



Root of Peasants' Poverty in China

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Abstract: The Chinese rural development can be divided into 3 periods: control under People's Commune (1949-1984), implementation of household responsibility system (1985-2005), and abolition of agricultural tax (2006-present). Throughout these periods, peasants are always oppressed under rigid policies on agriculture and trapped in the lowest socioeconomic status. Taxation and policy restrictions made living on only farming impossible, forcing peasants into cities, where they become migrant workers, a low-income workforce fueling labor-intensive industries. They continue to suffer from the widening gap of income and public services between them and city dwellers. Though they have made significant contribution to both rural and urban construction, their hard work and sacrifice were not rewarded nor recognized. Bearing the labels of poverty and backwardness, they become the victims of China's economic boom.

Keywords: People's Commune, household responsibility system, agricultural tax, migrant workers, labor-intensive industry

1. Introduction

The transformation of China's countryside reflects national development, documenting farmers' struggles across collective control (People's Commune), individual liberation (household responsibility system), and urban-rural imbalance post-agricultural tax abolition. Rooted in Jingzhou fieldwork, this study reveals farmers' institutional constraints (forced labor, heavy levies), survival challenges (famine, population policies), and developmental paradoxes (economic contributions, welfare deficits) via oral accounts, archives, and data. Amid narratives of "rise without colonialism," farmers sacrificed dignity and land to fuel industrialization and urbanization. Their stories embody both micro-level livelihoods and macro-level national costs.

2. Control under People's Commune (1949-1984)

During the People's Commune period, land was collectively owned rather than individually held. A portion of agricultural profits was submitted to the government at fixed rates, while the remainder was distributed among peasants based on their participation in collective labor, as regulated by village leaders. Key reasons for this collectivized system included: a shortage of production tools (such as oxen and plowshares), necessitating shared use; inadequate water storage and irrigation infrastructure, requiring large-scale construction of reservoirs and ditches through collective labor; and the state's procurement of agricultural products at low prices to support urban development, which reduced peasants' income and minimized the risk of resistance under collective management.

The period 1958–1960 inflicted severe hardship on peasants, known as the "Three Years of Difficulty" or the Great Chinese Famine. Contributing factors included local governments' unchecked consumption — such as slaughtering oxen and consuming seeds — and a widespread drought beginning in 1958 that drastically reduced output. According to Forty Years in Jingzhou, 1960 production totals of staples, cotton, oil, and marketable pigs fell by 30.02%, 59.82%, 58.82%, and 61.77%, respectively, compared to 1957 [1].

The fact that food-producing rural areas suffered more severely than urban consumption areas underscores the extent of peasant oppression during this period.

3. Implementation of household responsibility system (1985-2005)

The main characteristic of this period was that the peasants obtained rights of individual usage of land. They could farm individually, and were responsible for the costs of farming. All the profits earned from the land belonged to the individual peasants. They had to pay taxes to the government according to the amount of land they owned.

After 1995, there were 10 years of darkness for the Chinese peasants. Due to the cost exceeding profits, the funding of government in every region was lacking, even unable to pay the wages of the civil servants. Except from the normal agricultural tax, the local government used regulations to appoint fees from the peasants. According to the archive Jingzhou City Annals 1994-2005 Volume 9 Agriculture, the cost of every acre of land increased from 88.5 yuan in 1994 to 164.7 yuan

in 1999 [2].

Table 1. Peasants' burden from 1994 to 2005 in Jingzhou

Year	Total burden on peasants/k yuan	Burden per person/yuan	Burden per mu/yuan
1994	700170	128.9	88.5
1995	1007380	187.9	128.5
1996	943780	226.0	156.0
1997	953860	229.3	157.9
1998	914570	219.9	151.4
1999	973730	240.0	164.7
2000	847630	208.2	142.5
2001	860340	212.6	146.6
2002	838450	207.2	143.0
2003	582990	142.2	105.5
2004	379080	96.9	68.7
2005	109920	19.6	28.2

Tax collection in the 1990s imposed severe burdens on peasants. Defaulters faced the seizure of oxen or food rations, or were compelled to borrow, resulting in widespread farmer exodus and abandoned farmland in Jingzhou. According to the archive Jingzhou City Annals 1994-2005 Volume 9 Agriculture, the grain cultivation area of Jingzhou turned from 562390 hectares in 1994 to 409620 hectares in 2003 [2].

Table 2. The staple production from 1994 to 2005 in Jingzhou

Year	Staple			Wheat			Rice		
	Area/k hectares	Yield per mu/kg	Total yield/k tons	Area/k hectares	Yield per mu/kg	Total yield/k tons	Area/k hectares	Yield per mu/kg	Total yield/k tons
1994	562.39	6345	3566	87.27	2730	23.83	400.12	7815	312.59
1995	559.61	6525	3653.1	78.69	2700	21.26	413.49	7860	324.91
1996	556.22	5910	3285	91.44	2565	23.44	436.09		298.48
1997	597.05	6495	3877.9	102.61	2850	29.22	422.83	7935	335.27
1998	565.06	5760	3257.8	90.47	2880	26.03	396.63	6975	276.43
1999	565.95	6150	3480.2	76.6	2430	18.62	403.1	7425	299.05
2000	487.94	6735	3284.7	43.27	2835	12.30	366.41	7875	282.32
2001	451.76	7020	3172.7	38.12	2775	10.60	335.64	8325	279.27
2002	429.56	6750	2899.3	35.82	2055	7.36	309.2	8250	255.19
2003	409.62	6330	2592	35.71	2475	8.82	298.82	7500	224.23
2004	430.66	7065	3042.9	33.90	3090	10.5	336.81	8040	270.84
2005	459.04	7020	3222	46.51	3060	14.3	349.87	8130	284.55

In 1999, the peasants in Fengcheng, Jiangxi could not endure the situation anymore. Tens of thousands of peasants attacked the government, leading to the death of the town mayor and police station chief [3]. On March 2nd 2000, the party secretary of Qipan town, Jianli county, Jingzhou Li Changping wrote a letter to the president of China Zhu Rongji, reflecting the issues in rural villages: the burden on farmers like 'Mount Tai', the debt like 'Mount Everest', the cadres like 'locusts', the policies like 'lies', the lies like 'truth'[2]. The countryside is on the brink of collapse.

Peasants suffered greatly under the strict One Child Policy. According to the Jingzhou City Annals, 33,651 compulsory birth control surgeries, including abortions, were performed in the first half of 1997 alone[2]. The policy, which typically limited families to one child, was brutally enforced through late-term abortions, causing women severe physical and psychological harm.

From 1997 to 2004, there was fewer than 2% of the population violating the birth control policies [2]. For those violating the policy, the government executed cruel economic punishments, collecting social child support fines 3-6 times higher than that of the annual revenue [2]. The peasants who violated the policies had to move away from their hometown due to the punishments.

Table 3. The birth control conditions from 1994 to 2005 in Jingzhou

Year	Number of people obeying birth control	Birth rate under birth control/%				Birth rate under birth control/%	Number of people disobeying birth control	Birth rate disobeying birth control/%
			One child	Birth rate under birth control/%	Two children			
1995	54339	95.60	47279	98.28	6999	83.72	2498	4.40
1996	46679	97.21	39480	98.36	7139	93.26	1339	2.97
1997	43931	98.25	36297	99.12	7567	95.64	782	1.75
1998	46757	98.77	36367	99.41	10286	97.46	584	1.23
1999	45883	98.77	34256	99.41	11490	98.32	478	1.03
2000	46718	98.91	35786	99.34	10825	98.26	517	1.09
2001	44717	98.45	35834	98.94	8806	97.48	704	1.55
2002	44020	98.66	35424	99.35	8576	97.23	597	1.34
2003	44480	98.59	36042	99.45	8314	95.73	634	1.41
2004	45656	98.18	36495	99.51	8969	93.82	847	1.82
2005	47742	96.38	38485	99.35	9044	86.58	1795	3.62

4. Abolition of agricultural tax (2006-present)

Beyond the economic gap, a disparity in public services widened between urban and rural areas. The exodus of working-age adults hollowed out villages, leaving behind children without parental care and elders without support, shattering traditional family structures.

The rural exodus also precipitated a decline in public services. As populations shrank, schools and hospitals were consolidated or closed. Zhujialing village, once a regional hub with its own schools and a surgical-capable clinic, now retains only a basic two-person clinic. Students must commute eight kilometers to town for school, and diminished educational resources have curtailed the historic pathway for rural youth to advance through university. This erosion of essential services raises a critical question: what future remains for China's villages?

China's rise is often noted as unique for its absence of colonial plunder. While this may be true, it does not mean the ascent was without sacrifice. The nation's development has been built upon the generations of peasants who bore its heaviest costs.

5. Conclusion

China's rural transformation over 70 years reveals modernization's deep contradictions: collective deprivation under the People's Commune, burdens pre-reform, and implicit sacrifices post-tax abolition. Farmers bore development costs, not benefits. Land reforms boosted productivity but policy missteps, urban-rural gaps, and service imbalances trapped farmers in survival crises. Urban prosperity, fueled by rural resource extraction, achieved "rise without colonization" at farmers' expense—land, dignity, and opportunities. Rural revitalization must confront this legacy, rebuilding equity and care for symbiotic development.

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