

## **The Village Commune in Contemporary China: Its History and Status**

Unlike the Russian and Indian village communes that attracted the attention of Karl Marx in the 1850s, the village commune in China is a new thing and did not exist before the 1950s. From the Qin Dynasty to New China in 1949, private ownership of land in China was the dominant form of land ownership and most of the land was owned by landlords or rich peasants. From 1950 to 1952, the central government supervised land reform; thus land in rural areas was distributed equally to peasants. But, by the end of 1952, soon after land reform was accomplished, some peasants began to spontaneously establish mutual-aid teams. This was similar to cooperative enterprises that appeared spontaneously in England during the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and also attracted Marx's attention. At the same time, from 1953 to 1956, socialist transformations were carried out in China and peasants, as small land proprietors, gradually became the members of agricultural cooperatives which evolved from a low stage to a high stage and finally reached the level of people's communes.

The system of People's Commune lasted for 24 years in China from 1958 to 1982. This system consisted of three levels of land ownership, the lowest level was the production team which was usually the same as the natural village in rural areas, the middle level was the production brigade which usually consisted of a few natural villages and the highest level was the commune on the township government level which usually consisted of a number of production brigades. Under this system, the land was cultivated on the basis of the production team but the production brigade provided some common goods such as basic education (e.g. primary school and junior high school), primary public health services (e.g. the famous barefoot doctors in health centers), and basic irrigation systems. The people's commune provided senior high schools, big irrigation systems (e.g. the famous Red-Flag Canal in Henan province), small hospitals, and it was also the lowest local government.

In 1982, the people's commune system was stopped suddenly. The function of People's Commune was changed to the township government, the production brigade being changed to the administrative village. The land still owned by the administrative village was divided into small plots and contracted to households for 30 years. So after 1982 the collective economy on the level of administrative village still existed, but in most rural areas (especially in the middle and western parts of China) the collective economy existed in name only because it was often in debt. The number of primary schools and high schools decreased sharply and villagers often had to raise money to repair school buildings and build new village roads. The health centers on the level of the administrative village disappeared and the barefoot doctor was forbidden. Most of the irrigation systems fell into disrepair for many years and did not function properly.

But, in some rural areas especially in the eastern coastal areas of China (e.g. Guangdong province and Jiangsu province), the collective economy on the level of administrative villages not only existed, but also developed rapidly because many collective Township Enterprises emerged and strengthened, and the joint stock cooperative system also appeared in some of these rural areas. Compared with the peasants in the middle and western parts of China who barely feed and clothe his family, the peasants in the eastern coastal areas became more and more wealthy.

In a few administrative villages (e.g. Huaxicun Village in Jiangsu province, Nanjiecun Village in Henan province, Daqiuzhuang Village attached to Tianjin City), the land previously owned by the production teams was not divided and contracted by the households. The leaders of these administrative villages tried to help the villagers run the collective economy and they were successful. For example, Nanjie Village has a population of 3180, but its annual value of production is more than \$200 million. Nanjiejun Village provides free housing, education, medical treatment and pensions for its villagers, but the village is far from Marx's ideal of an association in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all. Its villagers have no private goods, basic human rights or freedom of speech and the village leader's behavior is just like a lord in the Middle Ages.

I argue in this paper that the so-called "socialist star village" is not a good model. For most villages in rural areas of China, common goods such as infrastructure, primary and junior high schools, health services and pensions, etc. should be provided by the central and provincial governments without reliance on the development of the collective economy at the level of administrative villages. On the other side, urbanization processes are also needed so that the population in rural areas decreases rapidly and the environment in the countryside is protected effectively. This is the precondition for the construction of the "socialist new village", a slogan put forward by CCPCC in 2005.

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