi ban nongye shengchan hezuoshe de zuihou baogao."

the Yaoshanggou venture. Almost all the surviving documentation found in local archives indicates that they were regarded as an unqualified triumph. Each county where cooperatives were located submitted a report to Changzhi prefecture, which in turn produced a summary of each cooperative's results and passed them higher up the chain together with an overall account. Not surprisingly, during this process, figures were inflated. For example, where Wuxiang County had reported that the unit yield of the Yaoshanggou cooperative was 1.8 dan, the prefecture raised this figure to 2.6 dan when reporting to Shanxi Province. In addition, Changzhi's report emphasized that the Yaoshanggou cooperative had channeled resources into arranging for local farmers to study politics, disciplining wayward members, organizing criticism and self-criticism sessions, and educating the peasants to subordinate their personal interests to the interests of the state.²⁶ None of this was mentioned in the Wuxiang County-level report.

Again, the reports drafted by higher authorities had an influence on issues at higher levels. Based on the versions produced by Changzhi prefecture, a special dossier was compiled at the national level for this set of documents, and was frequently referred to in the mid-1950s. In the 1970s, a collection was published under the title "Several historical documents regarding the establishment of experimental agricultural producers' cooperatives in the Changzhi area."²⁷

At the experimental stage, Shanxi's ten cooperatives were established in response to orders from above and were closely monitored by cadres at county and prefecture level. Nevertheless, the peasants were not merely passive recipients—as we have seen, they made their own calculations and made their own decisions about whether to join. Political ambition, respect, fear of the CCR, personal ties, economic considerations, and opportunism all played a role. To a certain extent, farmers managed to modify the rules to their own advantage.

The clearest example relates to community funds. Few peasants liked the idea of 20 percent of their total output being taken away from them for this purpose—it was almost as steep as the tax rate. Although the negotiations between villagers and local party cadres were never documented, the

26. "Guanyu 10 ge nongye shengchan hezuoshe de zongjie" (A review of the ten agricultural producers' cooperatives) (November 1951), SPA, 53.1.1.

27. Shanxi nongcun zhengzhi gongzuo bu, *Changzhi diqu shidian he fazhan nongye shengchan hezuoshe de ruogan lishi ziliao*.

farmers did end up paying a much lower rate. This change was later acknowledged by the party. In early 1952, the North China Bureau ruled that the rate for community funds should be set between 1 and 5 percent of total income and should not significantly affect members' annual earnings. Farmers also succeeded in increasing their return on land input. They succeeded in getting the cooperative to bear the cost of seeds, fodder, and fertilizers, which in the original scheme was to be shouldered by the landowners. These changes reflected the bargaining that went on between peasants concerned with the needs of the individual household and CCP cadres who wanted to inject more socialist elements into the cooperatives. In the end, the cadres made concessions as they came to see the need for material incentives. These changes were ultimately acknowledged at the local government level and later became a common standard that many agricultural producers' cooperatives, both inside Shanxi Province and elsewhere, took as a model. Thus, to a certain degree, the earliest agricultural cooperatives were what peasant farmers and local officials made of them.

Underside of Success Stories

The success of Shanxi's ten experimental agricultural producers' cooperatives sounded almost too good to be true, although no evidence has yet been uncovered that would prove otherwise. A consideration of some of the circumstances surrounding those cooperatives might help us in arriving at a balanced assessment.

One significant factor was the collection of agricultural tax. In the early 1950s, taxation was a complex issue. Tax rates varied dramatically from year to year and across different regions, as discussed in Chapter 6. In Shanxi Province, before 1952, agricultural tax was theoretically collected as a proportional of the "normative yield." Taking into account factors such as the amount of sown land, soil fertility, planting customs, and harvests in normal years, a perennial land yield (*changnian yingchanliang*) for each household was struck through democratic discussions among the farmers, and this figure was then ratified by local government. But the rate differed each year, being adjusted to the needs of the party, generally ranging between 15 and 25 percent.²⁸ Actual land yields played a relatively minor role in the way

28. Zhongguo nongmin fudanshi bianji weiyuan hui, *Zhongguo nongmin*

land tax was calculated. In practice, however, tax matters were often simplified. In 1949 and 1950, in Shanxi, each mu attracted a levy of 22 catties of millet for the state agricultural tax and 5 catties for local surcharges. In 1951 and 1952, the state agricultural tax was 21 catties per mu, with surcharges on top of that.²⁹ Thus, the tax farmers paid had little to do with their actual production. In other words, no matter how high the land yield claimed may have been, peasants were not required to pay more tax immediately.

In the short term, fabricating a high yield would not cost peasants a penny. On the contrary, if the unit yield was high enough to impress local cadres, the latter were likely to reward farmers with substantial bonuses—perhaps a draught animal, or an expensive farm implement. Furthermore, farmers who rose to official notice in this way might receive benefits such as priority in obtaining government loans or being nominated as model laborers. Those chosen for the latter role would have the chance to travel to the provincial capital, to Beijing, or even to the Soviet Union. Such prestige could bring peasants and their families even more benefits. For example, through the networks he had formed with party cadres, Geng Changsuo, a national figure well known for his work in forming mutual aid teams in Hebei, managed to secure his sons comfortable jobs in major cities.³⁰ In addition, promoting the activists who made a name for themselves during a particular campaign had become common practice within the party. As a result, local activists tended to overfulfill their established goals in return for promotions and rewards.³¹

For peasant farmers in Changzhi prefecture, achieving “enhanced” results was a tempting option. As one of the established liberated regions, Changzhi had produced a large number of native cadres who were sent by the party out of Shanxi Province to the south to help in administering the newly liberated areas. At the same time, the province’s bureaucratic infrastructure was expanding, leading to a shortage of administrative personnel. In August 1951, the Shanxi party branch decided to promote ten thousand

judanshi, 47.

29. *Ibid.*, vol. 4, 76–77. This tax system started to change in 1952 and the amount of tax was increasingly linked to the land’s actual output.

30. Edward Friedman, Paul Pickowicz, and Mark Selden, *Chinese Village, Socialist State*.

31. Yu Liu, “Why did it go so high?” 740.

new cadres, who would work either for the party or for the government.³² In Changzhi prefecture, the plan was to recruit one thousand new cadres of peasant origin, who would be relieved of agricultural duties and put on the state payroll; two hundred would be selected from rural model laborers.³³

It was hardly surprising that many villagers aspired to become state employees, as a peasant’s life was full of hardships. Totally depending on a natural environment that was hard and unpredictable, engaging in back-breaking labor in the fields marked by periods of intense hard work, living in small rural communities—the average peasant knew little of the amenities offered by urban civilization.³⁴ Getting onto the state payroll meant a farewell to this harsh lifestyle. Furthermore, one cadre’s salary was sufficient to feed an entire family. When such rare opportunities presented themselves, rural party members, village model laborers, and activists were only too eager to take advantage of them. As mere peasants, villagers enjoyed limited means of gaining their superiors’ attention. The experimental cooperatives that party bosses were promoting so vigorously provided a channel through which villagers could interact with county heads and cadres of even higher rank.

Considering the low tax costs and the potentially high returns in these other areas, farmers commonly inflated data. Although evidence is lacking to suggest that such practices were followed in the ten Shanxi cooperatives in the trial stage (1951), later, in 1952 and 1953, the heads of these same cooperative were exposed for falsifying their accounts (see Chapter 5). Yaoshanggou cooperative, for example, had a reputation for overreporting its harvests.

The absence of any mention of problems in Changzhi’s reports on its experimental cooperatives invites suspicion in itself. Even assuming that the data provided by the prefecture were reliable, and those farmers did in fact produce more in cooperatives, could they have sustained their initial success? The answers suggested by the surviving evidence are hardly positive.

First of all, it should be noted that agricultural taxes were not included in cooperatives’ accounts. If taxes had been included, households owning

32. “Wei yingjie xin de jianshe gaochaodalian peiyang tibia ganbu de tishi” (A notice regarding the promotion of a large number of cadres to meet the needs created by the new surge in development) (August 18, 1951), JMA, 39.1.1.

33. “1950 nian changzhi diwei youguan ganbu xun lian jihu” (Changzhi prefecture’s plan for training cadres in 1950), JMA, 43.5.1.

34. Moshe Lewin, *Russian Peasants and Soviet Power*, 22–30.

more land would have barely increased their incomes. At the same time, few reports acknowledged the significance of government loans in contributing to the success of the trial farms. In the case of Yaoshanggou, the cooperative obtained at least 12 million yuan worth of loans, sufficient to purchase 670 dan of grain at the local market. This figure almost equaled the cooperative's total income in 1951, combining agricultural income and returns from sideline work. This high level of government investment was a common policy in the province's ten experimental cooperatives. To cite another example, Guo Yuen's cooperative in Pingshun County received a loan of 6.8 million yuan, the equivalent of 51 percent of its total income. The interest on the loan accounted for 59 percent of its increased agricultural production. In both these cases, the cooperatives involved were unable to repay their state loans within the year—they could barely afford the interest. Repaying state loans rapidly became a heavy burden for cooperatives. For its part, the state could not sustain this excessive level of investment, let alone extend it further. Troubled by this situation, the North China Bureau implored local governments to cap their investment in agricultural producers' cooperatives.³⁵

The most potentially lucrative part of the cooperative economy was its ability to organize surplus laborers into sideline work. However, in many cases, the cooperatives acknowledged that the supply of labor was outstripping demand. The success of sideline work depended largely on the strength of demand from urban markets. However, following the founding of the PRC, urban markets were shrinking at a rapid pace. For rural traders, finding short-term jobs in the cities would become more and more difficult and later became illegal after the household registration system was introduced.

There was another way for the cooperatives to raise their income levels. If the high production rates reported by the experimental cooperatives were accurate, planting cash crops was a surefire way of increasing profits. Until 1952, farmers paid the same agricultural tax on cash crops as they did on grain, and profits from sideline ventures involved no tax at all.³⁶ Such a plan was possible in 1951 when the central government was in need of industrial materials, such as cotton, and encouraged peasants to plant them. But in

1952, this trend was reversed. In its annual plan the central government made it clear, "Grain output must be substantially increased—the acreage dedicated to growing it can in no way be reduced." Accordingly, cash crops were not to exceed 1951 levels, at least as far as acreage was concerned.³⁷ In 1952, a higher tax was also levied on cash crops. Thus cooperatives hoping to profit from cash crops ran up against government policy. In formulating its five year plan—involving increasing the area dedicated to cash crops from 590,000 to 2,230,000 mu, while reducing grain crops from 8,490,000 to 6,910,000 mu—Changzhi prefecture attracted criticism for its emphasis on cash crops, which threatened the state's grain supply plan.³⁸ Shanxi leaders were furious when they discovered that the province had to supply more grain to the villages than to the cities.³⁹

From the moment the experimental agricultural producers' cooperatives were launched, administrative problems became evident. How were labor inputs to be calculated? Who should work on a specific piece of land? How could all members be encouraged to maintain the same work rates? As cooperative heads did not usually engage in farming per se, how could their labor inputs be calculated? Because draught animals were borrowed from individual members, how should they be compensated and on what basis? How much land should each family retain as their private portion? These were certainly thorny questions, and farmers spent days and nights contesting every detail with cooperative heads. If the latter were overwhelmed, so were the local party cadres. No doubt for their own convenience, some cadres suggested a number of shortcuts—pooling all peasant-owned land into cooperatives, purchasing all livestock and farming implements from members and putting them at the permanent disposal of the cooperative, and severing the link between leaders' income and their labor input as farmers. One after another, these suggestions would be put into practice in the mid-1950s. Although Chinese historians have tended to explain these innovations as "leftist" errors, documents from the early stages of the movement show that they were not purely ideological in intent. Rather, they were derived from the everyday practices involved in operating a cooperative. In

35. "Huabei ju nongye shengchan hezuoshie de qingkuang yu jingyan" (The situation of agricultural producers' cooperatives in the North China Bureau's jurisdiction and lessons to be learned), *Huibian*, vol. 2, 586–589.

36. Zhongguo nongmin fudanshi bianji weiyuanhui, *Zhongguo nongmin fudanshi*, 44–80.

37. "Zhongyang renmin zhengwuyuan guan yu 1952 nian nongye shengchan de jue ding," 43.

38. "Bixu kefu zai lingdao nongye shengchan zhong de yanzhong mangmu xing."

39. *Ibid.*

other words, they were part of the mechanism of agricultural producers' cooperatives.

Shanxi's ten experimental cooperatives were composed of middle-ranking peasants. Given the distribution formula that favored labor input, poor peasants who tended to have less land should have been the most enthusiastic about joining cooperatives. In reality, however, this was not the case. Although the reasons for this situation have not been documented, it seems likely that either poor peasants refused to join, or that cooperative heads declined to admit them. The party was not yet ready for this development.

Indeed, in their hearts, the Shanxi leaders knew that they had effectively dismissed any opposition to their plans, thus leaving it up to them to succeed or fail on their own terms. They were aware that they had paid insufficient attention to local conditions and regional diversity, and that they had overestimated the popularity of both mutual aid teams and agricultural producers' cooperatives. On central issues, such as compensation for land inputs, community funds, and public assets, they had pursued their own ideological agenda. Yet over the next two years, they did their best to conceal these problems and offered only positive views of the ten experimental cooperatives.⁴⁰

What if agricultural producers' cooperatives had been left to the peasant farmers themselves? While it is difficult to address this question directly, the experience of Sichuan Province might begin to provide some answers. Sichuan is located in southwest China and was liberated in 1950. It was considered a "backward" region in terms of where the CCP's strength lay. In the spring of 1952 and in response to the party's call for establishing experimental cooperatives, twenty-five cooperatives were established in Zizhong County in Sichuan. Most were organized by village heads who had attended only a single party meeting. Zizhong County failed to provide much guidance; the peasants formulated a number of rules themselves. Of the twenty-five initial cooperatives, only two were still operating after the fall harvest of that year.⁴¹

Of the two survivors, Sun Xianhe cooperative was the better docu-

40. Tao Lujia, "Zai di 190 ci shengwei changweihui shang de fayuan," 333-334.

41. "Cong Zizhong xian qige nongye shengchan hezuoshe tiaocha zhong suo kandao de jige wenti" (Several problems discovered in Zizhong County's report on seven agricultural producers' cooperatives) (October 24, 1952), Sichuan Provincial Archive, Agricultural Committee, vol. 362.

mented. In the spring of 1952, a cooperative was formed there, and members were required to pool all their land. All the property that peasants had registered during land reform was counted as shares, regardless of the actual amount of land they owned or its suitability for farming. Although this arrangement worked to the disadvantage of farmers who owned land of better quality and who had "hidden" land, it was a convenient way of avoiding disputes as each household had a certificate identifying the land it held. Cooperative members later complained about this arbitrary policy and requested some private land to plant vegetables, with the result that each household was able to reclaim a small share (about 2 percent) of their land.

The cooperative purchased members' draught animals using credits and put the animals to collective use. Following the harvest, the cooperative was unable to honor these credits and went into heavy debt, which was then transferred to poor members who originally did not own livestock. The cooperative set a fixed wage for laborers of only half a catty of rice per work point, with a maximum of five points per day. As sideline income was listed under land output, landowners could take a share of sideline income too. As a result, in the Sun Xianhe cooperative, labor input accounted for only 20 percent of total income, whereas land input formed a much larger proportion. In essence, the cooperative was in the business of hiring laborers, only wages were lower than the market rate. Different from Wang Qian's original vision, Sun Xianhe cooperative provides a unique perspective on running a successful cooperative from the peasants' point of view.⁴²

In Zizhong County, as in Shanxi, the overwhelming majority of agricultural producers' cooperatives were controlled by middle-ranking peasants, although it was not uncommon for poor peasants to serve as their nominal heads for the purpose of acquiring state loans. As one cooperative head, a party member and also a middle-ranking peasant, remarked: "We, the middle-ranking peasants, are able to coordinate them, the poor peasants, because only we have the necessary resources."⁴³ The key distinction here was between "we" and "they." All the cooperatives in Zizhong County, with the exception of Sun Xianhe, were divided into an "upper courtyard" and a "lower courtyard." The former accommodated middle-ranking peasants and their property, while the latter was reserved for poor peasants and their belongings. The former accused the latter of being lazy, while the latter were

42. *Ibid.*

43. *Ibid.*

jealous of their better-off counterparts. The two groups did not trust each other and frequently spied on each other. Conflict between the two "courtyards" often led to the collapse of cooperatives.

Poor peasants were wary about becoming involved in cooperatives. At the first sign of trouble, they were usually the first to jump ship, and this group pressed most firmly for the right to withdraw. While middle-ranking peasants sometimes formed cooperatives with the express purpose of exploiting poor peasants, the latter were not always passive. In some cases, poor peasants were active in forming cooperatives, inviting farmers with more resources but suspect class backgrounds to join them. Sadly, such cooperatives tended to collapse even sooner than most.⁴⁴

In Changzhi, cases of failures were well-kept secrets and rarely came to light. The stark contrast between the experience of Changzhi and that of Sichuan shows the difference that effective party leadership could possibly make.

In addition to their efficiency, cadres from Changzhi were well known for their commandist approach to leadership. An internal investigation revealed that cadres in the prefecture had low levels of literacy and knew little about New Democracy. They believed that as the advent of socialism was only two or three years away, there was no need to protect private ownership. Thus, they were lukewarm at best when it came to issuing land certificates to peasants. When exhorted to "guide" the peasants, they simply resorted to command and coercion. They were known for such sayings as, "The masses are like pecan nuts—you have to smash them so you can eat them," and "One horsewhip works better than thousands of fine words." Some cadres went about equipped with handcuffs and there were even cases reported of peasants being tortured to death. These cadres had developed a variety of methods to persuade villagers to accept their suggestions. Holding meetings day after day until the peasants agreed to adopt whatever the cadres asked was a common practice. They would also question peasants one on one. A typical conversation might have run as follows. Cadre: "Who encouraged you to become a master?" Peasant: "Chairman Mao." The next question followed: "Do you support Chairman Mao?" and the answer was, of course, "Yes." Then came the clincher: "Chairman Mao has issued a call to get organized—so why don't you support it?" Another trick question was, "Who doesn't support Chairman Mao?" The answer was counterrevolutionaries—but who would dare to align himself with them? By practicing such

tough methods, cadres in Changzhi enjoyed considerable success in having their orders carried out.⁴⁵ Establishing successful producers' cooperatives in 1951 was at the top of their agenda.

Stage One (1951–1952): Peasants Adapting Party Policies

As Changzhi prefecture was setting up its pioneering agricultural producers' cooperatives, organizing peasants into mutual aid teams was put on the national agenda. In September 1951, the Draft was passed, projecting a three-stage plan to advance peasant farmers from mutual aid teams to agricultural producers' cooperatives and finally to advanced agricultural producers' cooperatives (in nature, collective farms). The Draft set a short-term target of 40 percent of the rural population organized into mutual aid teams by the end of 1952.⁴⁶ In October 1951, Mao circulated the report issued by the Northeast China Bureau calling on party members to discourage peasant farmers from working on their own account.⁴⁷ In December 1951, Mao ordered that the provisions of the Draft be carried out. Between the winter of 1951 and the spring of 1952, a campaign was conducted with the aim of educating farmers to "get organized." In February 1952, the State Council released the "Decisions on Agricultural Production for 1952," urging that "in the older liberated regions, 80–90 percent of the rural population should get organized within two years; in the newly liberated regions this task should be completed within three years."⁴⁸ It also encouraged the upgrading of a select number of mutual aid teams to agricultural producers' cooperatives, albeit with caution.

Following the directive from the State Council, each province set its own timetable. The Agriculture Ministry and the People's Bank issued decrees promising state loans at low interest rates to peasants' organizations such as mutual aid teams and agricultural producers' cooperatives.⁴⁹ Thus the Mu-

45. *Neibu cankao*, February 28, 1951.

46. Zhu Yonghong, "Reflections on the Party's Policy," 29.

47. Ye Yangbing, *Zhongguo nongye hezuohua yundong yanjiu*, 201–202.

48. "Nongyebu, Zhongguo renmin yinhang guanyu 1952 nian nongdai gongzuo de zhisui" (Directives from the Agricultural Ministry and the People's Bank regarding agricultural loans, 1952) (January 25, 1952), *Nongye jian*, 154–155.

44. *Ibid.*

tual Aid and Cooperation movement officially unfolded across China. In what follows, we move beyond the borders of Changzhi prefecture and observe how peasants across the nation responded to the call to "get organized."

Although Mao Zedong had specifically instructed CCP cadres to "regard mutual aid teams and agricultural producers' cooperatives as important issues,"⁵⁰ cadres at the county level and higher did not regard this as their most urgent task. Their attention was fully occupied by the Three-Anti movement, which was initiated in late 1951. The Three-Anti movement was the most prominent political movement in China in 1951–1952. It aimed to eliminate three organizational vices: corruption, waste, and obstructionist bureaucracy. Primary targets were party members, bureaucratic officials, and the managers of factories and other businesses.⁵¹ As targets themselves, party members were understandably preoccupied with this campaign.

However, as it was launched the party declared that the Three-Anti movement would not be extended to the countryside, at least for the time being. For example, the North China Bureau stated that although corruption at district and village levels was serious, the movement would not be extended to district or below. At the county level and above, tensions were heating up. Fearing that once the movement took off in the countryside, it would be difficult to contain, the North China Bureau ordered that if any village started the Three-Anti movement on its own initiative, the county should immediately send a work team to suppress it. Village cadres were not encouraged to confess to their failings and ordinary peasants were forbidden to bring accusations of corruption against rural cadres.⁵²

As a result of these measures, the Three-Anti movement did not directly affect party members in the rural areas. Nevertheless, by paralyzing the machinery of government, the movement caused serious setbacks to the rural economy. In the case of Shanxi Province, its departments dealing with trading, finance, and taxation were in a state of chaos and daily business operations were frequently suspended. The circulation of commodities was reduced by half, and market-based trading fell by a third. The previously

congested rail network now had almost nothing to carry and two-thirds of cargo trains were empty. The state ceased purchasing cash crops in the villages and state-owned grain stores often refused to sell grain to the peasants.⁵³ It was an especially difficult time for farmers who had planted cash crops. But all these changes did not happen overnight. It took months for the Three-Anti movement to substantially affect peasant farmers, as discussed in Chapter 5.

Preoccupied with the Three-Anti movement, cadres at county level and above gave little thought to other issues. In Changzhi prefecture, following the launch of the movement, county-level cadres stopped visiting the villages for two months.⁵⁴ Lacking consistent direction from above, village cadres took control of the Mutual Aid and Cooperation movement. In North China, for example, during the spring of 1952 more than three thousand agricultural producers' cooperatives were organized, mostly by village heads, rural activists, and peasants, and with very little guidance from above.⁵⁵

Left to their own devices, rural cadres responded to the call to "get organized" in their own ways. Many simply had no interest in "getting organized." For example, in Sichuan Province, after land reform had been completed, rural cadres turned their attention to increasing agricultural productivity. Their catchcry was: "To carry out land reform we must rely on the poor peasants; to increase rural productivity we need to rely on the middle-ranking peasants." In selecting model laborers, they took agricultural productivity as the sole criterion, regardless of a farmer's class background. As a result, 90 percent of the model laborers in Sichuan were middle-ranking and wealthy peasants. Local cadres simply disregarded their responsibility to organize peasants into mutual aid teams.⁵⁶ Some doubted that mutual aid teams had a positive future and treated the task casually.⁵⁷

On the other hand, cadres in other regions interpreted the call to "get organized" as yet another political campaign and faithfully passed the message down the line. In Guizhou Province in southwest China, villagers were informed, "Building mutual aid teams is an order from above. Everyone must join them. Those who refuse to do so are only making trouble for us."

50. *Shanxi sheng nongye hezuoshi wenjian huibian jian*, 37.

51. Jonathan D. Spence, *Search For Modern China*, 509.

52. "Huabei jiu guanyu qu, cun liangji muqian jianjue bu jinxing sanfan gei Cahaer shengwei de zhishi" (The North China Bureau's directive to Cahaer Province on terminating the Three-Anti movement at district and village levels), *Huibian*, vol. 2, 434.

53. *Neibu cankao*, March 12, 1952.

54. *Ibid.*, March 20, 1952.

55. *Ibid.*, June 18, 1952.

56. *Ibid.*, July 5, 1952.

57. *Ibid.*, July 5, 1952.

The party secretary in one village told peasants, "If you don't join the mutual aid teams, you should not consider yourselves under the direction of the CCP. Unless you want to go and live in Taiwan, this is an order from the state [that you are bound to obey]."⁵⁸ In Jiangxi Province in central-south China, many peasants were told that joining mutual aid teams was an obligation.⁵⁹ In the northeast, village cadres coined the slogan, "Joining agricultural producers' cooperatives is following Mao Zedong's road—not joining them is following [U.S. President] Truman's road." In 1951, Chinese troops were fighting American forces in Korea, and President Truman and the Guomindang leader, Chiang Kai-shek, exiled in Taiwan, were potent symbols of evil. Taking their side was doubtless a counterrevolutionary crime of the highest order. Some village cadres told villagers: "If you don't join the mutual aid teams now, when socialism arrives you will be forced to write confessions."⁶⁰

Given these pressures, the decision was not hard to make for most rural people. Mutual aid teams and agricultural producers' cooperatives sprang up throughout the nation. Not surprisingly, a large number were extremely short-lived and many only existed on paper in official reports. For example, in Ba County in Sichuan Province, while the county head claimed that 13,000 mutual aid teams had been established, it turned out that 85 percent were complete fakes. It was not uncommon for teams to be formed at a meeting convened by rural cadres and then disbanded immediately after the meeting.⁶¹ In the "number one" village of Taihe County in Jiangxi Province, of eighteen mutual aid teams established in a single morning, ten were dissolved in the afternoon of the same day. In the remaining eight teams, members did not even know who their head was.⁶² To fulfill their quota, in some counties of Southwest China rural cadres formed mutual aid teams according to administrative convenience, totally regardless of the peasants' own wishes, and reported their "achievement" to their superiors. Teams formed under such circumstances simply never got off the ground.

In stark contrast to these attempts at deception, a few rural cadres were willing to go further than the Draft had indicated as a way of getting their names known in official circles. Sporadic cases of "rash tendencies" were

reported.⁶³ In Muliu village of Shanxi Province, in an effort to have their village reported in the newspaper, a demobilized soldier, a village head, and a party member resolved to establish a collective farm instead of a mutual aid team. The scheme was nothing if not ambitious. Their plan was to pool all available land and have the peasants work and eat together. The harvest would be stored in two warehouses and members would be provided with whatever they needed. Each day members would follow a fixed schedule: work for eight hours, study for six hours, and rest for eight hours. The three organizers held a village meeting to discuss "organizing a collective farm and practicing socialism," although most villagers remained silent when asked their opinions. When the organizers then accused those who had refused to join of being unpatriotic, some relented while others remained skeptical. Eventually, the three organizers were criticized from above.⁶⁴

At the same time, many rural cadres saw the movement as an economic opportunity, partly because the Draft had emphasized increasing production. They used economic incentives to attract peasant farmers to join up. Offering agricultural loans to mutual aid teams and agricultural producers' cooperatives was quite common. "The government will lend peasants whatever a mutual aid team needs," rural cadres promised villagers. In this way, Junchu County organized eighteen teams, sixteen of which immediately disbanded after receiving agricultural loans.⁶⁵ Because they had not been given specific instructions on how to manage mutual aid teams, many rural cadres were inclined to give farmers more "freedom." The peasants were thus able to make their own rules.

If local cadres varied in their responses, so did the peasants. Village heads, activists, model laborers, and (some) CCP members were usually the first to answer the party's call. Like the villagers of Changzhi prefecture, their motivations were multiple: genuine faith in the CCP, the habit of sticking closely to CCP directives, which so far had been well rewarded, a desire for respect and even fame, ambition to succeed in local politics, and the lure of material incentives were all part of the mix. The rewards were potentially significant. Performing well as part of a mutual aid team or cooperative would substantially increase an individual's chances of being selected as a model laborer and raise their social status, thus enhancing their influence in

58. *Ibid.*, September 21, 1952.

59. *Ibid.*, April 22, 1952.

60. *Ibid.*, June 18, 1952.

61. *Ibid.*, August 25, 1952.

62. *Ibid.*, July 5, 1952.

63. *Ibid.*, April 14, 1952.

64. *Ibid.*, July 8, 1952.

65. *Ibid.*, August 25, 1952.

village affairs. Model laborers with good reputations and effective networks were capable of challenging local cadres, and even resisting their orders.

For ordinary villagers, economic incentives were important. Agricultural loans offered by the state were especially tempting. In the older liberated areas, these loans were almost exclusively limited to mutual aid teams and agricultural producers' cooperatives. Rewards and honors were regularly bestowed on those who had proved themselves in the fields. From the end of 1951, the title of model laborer was highly recommended, if not reserved, for heads of mutual aid teams and agricultural producers' cooperatives, as were the rewards that went with it. While the organizations concerned might be nominal, the prizes were substantial. In 1952, the first mutual aid team established in Jieyang County of Guangdong Province in South China was rewarded with a buffalo, an invaluable asset for peasant farmers.

In the countryside, those with undesirable class backgrounds sought alliances with people of better standing in the eyes of the Communist regime. It was reported that rich peasants, and sometimes former landlords, volunteered to join mutual aid teams and offered to lend, even transfer, their draught animals and tools to their peers. They hoped that such economic sacrifices would enable them to befriend and seek protection from the rural majority. In most cases, these better-off villagers were welcomed by both mutual aid teams and agricultural producers' cooperatives.

If managed well, farmers indeed profited from their membership of mutual aid teams. By making their own distribution rules, middle-ranking peasants, sometimes allied with their wealthy counterparts, were able to reduce the cost of labor and make more money than they could by working on their own account. In cases when economic gain was the main motivation, middle-ranking peasants usually dominated. For example, Tong'an village was a relatively wealthy village situated in Keshan County in Northeast China. In 1952, seventy-three middle-ranking peasants, twenty-one peasants from upper-middle backgrounds, six rich peasants, and forty-nine poor villagers and hired laborers were living in Tong'an. Four of the six wealthy peasants were party members—one was secretary of the village party branch, one was a former deputy village head, and a third was a model laborer well-known at provincial level. All were engaged in "capitalist" business enterprises in 1951. When the Mutual Aid and Cooperation movement was launched, many mutual aid teams and agricultural producers' cooperatives were formed in which wealthy peasants played leading roles. Economic

imperatives were the driving force behind them. An investigation into eight agricultural producers' cooperatives in Keshan County revealed that most were controlled by rich peasants. Income distribution favored land input and the input of production materials; seven had actually hired their own farm laborers.⁶⁶

Wealthy peasants frequently used collective organizations as a screen to "exploit" the poor. For example, one rich peasant, Wang Fa, together with three other wealthy families, established a mutual aid team. The team also included five poor peasants who were living at Wang's home, following his orders and working for him. Although these five villagers were essentially hired laborers, they were reported as team members and one was actually the nominal team head. Using a similar system, another rich peasant, Chen Qingshan, boosted his personal income by 20 percent in 1952 in his agricultural producers' cooperative, which included two hired laborers. Chen himself did not farm any land at all. It was not uncommon for rich peasants to hire laborers and pay them wages at a lower rate than the market price, all in the name of cooperative labor. Moreover, mutual aid teams and agricultural producers' cooperatives tended to scorn poor peasants and to discriminate against them; land belonging to poor farmers was usually the last to be cultivated.⁶⁷

The rules set down for mutual aid teams and agricultural producers' cooperatives varied from place to place. Some favored land input, others labor input. Some mandated the collection of community funds regardless of members' opposition, while others did not. Despite different rules, the organizations had problems in common. Members fought each other over the distribution of resources. Nearly all these cooperative bodies lacked democracy and were effectively controlled by one person. Financial accounting was patchy at best. Few members wanted to work hard and fewer still were keen to assist other members.

One outcome that particularly disappointed the party was the lack of improvement in villagers' cultural life. A report from the North China News Agency highlighted the absence of political education in mutual aid teams. After interviewing a large number of mutual aid teams in Shanxi, the agency concluded that most members saw them as an economic organization and had only vague opinions as to their future. In spring 1952, the mutual aid

66. *Ibid.*, September 17 and September 29, 1952.

67. *Ibid.*

movement mushroomed in Shanxi, but few peasants joined it as a way of ushering in a socialist future. As we have seen, some used the teams as a cover for hiring their own laborers and others were attracted by economic incentives. It was rare that peasants joined because of their political consciousness. Even in those organizations that claimed success, the established mentality remained intact. Peasants continued to care little about socialism—they preferred to seek individual profits and short-term gains. The heads of mutual aid teams and producers' cooperatives paid little attention to training peasants in the principles of socialism. In some cases, they feared to do so. One village head in Shanxi Province said candidly, "I got the peasants organized, but I dared not say anything more about the future of socialism. Had I done so, the peasants would not have joined up." Even cadres at the county level did not attempt to introduce courses in socialist education for peasant farmers.⁶⁸

In August 1952 an investigation into agricultural production in Shanxi revealed widespread cases of false reporting. Village reports inflated production and exaggerated peasants' participation in political education and levels of political consciousness. For example, an exemplary village, Dongtai in Luchuan County, reported that "following education in patriotism, the masses were confident about increasing agricultural production." However, when the investigation team interviewed eight villagers, five knew nothing about these educational sessions. The same report claimed that all villagers were involved in making production plans and competed among themselves. The follow-up interview revealed that only a single mutual aid team had formulated a production plan and that it was unrealistic at best. And whereas the same report stated that 90 percent of laborers of both sexes had joined mutual aid teams, the investigation revealed that 191 female laborers in the village were not involved in farming at all. Likewise, model laborer Dong Zhongzheng, from Xinzhuang village in Wanguan, reported that his mutual aid team had established a work points system, subscribed to the *Shanxi Daily* and the *Shanxi Peasant Daily*, and had organized members into study groups that met three times every ten days. He even attached work point tickets and accounts to his report. The unglamorous reality was that Dong's team only worked together during the busy season, had never subscribed to newspapers, and had never even sat down to read together. Production records are often unreliable. Inflating agricultural output was

common. For example, while it was reported that grain production by mutual aid teams in Jiluo village of Zhao County had increased by 50 catties per mu, in reality production had *dropped* by 50 catties per mu.⁶⁹

If the official records were to be believed, Shanxi's mutual aid teams and agricultural producers' cooperatives both appeared to have multiplied. By spring 1952, 278 producers' cooperatives had been established in Changzhi prefecture alone, and the number of peasants who had "gotten organized" rose from 52 percent in 1951 to 80 percent in 1952. Nevertheless, even Shanxi provincial leaders admitted things were not perfect. Progress was uneven. In some counties, 95 percent of peasants were organized, yet in others where rural cadres had failed to support the Mutual Aid and Cooperation movement, the rate was as low as 10 percent. As for producers' cooperatives, a third of them were distributing their resources more according to land input than labor input, reversing Wang Qian's priorities.⁷⁰ Many peasants had formed sham mutual aid teams to cover their private farming activities, while others sought to acquire material incentives. Political education was scant, and Shanxi peasant farmers remained unchanged in their basic outlook, continuing to put their own interests first. For example, they frequently took advantage of the illness of other members, did not hesitate to work their colleagues' cattle to death, and were single-minded in the pursuit of personal profit. The peasants' cynical take on the party slogan was, "Get organized to accumulate the family fortune."⁷¹

In Changzhi, local investigations showed that a quarter of the villages in the prefecture had failed to develop successful mutual aid teams. More than five thousand of these teams were purely nominal, and either lacked a leader or a viable plan. Many "mutual aid teams for private farming" were created. As the peasants themselves put it, "[mutual aid teams were] formed in the spring, came undone in the summer, collapsed in the fall. [This pattern] will repeat itself next year." Even the teams that survived did not always please the party. As we have seen elsewhere, members used mutual aid teams to take advantage of their fellow villagers. For example, in Luchengxi village,

69. Ibid., August 22, 1952.

70. "Bo Yibo, Liu Lantao tongzhi guanyu Huabei nongye luzhu yundong de fangzhen he renwu xiang Mao zhuxi de zonghe baogao" (The reports by Bo Yibo and Liu Lantao to Chairman Mao on the development of the Mutual Aid and Cooperation movement in north China), *Huibian*, vol. 2, 598.

71. *Neibu cankao*, April 29, 1952.

one herd of cattle was the equivalent of eleven human laborers. In the party's eyes, better-off peasants who could afford to keep draught animals were exploiting the poor. Gender discrimination was rife, too. Female laborers received less than half of what male laborers earned.⁷²

Conclusion

Many of the features that characterized the early Mutual Aid and Cooperation movement—coercing peasant farmers to join mutual aid teams and agricultural producers' cooperatives, commandism, false registrations, the use of economic incentives, sporadic outbreaks of "rash tendencies"—would all be repeated by the future agricultural cooperativization movement. Still, compared with what the future had in store, the early stages had some unique features.

First, there was absence of significant intervention or "guidance" from above. Rural cadres at village level played the leading role in the early movement; they took more account of their personal stake in village life and local specifics than the higher-ranking cadres who came after them. At the same time, because the party emphasized the dual goals of increasing production and moving toward socialism, local cadres enjoyed considerable leeway in interpreting official policy. Ideology was not yet a dominant factor. Many cadres chose to interpret the movement as an economic campaign and gave priority to rural production. To a large degree, the peasants were left to make their own choices. Except in areas where local party cadres enjoyed exceptional influence, farmers could choose whether to join a cooperative organization or not. At the very least, they could choose to be part of a nominal mutual aid team that did not interfere with their lives. Those who chose to keep farming on their own account did not commonly suffer discrimination. Because the party failed to provide detailed instructions on running mutual aid teams, farmers were given plenty of leeway to work things out for themselves. At the village level, rural cadres and peasants together shaped the system and often managed to profit from it. They could adjust party policy to suit local conditions and protect themselves from ad-

verse consequences. Peasants were rational people—they made their choices after careful consideration of all relevant factors. Some peasants chose to form their own organizations to avoid being organized by outsiders.⁷³

Despite the central government's stress on the socialist character of mutual aid teams, few peasants were aware of it; fewer still cared.⁷⁴ By spring 1952, agricultural producers' cooperatives were still at the experimental stage. Except in Shanxi Province and in Northeast China, permission was required from the provincial authorities to set up a cooperative and the numbers remained low. In Shanxi and Northeast China, the regulations were more flexible. For example, in Shanxi, permission from the district authorities was sufficient to start a cooperative. In Northeast China, the counties could issue the necessary permission. Nevertheless, in all regions, prudence was emphasized, at least on paper. Certain conditions were required to be met before an experimental cooperative could be set up. Although they varied from region to region, these conditions largely reflected the criteria that Wang Qian had established.

In sum, in the first half of 1952, agricultural producers' cooperatives were little more than a showcase—the mutual aid teams still dominated the scene.⁷⁵ During this early stage, while commandism was evident, the degree of coercion used to enforce decisions was mild. With minimal intervention from above, the leading roles fell to village cadres. Peasant farmers themselves dealt with the practicalities of running a mutual aid team or cooperative and retained the capacity to steer the movement to their advantage. They could protect their own interests, for a short time at least. However, as the political atmosphere intensified, the party revised the ground rules for the Mutual Aid and Cooperation movement and set rigorous standards for new cooperatives to meet, as discussed in the following chapter.

72. "Changzhi diwei guanyu bannian lai nongcun shengchan huzhu hezuoyundong zonghe baogao" (Changzhi prefecture's report on the Mutual Aid and Cooperation movement during the last six months) (June 30, 1952), JMA, 92.1.1.

73. *Neibu cankao*, May 15, 1952.

74. *Ibid.*, April 29, 1952.

75. Ye Yangbing, *Zhongguo nongye hezuohua yundong yanjiu*, 230.