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978-1-107-02404-5 - City Versus Countryside in Mao's China: Negotiating the Divide

Jeremy Brown

Excerpt

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Introduction

Over the summer of 2011, Beijing authorities demolished approximately thirty schools for the children of rural migrant workers, leaving thousands of young students in limbo. Only those children whose migrant parents were able to produce “five documents” (*wu zheng*) affirming their legal residence and proof of employment in the Chinese capital would be allowed to attend other Beijing schools. Few could do so. Of the more than fourteen hundred students at one demolished school, only seventy had parents who had the required papers. The rest were out of luck. They were effectively illegal immigrants in their own country. “I don’t get it,” the principal of one closed school said with tears in her eyes, “I’ve been working in schools for migrant children for more than ten years and I’ve always thought I was doing a good deed. But invariably, they get rid of us.”¹

The gap between city and countryside is one of contemporary China’s most pressing social problems. The roots of today’s rural-urban divide can be found in the Mao Zedong era (1949–1978). This is puzzling and ironic. Mao led the Chinese Communist Party to power on the strength of a peasant-backed revolution that promised to eliminate the “three great differences” between worker and peasant, city and countryside, and mental and manual labor.² But in spite of Maoist programs to redistribute

¹ Shi Minglei, Wang Jialin, and Du Ding, “Jin 30 dagong zidi xiao shoudao guantong tongzhi” [Around 30 schools for the children of migrant workers receive closure notices], *Xinjingbao*, August 16, 2011, A12, <http://epaper.bjnews.com.cn/images/2011-08/16/A12/A12816C.pdf>

² Some writers refuse to translate *nongmin* as “peasant” because the word can be pejorative. I follow Sigrid Schmalzer in using “peasant” because it was an “actors’ category”

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wealth, encourage rural industry, transfer urban youth to villages, train barefoot doctors, and educate villagers, the Communists ended up sharpening rural-urban difference rather than erasing it. Over the course of the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, cities became privileged spaces while villages became dumping grounds. City-dwellers enjoyed special perks while villagers endured bitter sacrifices. Contrary to the wishes of Mao and other top leaders, cities and villages became alienated from one another. This book seeks to explain this process of alienation by focusing on how people experienced it at the grassroots.

Given the challenges and constraints facing the Communists when they assumed power in 1949, the achievements of the Mao era appear all the more remarkable, and it is unfair and unrealistic to bash Mao for failing to completely eradicate inequality.³ It is fair, however, to ask how the result of the revolution differed so starkly from its originally stated ideals. The answer begins with tension between the Communists' intertwined goals of revolution and modernization. On the one hand, Mao wanted to build a strong, prosperous, and modern nation that would no longer be humiliated by foreign powers. On the other hand, he sought to make China a more equal and fair society by eliminating class exploitation and redistributing property. Mao and his colleagues in party center never saw these goals as mutually exclusive – they thought China could simultaneously become richer and fairer through revolutionary modernization.⁴ A widening rural-urban divide was one of the unintended consequences of this revolutionary modernization project.

during the Mao era, and precisely because the word had pejorative connotations during the modern period. To obscure this fact by using equally problematic words like “farmer” would mean sacrificing historicist authenticity. Sigrid Schmalzer, *The People's Peking Man: Popular Science and Human Identity in Twentieth-Century China* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), xviii.

³ By challenges and constraints I mean the effects of a century of war, hunger, instability, and poverty leading up to 1949, plus a massive war against the United States in Korea in the early 1950s. The achievements of the Mao period include increases in life expectancy and literacy, and also laying the foundation for rapid economic development after 1978. See Barry Naughton, *The Chinese Economy: Transitions and Growth* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007), 82; and Chris Bramall, *In Praise of Maoist Economic Planning: Living Standards and Economic Development in Sichuan since 1931* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

⁴ Referring to the shared goals of “Mao and his colleagues” is, of course, an oversimplification that obscures heated policy debates among central leaders. Top officials during the Mao period, however, were consistently committed to revolutionary modernization. Their debates were about how to reach their goals and whether class struggle or careful state planning deserved more emphasis.

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My use of the word “unintended” to describe the deepening rural-urban divide under Mao should not be read as an attempt to apologize for or defend the staggering human costs of the Great Leap famine and the Cultural Revolution. The evidence is clear: Mao and other leaders often displayed a callous disregard for human suffering, and were particularly cavalier about the lives of rural people. But condemning Mao as fundamentally evil or equating him with Hitler, as some scholars have done, actually hampers our understanding of modern Chinese history.⁵ Debating whether Mao was a great leader or an evil dictator equivalent to Hitler sheds no light on how people in China experienced life during the period of his rule. Focusing instead on unintended consequences means that I take Mao's goals seriously, assess how his projects went so wrong, and focus on how people dealt with the fallout.

The pages that follow tell the story of how people in the Tianjin region of north China negotiated the rural-urban gap in their everyday lives. Rather than a case study of a single city or village, this is a book about interaction between the two realms. Examining rural-urban interaction during the Mao period shows how individuals created and contested a divided society of privileged urban citizens and second-class peasants. The most significant structural factors in creating the divide were the two-tiered household registration (*hukou*) system and grain rationing regime, which classified every individual in China according to rural or urban residence.⁶ Household registration was gradually implemented during the 1950s, first as a way for police to monitor the population amid fears of counterrevolutionary sabotage, and later as a way to stem the influx of rural migrants seeking work in cities. It was not until the early 1960s that central leaders firmly institutionalized the *hukou* system in response to the starvation and massive population dislocation of the Great Leap famine. Planners in Beijing attributed the Great Leap crisis to a lack of centralized control over the labor force. Their solution was to attempt to fix everyone in place. An urban, or “non-agricultural”

⁵ One of the most recent and influential demonizations of Mao is Jung Chang and Jon Halliday, *Mao: The Unknown Story* (New York: Knopf, 2005).

⁶ Important works about the systemic dimensions of this two-tiered society include Martin King Whyte and William L. Parish, *Urban Life in Contemporary China* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984); R. J. R. Kirkby, *Urbanization in China: Town and Country in a Developing Economy, 1949–2000 A.D.* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985); Andrew G. Walder, *Communist Neo-Traditionalism: Work and Authority in Chinese Industry* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986); and Sulamith Heins Potter and Jack M. Potter, *China's Peasants: The Anthropology of a Revolution* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), especially 296–312.

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(*fei nongye*) classification guaranteed food rations, housing, health care, and education to city residents. Families holding “agricultural” (*nongye*) *hukou* were expected to be self-reliant and were restricted from moving to cities.⁷

This systemic inequality was justified by the socialist planned economy's emphasis on heavy urban industry. Why stress city factories? In the face of national security threats, top leaders argued, China had to become stronger and more modern before it could eliminate the “three great differences.” So China emulated the Soviet Union's path of expropriating grain from the countryside in order to develop heavy industry. Top-down planning put rural people at the bottom of the economic and political hierarchy, and had the practical effect of turning a diverse rural population into “peasants” tied to agricultural collectives that produced grain for the state.⁸ As Jacob Eyferth writes, “In the view of Chinese state planners, modernity lay in the rational division of the economy into discrete, hierarchically ordered jurisdictions, arranged and interlinked in such a way that a person at the top could trace and direct the flow of resources through the system.”⁹ People “at the top” lived in cities and prioritized them over villages.

Top leaders in Beijing including Mao remained consistently committed to this Stalinist development model throughout the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s. Mao periodically attempted to address the imbalances that had been caused by prioritizing heavy urban industry, most notably when launching the leap in 1958 and at the outset of the Cultural Revolution (1966–1968). And between 1949 and 1978, rural areas did see significant

⁷ Tiejun Cheng, “Dialectics of Control – The Household Registration (Hukou) System in Contemporary China” (PhD diss., State University of New York at Binghamton, 1991); Tiejun Cheng and Mark Selden, “The Origins and Consequences of China's Hukou System,” *China Quarterly* 139 (1994): 644–68; Kam Wing Chan, *Cities with Invisible Walls* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994); Fei-Ling Wang, *Organizing through Division and Exclusion: China's Hukou System* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005); Ching Kwan Lee and Mark Selden, “Durable Inequality: The Legacies of China's Revolutions and the Pitfalls of Reform,” in *Revolution in the Making of the Modern World: Social Identities, Globalization, and Modernity*, ed. John Foran, David Lane and Andreja Zivkovic (New York: Routledge, 2007), 81–95; and Martin King Whyte, “The Paradoxes of Rural-Urban Inequality in Contemporary China,” in *One Country, Two Societies: Rural-Urban Inequality in Contemporary China*, ed. Martin King Whyte (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 7–13.

⁸ Jacob Eyferth convincingly explains this process of peasantization and rural deindustrialization in his *Eating Rice from Bamboo Roots: The Social History of a Community of Handicraft Papermakers in Rural Sichuan, 1920–2000* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2009).

⁹ Eyferth, *Eating Rice from Bamboo Roots*, 223.

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gains in education, electrification, health care, irrigation, and literacy. But even during the Cultural Revolution, Mao and his colleagues never wavered from the rural-urban divide's ideological justification (making China modern and strong through top-down state planning) and institutional underpinnings (the *hukou* system and grain rationing). As a result, cities and villages became more and more alienated from one another over the course of the Mao years.

The *hukou* and grain rationing regimes were crucial structural elements of rural-urban difference under Mao. Human interactions, however, were as important as government-imposed structures in creating the rural-urban divide. People themselves made the divide, and they constantly challenged and crossed it. If the *hukou* system indeed functioned as a "legal Great Wall," as Fei-Ling Wang writes,¹⁰ it was a porous wall, not an impenetrable one. Alienation between village and city came about not through isolation, but through regular contact. During the socialist period, in spite of restricted mobility, people continued to travel between city and countryside in massive numbers.¹¹ Such movement – sometimes hidden and illicit, sometimes state-sanctioned – led to exchanges and interactions in which difference was negotiated on personal, familial, and professional levels. *Hukou* and grain rationing were only one factor in these moments of everyday contact. Language, physical appearance, work, family, food, and sex also came into play as people negotiated the rural-urban divide.

So did long-standing native place networks, which had been important resources for migrants during the late Qing and Republican periods.¹² Household registration and grain rationing failed to sever city dwellers' ties to their rural native places. During the Mao era, urban residents maintained ties with the countryside by hosting visiting relatives, and

¹⁰ Fei-Ling Wang, "Renovating the Great Floodgate: The Reform of China's *Hukou* System," in Whyte, *One Country, Two Societies*, 335.

¹¹ On the substantial unsanctioned migration of the Mao period, see Diana Lary, "Hidden Migrations: Movements of Shandong People, 1949–1978," *Chinese Environment and Development* 7 (1996): 56–72.

¹² On native place identity during the Republican period, see S. A. Smith, *Revolution and the People in Russia and China: A Comparative History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), especially chapter 1; and Hanchao Lu, *Beyond the Neon Lights: Everyday Shanghai in the Early Twentieth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999). On the late Qing see William T. Rowe, *Hankow: Commerce and Society in a Chinese City, 1796–1889* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1984), especially chapter 7. Byrna Goodman's *Native Place, City, and Nation: Regional Networks and Identities in Shanghai, 1853–1937* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), covers the late Qing and Republican periods.

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through visits home for the Chinese New Year. Ironically, the Communist bureaucracy also helped sustain rural-urban ties by including “native place” (*jiguan*) on paperwork in individuals’ dossiers. During movements to reduce the city population (in the 1950s and early 1960s, covered in Chapters 2 and 4) or to purify urban space (in 1966 and 1968, discussed in Chapter 6), authorities used this information to determine where to deport people.

The administrative categories of “urban” and “rural” shaped life choices and opportunities, but they often clashed with lived reality. It is therefore useful to think of the categories as one of the “state fictions” described by James Scott, in that they “transformed the reality they presumed to observe, although never so thoroughly as to precisely fit the grid.”¹³ When the state’s rigid rural-urban scheme was imposed on a complex human landscape, individuals and families had to sort out the mess. Labels pushed people into choices and situations that they might not have confronted otherwise. But surprisingly often, people took matters into their own hands and pushed back against the state-imposed binary between city and countryside. They did so through what Geoffrey Bowker and Susan Leigh Star call the “dynamic compromise” between “formal restrictions” and informal workarounds that is part of all classification systems.¹⁴

In other words, the state could never have maintained the rural-urban divide had it been consistently and inflexibly enforced at the local level. During the Mao period, negotiating the gap between city and countryside meant recognizing the power of state regulations while simultaneously finding ways around them. City and village, however, did not negotiate on equal terms. The city was the locus of economic and political power in Mao-era China. While peasants and rural cadres were not powerless to challenge directives from the metropole, they were at a distinct disadvantage. City-based officials were brutally coercive when they exiled people to the countryside, and they behaved like colonizers when they violently requisitioned grain from hungry peasants or dispatched work teams to occupy villages. Villagers resisted in small ways that tweaked the system but never really threatened it. Authorities, probably aware that “dynamic compromise” worked in their favor, often tolerated behavior that challenged *hukou* rules and grain rationing. For example, bureaucrats acted

¹³ James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 24.

¹⁴ Geoffrey C. Bowker and Susan Leigh Star, *Sorting Things Out: Classification and Its Consequences* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), 55, 53.

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flexibly, even humanely, by turning a blind eye to grain smuggling or approving petitioners' requests to reunite their families in cities.

I would have never discovered the many examples of coercion, negotiation, and resistance described in this book if I had limited myself to reading newspapers and officially published sources, which tend to overstate the rigidity of the rural-urban divide and wash out human color. My source base of archival documents, unpublished manuscripts, personal diaries, and grassroots-level personnel records, supplemented by oral history interviews and memoirs, gets us as close as possible to how people in villages and city neighborhoods experienced the Mao years. Many of the documents I purchased at weekend flea markets or hand-copied in local archives, along with the interviews I conducted in villages, bring to light the experiences of people whose voices would not otherwise be heard.¹⁵ Their stories show a society that was more diverse, complicated, and above all, more human than the simple institutional division into urban and rural spheres would suggest.

Using grassroots sources to focus on rural-urban interaction allows for fresh perspectives on such important events as the Great Leap famine, the Four Cleanups movement, the sent-down youth program, and the Cultural Revolution. The disastrous leap and its aftermath poisoned the relationship between city and countryside during the Mao era. This book shares Frank Dikötter's contention that the "pivotal event in the history of the People's Republic of China was the Great Leap Forward." Dikötter's argument that "the catastrophe unleashed at the time stands as a reminder of how profoundly misplaced is the idea of state planning as an antidote to chaos," however, is misleading.¹⁶ His polemic against state planning makes it impossible to comprehend how China's society and economy developed after the leap in the 1960s and 1970s, because it is fundamentally at odds with how China's top economic planners understood and reacted to the famine. They saw the leap as a failure of state planning, and viewed better planning – including strict mobility control and food management – as the solution. Even though many central economic officials would fall during the Cultural Revolution, the *hukou* and grain rationing regulations they implemented in the aftermath of the famine remained in force during the 1960s and 1970s, despite the "chaos" of the period.

¹⁵ I detail my strategies for digging up unique documents in Jeremy Brown, "Finding and Using Grassroots Historical Sources from the Mao Era," *Chinese History Dissertation Reviews* (December 15, 2010), <http://dissertationreviews.org/archives/310>.

¹⁶ Frank Dikötter, *Mao's Great Famine: The History of China's Most Devastating Catastrophe, 1958–1962* (New York: Walker, 2010), xii.

A strengthened commitment to state planning was one consequence of the leap. Reemphasizing revolution was another. Mao Zedong blamed the failure of the leap on counterrevolutionaries in the countryside, claiming that China's "democratic revolution" (meaning the Communist Party's attempt to overthrow "feudal" forces and eliminate rural exploitation through land reform) was incomplete. For Mao, the answer was more class struggle – in his words, a "war of annihilation" against class enemies in the countryside.¹⁷ This legacy of the leap is the key to understanding the Four Cleanups movement, which treated rural areas as "problems" to be solved by urbanites, and also the Cultural Revolution, which dumped city outcasts in the laps of rural people. By the 1960s and 1970s, revolution meant purifying urban spaces and dumping on rural ones. While urban industrial modernization continued to contribute to rural-urban inequality, calls for revolution – dictated by urban officials and often detrimental to rural interests – deepened alienation between city and countryside.

I refer to *Mao's China* in the title of this book because Mao's views, whims, and policy judgments were extremely important not only in pursuing a revolutionary modernization project that institutionalized rural-urban difference but also in launching key moments of rural-urban contact. Mao Zedong himself, however, only occasionally appears in this book. Mao and other central leaders' decisions help to explain why things happened when they did, but do not shed much light on how events unfolded at the grassroots level. The approaches of local leaders, including such top Tianjin officials as Wan Xiaotang (a public security chief in the early 1950s and top leader of the city from 1958 until his death in 1966) and Xie Xuegong (who led the city between 1967 and 1978), were often more relevant to the lives of the people who lived in and around Tianjin. At least as important as the Chairman in the Tianjin region were lieutenants who enjoyed proximity to Mao and who acted in his name, including ghostwriter and theorist Chen Boda and Mao's wife, Jiang Qing. Chen and Jiang's forays from their Beijing offices to the Tianjin countryside would have disastrous consequences for rural-urban relations.

I focus on Tianjin and its hinterland because the area is unique and significant, not because it is representative of China. No place is. Tianjin was the most important urban center and port in north China during the late Qing and Republican periods, but it remains understudied compared with Beijing and Shanghai, in part because of its relatively inaccessible

¹⁷ ZGSX, 506.



MAP 1. Tianjin and Hebei

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archive. The city is best known for its status as what Ruth Rogaski calls a “hypercolony,” a treaty port home to as many as eight foreign concessions in the early 1900s.¹⁸ By the time the People’s Liberation Army occupied Tianjin in January 1949, the concessions were no longer administratively significant. Tianjin was unique for other reasons during the Mao period. First, its proximity to Beijing meant that central leaders could easily visit to give speeches, test new policies, and try to establish a separate power base away from the capital. Second, its pre-1949 history of occupation by imperialist powers meant that many residents had “historical problems” that cadres and activists could focus on during political movements. Third, Tianjin constantly clashed over resources with Hebei province, which surrounded the city to the north, west, and south. Battles with mostly rural Hebei became especially pitched between 1958 and 1967, when Tianjin lost its status as a special municipality and became administratively subordinate to the province. Party center often sided with Tianjin when mediating disputes between the city and Hebei.

While Tianjin’s particularities mean that I cannot extend my conclusions to all of China, its experiences do shed light on broader trends. Relationships between other large cities and their hinterlands unfolded on a timeline that corresponded to Tianjin’s: migration during the 1950s accompanied by gradual restrictions on movement; protecting the food supplies of city dwellers at the expense of villagers during the Great Leap famine; deporting people to the countryside in the early 1960s and again during the Cultural Revolution; dispatching urban youth and work team members to villages; and cultivating model villages that served the interests of city-based officials.¹⁹

¹⁸ Ruth Rogaski, *Hygienic Modernity: Meanings of Health and Disease in Treaty-Port China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004). Other important works on late imperial and Republican Tianjin include Gail Hershatter, *The Workers of Tianjin, 1900–1949* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1986); Kwan Man Bun, *The Salt Merchants of Tianjin: State-Making and Civil Society in Late Imperial China* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2001); Liu Haiyan, *Kongjian yu shehui: jindai Tianjin chengshi de yanbian* [Space and society: The evolution of modern Tianjin] (Tianjin: Tianjin shehui kexueyuan chubanshe, 2003); and Brett Sheehan, *Trust in Troubled Times: Money, Banks, and State-Society Relations in Republican Tianjin* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003).

¹⁹ Lynn T. White III has written on migration to and from Shanghai in his *Careers in Shanghai: The Social Guidance of Personal Energies in a Developing Chinese City, 1949–1966* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978); and “The Road to Urumchi: Approved Institutions in Search of Attainable Goals during Pre-1968 Rustication from Shanghai,” *China Quarterly* 79 (1979): 481–510. Chan, Madsen, and Unger discuss the experiences of city youth in a Guangdong village during the 1960s and 1970s; Anita