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AGRARIAN CHANGE IN AN EAST CHINESE VILLAGE

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Agrarian Change in an East Chinese Village

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requirements for the degree of Master of Philosophy**

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ABSTRACT

This thesis investigates agrarian change in Plough Village which is located in the eastern coast of China. It primarily explores the transformation of relations of production in the village since the market reform in the late 1970s. In the thesis, I focus on two issues: the change in peasant-land relationships and the development of social differentiation and class relations.

The opening chapter sets the scene of the thesis. It begins with an introduction to the macro politico-economic situations confronting Chinese peasantry today and suggests that with the development of capitalism, relations of production in the countryside have changed and exerted significant impact on rural people's livelihood. It then further reviews studies on agrarian political economy from classical theories to contemporary researches and, on that basis, constructs the theoretical and methodological framework for my own study.

The second chapter gives a general description of Plough Village. It briefly introduces geographical, climate and socio-economic conditions in the village.

The third chapter is one of the two major chapters of the thesis. It discusses the transformation of human-land relations in the village. By reviewing rural constructions in the collective era, it argues that Plough Villagers established a relatively harmonious relationship with their land on the basis of collective economy in which the soil fertility was maintained and soil quality improved. However, with the rise of de facto private ownership of land and commodity relations initiated by the rural reform, this virtuous relationship has been gradually undermined. Erosion of traditional farming skills, capital intensification of agricultural production and especially the development of commercial agriculture combine to destroy the land vitality. This chapter concludes that after three decades' evolution a new, exploitative relationship between Plough Villagers and their land has been established and, thus, plundering of soil fertility becomes increasingly common.

The other major chapter examines the process of social differentiation in the village. It argues that the development of capitalist employment creates

a class differentiation in the village. The once equalitarian village basing on the peasant-household economy, as indicated in this chapter, has divided into four groups of people (classes): marginalized peasants, impoverished peasants, moderate peasants and rich peasants. The exploitative economic relations have become the major bonds of different groups of people in the village. Due to the development of employment and commodity relations in the countryside, Plough Village has been incorporated into the whole capitalist economy in China.

The final chapter concludes that the above two issues are not isolated but rather interdependent and subject to the same dynamics of capitalist production.

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All progress in capitalistic agriculture is a progress in the art, not only of robbing the labourer, but of robbing the soil; all progress in increasing the fertility of the soil for a given time, is a progress towards ruining the lasting sources of that fertility..... Capitalist production, therefore, develops technology, and the combining together of various processes into a social whole, only by sapping the original sources of all wealth—the *soil* and the *labourer*.

—— Karl Marx, *Capital*, Vol.1, 1906[1867]: 555-556

CHAPTER 1

Introduction: Setting the Scene

1. China's peasantry in transformation: a great background

Chinese peasants have been involved in the capitalist market reform for more than thirty years. In the official story, until the most recent times, rural reform is still praised highly as a huge improvement in rural development both economically and politically.

As the Communist Party of China elevated the solution of “*sannong wenti*”¹ to the top priority of the party's work in the early 2000s (China.com.cn, 2003), the development of Chinese rural societies rapidly becomes one of hottest issue in China that attracts extensive concern of the whole nation. Chinese countryside which has been neglected for about twenty years under the urban-oriented reform policy obtains an unprecedented support. Most obviously, the fiscal fund for assisting agriculture increases dramatically in recent years. In 2002, the financial support fund at the central governmental level allocated to agriculture was about 156.368 billion *yuan*. In 2006, the quantity reached 216.125 billion *yuan* in total, and in 2009, it further increased to 716.140 billion *yuan*². In 2010, as the fiscal budget shows, it

¹ Literally, *sannong wenti* means the rural problem in three dimensions, namely peasants, rural community, and agricultural production.

² Data source: National Bureau of Statistics of PRC, *China Statistical Yearbook*, 2007 and 2010.

will amount to 818.3 billion *yuan*. Moreover, in 2006, the government abolished agricultural tax completely and thus granted a material benefit of some 125 billion *yuan* to peasant households.

Today, the *sannong* study has become one of the most influential research subjects in China. Innumerable survey reports and research articles blow out, multifarious research teams and academic organizations mushroom, various symposium, seminars and workshops are held one after another, and social thoughts in the forms of anarchism, neo-liberalism, populism, institutionalism, and authoritarianism or statism all come forward and struggle with each other either overtly or covertly.

What is more, as the central government started to implement the strategy of “socialist new countryside construction”, practices of rural construction and rural relief sprang up rapidly under the rubrics of “rural reconstruction” and “rural development”. Government sectors, NGOs and academic bodies and other groups and practitioners jumped to design and implement a variety of rural development projects.

The intensification of concern for the peasantry and rural development is far from an isolated issue confined to China. Rather it is a broader tendency with a world-historical significance. Due to the damaging effects of neo-liberalism and imperialism on the agrarian production, peasantries on the global scale and in particular in the third world—Latin America, Asia, Africa—are compelled to rise up against the invasion of large agro-capital usually in the form of transnational agro-corporations. Peasant resistances and revolts scattered around the world have been organized and connected, and more and more grown into Transnational Agrarian Movements (Borras, et al., 2008). Some TAMs, like *La Vú Campesina* and *Movimento dos*

Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra (MST), have demonstrated considerable power when they struggle with predatory agribusiness in the backdrop of globalization (Desmarais, 2002; Borras, 2008; Vergara-Camus, 2009). As some people applauded, the global proposals formulated by the TAM, *La Vía Campesina*, “have created a true peasant internationalism” (Martínez-Torres, et al., 2010: 171).

It is also said that the peasantry or “the peasant way” is just experiencing a great resurgence globally (Moyo and Yeros, 2005; Patel, 2006; McMichael, 2006). With the support of national power and depending on the rural petty producers’ capacities, some peripheral countries, like Cuba and Venezuela, have established alternative agricultural systems which are largely self-sufficient and not controlled by transnational agro-corporations (Rosset, 2000; Dávila, 2006; Schiavoni and Camacaro, 2009). Besides, some traditionally central countries in Europe are also involved into the tendency of “repeasantization”. “[T]he peasantries are ‘still there’—as a remnant of the past.” Argued Jan Douwe van der Ploeg, “Repeasantization is, in essence, a modern expression of the *fight for autonomy and survival in a context of deprivation and dependency*.” (Ploeg, 2010: 2; 2008: 7) The vast peasant movements and the resurgence of the peasant way, highlighted by some scholars, have become the major politico-economic power against the oppression and deprivation exerted by the transnational capital (McMicheal, 2005, 2006; Ploeg, 2008).

Dialectically, the issue of the peasant restructuring itself signifies the deep crisis the peasantry confronts. The eminent historian, Eric Hobsbawn, once proclaimed that “the most dramatic and far-reaching social change of the second half of the [twentieth] century, and the one which cuts us off for ever from the world of the past, is *the death of the peasantry*.” (Hobsbawn, 1994:

289; italic added) Although his declaration of the peasantry's death in this way is not uncommonly labeled as something exaggerated and linear (Bernstein, 2001, 2003; Patel, 2006), it still manifests clearly the rough situation and severe process the peasantry is facing and has experienced. Since the early 1970s, the world, as Farshad Araghi (1995) wisely pointed out, has undergone a general trend of "global depeasantization". Hundreds of millions of country people have been forced to leave their homeland for the urban to pursue survival, while most of them are forced to overcrowd in the notorious slums of increasing megacities (Davis, 2006). In 2008, the proportion of global urban population started to exceed that of rural population for the first time (Bernstein, 2010: 2), even though the absolute quantity of rural residents was still on the rise. Today global peasantries are still confronted with the huge threat and endless persecution of predatory capital. Even the most optimistic peasant essentialists no longer deny this touchy reality.

As we turn the focus on Chinese peasantries, the situation becomes ever more severe. Since the late 1970s it is estimated that more than 200 million peasants have migrated from rural areas to towns and cities. According to a nationwide survey, in 2004, there were about 118 million rural migrant workers making their living in urban (ZBGQCZ, 2006: 3). Today, the number has increased to about 230 million (Ce.cn, 2010). Moreover, the popularization of agricultural machinery annually excludes about 10 million agrarian labour forces (Chinanews.com.cn, 2010). The depletion of massive rural able people leads to a great depression in the countryside. Tens of thousands of villages are abandoned and hollowed after the original residents' departure. The local agricultural production therefore declines and rural families and communities disintegrate. In large measure, the booming of China as "the world factory" after the market reform does not imply the

upsurge of China as “the world farm” at all, but rather signifies the severe decline of China’s peasant-household economy.

In addition to the running-off of rural labour, the loss of other agrarian wealth is also an astonishing fact. After the rural reform, with the deepening of market economy, agrarian capital is always in a state of net outflow. Annually, according to an authoritative *sannong* scholar’s estimate, at least hundreds of billion *yuan* of capital is drained off from the agricultural sector to the industrial and financial sectors (Wen Tiejun, 2001: 24). In the meantime, every year 2.5~3.0 million *mu* of arable land is expropriated and transformed to non-agricultural construction by governments at all levels as well as industrial and commercial sectors, which means that at least 2.5~3.0 million rural residents lose their homeland and become landless peasants (*shidi nongmin*) (Han Jun, 2009:19-20). From 1987 to 2001, as many researchers suggest, 40~50 million peasants had lost all or a part of their land. By 2030, it is estimated that the amount of land-deprived peasants will reach more than 100 million (Han Jun, *ibid*).

What’s more serious is that, since China obtained the accession into the World Trade Organization (WTO) and steadily cut the tariff for import of agricultural produce, Chinese rural petty producers have suffered continuous attacks from transnational agro-corporations. One of the most obvious instances consists in the fall of Chinese soybean. Before the middle 1990s, China as the motherland of soybean was one of the leading soybean exporters in the world. However, due to the manipulation of several agro-food transnational corporations, a huge quantity of foreign soybeans have been dumped into China, and thus Chinese domestic soybean rapidly lost its competitive advantage in both the overseas and home markets. In 2005, China imported 26.59 million ton of soybeans and became the biggest

importer in the world (Caogen.com, 2007). In 2008, the import volume amounted to 37.44 million ton, and in 2009, it further increased to 42.55 million ton. In consequence, millions of local soybean cultivators were walking bankruptcy under the squeeze of foreign genetically modified beans; more than 80% source of soybean supply and 70% share of edible oil market were occupied by the giant transnational agribusinesses, e. g. ADM, Bunge, Cargill, Louis Dreyfus and Wilmar International (Taxe.org.cn, 2010). In addition to the soybean, China's other major crops, such as rice, corn, rapeseed, sugarcane and various vegetables (as well as the industrial chain of livestock husbandry), are also under similar threat from the international agrarian capital. It is clear that after market reform China's atomized peasants have been thrown into the unpredictable market and placed at the teeth of transnational agro-corporations.

In brief, Chinese market reform has deeply transformed the relations of production in the countryside. It not only dismantles the collective production based on the commune system, but also damages—if not destroys—the peasant-household economy established in the initial years of the reform. The introduction of commodity relations and (*quasi*-)private property, both constituting the base of capitalist economy, arouses contradictions between capitalist market economy and peasant production. It is the contradictive movement between petty peasant production and capitalist commodity production—with very nature of exploitation, robbery and plunder—that determines the conditions of peasant production and living.

Although the conditions of production in China's countryside have undergone such a profound transformation, and the change of relations of production has exerted tremendous impact on rural people's everyday life,

still very few people focus their attention upon the far-reaching influence caused by the transitions of relations of rural production. In other terms, researches which directly point to the changes of relations of production in China's rural societies after the market reform are largely neglected. This thesis is dedicated to make up for this vacuum. It provides a profile of the agrarian change in an east Chinese village. By investigating two major respects of relations of agrarian production, namely the cultivator-land relations and class relations, it examines the transformation of production in the village and presents the dynamics and mechanisms of the agrarian change in a Chinese context.

2. Discussing the “agrarian question”: classical theories

Discussion of the agrarian question roots in the Marxist tradition. It is Karl Marx who first brought the agrarian transition in the global picture of capitalist development. Based on the Western-European, especially the British experience, Marx maintained that, with the capital extension and penetration into agricultural production, it was impossible for the peasantry to escape from the fate of bankruptcy and being eliminated¹, because “[the] agricultural smallholding, by its very nature, rules out the development of the productive powers of social labour, the social concentration of capitals, stock-raising on a large scale or the progressive application of science” (Marx, 1981: 943). Inasmuch as the peasant family cannot accommodate to the expansion of capitalist market, and according to the operational logic of capitalism, it is also unnecessary for the market to sustain the peasant mode of production. The peasantry will ultimately disappear and become a part of

¹ Although he recognized elsewhere that the development of capitalism was in fact consistent with different proprietorships. (See Marx, 1979)

proletarian, just like the dismantling of any other intermediate groups (Goodman and Redclift, 1981:4). In a word, peasant economy based on the proprietorship of land parcels is unable to adjust to large-scale social production. When discussing the genesis of capitalist ground-rent, Marx observed that, various factors will cause the decline of the small-scale peasant ownership. First, the development of large-scale industry destructs rural domestic industry which normally forms an indispensable complement to the smallholding farming. Second, the irrational form of cultivation on the parceled land gradually deteriorates and exhausts the soil. Third, the usurpation of communal land by large landlords dismantles the second supplement of peasant economy and makes impossible the small peasants to upkeep livestock. Fourth, the rise of large-scale agriculture, whether in the form of plantation systems or large capitalistic enterprises, squeezes small peasant's ownership seriously. Moreover, improvements of agriculture, which on the one hand require greater investments and more abundant material conditions of production, and on the other bring about a fall in the prices of agricultural produce, also contribute to the decline of the smallholding economy. (Marx, 1981: 943)

Unlike Marx's interest in the economic characteristics of agrarian transition, Engels' central focus is first of all on the explicitly political formulation of the agrarian question. In his later writings, especially *The Peasant Question in France and Germany*, Engels reiterated Marx's sentiments about peasant dissolution. Yet he added two key modifications to Marx's analysis (Bernstein, 1996:23-24). The one is that processes of industrialization in continental Europe were not identical to the complete transformation of agrarian production in England as discoursed in *Capital*. The other addition is that, because of new contradictions aroused by the development of capitalism, the political nature of the peasantries was far beyond "a sack of

potatoes” as metaphorized by Marx in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*.

Another pioneer is V. I. Lenin. Lenin’s contribution to the evolution of Marxist theory about the agrarian question mainly lies in the emphasis on the role played by the differentiation (disintegration) of the peasantry in promoting the preliminary/primitive accumulation for the later comers of modernization. By analyzing the statistical data of Zemstvo household censuses, Lenin found that after the capitalist reform, the contemporary Russian peasantry had been in a social-economic situation of commodity economy. Within this system of social-economic relations, it existed all kinds of contradictions which were inherent in every commodity economy and every order of capitalism. The total sum of these economic contradictions in turn constituted the disintegration of the peasantry. It is clear for Lenin, Russia’s old peasantry was not only in differentiation, it was being absolutely dissolved, it was ceasing to exist. In consequence, it was being replaced by two new types of rural groups which constituted the basis of a society in which commodity economy and capitalist production prevailed: one was the (petty) rural bourgeoisie which comprised a class of rural commodity producers; the other was the rural proletariat that was a class of agricultural wage-workers. “The feature common to both types”, noted Lenin (1956:176), “is the commodity, money character of their economy”. Moreover, the development of rural bourgeoisie and rural proletariat compressed the living space for the middle peasantry which, according to Lenin’s observation, was distinguished by the least development of commodity production. To sum up, in Lenin’s eyes, the rural class differentiation as discussed above is required for the development of the rural as well as the urban capitalist market, for, “in capitalist production the basis for the formation of a home market is the process of the

disintegration of the small cultivators into agricultural entrepreneurs and workers” (Lenin, 1956:50).

Among the “orthodox” Marxists, it is Karl Kautsky who devoted great efforts to exploring the agrarian question. Like his antecessors, Kautsky also believed that in the field of agriculture, just like that in manufacturing industry, the tendency towards concentration and centralization of production that was set in motion by the dynamics of capital accumulation, result in the demise of the peasantry and a polarization of rural society into two classes: one end was the rural proletariat, the other capitalist farmers (Alavi and Shanin, 1988).

However, in light of the specific conditions after Marx, to a considerable degree Kautsky revised and developed previous sentiments about peasant economy under the domination of capitalism. To him, the key to the agrarian question is not merely to concern the future or “fate” of the peasantry—“whether the smallholding has a future”, but to seriously consider all the changes which agriculture has experienced in the course of the capitalist mode of production, so the thing is,

“whether, and how, capital is seizing hold of agriculture, revolutionizing it, making old forms of production and property untenable and creating the necessity for new ones” (Kautsky, 1988:12).

He put forward that “agriculture does not develop according to the pattern traced by in industry” but follows its own laws, even though they have the same end (Ibid: 11).

Above all things, Kautsky conceptualized peasant production as an integral

part of capitalist production, and pointed out that an investigation into the agrarian question was required to incorporate the peasantry into the structure and dynamics of the capitalist mode of production without which the peasant production would become unaccountable. Thus, the peculiarities of peasant economy must be considered carefully. In his pioneering work, *The Agrarian Question*, Kautsky stressed two particularities of peasant economy. One concerned the non-reproducibility of land, the decisive means of agricultural production, which primarily distinguish agriculture from the manufacturing industry. As Kautsky suggested, while it was possible for industry to multiply the means of production at will, the non-reproducibility of land conditioned its form of centralization and made the agricultural accumulation much more difficult than the accumulation and centralization of industrial capital (Ibid: 145-153). The other related to the particularity of the production of family farms, namely its peculiar productive aim and relevant process. For family farms (peasant economy), because a significant part of production is to provide necessities for self-consumption, to a great extent, it is not valorized by the market (Alavi and Shanin, 1988: xv).

Moreover, there are two “powerful” weapons for smallholders to set against the capitalist large production: overwork and underconsumption (Kautsky, 1988:110). For Kautsky, although the large farm is superior to the small farm in the major branches of agriculture (Ibid: 133), it is still difficult for the large land-ownership to displace the small scale one widely. In his view, that is because peasants are ready to accept “overwork” and “underconsumption” (Alavi and Shanin, 1988: xvi), and become “super” producers and “unqualified” consumers. The price of peasants’ reproduction is so low that modern capitalism cannot contend with. Nevertheless, according to Kautsky’s understanding, these two “weapons” do not

disintegrate peasant economy from capitalist production. Rather, they reinforce the function of peasant economy for the development of modern capitalism. It is his major finding that recognizes the specific manner in which the development of capitalist production is very capable to transform the traditional peasant life, without any need for capital to engage itself directly in peasant production.

3. Peasant and global capital

Before the Second World War, studies about the agrarian question were largely concentrated in the western world (here Russia included). Marx focused on the capitalist development in Eastern Europe, mainly Britain, France, Germany and also Russia, Engels concerned the peasant question in France and Germany, Lenin and Chayanov gave attention to Russia, and Kautsky discussed the agrarian question in Germany. Even so, a global perspective was embedded in their theories.

Yet, it is Rosa Luxemburg who built a systematic theory of the accumulation of capital in a world scale. While examining Marx's thesis of enlarged reproduction, Luxemburg found that his diagram did not conform to the conditions of an accumulation in actual progress, for it reduced the process of accumulation to static inter-relations and inter-dependence between the two great department of social production, the departments of producer and consumer goods (Luxemburg, 1951: 417). Hence, in Luxemburg's eyes, Marx's diagram was established on the premise that a society consisting exclusively workers and capitalists, under the universal and exclusive domination of the capitalist mode of production (Ibid: 333). For Luxemburg, it is merely a fiction. As a historical process, the reproduction of capital

relies in every respect upon non-capitalist social strata and forms of social organization (Ibid: 366). In other words, it requires historical conditions of non-capitalist forms of production. To use Luxemburg's statement, "Capitalism needs non-capitalist social strata as a market for its surplus value, as a source of supply for its means of production and as a reservoir of labour power for its wage system" (Ibid: 368). In this course, several phases could be distinguished: (1) the struggle of capital against natural economy; (2) the introduction of commodity exchange and commodity economy into societies based on natural economy; (3) the struggle against commodity economy as soon as the later has superseded natural economy; (4) separation of industry from agriculture and eradication of rural industries altogether from peasant economy; and (5) the competitive struggle of capital on the international stage for the remaining conditions of accumulation, e.g. International loans, protective tariffs and world militarism (Ibid: ch.27-32).

It seems reasonable to regard Luxemburg as a significant, but transitional theorist between the classical Marxists and her descendent political-economists. In order to demonstrate the global dimension of the agrarian question, I will proceed to review some theoretical and methodological findings of our times.

It is clear that, since the end of the Second World War, the agrarian question has been globalized to a considerable extent. The agrarian question previously took place in developed countries has moved to less developed countries, mainly in Asia, Africa and Latin America. Western countries, both from so-called first and second world, achieve a successful capitalist agrarian transition¹ through various ways.

¹ By "agrarian transition", it refers to "those changes in the countryside, in the relevant economies, necessary to the overall development of capitalism and to its ultimate dominance in a particular national social formation" (Byres, 2003: 55). In his seminal

Contrary to a limited number of economies which realize the agrarian transition, vast countries/regions are still encompassed by the “classical” agrarian question. As capitalism penetrates into the countryside, Byres (2003) suggests, a process of commoditization arises. It destroys relations of production in “national economy”, forces rural producers into labour market (formal or informal) and throws them into the world market system. What’s more, it even alienates them from the land, their primary means of production, propelling them into the landless wage-labour. It is also a process of rural reconstructing that breaks previous social relations and rebuilds new class relations. In other words, what capitalist production really brings to peasantries in the periphery is not the equal development rather the fragmentation of rural communities; not the integration of “backward” rural regions to global economy rather the increasing subordination of the former to the latter.

It is beyond doubt that globalization has brought essential changes to the peasantries. In a global context, the most obvious consequence should be the peasant dispossession in the forms of national class differentiation and global displacement (Araghi, 1999). As Bernstein (2003: 30) suggests, theoretically, the displacement model originates from Marx who in the first volume of *Capital* describes a bloody history of land enclosure — commoditization of land and exclusion of rural population— in Britain, revealing the “secret” of primitive accumulation (see Marx, 1979; esp. 873-895). Yet, the differentiation model is mainly from Lenin (1956). According to Bernstein’s reading, the tendency of class differentiation is caused by “the peculiar combination of the class place of capital and labour

essay, *The Agrarian Question and Differing Forms of Capitalist Agrarian Transition*, Byres (1991) identifies six paths of this transition. They are: 1.the English path; 2.the Prussian path; 3.the American path; 4.the French path; 5.the Japanese path; and 6.the Taiwanese/South Korean path (Byres, 1991).

in petty commodity production” (Bernstein, 1994: 56). In this perspective, “[p]oor peasants are subject to a simple reproduction ‘squeeze’ as capital or labour, or both..... Middle peasants are those able to meet the demands of simple production, while rich peasants are able to engage in expanded reproduction” (2001: 30). Peasants become petty commodity producers because they are unable to obtain adequate means of subsistence for themselves (and their families) within peasant production. They have to rely on incomes from non-farming occupations. In other words, peasants of our times have been absorbed into the relations and processes of capitalist commodity production. In other words, relations of capitalist production is conditioning (if not determining) the existence of peasant economy. Since capitalism has been internalized in peasant organizations and activities, outside the capitalist system, peasantries are unable to reproduce themselves (1994: 55; 2001: 29).

The process of peasants to petty producers, as it were, is far from a natural issue. In fact, it is determined by the predatory nature of capital. As David Harvey (2003) points out, the expansion of capital promotes a new social division of labour at a global level, and the capitalist penetration into the countryside, although still incomplete, entails appropriations of social structures and relations of production in pre/non-capitalist societies. Furthermore, globalization, in the forms of financialization and trade liberalization, not only starts a new phase of the centralization and concentration of capital, but also intensifies the fragmentation of labour in various ways in agrarian societies (Bernstein, 2004: 204; 2007: 18).

Conditions mentioned above, not only accelerate agricultural class differentiation, but also generate the displacement of rural population. The overt manifestation of rural displacement is the ever increasing tendency

towards to a large scale deagrarianization. “Deagrarianization”, as defined by Deborah Bryceson (1996), is a process of economic activity reorientation, occupation adjustment, and spatial realignment of human settlement away from agrarian patterns. It comes through in four aspects: 1. the diminishing of self-sufficiency degree of rural household necessities and basic needs; 2. the decline of agrarian labour; 3. the decrease of agricultural output *per capita* in the natural economy; and 4. the shrinkage of the total rural population (1996: 99). In our times, income diversity or livelihood diversification becomes ever so prevalent for countryside people in less developed countries (Ellis, 1998). Diversified off-farm or non-farm activities, as Bryceson (2000b: 310) argues, are not simply supplementary to peasant farming, “rather their active pursuit tends partially to replace agriculture”.

What’s more, in last three decades, agricultural producers even including a great number of farmers in North America and West Europe, have been squeezed by agro-industries, multinational chemical corporations and gigantic supermarkets severely. These agro-corporations, with large economic scale, high-level capitalization and advanced technology, marginalize peasant farming and in some cases uproot peasants from their land (Bryceson, 2000b). Because of agro-industrial corporations getting involved in the production of agricultural inputs and the processing of rural outputs, vast rural producers throughout the world, as Lewontin (1999) suggests, have been forced to discard the control over their labour process and been alienated from the produce of their labour. It is a process with very nature of proletarianization, although the labour still partially keeps the ownership of means of agricultural production.

4. The agrarian question in China: local awareness, cultural consciousness, and beyond

Since the “arrival” of the West in the mid-nineteenth century, China has started the process of modernization and involved herself to the waves of global politics and economies deeply. Foreign capital, at first commercial capital and then industrial and financial capital, has influenced China’s countryside from the very beginning of her modernization. By means of imperialist invasion and colonial robbery, it destructed the “arcadian” life of Chinese peasantry. In this view, Chinese peasants cannot and do not isolate themselves from the global agrarian question.

4.1 The agrarian question in semi-colonial China: the pioneers

In domestic scholarship, the term “the agrarian question” is not used very prevalently. While conveying similar meanings, Chinese scholars often tend to use other words. For instance, in one of his influential books, *Zhongguo Nongcun Wenti* (Rural Problems in China), Li Jinghan (1939), who was a well-known rural sociologist in the Republican era, generalized eight types of rural problems, among which the first five problems¹ are all tightly related to “the agrarian question”, although they are not always consonant with the question we are concerning here.

If we want to understand China’s agrarian question and domestic studies

¹ They are: 1.rural land problem; 2.rural finance problem; 3.rural cooperation problem; 4. agricultural management problem; and 5.rural organization problem. Other problems include education problem, health problem and other problems (leisure, superstition, family) (Li Jinghan, 1939).

about it, in my mind, we must understand the so-called “Chinese Schools of Sociology”, especially its rural studies in the Republican era first. In general, there are three academic schools in the field of rural China study. They are the school of community study, the rural reformist school and the Marxist school (Li Yefu, 1976: 11-13). About the rural studies, three pioneering figures should not be neglected by us. They are Fei Xiaotong, Liangshuming, and Chen Hansheng.

Fei Xiaotong, one of the most important scholars from the school of community study, is well-known for his field studies and illuminating essays on Chinese rural society. In his celebrated work, *Xiangtu Zhongguo (Rural China)*, Fei made an insightful generalization about the fundamental principles of traditional China. Several special characteristics of the traditional Chinese society are highlighted in this book, such as *chaxu geju* (the differential mode of association), *lizhi zhixu* (rule of ritual), *wuwei zhengzhi* (do-nothing policy), *zhanglao tongzhi* (rule by elders), etc (Fei Xiaotong, 1985; 1988; Fei, 1992). In fact, as early as in his first important book, *Peasant Life in China* (1939), he had correctly disclosed the essence of China’s rural problems. In the final chapter entitled “Agrarian problems in China”, he wrote, “[t]he essential problem in Chinese villages.....is that the income of the villagers has been reduced to such an extent that it is not sufficient even to meet the expenditure in securing the minimum requirement of livelihood”. So the real issue in China was the hunger of the people (Fei, 1939: 282).

From a functionalist view, Fei Xiaotong saw a “mutually supplement between agriculture and industry” (*nonggong hubu*) as a healthy state of rural society. However, the invasion of western mechanized industry destroyed this balance. Once foreign goods took over the market originally

for domestic rural industries, a great number of peasants were deprived of a part of income which was indispensable for their lives. In consequence, the land could no longer feed neither the peasantry nor the landlords. Just then, the agrarian conditions became worsening rapidly (Fei, 1993: 275-278).

From a functionalist view, Fei Xiaotong saw China's agrarian question as one of social-economic disintegration in the rural, and concerned a "mutually supplement between agriculture and industry" (*nonggong hubu*) as a healthy state of rural societies in which a unique balance had been struck between the social classes of the town and the countryside and the ruling authorities (Fei, 1953: 119). From his village studies, Fei found that, although most Chinese peasants are engaged in agricultural production, China has never been a purely agricultural nation. In fact, for Chinese peasantries, especially for tenant peasants in traditional society, merely relying on products from their land, it was impossible to maintain even a minimum standard of living, which was "not starving, nor freezing" (*buji buhan*). Only with rural industries or handicrafts supplementary to farm incomes could the peasantry kept this standard.

However, as Fei observed, the inflow of western mechanized commodities after the Opium Wars smashed this equilibrium. Foreign goods took over markets originally for the domestic rural industry, and squeezed it into break down. To make things worse, it aroused desires of the urban *rentier* class to modern commodities. In order to maintain their parasitic life, they increased the exploitation of the rural people on the brink of bankruptcy. That inevitably deepened antagonism between urban centers and rural areas (1953: 122). In this way, the widening rural-urban gap and the growing antagonistic relations exaggerated social crises in China as a whole.

As Fei Xiaotong's contemporary, Liang Shuming also made good efforts to explore the agrarian question in traditional China. Unlike Fei, beside academic work, Liang also engaged himself in the movement of Chinese rural reconstruction. It is on the basis of the experience from the rural reconstruction that Liang constructed his own theory about rural China systematically. In his eyes, the century following the Opium Wars was indeed a history of rural destruction (Liang Shuming, 1989: 98). During this period, China was constantly suffering shocks from both colonial invasion and internal chaos. All these crises—social, political, economic, and moral—as Liang (1989) claimed, stemmed from the underlying “cultural failure”. Its “failure” came from the uncompetitiveness with the West. According to Liang's understanding, Western culture has two main strong points which are also China's primary cultural weaknesses: science and organization (Liang Shuming, 1989: 191; Alitto, 1979: 202). For Liang Shuming (1989: 166), it is little doubt that instruction and development of science is crucial for China, but the most fundamental and urgent issue of Chinese rural society is the reconstruction of social organization. “How to create conditions of group life in their everyday life, and gradually cultivate their organizational abilities, is the only way for the peasantry to liberate themselves” (1989: 410). Therefore, Liang saw his rural reconstruction experiment as a cultural-educational movement whose mission was to get the decentralized, idle rural society organized and deal with the problem of the lack of organizational resources in China (Lü Xinyu, 2007: 100).

It is worthy to note that both Liang Shuming and Fei Xiaotong stressed on the specialty of Chinese culture and social organization by comparison with the Western world. For instance, Fei utilized the concept of “*chaxu geju*” to describe the organizational principle of China and contracted it to the “*tuanti geju*” (“organizational mode of association”) in the West (Fei, 1992).

For Liang, he insisted that social structure in China was essentially different from that in the West. Instead of an individualist, class society, China created a society which was “ethics centered” and “occupationally differentiated” (*lunli benwei, zhiye fenshu*) (Liang Shuming, 1989: 167). Based on the Chinese particularism, Liang designed his reformist social project. Similar to but not the same as Fei’s proposition, he held that the primary path of rural reconstruction was to develop agriculture and based on the rural revival to promote the modern industry (Ibid: 158, 509).

As a Marxist rural economist and sociologist, Chen Hansheng, is famous for his broad rural economic surveys in Jiangnan, Hebei and Lingnan. Unlike most non-Marxist researchers who focus on the psychologies of individual peasants, cultural peculiarities of Chinese society (like Liang Shuming), or functional inter-relations between/among different social classes (like Fei Xiaotong), Chen Hansheng and his colleagues treat production relations as the central issue in their studies. As one of his followers, Xue Muqiao suggested, the theme of Chinese rural economic investigations of the Marxist school was neither natural conditions, nor production technologies, and nor merely feudal exploitation or commodity production, although these issues were also concerned with by the school to some extent. Marxist scholars, argued Xue, must study the complicated economic structures in the countryside, and examine the whole economic system which dominated the peasantry directly or indirectly (Xue Muqiao, 1937: 9). Chen Hansheng himself persisted that the real starting-point of the sociological study be nothing but the sum total of all relations of production, which, in a very Marxian sense, constituted the society’s basic structure (Chen Hansheng, 2002[1931]: 32).

Relying on the Marxist approach of class analysis, Chen found that the core

of present agrarian problems in China dwelled in the contradiction between land owning and land using (Chen, 1933: 327). For him, beyond the extreme peasant-land ratio and the increasing parcellation of cultivated land, the chief factor for rural immiseration and peasant unrest in China was the big landowners—most of landlords and a part of rich peasants—who were protected by semi-feudal institutions and further assisted by imperialists. Under modern economic pressure, noted Chen Hansheng, the public domain, mainly state and community land, had been constantly usurped and rapidly transformed into private property by big landowners for a century (Ibid: 11-18). The process of privatization caused greater economic differentiation between peasants as the society became further fragmented into landlords, rich and poor peasants, and landless peasants (Myers, 1967: 212). Although Chen's study limited in agrarian economies, his findings revealed the political-economic structure, relations and nature of the whole Chinese society at that time (Yang Yabin, 2001: 381).

To sum up, Chen Hansheng's investigations prove that the real essence of the agrarian question in semi-colonial China consists neither in the backwardness of agricultural technique or the lowness of Chinese people's educational level, nor in the unequal distribution of land property, rather it lies in a series of antiquated social relations and outdated political, cultural relations based on, as we emphasized above, the contradiction between land owning and land using. Within this contradiction there firmly roots the exploitative, persecutive relations of the ruling class to the ruled.

Chen Hansheng as well as his colleagues is often regarded as a Maoist theorist. This is beyond dispute that Mao Zedong's view on the agrarian question is also unique. Contrary to Liang Shuming's (to some extent also

Fei Xiaotong's¹) particularist thesis, Mao Zedong tends to put emphasis on the commonness of Chinese society sharing with other countries (see Liang Shuming, 2002: 321-322). As early as in the Yanan era, Mao had criticized Liang's rural reconstruction theory systematically (Zhu Hanguo, 1996: 177-180). In the first place, Liang conceptualized traditional China as an "ethics-centered society"; in this society, economy, politics and social life were all embedded in a framework of ethic-moral relations (*lunli guanxi*). So there merely existed occupational division rather than class differentiation. For Mao, however, it was totally misunderstanding. In his eyes, the existence of class difference and class struggles was unquestionable in China, and ethic relations with various forms were merely ideological means used by the ruling class to maintain their exploitation of the peasantry (Mao, 1967[1926]; 1967[1927]; Mao Zedong, 1982). Secondly, like Mao, Liang acknowledged that in order to realize Chinese modernization, the formation of modern class was necessary; what's more, he even believed that violence was inherent in the process of class making (Liang Shuming, 2002: 354). But he did not accept the reality of class conflicts. In order to avoid the turbulent effects of revolution, he insisted on his rural reconstruction as the exclusive choice for China's renaissance. For Mao, nevertheless, reformist paths of this kind have no good for the solution of Chinese problems at all. The only way for China to shake off crisis is nothing but the violent revolution. In the postil to Liang's *Rural Reconstruction Theory*, Mao wrote, China's crisis is derived from the Western invasion; when facing the foreign invasion, "only the stronger could defeat it. The stronger is just the national-democratic revolution. Revolution outweighs anti-revolution" (cited Zhu Hanguo, 1996: 180).

¹ Although Fei Xiaotong is not so "particularism" as Liang Shuming, the distinction between he and Mao is also obvious. It mainly reflects in their path selection of industrialization, methods of capital accumulation, and attitudes to the old ruling class.

Moreover, Mao's viewpoint in some sense is also different from Lenin's. To my mind, the Leninist perspective is accustomed to attach the importance to productive forces. Noticeably, Lenin often valued the affinity between the development of capitalism and the technological improvement in agrarian Russia. For Lenin, on the one hand, it is capitalism that is going rise to and extending the use of machines in agriculture; on the other, the application of machinery is of a capitalist character which causes the establishment of capitalist relations and their further development (Lenin, 1956: 235). Yet, never disputing the primacy of the productive forces, Mao seems more concerned with the role of production relations. Like Lenin (and influenced by Lenin in fact), Mao is also very good at dividing classes (See Mao, 1967[1926]; 1982). While Lenin psyched out the weakness of Russia's peasantry in revolution, Mao, nevertheless, from his class analysis, noticed the inexhaustible power in the burgeoning peasant movement (Mao, 1967[1927]). This difference, by and large, led to the distinctions of political strategies in revolution as well as in construction between these two great teachers.

4.2 *Sannong* study in contemporary China: tendency and limitation

In today's Chinese scholarship, very few people treat "the agrarian question" as a significant research theme in a definite way. In many cases, it is dismembered into several subordinate issues such as peasant livelihood, landed property rights, agricultural development, surplus labour, etc., and examined by different disciplines in isolation, whereas the core of the question, the "production", is always trivialized and even disregarded. The

most prominent progress, however, is the formulation of “*sannong wenti*” in the early 2000s. Indeed, the *sannong* study has become one of the most influential research subjects in China. Although “*sannong wenti*” is not the same as the agrarian question we concern here, they are inter-lapped in many aspects. So it is reasonable for us to review several respective findings from this subject.

On the whole, there are two tendencies we can delineate as follows. The first tendency is to place local problems into the whole process of world modernization. Through historical and comparative investigations, local scholars start to rethink the western, in particular the American, model of modernization. They argue that current circumstances, in other words, the externality of modernization for less developed countries is very different from that for developed countries centuries ago. It is impossible for later comers to replicate the western road. For China, as Wen Tiejun (2000; 2001; 2003) contests, there are two basic paradoxes in her developing process. The one is the paradox of basic state conditions, namely the extreme population-land ratio. The other is the system paradox, namely the dual structure in urban and rural economy. Resource restriction and rural-urban disintegration made China’s modernization very difficult, because the “transaction costs” between the state and peasants are extremely high. Given this situation, some researchers argue that for a long time Chinese peasants would be bound to a state which is “warm and adequately fed, but not comfortably well-off” (He Xuefeng, 2004; He, 2007).

The second tendency is to explore the social foundation of Chinese rural society. Scholars from the “central China school of rural studies” have made good contribution in this respect. Their attention is largely focused on regional variation and village culture (He, 2008). While using “rural

governance” as the central category, they bend themselves to “read and interpret the transformations and characteristics of rural Chinese society in the period of transition, to research the top-down implementation of government politics, laws, and institutions in the countryside, and, on this basis, to propose theoretical descriptions and practical recommendations regarding the modernization of rural China and China as a whole” (Wu, et al, 2008:58). In this rural-centered perspective, relevant epistemological and methodological issues are further discussed (Xu Yong, et al, 2002; He Xuefeng, 2003, 2006; Wu Licai, 2005; Wu Yi, et al, 2005).

To sum up, many findings of domestic scholars are profound, but they are still not unquestionable. About the first tendency, it is easy to note that researchers on this side place the resource constraint in a most prominent position. It is true, resource restriction is always rigid. But treating it as a “law”, as some have done, will result in a danger of absolutism which may generate the risk of anti-history. Notably, some of their central concepts and theories borrowed from new institutional economics or modern management science—like “transaction/organization costs”—in some sense, are devoid of substantial meaning. As Ankarloo points out, these concepts and theories contains an “as-if methodology” implicitly, because they are simply used as instruments to understand what happens in reality, whereas the concepts and theories themselves are not realistic. In this sense, they make little ontological commitments, and even have little truth-value (Ankarloo, 2002: 26-27). About the second tendency, its theoretical closure is also obvious. When attention is intensively focused on the pre-existing institutions in villages and their relations to external factors, a more fundamental issue has been largely ignored. It is, in my opinion, the political-economic conditions of villages. It is also the foundation on which the so-called “social foundation of rural governance” (He Xufeng, 2003) is standing. What’s

more, unlike their “social foundation”, this political-economic foundation cannot be comprehended within the rural society. It resides in the broad, underlying forces and processes which transcend boundaries of villages, cities, and often countries.

5. Some comments on the literature

From the above review work, it is easy to see that the agrarian question as an academic theme was derived from the works of western classical political economists (Bryceson, 2000a: 7) and was highlighted by Marx (and particularly by Marxists after Marx himself). However, it is neither a metaphysically intellectual issue, nor an independent problem restricted within the countryside. To be sure, no agrarian question would be distinguished if the world were still a purely agrarian one. It only took place on the interface between “traditional” agriculture and modern industry. It is the Industrial Revolution which produced and reproduced numerous disintegrated peasants that resulted in the so-called “agrarian question”. In this sense, the agrarian question is a “byproduct” of industrial revolutions, which is internalized in capitalist development.

Based on the above point, I can say, the agrarian question is never an eternal category. It comes from, as we have seen, a specific “historical structure” (Robert Cox). It also changes along with movements of the external structure, that is, at the micro-level, the mobility of capital and its exploitive modes, and at the macro-level, adjustments of the capitalist world order in different periods. That reminds us that we cannot fully capture the agrarian question without placing it in the historical and global context of complex interactions and conflicts among political-economic as well as cultural,

ideological forces (Araghi, 1999).

Furthermore, rural class differentiation, increasing deagrarianization and the tendency of proletarianization, all make the agrarian question more complicated and troublesome. Except a few countries/regions that, as exemplified in Byres's studies, obtain a successful agrarian transition via different ways, the rest countries—no doubt including the majority of peasants—are still bound to economic backwardness, social disintegration, deteriorating conditions of basic well-fare, in short, to the great suffering of “underdevelopment”.

About the situation in China, previous scholarship, especially the Marxist theories about the agrarian question, provides us a crucial framework, both in epistemology and methodology. The discussion of the global political economy, meanwhile, provides a perspective which is insightful and requisite for us to explore the state of the peasantry in a globalized world.

It is worthy to note that while in the Republican era there were three important academic enterprises, today, among these three enterprises the Marxist tradition is largely neglected in China's rural studies. Without this political-economic dimension, it is easy for us to ignore some fundamental issues, say, relations of rural production, basic social contradiction, capital and exploitation, globalization and class differentiation, etc.

6. Subsumption of peasants to capital: the theoretical framework and methodological issue

6.1 Real subsumption & formal subsumption

While discussing the labour process in the mode of capitalist production, Marx (1976) divides two forms of subsumption of labour under capital: the formal subsumption and the real subsumption (Marx, 1976: 1019-1038). The *formal subsumption of labour under capital*, as Marx designated, is a universal form that exists in every capitalist process of production and hence “can be found as a *particular* form alongside the *specifically* capitalist mode of production” (Ibid: 1019). One essential feature of this subsumption form is that it neither leads to a fundamental change in the nature of the labour process nor modifies the actual mode of working. In other words, “capital took over an available, established labour process” which was developed by the existing and archaic modes of production (Ibid: 1021). Unlike the real subsumption in which a specifically capitalist mode of production has been established and the labour process as well as its conditions has been fundamentally transformed, the formal subsumption is often found in the absence of the really capitalist mode of production (Ibid: 1019). As Marx put it, in the formal subsumption,

“[t]here is no change as yet in the mode of production itself. *Technologically speaking*, the *labour process* goes on as before with the proviso that it is now *subordinated* to capital..... With the formal subsumption of labour under capital the *compulsion to perform surplus labour*, and to create the *leisure time* necessary for development independently of material production, differs only in form from what had obtained under the earlier mode of production.” (Ibid: 1026)

Although there is no substantial change in the nature of the mode of production, with the formal subsumption, a series of new relations of production have been created. On the one hand, it brings about a new relation of supremacy and subordination between capital and labour. A purely economic relationship is established and becomes the principal bond

connected people who occupy conditions of production and who are employed to produce surplus-value, while the patriarchal, political and religious constrains — in a word, the super-economic forces — which determine the labour-capital relationship before have totally been stripped. (Ibid: 1025-1027) In consequence, production becomes the end in itself; “the immediate purpose of production is to produce as much surplus-value as possible”, and “the exchange-value of the product becomes the deciding factor” (Ibid: 1037). Indeed, it is viewed by Marx as the *political expression* of the formal subsumption. On the other, as soon as the labour process is subsumed under capital, both continuity and intensity of labour will be increased evidently (Ibid: 1026). In order to obtain the means of production, producers must lengthen the working day, under the management and supervision of the owner of the conditions of production who appropriates surplus labour. In fact, the production of absolute surplus-value has become the material expression of the *formal subsumption of labour under capital* (Ibid: 1025).

The formal subsumption lays the foundation for the development of capitalist relations. As an adequate form of such subsumption, the *real subsumption of labour under capital* does come on scene when capital brings about a fundamental modification in the very nature of the labour process and revolutionizes the actual mode of production (Ibid: 1021). In contrast to the formal subsumption as discussed above, the real subsumption sets the production of relative surplus-value as its own material expression (Ibid: 1025).

6.2 Bring “production” back in

Following the Marxist tradition of studies about the agrarian question,

historical materialism will be used as the methodological approach in this study. Historical materialism, first articulated by Marx, lays its theoretical basis on human production. It starts from a simple reality, that, for human beings, in order to survive and to reproduce themselves from generation to generation, it is necessary to meet their basic needs through production and reproduction. In this sense, production of material life is the first historical act of human. To use Marx's own words, "...this is a historical act, a fundamental condition of all history, which today, as thousands of years ago, must daily and hourly be fulfilled merely in order to sustain human life" (Marx, 1986:174).

Yet, the "production" in question refers to neither a set of purely economic activities nor some simply demographic phenomena. Although it is usually *economic* in character, production itself is not the same as economy in essence. It should be used as a comprehensive term to capture "the complex set of inter-dependent relations among nature, work, social labour and social organization" (Wolf, 1982:74).

In the 1859 Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, Marx presents a brief statement of his theory of history. It begins with the following words:

"In the social production of their life, men enter into definite relations that are indispensable and independent of their will, *relations of production* which correspond to a definite stage of development of their material *productive forces*. The sum total of these relations of production constitutes the *economic structure* of society, the real foundation, on which rises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness..." (Marx, 1986:187; emphasis added)

Emphasized are first of all two basic elements: production relations and productive forces. Production relations which as a whole constitute the economic structure of society are said to correspond to productive forces at a certain phase of social development. That is a crucial premise of human history. Only when people enter into very definite social relations, most fundamentally relations of production, can they actualize the production process, and then satisfy their primary needs, such as eating and drinking, housing, clothing and various other things (Marx, 1986:174). Whenever we speak of production, therefore, we should locate it in “relations” and, in this way, explore the property or properties of a specific relation of production. Legally, it is to study the nature of property relations¹, although, by definition, “[p]roduction relations are relations of effective power over persons and productive forces, not relations of legal ownership” (Cohen, 2000:63).

6.3 Data collection methods

I conducted my main field research on the agrarian change in Plough Village from September to November 2009. In February and March 2010, I did a supplemental survey to collect the necessary data I ignored in the first round. In my research, I employ four methods to obtain data, including participant observation, interview, document collection and my personal recollection.

For a qualitative case study, I have conducted more than 20 interviews with local villagers of different ages and occupations, including a retired brigade cadre, two former production team leaders, an old teacher once serving for the village primary school, a member of the former River Sludge Group, several other senior residents who were familiar with both the history and

¹ According to Marx’s own statement in the Preface, the property relations are just a legal expression for the same thing as the relations of production (Marx, 1986:187).

reality of the village, a present village cadre, a tractor driver, a former bamboo weaver, three worker families who earn living in the factories, a group of casual labourers, etc. Most of these interviews were not very “structural”, because it is not feasible for me to do some “formal” talks with the people who had lived in a village for many years. Indeed, every time I tried to transform the interview to a stylized one, did my interviewee become uncomfortable and often kindly remind me not being so “perplexing”. Beside these specific interviews, I also did numerous conversations with local people. These informal chats helped me a lot to obtain valuable information and clarify some confusion.

As a local person, I also benefit much from my personal life experience in Plough Village. The research process, in some sense, is a long journey for me to marshal my memories and introspects the road that I have taken. Those memories, despite trivialness and scrappiness, provide significant clues and threads for me to integrate my thinking on the agrarian changes in the village.

Apart from the data I collect from field work and personal recollection, I also use materials from presswork and local archives. In order to make clear the historical backdrop throughout the collective age and reform era, I inquired three kinds of old newspaper published in Ningbo area: *Ningbo Dazhong* (The Masses of Ningbo, NBDZ), *Ningbo Bao* (Ningbo News, NBB) and *Ningbo Ribao* (Ningbo Daily, NBRB). Moreover, I also resorted to local chronicles and village archives.

CHAPTER 2

The Village

Plough Village is where I grew up. I choose my home village as the fieldwork site because it is my most familiar place. I had lived in the village for more than fifteen years before I left for pursuing my college study in 2004. As a part of the village, I am not strange to the local natural environment and socio-economic conditions.

1. The geographical conditions

Plough Village is an administrative village comprised by seven smaller natural villages, respectively, Pavilion Bridge, Pot Hill, Rice Side, Upper Brook, Lute Valley, Grand Field and Stone Ground. It covers an area of 3.8 square kilometers, of which 1,743 *mu* is arable land and 2,596 *mu* is hilly land. In 2009, the village had a population of 1,050 and 464 households.

Plough Village is located in the Ningbo-Shaoxing Plain which roughly constitutes the eastern region of Zhejiang province. Zhejiang, a coastal province with an area of 101,800 km² in east China, is largely covered by hills and mountains but a small portion by lowland areas. It can be divided into two general zones: in the north (and east) is the fertile alluvial plains around Hangzhou Bay, which account for about three-tenths of the total land; in the south (and west), the mountainous and hilly regions account for some seven-tenths land (Shiba, 1977:391). Geographically, the south hilly

Zhejiang, together with North Fujian and East Guangdong provinces, forms the Zhe-Min Hills, whereas the western mountainous area forms a component part of the vast Jiangnan Hills. The rest region, composed by Ning-Shao Plain, Hang-Jia-Hu Plain, and narrow plains in coastal Taizhou and Wenzhou, is normally seen as the most economically prosperous area in the province.

The village just lies in the transitional area between the hilly south and the relatively flat north. It is facing the open Ningbo Plain in the southeast, while backing on the Gouyu Mountains (an offshoot of Tiantai Mountains) in the northwest.

The seven natural villages where I conducted my fieldwork, and more than twenty such villages form a triangle which is embraced on three sides—west, north and east—by green hills. This triangle-like valley has an area of about 10,000 *mu*. To the open south, there are three roughly parallel traffic lines: 1. Yong-Yu Road (from Ningbo to Yuyao); 2. Xiao-Yong Railway, which links Ningbo with Shaoxing, Hangzhou and Shanghai; and 3. Yuyao River, which is a section of the east Zhejiang Canal. Since each line is east-west bearing, they look like the base of the triangle. Another important line in this district is Shenhai Highway which runs through the valley from north to south. It is conjunct with Yong-Yu Road in the south and goes through the northern hills. This newly paved passage further extends itself to the coastal region in the city of Cixi, and connects with the 36 km long sea-crossing bridge to the northern coast of Hangzhou Bay. Hence, in shape, the highway constitutes the height line of the triangle land.

For one kilometer round, there are a series of villages surrounding Plough Village. About 500 meters to the north are two villages in a long, narrow

valley, Han Village and Porcelain Village. Some 500 meters to the northeast are Stone Bridge, Fu Village and Ye Village. These five villages constitute the big administrative village named Eight-Character Bridge. About 1000 meters to the east are a series of small villages which constitute Master Hill. To the southwest is Zhu Village, a village under the administration of Yuyao City. Most villages in this region are situated at the foot of hills and very often along rivers, but only a small portion is constructed in the middle of paddy fields. This is an obvious feature of village setting in the locality.

As a semi-hilly village, Plough Village stands on the border between Jiangbei District and Yuyao City. It is one of the westernmost villages in Ningbo. Yet, as demonstrated above, contrary to many hilly or mountainous villages in other place, it is far from a remote, isolated community. The transportation, postal services and electronic communication tools, such as telephone and Internet, connect it with outside world.

2. Climate conditions

Ningbo Plain, as well as other regions of Zhejiang province, is situated in the north subtropical belt. It is sharply influenced by both continental air-mass and oceanic circulations. Winter cyclones storms and summer monsoon winds affect this region in turn. Hence, it has a wild and humid climate with four distinct seasons. Normally, Winter and Summer are longer than Spring and Autumn. The former both have four months, while the others each last only for two months (see the following table).

Seasons	Time of Duration	Average Temp.	Rainfall	Seasonal Rainfall/Annual Rainfall
Spring	Late Mar. ~Late May	14.0~15.2 °C	381.5 mm	26.3%
Summer	Late May~Late Sep.	25.5~26.8 °C	552.4 mm	38.0%
Autumn	Late Sep.~Late Nov.	18.2~19.1 °C	362.4 mm	22.5%
Winter	Late Nov.~Late Mar. (next year)	5.5~6.9 °C	129.7 mm	13.3%

Source: Liu Aimin, et al. 2009: chaps. 2 and 4.

The annual average temperature in this region is slightly higher than 16 °C. Of the year, July and August are usually the hottest months whose temperature frequently exceeds 35 °C. In contrast, January and February are the most frigid ones. Their temperatures fall below the freezing point occasionally. According to the regional meteorological data, the annual EAT (effective accumulated temperature, ≥ 10 °C) in the agro-climate zone of north Zhejiang is 5,300 °C in total, and the annual frost-free period reaches some 235 days (ZJNYZ, 2004).

Then look at the precipitation. Owing to the combined effect of the Eurasian continent and Pacific Ocean, there is plenty of rain in most of Zhejiang province, whether in the plain north or the hilly south. In Ningbo region, for example, the annual precipitation amounts to 1,400~1,700 mm. On the basis of temperature and precipitation, the growing season in this area comes up to more than 300 days (Liu Aimin, et al., 2009:3).

3. Socio-economic conditions

Conditions of climate and geography, as discussed above, combined to make this region one of the most prosperous parts in China historically and currently.

In archaeology, Plough Village is a small cultural site whose age can be traced back to the Neolithic period. It belongs to the well-known Hemudu Culture which is famed for its original techniques for rice cultivation. As early as seven thousand years ago, the pre-historic Hemudu people had been master of such technologies that they utilized bone *si*¹ and wooden *si* to husbandry riverside land and cultivate primitive rice.

In history, until the Sui Dynasty (A.D. 581-618), plains around Hangzhou Bay had largely not been explored. It was thus rather a relatively isolated and underdeveloped place compared with the core region in north China (Shiba, 1977; NBSZ, 1995). However, owing to the construction of the Grand Canal and the southward transfer of the national economic as well as political center, since Tang Dynasty (A.D. 618-907), this region, along with the middle and lower reaches of Yangtze River, had become one of what Chi Ch'ao-ting called "key economic areas"² in ancient China (Chi, 1936). "By Southern Sung [Song] times," Yoshinobu Shiba (1977: 396) put it, "shipping flourished in Ningpo [Ningbo], and both domestic and foreign markets had expanded." In effect, Ningbo from the 12th century throughout the late Qing Dynasty prospered itself as a center for long-distance trade.

In China's modern history, Ningbo was also one of the earliest five treaty ports opened to European colonialists in the mid-nineteenth century. In 1984, it was listed as one of the first batch of open coastal cities by authority. Currently, cities standing on the north Zhejiang province, including Ningbo, Shaoxing and Hangzhou, have become an industrial and commercial center

¹ *Si*, an ancient agricultural implement, is a spade-shaped tool used for soil digging and ripping.

² By the concept of "key economic areas", Ch'ao-ting Chi (1936:5) defines in his seminal work, *Key Economic Areas in Chinese History: As Revealed in the Development of Public Works for Water-Control*, as "an economic area where agricultural productivity and facilities of transport would make possible the supply of grain tribute so predominantly superior to that of other areas that any group which controlled this area had the key to the conquest and unity of all China".

in Yangtze River Delta region, as well as an area with the most prosperity in China.

Written documents about the historical origin and development process of Plough Village is not collectable. All the ancestral temples were torn down, and, according to the senior locals, all the family archives were burn out during the radical years of Cultural Revolution. Yet, as some legends and anecdotes circulating orally show, the natural village of Pot Hill turned out a *jinshi*¹ in Tang Dynasty. In Upper Brook, the Fan family claimed that they were the offspring of Fan Zhongyan (A.D. 989-1052), an eminent litterateur and politician in the Northern Song Dynasty. The Dong family in Lute Valley was convinced of that they all descended from Dong An of Eastern Han (A.D. 25-220) who is probably the most celebrated filial son (*xiaozi*) in Chinese history. Outside Rice Side, there stands an ancient tomb. On the gravestone, it could be recognized that its construction period was Qing Dynasty. Thus, just upon existing materials it is hard to date the village accurately. Yet, according to the aged buildings and other historical remains, it could be estimated that, at the latest in the mid-Qing Dynasty, the basic pattern of Plough Village had been established.

Documentation of the village's "modern history" is also very scarety. Some aged villagers still remembered how the Japanese troops passed through their homeland in April 1941, after the former Cixi County (which governed Plough Village at that time) was occupied by Japanese. At the top of Taishan Hill near Grand Field and Stone Ground, there stands a small Buddhist temple (*fotang*) which was rebuilt in 2008. It is said that in the early 1940s, members of *san-wu zhidui*² once put the temple as a temporary base for

¹ *Jinshi* literally means "presented scholar" who was ranked the former third class in the imperial civil service examination (*keju*).

² *San-wu zhidui*: the 3rd and 5th detachments of the New Fourth Army Guerrilla

their anti-Japanese activities. It is also said that a few peasants from nearby villages took part in the guerrilla and fought in mountains north and south of Zhejiang province. That might be the only revolutionary tradition in the village.

Nowadays, Plough Village has become a fairly affluent village. According to the village statistics, in 2007, its per capita annual net income reached 8,016 *yuan* (and, in 2009, it further reached 10,792 *yuan*). Although this figure is lower than the municipal and provincial levels, respectively 10,051 *yuan* and 8,265 *yuan*, it is far above the national level which is only 4,140 *yuan* in the same year¹. Local people make a living primarily on family business and wage labour. The tendency of livelihood diversification is rather prevailing in the village, just as that in other rural areas of China.

Column led by the Chinese Communist Party.

¹ Sources: Ningbo Municipal Bureau of Statistics, *Ningbo Statistical Yearbook 2008*, Table 5-14; Zhejiang Provincial Bureau of Statistics, *Zhejiang Statistical Yearbook 2008*, Table 5-35; National Bureau of Statistics of PRC, *China Statistical Yearbook 2008*, Table 9-20.

CHAPTER 3

Peasant and Land

September 6, 2009, a sultry evening of the late summer. After dinner, my parents and I walked out the door to the concrete road in front of our house. Since the last summer, this newly-built road has become an ideal place for us to enjoy the cool in summer nights. As we walked down along the road and chatted with each other, a man drove an electric bicycle suddenly rushing at us but stopped in time with grinding brakes. It was only a small prank played by Miliang, a villager living in Pot Hill. He laughed and told us he had just fertilized his rice fields. So we asked him why he did it so late. Of course, we all knew the reason: Miliang and his wife were respectively working in the metal products plant and the textile mill in Mater Hill and Mercy Town; since they must work in the day, the couple always had no enough time to manage their field.

“Brother Zhang,” Miliang asked my father, “Is there any question about my rice? I poured all the fertilizers in the fields.” But he did not give my father any chance to reply and continued to explain for himself, “It is very dark. I don’t wanna waste time...” He spat out curses at the Heaven as local people were accustomed to do. “Let it be!” He laughed again, “If we can harvest two to three hundred catties per *mu* from such marshy land, we’ll be well content!”

Above is an accidental meeting I recorded in my notebook. Nowadays it has become an increasingly prevalent issue in Plough Village that more and more villagers, like Miliang’s family, are being locked into the contradictions and tanglements with their land. It presents a paradox that peasants are further estranged from their land even though they are vested with more power to use it.

This abnormal phenomenon reminds me a solemn commitment once made

by the promoters of the rural reform dated from the late 1970s. In the initial years of the reform, the reformers had loudly advocated the merits of the household responsibility system (HRS) which held to contract production quotas to individual households. According to their logic, while the collective economy had repressed the enthusiasm of individual peasants for production, rural reform unleash it. In their imagination, therefore, as long as the individual peasant households obtained the use right of the collective land, they would devote their best to raise productivity. Just as a leading reformer maintained, “HRS encourages the masses to manage the collective land with their very enthusiasm for farming private plots” (Du Runsheng, 1985: 91). On this basis, they promised a harmonious relationship between the peasantry and their land which integrated people’s happy life with the glory of land¹.

Evidently, for Plough Villagers, it has never become a reality. There are few empirical facts in the village in accordance with the reformers’ judgment. On the contrary, rural reform has weakened the peaceful human-land relationship developed in the collective era, and further led to a metabolic rift of nature and society.

It is necessary to note that “metabolic rift” is a central concept adopted by Karl Marx as he was to develop a systematic critique of capitalist depredation of Nature (Foster, 1999: 378-379; 2000: 154). In his eyes, capitalist mode of production is not only destructive in economy but also

¹ *In the Field of Hope*, one of the most popular songs in the 1980s, was compromised to eulogize the big achievements of the rural reform. With a delightful melody, it portrays a picturesque countryside for hundreds of millions of Chinese audiences. One part of its lyric reads as follows: “Our dreams are in the field of hope: Young crops are earring in the cultivators’ sweat, whenas flocks and herds are growing up in the sweet sound of seed; the west villagers are spinning, and the east inhabitants are casting net; some are sowing seed in the northland, while the others are threshing grain in the southland... This is our land on which we have laboured for generations, for her beauty, for her glory.” (translation mine) It presented an imagination of the future of China’s rural societies in the mainstream

unsustainable and disastrous in ecology. It contains a natural impetus to squander and plunder the fertility of the soil, and, in this way, destroys the very material conditions and foundation of human development. As he holds in the first volume of *Capital*, capitalist production

“...disturbs the *metabolic interaction* between man and the earth, i.e. it prevents the return to the soil of its constituent elements consumed by man in the form of food and clothing; hence it hinders the operation of the eternal natural conditions for the *lasting fertility of the soil.*” (Marx, 1976: 637; emphasis added)

In Marx’s theory of “metabolic rift”, the exploitation of the soil is not merely an ecological consequence caused by the capitalist production, but rather a structural element of capital accumulation. It corresponds to the predatory essence of capital which not only leads to the antagonism between town and country but also results in the simultaneous degradation of earth and labour (Moore, 2001: 244).

It is clear, what Marx criticizes is capitalist agriculture. “Capitalist agriculture”, in his writing, mainly refers to the large landed property which highly relies on the intensive application of capital (both constant and variable capitals). Such “capital intensification” in agriculture, to use Lenin’s term, links up large-scale agriculture with large-scale industry in a systematic manner. The combination of capitalized agriculture and large-scale industry aggravates the squandering of vitality of the soil (and labour):

“Large-scale industry and industrially pursued large-scale agriculture have the same effect. If they are originally distinguished by the fact that the former lays waste and ruins labour-power and thus the natural power of man, whereas the latter does the same to the natural power of the soil, they link up in the later course of development, since the industrial system applied to agriculture that enervates the workers there, while industry and

trade for their part provide agriculture with the means for exhausting the soil" (Marx, 1981: 950).

For Marx, it is no accident but the final destiny of small-scale peasant ownership under capitalism. Through concentration of land and capitalist investment, large-scale agriculture has historically succeed in undermining and even ruining peasant economy on a global scale.

This chapter proceeds to investigate the paradox in man-land relationships in Plough Village. Two questions will be examined: 1. What transformations have happened in the relationship between peasants and their land since the rural reform? 2. Why do these changes happen? Or, what gives imputes to these changes?

In order to make the man-land relationship in the reform era clear, I set the one in the collective era as a reference. Before this, a brief introduction to the traditional peasant economy should be made first. It is not unnecessary because the man-land relationship in ancient times provides us a starting-point of history. As we will see in the following sections, changes or development in later ages are always bound up with the reality and predicament faced by the people of previous times.

1. Self-circulation of peasant economy in the traditional society

It was often said that the traditional rural society was based on a self-fulfilling cycle of materials. In this society, people's life and production were internalized in the natural process of the soil. Rural cultivators were all

born and grew up from the earth. When they were living, they scratched food from the soil and then turned all the discarded things back to the soil. After their death, their bodies would be buried into the earth and finally changed to soil nutrients. Human life in this way, according to a famous sociologist emphasized, was a link in the nature's organic circulation rather than a process of exploitation of the earth (Fei, 1953: 129).

A conspicuous example of such self-circulation was the intensive agricultural system in the Yangtze River Valley. According to an ancient agricultural treatise, *Lei Si Jing*¹ (Lu Guimeng, 1936[880]), since the late Tang Dynasty at latest, this area had established a whole farming pattern which embodied plowing, raking, leveling and weeding. The intensive and meticulous farming technology came to maturity in the Ming and Qing Dynasties (ZJNYZ, 2004: 10-12). During the 16th and 17th centuries, there emerged a new type of farming management which was established on the system of circulation of substances while integrating multiple production activities organically (Li Bozhong, 2003). In the ancient agricultural experts' minds, an ideal farming system should contain diverse industries—normally “five industries” (*wu ye*) including crop farming, livestock husbandry, fish raising, silkworm breeding and forestry. All the industries should be integrated into an organic whole. Under a comprehensive management, both output productions and waste materials would be utilized circularly and adequately. In the Lake Tai area in the Ming-Qing Dynasties, for example, the use of agricultural resources was extremely rational. Local peasants raised fish in the pond and bred sheep on the banks of the pond. Surrounding the lake, they shifted the highland into mulberry groves but kept the lowland as paddy fields. Mulberry leaves were used to feed silkworms, the remaining leaves and grass from the rice fields were used to

¹ Literally, *the Classic of the Plough*.

feed sheep, and silkworm excrement feed fish. In return, the sheep manure and the mud of fish pond which contained fish waste became the natural fertilizers for mulberries and rice (Li, 1998:64). The recycling use of organic materials maintained the conservation of energy in the production system.

However, this self-circulation of the traditional economy was built on a dynamic but vulnerable equilibrium. First, such highly intensive agriculture was not a natural choice but the result of the severe man-land ratio. In other words, it presupposes huge labour investment and heavy self-exploitation (Huang, 1990). Second, the traditional peasant economy based on the circulating use of organic materials, in effect, was not so self-sufficient as many people might think. Rather, for Chinese peasantries, especially for tenant peasants in traditional society, it was impossible to maintain even a minimum standard of living merely depending on products from their land (Fei, 1952; Li, 1998). The peasantry must rely on the commercial exchanges with other households, villages, towns and even more distant markets. They were always bullied and exploited by the unscrupulous usurers and merchants, let alone the severe squeeze from political forces (Wang Yanan, 1998). Besides, natural disasters in forms of drought, flood, insect plague, frost and so forth also ruined crops and impoverished poor peasant families from time to time. In short, the peasant economy was far from an idyllic life-way but only a complex of contradictions (social, political, natural, etc.). Struggles in different forms always ran through a petty producer's whole life.

In modern times, due to the imperialist oppression and enslavement, the cruel exploitation of landlord economy, as well as the extreme human-land ratio (Chen, 1933; Huang, 1990), agricultural technology in the Yangtze River Valley largely fell back to the primitive manual labour. By the 1930s,

as we learn from a celebrated sociological study, *tieda* or the pronged drag-hoe had become the only implement for land tillage, and all farming work of land preparation were completed by human labour, because paddy fields became too small and scattered to use draught animal power (Fei, 1939: 159-160; Needham, 1984: 212). In the turbulent political and economic crises, the scattered peasant economy could not sustain itself.

2. Establish an extended circulation on the collective land

Rural collectivization, encouraged and promoted by the communist government, was a historic attempt of the Plough Villagers to transcend the increasingly serious crisis of peasant economy. It carried a double duty. In the first place, it must provide a solid basis for the survival of the ever-increasing population. From 1965 to 1979, as recorded in a village archive, the village population nearly doubled (growing from 491 to 969). Accordingly, in consumption the absolute quantity of means of subsistence in forms of grain, vegetables and meat rose remarkably. A higher crop yield therefore was an intrinsic requirement of the rural collectivization. In the next place, rural collective economy was subject to the aggregate planning of national industrialization (Wen Tiejun, 2000: 170-171). This subordinate position in the national development strategy indeed led to an enormous exploitation of the rural areas for the benefit of the development of urban industry (Meisner, 1999: 421; Wen Tiejun, *Ibid*).¹ In a certain sense, collective economy was a kind of institutional arrangement in favor of both

¹ One of the most common marks used to measure the level of such exploitation is the scissors gap between the price of farm produce and industrial products. According to the estimate of a project team of Development Research Center under the State Council, the total income obtained by the government through the “price scissor” reached about 510 billion yuan between— 1950 and 1978. See NYTRZKTZ, 1996: 64; Wu Li: 2001: 9.

extracting agricultural surplus and protecting the countryside from depression in an accelerating process of industrial primitive accumulation. Besides, rural collectivization also served to the tremendous accumulation of the production teams, brigades and communes. For Plough Village, it was mainly embodied in the years of construction of irrigation and water conservancy works as well as in the village infrastructure facilities.

As a result of the large-scale collective constructions, a relatively harmonious man-land relationship—a material circulation between man and land—was gradually established by the villagers. This circulation based on the collective economy was neither a simple regression of the self-circulation in the old peasant economy nor a radical rupture with that old one. Indeed it absorbed virtues of the traditional way but developed them to a higher level.

This section proceeds to investigate the formation of the material circulation between peasants and their land in the collective era. The points to be discussed will be brought under three main headings. First, I will briefly introduce the resumption of traditional farming in the early years of the People's Republic. Then a larger space will be given to the course of collective construction in Plough Village. On this basis, I will try to present local experiences and innovations villagers used to maintain soil fertility and with that increase the field yields.

2.1 The resurgence of traditional agriculture: a neglected episode

When I was still a young boy in Plough Village, I often encountered with abandoned farming tools lying all over the place. It was a messy scene:

millstones and stone mortars were jumbled together with litters and left by the road; handspinning wheels were taken apart and fed to the stove chambers as firewood; wooden winnowing fans were all thrown away and became big toys of neighbouring naughty children... Deep in my memory is the fate of the dragon-bone water lift (*long gu che*). It was a kind of wooden square pump with a pallet-chain which was invented in the Eastern Han period, more than 1,700 years ago (Li Bo, 1981: 56; Zhou Xin, 1985: 62-67). After Liberation but before the popularization of electro-mechanical pumps, it was the most significant irrigation tool, especially in South China. In Plough Village, some senior villagers told me, this tool was also a very popular instrument of labour before the Cultural Revolution. But I only saw one such tool. It was owned by late Grand Mao who was living behind our house then. I see him only using his water lift to drain his low fields one time after a heavy rain in the early 1990s. Since then I have never seen any others operating it. It was tossed out of door by its owner and lay against the wall for years. No one noticed its disappearance. Many other traditional farm implements shared the same fate.

The remaining bodies of these old implements in the village implied an elapsed time in which traditional farm implements were widely used. It is a frequently ignored issue that, in Plough Village as well as in other numerous villages in China, the traditional farming regenerated and reached its brightest during the first two decades after Liberation. It was realized through the large-scale social mobilization and mass movements. Due to the long period of civil and international wars, at the time of the founding of PRC, conditions of agricultural production had been extremely impoverished. The insufficiency of traditional farming tools even amounted to 30%~40% (Zhu Xianling & Hu Huakai, 2009: 56). In Plough Village, before the mid-1950s, only several rich families raised buffalos and used old

wooden ploughs (*lao mu li*) for land tillage. Most villagers had to depend on their hands and crude tools. In order to promote agricultural production, the whole China was aroused to produce the old-fashioned farming tools and popularize the reformed ones. From 1950 to 1952, Chinese people totally organized more than 3,500 farming-implement cooperatives and production groups that could manufacture and repair 30 million iron and wooden tools per year. Only in 1952, the number of supplemented traditional implements, including ploughs, harrows, sowing drills (*lou che*), water lifts, iron hoes, man/animal-drawn vehicles, etc., reached over 5,900,000 (Zhou Xin, 1985: 97; DDZG, 1991: 15). In 1958, as Chairman Mao Zedong further issued an important directive to start a broad mass movement to improve the farming tools¹ (DDZG, 1991: 32), a vast movement of farming-implement reform was launched in Ningbo area in which tens of thousands of peasants engaged. As a result, a variety of reformed implements (as well as numerous supplemented traditional tools), such as rubber-tired barrows, foot-pedal threshing machines, hand sprayers and wooden transplanters, etc., were popularized in local countryside (NBSZ, 1995: 1278, 1488). Of all these reformed implements, many kinds were accepted by the peasantry and some were kept in use till today in Plough Village.

For Plough Village, it is really a history full of paradoxes. The years of the Great Leap Forward (1959~1961), without question, is the worst period for local people in material life since at least the Liberation. Leaving all the

¹ This reform movement in which the vast peasantry engaged was defined by the authorities as “A great revolutionary movement”. It was required to keep miniaturization and localization and rely mainly on the self power of rural cooperatives. Up to August, 1959, about 210 million pieces of farming tools were manufactured and reformed in all parts of the country, including 31.2 million pieces for land tillage, 7 million pieces for sowing and transplanting, 30.8 million pieces for harvest, 3.7 million pieces for grain threshing, 6.2 million pieces for manure collection and fertilizer processing, 10.1 million pieces for irrigation and drainage, 40.8 million pieces for hydraulic engineering, 14.2 million pieces for agricultural and sideline product processing, and 74.8 million pieces for transport.

utopian illusions aside, deeply branded on people's memory are almost the miserable experiences of toil, hunger and sickness. However, through years of frustrations and sufferings, when the villagers struggled from the verge of famine, they also found in their hands the technical conditions for the traditional agricultural production had hit a highest level. Ploughs took the place of *tieda* as the principal tools for land preparation. The No. 2-1 Production Team¹ in Rice Side, for example, comprised 21 households. By the mid-1960s, according to the village seniors' recollection, it had raised three buffalos. The whole team possessed five ploughs, four square harrows (*fang pa*), two vertical harrows (*chao*) and one bladed roller (*li ze*). Other tools for land preparation, for irrigation and drainage, for planting and transplanting, for field management, for harvest, for grain processing, and for transporting were all equipped. Based on that technical condition, Rice Side, once a tiny, poor village subordinated to the rich, powerful Pot Hill for ages, obtained for the first time the similar economic and social position as compared with the later.

2.2 Collective farming as an extended circulation of materials

Collective agriculture, as it were, did not simply exclude traditional farming techniques and ideas. On the contrary, traditional techniques and local people's good experience were highly valued.

First of all, the role of people was regarded as a crucial factor in rural development. Throughout the collective times, villagers with rich farming experience were always looked up to by others. Old Fuming, for example,

¹ In China, the People's Commune System before the rural reform had a three-tiered structure: commune-brigade-production team. Normally, a commune was made up of about ten brigades, and each brigade was often comprised of more than ten production teams. From the mid-1960s to the dismantlement of the commune system, Plough Brigade was governed by the Master Hill Commune and contained ten production teams.

was a well-known farming expert in the collective era. With exceptional skills in paddy field management, he was often invited by the brigade cadres and other villagers to impart his experiences in busy seasons. According to Qingxiang's recollection, his father's unique skill was named "*kan miao shi fei fa*". Literally, the way of fertilizer application by observing seedlings. It even became old Fuming's greatest joy that, in slack seasons, he observed rice fields and deciding the suitable times for fertilization. By right of his excellent reputation in Plough Village, in the summer of 1974, old Fuxing together with other farming experts from surrounding villages was invited by the Master Hill Commune to deliver farming techniques in the whole commune. Those years, he received a lot of honors. Till this day, Qingxiang still kept one of his father's certificates of merit awarded by the commune. It appraised old Fuming as an "Advanced Commune Member". The story of old Fuming was not an isolated case. If browsing the local old newspapers published in that era, it is not unusual to find out a mound of reports about an experienced old villager or a farming experts team comprised by soiled countrymen being invited by the government to deliver their experiences to other people.

In the collective era, traditional techniques for soil management were also greatly cherished. The most salient example is the collection of farmyard fertilizers¹. In Plough Village, six categories of farmyard fertilizers were widely used throughout the collective era: 1. Human extract. Night-soil pooling was a major way for manure collection². In collective era, local people still kept such habit. Well-rotted human manure was normally used to fertilize both collective fields and household plots. 2. Barnyard manure. It

¹ By "farmyard fertilizer", it refers to the traditional fertilizer which is collected, processed, stored and utilized by peasantry. Theoretically, it covers all the litters and wastes of agrarian life and production which can be used to enrich the soil.

² Well-known in the agrarian history, Chinese peasantry were accustomed to collect night-soil. They always held such a traditional view that "treasure night-soil as if it were gold" (*xi fen ru jin*). See Xue, 2005.

was a major traditional fertilizer including manures of swine, buffalos, sheep, rabbits and domestic fowls as well as silkworm excrement (before 1960s). 3. Ash fertilizer. It mainly included two kinds of ash, plant ash and scorched clay dust. 4. Sludge. Mud in ditches and rivers was regularly dredged up by the villagers to enrich their land. 4. Cake fertilizer. The most commonly used in Plough Village was rape cake which was the residue of rape seeds after oil manufacture. 5. Green manure. From the mid-1960s, aquatic green manures, such as the so-called “three waters” (*san sui*)—water peanut, water hyacinth and water lettuce, had been imported from Wenzhou area and widely stocked in paddy fields. Yet, the most important green manure in Plough Village was Chinese milk vetch (*astragalus sinicus*). It was often interplanted in other crops, especially rice and cotton. 6. Straw. It was a compost of decaying vegetation that was mainly made by the stalks of winter/spring dry crops, e.g. soy bean, horse bean, barley, maize, etc. Besides, life wastes and garbage were also processed by the villagers into various fertilizers.

Farmyard manures as introduced above played an irreplaceable role in conserving soil fertility. In the collective era, the use of farmyard manure amounted to about 60% of the total quantity of fertilizer application in Zhejiang province (ZJNYZ, 2004: 452). Plough Villagers, for example, usually utilized 30~35 dan¹ pig manure together with about 40 catties nitrogen fertilizer (e.g. NH_4HCO_3) to every *mu* paddy field per year². This rate, after years of experimentation by local people, was proved the most appropriate one which could yield the greatest manurial effect. The combining utilization of farmyard manures and chemical fertilizers was a common practice in the village in the collective era. Since chemical fertilizers are usually quick-acting and farmyard fertilizers were largely slow-acting, this combining application could make full use of each one's

¹ In the locality, 1 dan=100 catties.

² The data is provided by Guolin, the former leader of the No. 2-1 Production Team.

favorable condition and promote mutual complementarity. Furthermore, inasmuch as most farmyard manures were organic and generally harmless to the earth, they could not only increase the organic content of the soil but also help to neutralize the perniciousness caused by the chemical ones. This fertilizing method was an optimum option for maintaining a high agricultural yield while not depleting the fertility of the soil. It embodied local people's ecological wisdom.

Yet, villagers' intelligence and experiences could not play any role in agricultural development if they were dissociated from the whole farming system. This farming system, as I will analyse below, was a structural outcome of the collective economy. Its core element was a stable but changing pattern of triple-cropping. Plough Villagers reduced it briefly as "*yi han liang shui*"¹ that was planting one season of dry crops and two seasons of wet crops in every farming year². This cropping pattern normally contained three specific forms (or sub-patterns). The first form could be abbreviated as "Spring grain-Rice-Rice". It combined spring grain, e.g. winter wheat, barley and horse bean, with early rice and late/glutinous rice. The second form was "Rapeseed-Rice-Rice". In this form, rapeseed was planted for both cooking oil and monetary income. The last one was "Green fertilizers-Rice-Rice". It combined a season of green manure plants with two seasons of major grain crops. In light of the natural and technological conditions in the locality, triple-cropping of this kind maximized the land use capability. The sequential cropping of alimentary crops guaranteed the grain yield which was a crucial objective of agricultural production. However, in the usual conditions, such highly intensive production would easily exhaust the soil. In order to avoid this disastrous phenomena, local people integrated technologies of crop rotation, interplanting and multi-cropping artfully. Different crops were planted in different fields according to the conditions of the soil in previous years. As a senior villager in Rice Side put it, "Farming is just like cooking. Because different people

¹ *Yi han liang shui*: 一旱两水

² In this region, triple-cropping pattern emerged in the early 1950s and had become dominant since the mid-1960s.

have different tastes, it is not advisable to prepare only one recipe. Different fields also have different tastes, so you should cook different meals for them.” Villagers in the collective era were quite familiar with the location, fertility, as well as depth of their land. They made much amount of the diversity of their land. For example, low-lying fields were usually shift to dry land to plant barley and maize in winter, whereas the low-yielding land was more often used to plant green manuring crops, such as trumpet creeper and Chinese milk vetch. Moreover, villagers also tried their best to change the crop distribution in high-yielding fields regularly, so as to maintain the soil fertility.

In brief, throughout the collective era, since agricultural production was treated as a vital strategic productive activity concerning the national well-being and the people’s livelihood, it was always brought to a long-range consideration. The land as the foundation of agriculture was thereby cherished and prudently managed by local people. Traditional experience and skilled tillers were both highly valued. More importantly, establishment of collective economy made the comprehensive production arrangement possible.

2.3 Collective construction in Plough Village

The establishment of collective economy, notwithstanding the serious reserves and afflictions, finally broke through the narrow limit of peasant economy (Zhang Letian: 1998: ch.14), provided an organizational basis for agrarian production on a larger scale, and further laid a foundation for the extended reproduction¹. All made the large-scale movements of land leveling and construction of farmland irrigation and water conservancy

¹ Of course, in a limited period, the commune system had not fundamentally solved the problem of extended reproduction in rural areas (Huang, 1990: chap.11; Zhang Letian, 1998: chap.12; Hinton, 1990) and a significant portion of commune members were living at a lower level.

works possible. Although the process was not without hazards and disturbances¹, rural collectivization largely put an end to the village's impoverished state.

In the strict sense, the real collective construction in Plough Village started in the mid-1960s. Before 1965, Plough Village (then the Plough Brigade/Production Team) was largely an obscure, backward place. In normal years, when there were no marked damages caused by natural disasters, the rice yield was always no more than 600 catties per *mu*. For instance, in 1956, 1957 and 1958, the average rice yields per *mu* were, respectively, 514.5, 550.5 and 483 catties (NBDZ, 1959-7-8-2). Those years, Plough Village was often posited as a negative example in rural development by serving as a foil to the neighbouring Master Hill Brigade. During that period, Master Hill was always highly praised by the local government as an exemplary brigade/team. Plough Village, with similar conditions of natural resources and population, naturally, became a perfect “contrary”.

This situation began to change after 1965. In 1965, all villagers, men and women, young and old, started to engage in the broad mass movement to transform and renovate the village farmland. In the coming ten years, local people totally invested about 200,000 man-days to the farmland constructions. After years of laborious work, they obtained noticeable achievements in harnessing of their rivers and land. First of all, the water system was dramatically dredged and regulated. A 5 km long, east-west trend river and other three south-north trend rivers were dug one after

¹ In this thesis I am not going to discuss more about the bad experiences Plough Villagers got during the early collective era (mainly in the Great Leap Forward period), but I do not think it is reasonable to boast the revolutionary role of rural collective economy exaggeratedly while ignoring its inherent deficiencies which has brought disasters and suffering to the nation and people.

another. Meanwhile, fifteen unwanted river channels were filled and leveled up, and more than 170 tombs located in the middle of fields were all removed. In late 1960s, as the electric network covered the village, six electric pumping stations were built. All the improvement of farming channels and ditches provided more than 1,000 *mu* paddy fields previously distant from river ways favorable irrigation and drainage. Besides, by lowering the ground water table, even the 800 *mu* perennially muddy field could ensure stable yields despite drought or excessive drain. Through the large-scale projects of land improvement by themselves, villagers obtained a wide stretch of land which is level and well-irrigated unprecedentedly. There were ample justifications to believe that it was a movement of land leveling of the largest scale in the history of Plough Village hitherto.

All these favorable conditions set the stage not only for the development of plough farming but also for the agricultural mechanization. In 1972, 1974 and 1978, Plough Brigade purchased one four-wheeled-tractor each year for both land tillage and agricultural transport. According to a local senior tractor driver's estimate, in the late 1970s, except the winter dry farming for which villagers most used ox-ploughs, more than half of paddy land was plowed by tractors. Through the land transformation and with the adoption of advanced cultivation techniques—the importation of agricultural machinery, reformed tools as well as high quality seeds, etc., conditions of agricultural production had dramatically improved. As a result, the average grain output per *mu* doubled in the mid-1970s, amounting to more than 1,100 catties in normal years.

Except for the transformation of paddy fields, villagers also hewed out a large area of hilly farmland and transformed the barren hills. Before the mid-1960s, more than 2,000 *mu* hilly land in Plough Village was largely

unexploited. Local people got used to calling their hills jokingly as “the turnip mountains” (*luobo shan*), because most hills were barren and desolate and therefore looked like a pile of bare turnips. After ten years’ hard work, at the end of the 1970s, Plough Villagers completed the treatment of the once-barren hills. Tea gardens, bamboo gardens and an orange production base were established, respectively occupying areas of 202 *mu*, 170 *mu* and 157 *mu*. Other more than one thousand *mu* highland was covered by timber woods¹ and fruit trees². Based on collective accumulation, in 1982, an automatic irrigation system was built running through the orange base and tea gardens. By installing advanced drop and sprinkler equipments, the labour efficiency was heightened so much that since then two labourers in less than twenty minutes could complete all the irrigation task which once needed more than 500 labourers to carry water for totally three hours³. Productions of tea and oranges, as a result, were multiplied from the late 1970s to the early 1980s⁴. Further, in early 1970s, Plough Brigade organized a herding group and constructed a pasture at the foot of northwestern hills. In 1980, it raised more than 900 long hair rabbits and 150 pork pigs and became an important component of village economy. The dramatic development in agriculture, forestry and animal husbandry changed the old poor Plough Village to a relatively well-off place. Plough Brigade, as a former cadre praised proudly to me, had become a banner of collective agriculture in Ningbo area before the rural reform.

¹ Mainly Chinese red pines and fir trees.

² Mainly strawberry.

³ Unfortunately, this automatic irrigation system was soon casted aside. Due to the dismantling of collective economy in 1982 (just the year when the system was imported), although the collective forestry was preserved as an experimental plot, there was no enough money and labour power to maintain the pumping stations, pipes and other machines and equipments, let alone to renew them. In early 1990s, this system was abandoned completely. In summer 2009, I stood on the top of tea hill in Plough Village and searched for the remains of the irrigation system. There were pipes and ditches which had been partly buried in soil and weeds stretching for thousands of meters across several hills.

⁴ For instance, the total output, from 1979 to 1982, increased from 50,000 odd catties to 170,000 catties. Data sources: NBRB, 1983-3-11-2.

3. Metabolic rift of nature and society: the reform era

Reforms started in the late 1970s ushered in a new era for Plough Villagers. As all the paddy fields were contracted equally to village households in 1982, the village's collective era ended. Since then, local people were largely liberated from the highly organized commune system and granted certain more economic autonomy and independence. However, rural reform also broke the associated social relations in collective production and returned the rural society back to a small-scale peasant economy (coming close to the traditional autonomous peasant economy) (Wen Tiejun, 2000; Lü Xinyu, 2008: 74). In a narrow production space, villagers began to scratch food from the family land again as their forefathers did in the ancient times. A new type of human-land relationship was gradually shaped. With the deepening of rural reform, the grand material circulation between man and soil established in the collective era was eroded and destroyed irretrievably.

3.1 Rural privatization: from the beginning of rural reform to the early 1990s

During the first few years of the reform era, a relatively peaceful connection between villagers and their land was still maintained. Inasmuch as rural reform fostered an easy economic condition, there was no extra stress for the villagers to squeeze the land. It helped to lessen the exploitation of the soil fertility. However, the ever-accelerated development of rural private property begot a kind of antagonistic relationship contradictory relations between individual households and the collective and among different

families. It undermined the foundation of the nutrient-circling potentially and essentially.

Plough Villagers without question got good benefits from rural reform at least in its initial years. However, the reform itself did not create remarkable new wealth, as reflected in the interview I made with the former team leader of the No. 2-2 Production Team in Pot Hill:

Hongda: What do you think is the best of land distribution?

Xiangde: I felt that cultivation became much freer. I could decide what crops you wanted to plant and how to plant.

Hongda: Then you could put more time and more energy to your own fields...

Xiangde: Yes. At the beginning we were very excited. We stuck in the land all day. After all, they (the crops) were our own things. When you looked at your crops, you found you were looking at your own kids. Of course, in today's view, we were very silly. Ha-ha, we peasants were always very silly.

Hongda: Why do you think so?

Xiangde: I found the yield was largely stable. It was no use to pay so much time. Rice could grow up by themselves.

Hongda: You mean the yield did not increase after land allocation?

Xiangde: Sometimes it increased, but in other times it decreased. Actually the average output... I remember, early paddy was about 800 to 900 catties per *mu* and late paddy was normally above 1000 catties... I think, about 1100 to 1200 catties per *mu*. It was almost the same as that in the era of production team when I still acted as the team leader. Many times the yield in the collective was even higher.

The household responsibility system with the central content of land allocation did not bring about essential growth of crop yield to the village. It was a common phenomenon even in the whole region of the Yangtze River Delta. As an illustrious research reveals,

“Crop yields failed to advance with the introduction of the household responsibility system in farming in the 1980s, and few peasants grew rich along the lines predicted by the classical model and official propaganda.” Just the opposite, “marketized farming in the 1980s did no better in crop production than it did in the six centuries between 1350 and 1950, or than collective agriculture did in the preceding three decades.” (Huang, 1990: 17).

As a matter of fact, in the light of the existing farming technology, crop yield in Plough Village as well as in many other villages within the Yangtze River valley had reached the highest in the middle 1970s.

What the local people really benefited from the reform was not the absolute increase in crop yield. Rather, they obtained benefits mainly from the structural adjustment of the interest relationships between individual peasants and the collective.

In the first place, rural reform absorbed legacies of collective economy and transformed the collective wealth to its own advantage. It was another fact which we were frequently led to ignore. In Plough Village, although the commune system as a whole was collapsed politically in early 1980s, “collective”, as it were, did not vanished completely. A variety of factors made it reserved—both in conception and in reality—in the following few years, until the development of commodity economy eroded the foundation on which the collective once stood and destroyed all these factors irreparably. These factors covered the public services (village primary school, cooperative medical service, farmland water conservancy, etc.), the collective taxation system (accumulation and retention of common funds by the collective), and, most obviously, collective properties, e.g. draught animals, tractors, warehouses and grain-sunning ground, which were inalienable in a short time. These public goods provided village households

with plenty of material yet often overlooked interests.

Take one of the main indivisible collective property, buffalos, for example. Throughout the 1980s, buffalos in Plough Village all remained as collective property¹. Every production team kept its own buffalos. Two to three teams shared a buffalo shed. Villagers fed and utilized buffalos in turn. In Rice Side, for example, every family took care of one buffalo two to three days per month; in return, they were all free to drive the team's draught animals to plow their family land.

As another instance, the fine water conservancy system built before the rural reform continued to provide irrigation and drainage to paddy fields. Since the system as a whole had been constructed and in a satisfactory condition, only limited manpower and material resources were required to maintain those preexisting facilities. Besides, local people also benefited from the collective forestry. Unlike neighbouring villages who allocated collective hills to individual households, Plough Village's hills and forest were reserved as a collective experiment plot after paddy land allocation. Forestry products, such as tea, oranges, bamboo shoots and timber, provided the village with an important income. The later, according to local villagers' recollection, largely covered their agricultural fees and taxes as well as administrative overhead and village cadres' wages in the first half of the 1980s. What's more, about 30 villagers who represented the corresponding

¹ Indeed, for most villagers, buffalo was a very expensive means of production whose price was only lower than the tractor. Hence, when the collective was dissolved, no one was willing to buy such a costly animal for family use. Keeping a buffalo would be extremely uneconomical. For the buyer, s/he must build a shed for the animal and took quite some time to look after it every day. What's even worse, unlike a dairy cow who produces milk for its keeper, a buffalo could be only driven to plow and harrow land in every short farming season. So the profit obtained from buffalo raising was limited. For the seller, namely the production team members, it was also inadvisable to close out all the buffalos, because, at least through the 1980s, ox-ploughs were still indispensable for land preparation.

number of families were employed by the villagers' committee to comprise the Fruit and Forest Team (*guomu zu*) throughout the early 1980s to the early 1990s. They got wages from the collective to supplement their incomes from family farming. Members of the village could also collect firewood and other wild products, e.g. a great variety of wild fruit, bamboo sprouts, mushrooms, and herd's grasses, on the public land. The collective wealth which could be obtained and enjoyed by villagers at an easy rate virtually increased people's earnings and, in the meantime, lowered their cost of life and production.

Rural reform subsequently drew a clear distinction between the individual and collective and dismembered the private interests from the public ones. After the farmland distribution, villagers put almost all of their efforts into the family land. Their collectivistic feelings and enthusiasm went out quickly. Few people were ready to get themselves involved in collective issues unless they could reap perceptible profits for their families. As a former brigade cadre, Old Zuren¹, put,

*"Fen tian dao hu*² is a purely counter-revolution! Deng Xiaoping discolored Chairman Mao's rivers and mountains (*jiangshan*) and led the peasantry to take the capitalist road. You look at it! What are they doing now? What did we do in Chairman Mao's time? In Chairman Mao's time, we laboured firstly for the nation, then for the collective, and at last for ourselves. We put national and public interests ahead of personal interests (*xian gong hou si*). What's socialism? It is socialism. Only in this way, the village got better, becoming a place of gold hills and silver fields. But now who are still concerning the collective? Everyone labours for himself. Everyone racks his brains to sap the collective wall—one day you take a bucket from the collective storehouse and hide it in your own house, another day I carry a pair of scissors from the Fruit and Forest Team and tell others I find it on the road, and still another day he builds a walls on the collective

¹ Old Zuren, now a resident of Pot Hill, was a communist cadre of Plough Brigade before the rural reform.

² *Fen tian dao hu* literally means allocating collective land on the household base. Normally it is used by the locals to refer to the rural reform.

grain-sunning ground and encloses a piece of public land for his own use, but this time he is intent to zip his lips as if nothing has happened... What's the recipe for the rich today? I give you three words: theft, cheat, and corruption (*tou, pian, tan*). You see, in this way, bit and bit, the previously well-constructed village has been eaten hollow by these worms. Now we only leave a brilliant shell. I detest it thoroughly.”

Appropriation of collective properties was a very common issue in the whole 1980s. As Old Zuren revealed in his angry but realistic statement, rural reform per se was a process of dissipation of the public wealth. By nourishing private property, it caused a radical shift in social organization, that is, the tearing-up of collective accumulation (on the brigade and commune base) and the (re)establishment of individual accumulation (on the household base). The disappearing of the collective's accumulation function largely weakened its steering capability to condition the validity of the soil in a large scale. The brigade, now the villagers' committee, was no longer able to mobilize the forces of the villagers to the land melioration as before. In 1984, the brigade pasture was dismantled because of the poor management. It was sold to an individual in 1985. Meanwhile, the herding group was also disbanded. The disappearance of animal husbandry not only reduced the collective income but also deprived the village of animal manures to improve the low-yielding fields. It further stemmed the tide of equalization of soil fertility which had lasted for more than twenty years since the very beginning of rural collectivization.

As the collective gradually lost its capability to improve the soil fertility after rural reform, individual households resumed the task/burden of land improvement. Plough Villagers undoubtedly invest great efforts to manage their family land. In the first years of the reform era, as Xiangde described, local people always regarded their crops as their own children. Correspondingly, they cherished and bettered their own land. However, due

to the lack of collective regulation, trivial conflicts often happened among different families, such as fighting for public fertilizers and for protecting every inch of family land.

One of the conspicuous examples is the fights, or “wars” (the locals would say), for a farmland fertilizer, scorched clay dust, among different families.

In Plough Village, the scorched clay dust was one of the most indispensable manures. It was a kind of important ash fertilizers that was usually used to cover the newly-sown seeds and nourish roots of young plants, performing in particular as a “copping manure” (*gai mian fei*) for rice seedlings, watermelon beds, young rapeseeds and radishes, various beans and many other vegetables. Local people usually made this fertilizer in July and August shortly after the summer busy season. The method was quite simple. As a rule, they first stripped up the raw materials, that is, the greensward containing vegetation and soil from the paths in the paddy field, and then baked them in the sun. As soon as they were all dried, normally one to two days later, people laid those materials together in a heap. Some meticulous peasants would mix some straws and/or household garbage with the sward. When everything was ready, they lit the heap and roasted it to ashes. It was an age-old fertilizer whose technology had come to maturity in the Ming Dynasty in eastern Zhejiang Province (Xu Guangqi, 1962). In the collective era, as mentioned in the last section, Plough Brigade regularly organized the specific fertilizer team to bake this ash manure every year. After the land allocation, inasmuch as the village committee could no longer mobilize people to collect and process manures, every family must prepare the scorched clay dust and other fertilizers—both chemical and organic—by themselves.

Since the quantity of greensward on the country lanes was limited while the demand for farming usually seemed high¹, for the limited greensward, villagers often quarreled and fought with each other.

“It was a very funny thing.” Said Grandma Shen, one of our neighbours in Rice Side,

“Commune members² badly wanted to enclose all the greensward at the edge of rice fields for their self-use. The ‘ownership’ of every plot of land should be made very clear. When we went to our land in the morning, my husband and I respectively carried a ragged hoe and threw them on the road near our land. By this, we wanted to tell others that the greensward on this piece of land had been occupied by us. Then we worked in our fields. However, even this could not set my minds at rest. Every time someone carrying a hoe went by our land, I would straighten my back subconsciously and gaze the guy until s/he left that place we had occupied. Many a time I even hurried to shout to the passers: ‘This is our place! This is our place!’ Ha-ha, in my eyes, everyone become a thief who wanted to seize the territory we had claimed... Almost all commune members did so. Some inserted several sticks or old reaping hooks in the road, some put their harrows or ploughs on the road, and some used manure buckets and fertilizer ladles. It’s really like a battle, like a fighting. We treasured mud as gold. So we fought for the mud as if we were fighting for the gold...”

“That’s quite absurd.” Grandma Shen sighed repeatedly. True enough. For many senior villagers who had lived in the production team for a long time, rural reform sprang up all sorts of abnormal and fantastic phenomena. It compelled villagers to engage in the permanent wrestling for public resources, in particular, for natural fertilizers and the soil itself. The latter leads us to another “absurd” issue inscribed in people’s memory, that is, the story of a mobile ridge of the rice field.

¹ As the local villagers estimated, before the mid-1990s, one household needed no less than 800 catties of such fertilizer (plus 100~200 catties of plant ash), so the gross amount of this fertilizer consumed by the village reached at least 350,000 catties per year.

² “Commune member” (*sheyuan*) is an old use. After the rural reform, although the commune was dismantled, Plough villagers who had experienced the collective era still used “commune member” to style each other.

The hallmark event of rural reform, as we know, is the land allocation. The material manifestation of land allocation, a Plough Villager might tell you, is the crisscross footpaths between fields. When Plough Brigade started to distribute the collective land in 1982, the first thing was to measure and carve up the land. As the farming parcels were staked out, villagers rushed to their “own” farms and enclosed them with long raised footpaths. These narrow field footpaths (usually 20~30 cm wide) not only delineated the material boundary of land—the location of land, conditions for irrigation and drainage, land depth, soil fertility, etc—a peasant family obtained from the collective, but also largely defined the interest boundary in which the family could organize their production and get corresponding yield.

At first glance, a footpath between fields seemed changeless, but in the long run it always underwent subtle changes. For local people it was not merely a dead thing, but rather an animate entity shaped by realistic social and economic relations. In every jointing stage of rice, when the crops grew up profusely, a peasant would dig shallow ditches in each strip of land for ease of irrigation—to obtain an equal distribution of water over the farm. Normally one to two ditches were dug in the middle, parallel to the margin of the field, whereas other four ditches were excavated round the field. All these ditches compose a shape of the Chinese character *ri* or *mu*¹. When the peasant dug the framing ditches along the margin, he (or sometimes she) usually put the dredged mud on the top of the footpath between two fields. Ostensibly the newly-added mud served to patch up the eroded roadbed and strengthen the existing walkway. Never the less, if this footpath was just the boundary line between two family farms, it would cause easily some strange things. In this case, the peasant would be very disposed to shovel the mud to

¹ *Ri*: 日; *mu*: 目.

the margin of the footpath and let it automatically fall down to the neighbouring field. As a result, the footpath became wider temporarily. It was a little trick! A few days later, after the mud grew hard the peasant would excavate the ditch again. This time with a long-handle spade, he chipped off the soil of the footpath on his own side rapidly. Then the footpath reverted to its original width. By doing so, the area of his own farm extended even though in an ever so small size. It was without doubt that the peasant was also exposed to the counter-attacks from his neighbours. Other peasants would use a similar way to treat him without any hesitation. Thus for Plough Villagers, it was never a whirlwind campaign but rather a very protracted seesaw battle. After the rural reform but before the mid-1990s, it was quite common to find in the rice fields that a part of footpaths were much thinner than others. Some footpaths even became too narrow for a peasant to pass through. As we have seen before, a fair chunk of earth of those thinner footpaths had been chipped away by the villagers on both sides. A similar situation emerged on the side of the wide paths for tractors (*ji geng lu*). People whose rice fields were located by the tractor paths also had a rage for mining and occupying the soil of the paths. They whittled the roads bit and bit and even planted a row of vegetables or beans on the roadside. For the villagers, there seemed to be a kind of unutterable force that compelled them to contend for even an extremely small piece of land. During this period, complaints, quarrels, and conflicts between individuals and households were all in a day's work. The trivial struggles and continuous contentions set local villagers in a standing tension.

While people's everyday struggles around the greensward and field ridges were still moderate, their contests for the river sludge rather aroused the shooting wars. After land allocation, the villagers' committee still arranged a group of people to dredge village rivers and water channels every three

years. Before the spring ploughing, normally in late winter or early spring, villagers fix electric pumps along the river bank and set up a corresponding number of long, bulky rubber tubes on the bank. One end of the tube was connected with a pump, and the other end was extended to the rice field along the river bank. When the pumps ran, these tubes naturally led the river sludge to fields. As river mud contained rich organic materials and mineral components, it was a kind of high-quality fertilizers. However, for the villagers, how to divide and distribute this free gift was a very thorny question, often resulting in violent conflicts. While doing my fieldwork in Upper Brook, I met a member of the former River Sludge Group (*wuni zu*), Tianqing. He described the scene of conflict for me as follows:

“Once we turned on the motor, commune members gathered rapidly, men and women, young and old, carrying their own manure buckets and fertilizer ladles. Hoo, just like a swarm of flies... The owner of the field (to which river mud had been pumped) always leaped out to stop others to carry too much mud. In his eyes, the mud belonged to him because it flowed into his own field not other’s. But his reason didn’t work at all. Who would hear you? Now that I didn’t come to your field for nothing but for carrying the mud back to my own field... The field owner stood on the footpath, stared at the people and attacked them with a torrent of abuse. A few nearby commune members could not bear with him any longer. Then they began scolding each other. As long as someone couldn’t restrain his anger, a physical fight became inevitable: You knocked down my bucket with your foot. I immediately gave you a sound beating with my fist and pushed you down into the slush pool. If I was not able to defeat you, I would get help from my brothers. Of course, you also had brothers. Then we also had our own fathers, sons and uncles. Then we could have a good gang war!”

“A good gang war”, that was nothing but a fierce clan conflict. In effect, through decades of revolutionary transformation, the clan forces in Plough Village had been seriously suppressed and weakened, if not being totally cleaned. The rural reform, to a great extent, resurrected these forces and set a stage for them to compete with each other, not for the public welfares but

rather for the individual or small group's interest. Obviously, it is the intensive concern for self-interest that largely fueled local people's conflicts and competitions. This increasing concern for self-interest, as it were, presupposes the development of private property; the development of private property presupposes the division and seizure of collective property and public wealth—in forms of stealing, cheat and corruption, as the former cadre Zuren concluded; the appropriation of collective property leads to the deterioration of the collective accumulation. Like the course of accumulation of capital delineated by Marx (1976: 873), the process also presented itself as a never-ending circle. The struggle for different fertilizers and the exploitation of the soil itself was only a link of the whole movement.

In brief, the process of rural privatization in Plough Village dismembered the existing wealth which was accumulated by local people in the past two to three decades. It performed as a two-edged sword indeed. In the short run, since the wealth was redistributed within the village, and the land allocation generally conformed to an equalitarian principle, individual households as specific interest entities obtained benefits from the whole process for sure. However, the loss of Plough Village's ability to regenerate and increase its new wealth made impossible the augmentation of collective property thereafter. It squeezed the quantity of public goods that could be enjoyed by local people. Collective property, including the collective farmland, public farmyard manures, and other "ownerless" farming materials, was exhausted rapidly in the following few years. As the collective was weakened and fragmented its steering capacity to the rural production, the later became ever-more irrational.

3.2 Bitter struggles: the mid-1990s

In the mid-1990s, when my buddies and I as a group of little children in Plough Primary School learnt to sing the popular song, *In the Field of Hope*, which was composed to praise the achievement of rural reform, our parents and grandparents, saw diminishing hope. Those days Plough people still toiled themselves on their narrow fields. They still hoped to harvest a good life from the soil. But most of them got a huge disappointment at last. The rapidly increasing prices of agricultural inputs, and daily goods on the market, as well as the soaring agricultural taxes and fees, squeezed the surplus of peasant production.

It was a very special time for Plough Village. As the central government, with strong political and economic power, carried out the policies of overall market economy and promoted the whole country to integrate into the global capitalist system, a new world glutted with commodities was invoked from the earth. It resulted in the deep penetration of commodity relations into every detail of people's life. Money as the universal measure of commodity value in a capitalist world increasingly became the only medium to means of sustenance and production. In order to continue their existence and create a good future in the new world, villagers had to devote their most enthusiasm and greatest efforts to making money. It is clear, the income from the soil could not support villagers' dream to pursuit a fine life in a commodity world (see ch. 4, sec. 1). An increasing number of people hence turned their heads to the outside world to seek a better way out in non-agricultural areas.

In this period, the relationship between peasants and their land became quite awkward. It was a very common issue that people, their bodies, still stayed on their land, but their spirits had become increasingly restless. Villagers' disquiet emotion was deeply embodied in a popular local proverb which

said, “The Heaven is good, the Earth is good; if you can jump out of the rural footpaths, everything will be good”¹. There was a strong desire injected into people’s heart to get away from their land. However, tens of thousands of invisible hands extending from the soil captured most people’s legs and fixed them in the earth.² Villagers who had no help to leave the land pinned all their hopes on the younger generation. They invested their best in the education of their children. Except for the material investments, they also used various ways to impose stress on their children’s minds. For the villagers with little schooling, using the boring farming work as means of education to their kids was quite a common way. Through the transient, fragmented, but often marrow-depth labour experience (plus the elders’ severe scolding), seeds of fear and antipathy to the farming work were naturally sowed into children’s hearts. Life made the village younger believed that it was the fate bound them on the shameful pole of peasantry. As soon as the fetters of land were broken, they would flee from the countryside like eluding an epidemic. The land itself seemingly became a paradox: it was the root of all afflictions, even though it still provided all means of sustenance for most villagers.

As discussed in last sub-section, in the initial years of the rural reform the maintenance of soil fertility was embedded in those numerous, mild or violent struggles and conflicts in people’s everyday life and production. When the wheel of time ran into the mid-1990s, Plough Villagers’ attention was diverted to off-farm activities. Although they still often quarreled with

¹ *Tian ye hao, di ye hao, tiaochu tiancheng yangyang hao*: 天也好，地也好，跳出田塍样样好。

² My father might be a good example for this. Throughout the 1990s, he was always longing for a job in the township factory. His favourite occupation was driving a fork-lift truck in the copper-processing factory in Master Hill. Yet, since he was illiterate and more than forty years old, it was impossible for him to meet the basic requirements of the factory. Besides, the heavy farming work also made his occupation dream unpractical.

each others for all sorts of trivial matters, few people would like to invest any more time and energy to fight for manures, greensward or soil with others as they did before.

Still the former member of the village's River Sludge Group, Tianqing, described the contemporary situation as follows,

“Very few commune members were still concerned with the sludge we pumped from the river. For me, the thing [the work of dredging water channels] suddenly became boring and cheerless, because it was interesting to look at the struggles and quarrels between some commune members... That time we had been used to applying chemical fertilizers. Chemical fertilizers were much more powerful and more advanced (*haiyao youli*, *haiyao xianjin*) than river mud. It was also more convenient for us to use chemical fertilizers. At the end of day, chemical fertilizers were chemical fertilizers, but manures were manures. You see, it was quite clear. Right? ...”

In practice, chemical fertilizers not only replaced the river sludge but also became the primary substitute for scorched clay dust and many other farmyard manures. In the mid-1990s, according to the local people's estimate, the quantity of the main fertilizers—mainly including nitrogen fertilizer, potash fertilizer, phosphate fertilizer and compound fertilizer—used in rice field reached more than 100 catties per *mu*. In other words, it had increased two to three times since the rural reform.

The common use of chemical fertilizers was a dramatic change of the local farming system. It was intensified by the decline of household livestock-raising, especially the all-round bankruptcy of family pig-husbandry. The vanishing of pig-husbandry, as will be analyzed in next chapter (see ch. 4), dedicated the disintegration of “swine-grain type” peasant production. The so-called “swine-grain type”, as the predominant

economic form in Plough Village after the land allocation, was a typical peasant economy. It composes a small ecosystem which unified grain production and animal breeding on the household base. In this system, a peasant family was engaged in grain farming and livestock-raising at one time. Normally, they used by-products and wastes of grain farming, e.g. rice/barley/maize polishing, rice leftovers, vegetable leaves, stems of yams as well as surplus potato tubes, to feed pigs and other family live stocks. In turn they used manures and wastes of those animals to fertilize the soil of crops. Theoretically, only a limited quantity of supplementary fertilizers was demanded. In this way, the exchange and circling of nutrient components could be maintained within a small-scale production unit. However, the decline of pig raising in the locality ultimately put an end to this circulation. In consequence, chemical nitrates, sylvites, and phosphor salts replaced organic farmland manures and became the chief supplementary fertilizers.

On the surface, the increasing application of chemical fertilizers showed the local people's endeavor to maintain the land fertility and the agrarian equilibrium. Nevertheless, as an objective result, it caused the reduction of soil vitality. Chemical fertilizers, unlike farmyard manures, were no longer applied to improve the quality of the soil and that of crops. On the contrary, they were directly used to fuel the crops. In large part, the land became something "neutralized"—a container of inorganic chemicals, which Karl Kautsky suggested with insight in his classic *The Agrarian Question*:

"Technical progress in agriculture, far from making up for this loss [that is the material exploitation of the land], is, in essence, a method for improving the techniques of wringing the goodness of the soil and increasing the mass of nutritional material removed each year for dispatch to the towns... Without supplementary fertilizers, and given the current relationship

between town and country, and current techniques of cultivation, this would soon lead to the complete collapse of agriculture.” (Kautsky, 1988: 214-215)

In the above quotation, Kautsky attributed the reduction of soil fertility to the exploitative relationship between town and country. The natural nutrients in the soil of the countryside were constantly expropriated by the urban residents and industries in the form of exported agrarian products, e.g. corn, meat, milk and so on. In the materialist conception of history, the depletion of nutrients coincided with the irreversible outflow of value from the rural to the urban (Marx, 1981; Kautsky, 1988: 214; Bukharin, 1925: 111-113; Foster, 1999). In other words, it was embodied in the antagonistic value relations between the town and countryside—in the form of political economic way.

That was an essential fact concerned Plough Villagers. Although there was no enough evidence to prove that agriculture in Plough Village would head for the “collapse” in short order, that the soil was losing its organic nutrients and becoming infertile was beyond dispute. It just stemmed from the specific value relations between rural and urban. In the mid-1990, both peasant life and production became much more integrated into the commodity chain which was predominated by the capitals and industries in the urban world. Except for chemical fertilizers and farm pesticide/herbicide, local people put a great deal of money to purchase everyday commodities so as to satisfy their consumption demands. The majority of those commodities, e.g. household electric appliances, intensively processed food, and building materials in large quantity, undoubtedly were industrial products. In order to obtain these products, villagers had to double their efforts to exploit the land—applying more “powerful” fertilizers, striking more “effective” pesticides,

and planting more capital-intensive cash crops (that means in turn that more inorganic chemicals were needed). This accelerated the disintegration of the small ecosystem of the “swine-grain type” economy. Even in the case that the flow of value between town and country did not “signify an exploitation of agriculture in terms of the law of value”, as Kautsky argued, it ultimately did cause the material exploitation of the soil and made it lose its natural nutrients (Kautsky, 1988: 214).

3.3 Plundering the soil: from the late 1990s to present

3.3.1 The soil quality is still in deterioration

Plough Village after rural reform experienced a process in which peasant economy is increasingly subsumed into the market economy. Since the late 1990s, either peasant life or agricultural production has been governed by the commodity logic. Supplementary incomes from family sideline production, e.g. livestock raising, agrarian handicrafts, and courtyard farming (vegetable gardens), have largely disappeared (See Ch. 4). Moreover, planting areas of staple economic crops such as rape seed, shell-less barley, water melon, water bamboo and so forth, are also in shrinkage. Nowadays, there are few villagers still growing rape seeds or shell-less barleys which were widely grown before the mid-1990s. Only several sporadic households still plant water melons and water bamboos. As a local saying goes, “Peasants don’t grow vegetables.”¹ In the 2008-2009 farming year, for example, there were merely six households planted water melons, two in Pavilion Bridge, three in Pot Hill and one in Grand Field; no more than ten families still cultivated water bamboos, mainly distributing in Pot Hill and Upper Brook; and only one family in Pot Hill planted a small plot of rape seeds. As a result, the large proportion of peasants in Plough

¹ *Nongmin bu zhongcai*: 农民不种菜。

Village no longer produced sufficient vegetables and fruits for self consumption, not to mention poultry and meat. They directly purchased them from markets which were supplied by large vegetable bases, fruit plantations and animal plants controlled by big capitals.

Another great change in the village's agrarian production happens in the cropping system. As mentioned in the second section, Plough Villagers did three crops a year in the collective period. This cropping pattern was largely maintained in the initial years of the reform era. However, since the mid-1990s, it has been quite changed, that double cropping became progressively popular. Winter crops gradually vanished. In the late 1990s, even the double cropping system was waning. Rice farming largely became a losing business. More than a third of the paddy land thereupon was shift to grow single-harvest rice. This gloomy situation was not changed until the new millennium when the central government reduced and abolished agricultural taxes and provided subsidies for rice cultivation. In spite of this, the situation was not improved completely. Nowadays, quite a few families still prefer to grow single-harvest rice (See Ch.4). What's more, a few households even discontinue their farming and allow some of their land to go wasted for years. Although this is not so prevalent as that in numerous remote villages in western and central China, it is really an unprecedented issue in Plough Village.

All in all, as the triple cropping is dwindled down to an unsteady double cropping, the burden of the land is reduced to a great extent. However, the soil quality still experiences a progressive degradation. Generally, it is reflected in three aspects:

Firstly, the land becomes more infertile. The most solid evidence is that

today's paddy fields can hardly yield so much grain as that in the initial years of the reform era, not to mention the level in the mid-1970s. "*Qian jin tian*", or the land which produces no less than one thousand catties per *mu* every season, has largely passed into history and become somewhat a mythic thing. As some experienced villagers estimated for me, today the average per *mu* yield of rice in normal years is no more than 800 catties. Land production has seen a 30% deduction during the past three decades, and a 20% deduction in the last ten years. Only sporadic households can harvest about one thousand catties rice per *mu* in specific fields. The fertility of land cannot sustain a higher output, no matter how much chemical fertilizers are applied to the land.

Secondly, the soil has been poisoned seriously. Traditional China, as Chinese sociologist Fei Xiaotong said in his illustrious book *Xiangtu Zhongguo* (Rural China), was fundamentally rural. In that society, peasants customarily maintained a kind of blood-and-flesh contacts with the soil:

"Only those who make a living from the soil can understand the value of soil... [To] country people, the soil is the root of their lives... Indeed, those who must depend on farming seem to be stuck the soil... When I went abroad for the first time, my nanny slipped something wrapped in red paper into the bottom of my suitcase. Later, she told me in private that if I were too homesick, I should make some soup from the stuff wrapped in the red paper. In the package was dirt that she had scraped from her stove." (Fei Xiaotong, 1985: 2; translations from Fei, 1992: 38-39)

For the peasantry in old days, it is not uncommon to use the soil from their motherland as medicine to address their home sickness and physical wounds. Although it may not perhaps be strictly true that a bit of earth from some specific places has such magical healing powers, this widespread belief implies at least the harmlessness of the soil to local inhabitants. Actually, a similar conception of the soil even existed in today's Plough Village. In

2004, when I left the village for another city to pursue my college study, my mother and some old relatives still suggested me take a nip of village soil to my new school. They firmly believed that, if I fell ill in the distant place because of my maladjustment to the unfamiliar environment, a grinding from a piece of the native soil mixed with water could serve as a miracle cure¹. Even though such a belief is still popular in the village, the soil quality nevertheless has run down to a dangerous level. The intensive use of chemical fertilizers and in particular the ever-more frequent spraying of pesticides and herbicides of high density make the soil much more toxic than before. Nowadays, if a peasant gets injured in leg or hand, he/she will be highly recommended to disinfect and dress the wound in the hospital. The chemically contaminated soil and water on the farm make the wound vulnerable to infection and serious fester. This is another unheard-of phenomenon occurred recently in the village.

Moreover, the increasing poisoning of the soil accelerated the destruction of the circulation of nutrient materials within the village paddy land as a whole. Since the late 1990s, river dredging has become an awkward and even painful work for the villagers. That was not merely deficient in hands but due to the relocation of dredged mud. Contrary to the middle and late 1980s when villagers were crazy in struggling for the river silt as described before, now they find any way to prevent the village from pumping the silt to their family farm. They are very much aware that the river silt containing the toxicant soil which is eroded from villagers' farms by the rain and irrigating water does harm to their crops. People's simultaneous resistance ultimately leads to the permanent stagnation of the dredging task. It further causes water blooms and sedimentation of the river channels. Unprecedented indeed!

¹ But I rejected their kind suggestions since I was very confident of my health and a bit suspicious of the sanitation of the soil.

Thirdly, paddy fields are suffering an ever-increasing crisis of soil swamping and gleization. Today, a most sticky issue the local tillers confronted is the deep mud puddles widely spreaded in their fields. In the collective era, as an important component part of the massive land transformation movement as we discussed before, village devoted great for a long time to filling up mud puddles which mainly centered at marshy fields. They shifted low-lying fields to dry farmland in successive years and continually transported soil from the high-lying places to heighten those low-lying fields so as to reduce mud puddles. This work continued till the early 1990s. When I was studying in the Plough Primary School, through the windows, I often saw some villagers moving soil to patch up mires on their farms, with their *tieda*, or the pronged drag-hoes. Before the mid-1990s, the number of mud puddles in Plough Village was limited, and their miriness was at a low level. However, since the late 1990s, the filling work has been generally discarded, and most villagers stopped investing their time and energy to this work. As a result, the number of the puddles increased dramatically. As the tractor driver of Rice Side, Master Li, estimated for me in the summer 2009, there were at least one out of ten fields having a large and deep mud puddles whereas the small and shallow ones were much more commonly seen. The immediate causes are the reduction of the farm area and the proliferation of farming machinery. Master Li interpreted it as follows:

“I find two main reasons for the growing of mud puddles in rice fields. First is that, after land distribution, the farm has become much smaller than before. So we have more pieces of land. But you must see, we also have more water inlets and outlets then. As a result, more places, mainly the edges of fields, become waterlogged. The small fields further make the combine harvesters difficult to turn around. When a harvester wants to change its direction at the edge of the field, it has to be reversed for many

times. At last its crawler-type wheels break the ground shell (*di ke*)¹. Then I run my tractor to plow this field and mire down in the mud. Thus, several times later, a deep puddle comes to being. So the harvesters are the second cause.”

The expansion of mud puddles on fields indeed leads to a serious consequence. In order to plough the increasingly marshy fields, tractor drivers are forced to purchase new tractors with powerful engines. Those new type tractors with a great weight inevitably fasten the growing of mires and puddles in the fields. As a result of this, the drivers are compelled again to buy newer type tractors with more powerful engines and greater weights. Then the land becomes ever marshier. It not only accelerates the wasting of energy sources and the dissipation of agrarian capital but fuels the process of land gleization. A large number of mud puddles, either deep or shallow, make the low-lying areas waterlogged in a long term. According to the basic knowledge of science, the constantly wet environment normally slows the bacterial activity in the earth and thus discourages the decomposition of plant roots and straws. The growing acids released from the decaying vegetation then disturb the existing iron and manganese ions in the soil and finally deteriorate the soil fertility².

The deterioration of land quality in particular the diminishing of soil fertility is a common phenomenon occurred at a nationwide scale. As an agrologic study shows, due to the overuse of high nitrogenous fertilizer, the top soils in major Chinese farmlands have been badly acidified since the 1980s, with an average pH decline of 0.50. This dangerous anthropogenic acidification, as the agrologists warn, has caused negative impacts on the quality of both soil and environment (Guo, *et al.*, 2010: 1008-1010). The increasingly

¹ Ground shell (*di ke*) refers to the surface layer of a paddy field.

² A brief introduction to “gleization”, see http://www.uwsp.edu/geo/faculty/ritter/glossary/E_G/gleization.html

intensive inputs of the chemical fertilizers furthermore lead to the sharp decline of fertilizer efficiency. For example, the average utilization rate of nitrogenous fertilizer in China is mere 30%-35%, and more than ten million tons of nitrogen is drained away from the farmland. The loss of the huge quantity of chemical fertilizers has become a primary pollution source in the countryside (Cheng Cunwang, *et al.*, 2010: 4).

3.3.2 Capital intensification and plundering of soil

As observed from Plough Village, the progressively extensive management and intensive capital input—or what Lenin termed “capital intensification”—have been the two principal tendencies in agricultural production since (at latest) the mid-1990s. They signify increasing integration of the peasant household farming into the turbulent commodity tides aroused by the overall market economy. In recent years, commercial farming is enjoying a boom in Plough Village. Unlike the staple cash crops, e.g. rapeseed, watermelon and shell-less barley, which were planted by nearly all households before the mid-1990s, this new commercial agriculture is largely controlled by rich and well-off families not only from the village but more often from other places (See Ch.4). This emerging phenomenon, although still in the bud, unfolds a new period for the locals in which capital starts to get involved agriculture in a direct manner. It further provokes a new round of exploitation of the soil, not of the soil fertility, but of the soil itself. It can be seen clearly from a series of examples.

In the early spring 2000, Plough Village got her first intimate contact with industrial capital. During that year, a company which manufactured straw mats in Cixi County rent a little more than 150 *mu* paddy field from village families at a cost of 150 *yuan* per *mu*. A dozen of local peasants were hired by the company to do the daily management work on the farm, thoroughly

covering sprout cultivation, transplanting, irrigation, fertilization, chemical spraying, harvesting and so on. The problem mainly lay in the application of chemicals. The overuse of highly toxic chemicals not poisoned injurious insects but killed off frogs, water snakes and even field mice. The mass mortality of these animals sparked a panic among the local villagers. As a result, floating gossips and rumors spread in the village day after day. It is the first time in my memory that Plough Villagers' sense of crisis to their land was aroused. Eventually, the lease of land ended up in local people's endless grumblings and complains.

Another example occurred on the collective hilly land. As mentioned in the second section of this chapter, Plough Villagers constructed several bamboo gardens in the collective era. One of these gardens was planted spring bamboos (*ph. praecox*), or "thunder bamboos" as the locals would like to say. From 2000 to 2007, this thunder bamboo garden was contracted to a rich farmer from the neighbouring Mu Village and shift to produce out-of-season bamboo shoots. Every early winter, the farmer employed six or seven peasants to cap a thick insulating layer piled by duck/pig manures and rice chaffs on the garden. This practice artificially elevated the temperature of the soil surrounding the bamboo roots to about 30 °C and thus compelled the bamboo to grow out shoots in the frozen winters. In 2002, due to the unusual dry and cold weather in the winter, the normal insulating layer could not raise the land temperature to the required level. At last, the rich farmer ordered his employees to add lumps of caustic lime to the capping manures. His decision finally led to a catastrophic result. The overused lime lumps by the inexperienced peasants sparked off dry rice chaffs and destroyed a large part of the garden.

However, even that was not the full story. In normal circumstances, after a

long winter, new bamboo roots all burrowed into the upper layer of capping manures. In order to prevent bamboos lodging, the contractor always asked his employees to bank up the bamboo garden with earth after the harvest and apply sufficient fertilizers to strengthen those newly-grown but delicate roots. In 2007, namely the final year of his contract, the contractor nevertheless stopped all the land preservation work. On the contrary, he covered the garden with an unprecedentedly thick “insulating layer” so as to activate the bamboo roots to shoot rapidly and exploit all the productive potentials of the soil. As a peasant who once worked in the bamboo garden commented,

“The boss [the contractor] didn’t really concern with bamboos’ growth because the bamboo garden was not his own thing. In his minds, I think, the best thing was nothing but to drain off all the land capability. So, we all see, he stopped heaping soil to the bamboos in the last year of the contract period. He was dying to make bamboos grown shoots, as many as he wanted. It was only a one-off business [local idiom: *du hui shengyi*]¹. Little did he care about your life or death.”

“Little did he care about your life or death.” It is indeed the living embodiment of the contractor’s, or put it bluntly, a capitalist tenant farmer’s attitude to the rented land. For Plough Village and her people, it might be a new issue. For the world history of capitalism, nevertheless, it is no more than a platitude. As a matter of fact, the expansion of capitalist mode of production and accordingly the flourishing of a great capitalist civilization (e.g. the United States), as Max Weber (1948: 385) suggested, presupposed the availability and occupation of the vast free soil. In the third volume of *Capital*, Marx also analysed the struggles for the soil fertility and the term

¹ *Du hui shengyi*: 独回生意。

of the lease between tenant farmer and landowner (Marx, 1981: 756-757). It presented a similar case that occurred hundreds of years ago.

However, the most destructive affair is not the tragedy happened in the thunder bamboo garden but rather the savage plundering of soil on the family farms.

From 2003, Plough Villagers began to cultivate landscape trees in large scale. Their enthusiasm was fostered by the frenzied exploitation of real estate and the wildly-expanded infrastructure construction in towns and cities. The expansion of urban capital in those fields steadily produced demands for roadside trees and greening trees. Nowadays, the areas of landscape trees planted in Plough Village have reached about 250 *mu*. The rapid expansion of these commercial trees not only leads to a direct result of social disintegration as we will discuss in detail in next chapter, but also impoverishes the soil. It eventually results in, to use Marx's term, an irreparable metabolic rift of nature and society (Marx, 1981: 949; Foster, 2000).

In today's Plough Village, camphor tree is one of the most widely planted tree species, accounting for 80%~90% of the total planting area (about 200 *mu*). It is a fast plant that normally grows about 100 cm higher and 2.5 cm wider per year before it comes to maturity. During their growing period, camphor trees suck large quantity of nutrient matter—both naturals and chemicals—from the soil.

What really captures my attention yet is not the loss of soil nutrients brought about by the growth of the tree but the exploitation of soil through the circulation of commodity from the village to towns. According to market

demands, villagers must plant a camphor tree for more than three years until its mean diameter at breast height grows to no less than 8 cm. Then the tree owner hires some local villagers to dig the trees out and package them for transportation. In order to enhance the survival rate of transplanted trees, tree mongers always require villagers to wrap up tree roots with paddy soil. The paddy soil round tree roots are named as “soil ball” (*lanni qiu*) by the locals. In an ideal condition, as a local peasant told me, the diameter of a soil ball must be ten times larger than the breast-height diameter of the tree. For instance, a five-years-old tree whose breast-height diameter is about 10 cm should take a soil ball with a diameter of one meter. However, it is merely a theoretical value. In practice, the soil ball demanded by the tree mongers is much bigger, usually being twelve to fifteen times larger than the tree’s breast-height diameter. The reason is very simple. The best season for tree transplanting is the early and middle spring, from March to April, before the tree flowering period. For local villagers, however, the actual transplanting date in Plough Village is determined by the progress of a construction project which might be carried out hundreds of kilometers away. When I was doing my field work in the summer 2009, I happened to meet a series of transactions between the villagers and tree mongers. As far as I could see, the trees dug out by the villagers always took huge soil balls. It was quite common that a tree which was merely the 8 cm thick had a soil ball with a diameter of more than 100 cm. Such a tiny tree with a huge soil ball normally needed more than three male labourers to carry from the field to the vehicle. In light of local people’s estimate, the soil ball weighed at least 100 catties.

At the first blush, the loss of soil through soil balls is no more than a secondary product of the commercial transaction between tree planters and tree mongers. However, the depletion of the soil in the village presents a

ghastly sight. In fact it leads to catastrophic consequences. In usual practice, every *mu* paddy field can plant 400~500 camphor trees. It means that 400~500 soil balls will be dug out in three to five years. A soil ball, say the least, weighs 100 catties. Thus, when all the trees are sold out, this piece of land will lose 40,000 to 50,000 catties of paddy soil (or 20 to 25 tons). The whole village hereby will totally lose 8 million to 10 million catties (20,000 to 25,000 tons) of paddy soil! It is equivalent to 5 to 6 times of the the annual production of staple grains in the village. In other words, the yearly quantity of the soil output to towns and cities is even larger than the quantity of rice yielded in the village.

It is clear, once the soil is removed from the field and transported to towns and cities, it will never come back. Nevertheless, what is accounted here is only the loss of the soil in one round of cultivation. As long as the level of profits in tree planting is higher than that in rice cultivation, villagers will not give up this money-making business. Indeed whether and when will the local people stop this business is not dependent on their personal willingness but rather on the profit margin which is determined by the general economic conditions, especially on the boom and slump of the infrastructure construction in surrounding urban areas. In brief, the profit margin, working as the “invisible hand”, manipulates villagers’ productive activities. The agrarian production in this field has been totally subsumed into the commodity chain which is dominated by urban capital and far beyond local people’s control.

What is more serious is that the loss of paddy soil is irreversible for the village. With the disintegration of the “swine - grain type” economy, Plough Villagers have already largely lost the farming techniques to nourish farmland with farmyard manures. The disappearance of those organic

supplementary fertilizers makes it further impossible for the land to regenerate sufficient soil to remedy its loss. In this way, the antagonistic relationship or the rupture between the village and urban areas is deeply etched in the movement of the soil, a most humble thing in the countryside. The development of capitalist farming in the village, to a great extent, destroys the nutrient circling of the soil and the country people.

As already discussed earlier in this chapter, the beneficial circle of nutrients is a necessary condition for the continuance of traditional peasant economy, and the extended nutrient circling is a component part of collective economy. In a similar way, the metabolic rift of nature and society is also inherent in today's peasant household economy. In other words, it is not an incidental, but rather an inexorable, in the capitalist economy. As observed from Plough Village, pre-capitalist peasant economy, socialist collective economy and capitalist agriculture conform to different economic logics and possess different production barriers respectively. To use a political economist's words, the break of nutrient circulation of the soil on the commercial and capitalist (petty) farms "is not merely an empirically observed fact, but also the product of an inescapable economic logic which has operated in the actual history of capitalist production in agriculture" (Patnaik. 1999: 60).

4. Summary

In this chapter, I have explored the process of man-land relations in Plough Village, with a storyline of the nutrient circling and metabolic rift between nature and human society, and between the countryside and the city. The nutrient circling of the soil, as elaborated in the concrete expositions above, is far from a mechanical movement predominated by some natural laws or orders (as that in chemistry, physics, pedology or agronomy, etc.), but rather

a very sociological reality which has been and is still being conditioned by different social and economic forces. The maintenance/breakage of the material circulation in the soil is determined by struggles and conflicts between/among those forces. No change of the social metabolism as we discussed above takes place outside specific contradictions.

In traditional China, the peasant economy on the petty family farms was mainly subject to the exploitation of landlord economy and feudal taxes and services. The land therefore had a political and economical significance. It not only maintained direct producers' subsistence but also held up the landlords, bureaucrats, aristocrats and other parasitical classes. Accordingly, the self-filling circling of nutrient materials in the traditional peasant economy was sandwiched between the feudal exploitation and the increasing burden to feed a huge population. Its scale, on the basis of private property, was largely limited in the family farm.

Yet, the establishment of collective economy in Plough Village broke the narrow boundary of the old family economy. The development of traditional farming techniques and, in particular, the upsurge of broad mass movements in farmland improvement and water conservancy construction laid a solid foundation for nutrient circling in an extended scale, from production teams, to the brigade and furthermore to the whole commune. The extended material circling in collective economy took root in accumulation of collective in the long run.

Rural reform launched in the late 1970s smashed the collective accumulation mechanism and returned the village to the *defacto* petty peasant economy. By re-establishing private property, the reform provoked frequent quarrels and struggles for public wealth between different

households. Moreover, the decline of collective economy made the integrated land management impossible. As a result, the soil quality of different farms became diverged rapidly. It increasingly became an irreversible process. Meanwhile, agricultural production in Plough Village was gradually absorbed into the commodity economy. This process once activated is never interrupted. Indeed, whether commoditization in the mid-1990s or the “de-commodification” in the late 1990s signifies nothing but the increasing integration of the peasant household farming into the turbulent commodity tides aroused by the overall market economy.

A most deep-going transformation rather comes from the development of the capital-intensified crops in recent years. This new commercialized farming leads to a thorough reversal in human-land relationship. On the camphor tree farms, as observed from the village, soil has been drained from the field and hence separated from people’s life completely. Multiple social meanings once attached to the land have been peeled away. The old conception of land which combines land and labour, life and nature as an “articulate whole” (Polanyi, 2001: 187) has largely vanished. The economic value that is the availability of the soil to satisfy the requirements of a commodity market becomes the only value of the land. The soil itself also becomes a vital part of the exchange value of commodities—even if the both sides of trade have not appreciated this point in depth.

As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, rural reformers sang high praise for the Household Responsibility system and treated it as a magic bullet for rural revival and economic booming. In a frequently-quoted document, the land allocation, or in specific words, the dismantlement of people’s communes and the establishment of the household responsibility system were even trumpeted as “the first leap” of reform and development

of the socialist agriculture in China. On this basis, another leap that is the development of a fairly large-scale and collective economy can be realized at last (Deng Xiaoping, 1993: 355). However, the turbulent tides of private property aroused by the rural reform have washed out this wishful thinking completely. In brief, the rural reformers possess too stereotyped and essentialized an understanding of the human-land relationship that, as long as they have the land in hand, do the rural producers cherish their land and invest their best to agrarian production. They are simply blind to a plain truth that every certain period of history has its specific contradiction(s) whose movements ultimately condition the human-land relationship during this time. The story of Plough Village, as demonstrated in this chapter, just furnishes a counter-evidence that, in a capitalist market economy, the scattered rural petty producers cannot enrich their land; rather, even their soil will be plundered.

CHAPTER 4

Social Differentiation and Class Relations

“In the 1980s, we spent 2,000 *yuan* in building a house; in the 1990s, we spent 20,000 *yuan*; now (in the 2000s), 200,000 *yuan*. So I think we might have to pay 2,000,000 *yuan* to build a house in the next ten years... At first (in the 1980s), eight out of ten families could afford a new house; in the 1990s, only four families had that ability; now merely two families are still possible. Ten year later, I’m afraid only one family in the whole village is possible to build a new house by using up all the family fortunes (*qingjia dangchan*). Anybody else who wants a house must rob a rank first!”

In the summer 2009, a senior resident in Pot Hill described Plough Villagers’ experiences in building houses after rural reform for me. Although his narrative is appreciably exaggerated and his “prediction” might not come true exactly, from his words, I still read out some significant information about the social differentiation in the village. That is, since the late 1970s, Plough Village has undergone a rapid polarization between the rich and the poor. As illustrated in his description, the number of villagers who are able to raise new houses has been dramatically dropping off in last three decades.

Since the rural reform, Plough villagers have experienced three times of upsurges in house construction. The initial upsurge happened in the mid-1980. In that period, most families built their new houses or, at least, renovated their old houses. As a result, single-storey cottages with the brick-wood structure became the most popular house style. During that

period, storied buildings were still rare in the village. According to the local people's recollection, there were generally three categories of two-floor buildings. The first kind was the old wooden houses which were handed down from local gentries and lords before the Liberation. The second kind were public buildings, including the village convention hall (*da hui tang*), the brigade high school building,¹ and the brigade's office building, which were all constructed in the period of Cultural Revolution. The last kind of two-floor buildings was new-style houses built in the middle years of the 1980s. They were owned by four or five new rich families. From the early 1990s, more people began to construct two-floor buildings. In the middle 1990s, another upsurge of house construction sprang up. About half families were settled in new storied houses. In recent years, new villa-like houses come to style in surrounding rural areas. Nowadays, these reinforced concrete buildings are also welcomed by Plough Villagers. In the summer 2009, I happened to see nine families constructing these villa-like houses at the same time. However, this upsurge is not so hot as the last two ones. Villagers who are able to build these expensive houses are not many. Only the richest families can afford such a luxury house indeed. Take a rich family's house for example. Guofang and his family are a well-to-do (but not the richest) in Rice side. During 2008 to 2009, they built a villa-style house. I recorded expenses of the main items as follows:

1. Cost of basic construction (including cost of construction material and wages of plasterers, electricians and casual labourers): 120,000~130,000 *yuan*;
2. Cost of stairway decoration: 13,000 *yuan*;
3. Cost of decoration materials (including kitchen, bath room, but excluding the stairway): 31,500;

¹ After Chairman Mao's death, the brigade high school was transformed to village primary school.

4. Cost of the gate house, courtyard walls and others: 23,600 *yuan*;
5. Wages of lacquerers: 18,000 *yuan*;
6. Wages of carpenters: 15,000 *yuan*.

It is necessary to mention that, when I left the village, Guofang's house has not been completed. In order to finish the remaining decoration work, the house owner must spend another 20,000~30,000 *yuan*. So it is not hard to estimate that the cost they spent on the house would reach a total of no less than 250,000 *yuan*. To translate it into something more familiar, a local moderate-income family who has an annual balance of about 20,000 *yuan* would spend no less than 12 years to accumulate such a large sum of money, on condition that no severe inflation would happen during that period.

However, even Guofang's house is still regarded as an "ordinary" one, because this house only has a semi-frame structure. The construction cost¹ of such a house reaches 670 *yuan/m*², whereas a fully-frame-structure house normally amounts to 800~900 *yuan/m*². It is not unusual to see a country house being worth more than 400,000 *yuan*. For low-income households, that is really an astronomical number. As a poor resident in Rice Side sighed,

"We poor people will never get enough money to build this little foreign-style house (*xiao yangfang*). Even if we toil all our lives, we are still unable to save up enough money. Even if all our bodies and all our stones are sold to the market, it's still impossible for us to settle in a house of this kind. Very clearly, it's not gonna happen to us. It's all heaven sent."

Of course, not every family in Plough Village pursues a villa-like house. For most families, a well-decorated storied building is a more realistic pursuit. But for low-income families, even an ordinary house is not easy to get.

¹ That is the cost for manufacturing the rough house without decorations.

Changju (54 years old), another resident in Rice Side, is a good example for this. As Guofang's neighbour, Changju's family have lived in an old cottage for several decades. This tiny cottage with a small piece of front courtyard was built before the Liberation and taken over from Changju's father. Recent years, the cottage became dilapidated, and its roof leaked. Since it is not easy to patch holes and slits in the roof and walls, Changju and his family determined to rebuild their cottage. According to a plasterer's estimate, the construction cost of his cottage was only 80 *yuan*/m². Counting all costs of materials and labour in, the total estimated expenses reached about 30,000 *yuan*. For a moderate-income family in Plough Village, it was not much money. However, for a cash-trapped family like Changju's, even "30,000 *yuan*" was not a small amount. Finally, Changju and his wife were compelled to ask their relatives and friends for loans. For me, it was quite a sad experience to listen to this honest and sincere couple talking about all their hardships in raising money: how difficult for them to struggle to lay down their face, how sad when they were repeatedly rejected by their sisters and brothers in the first days, and how happy when they finally scraped up the miserable "30,000 *yuan*".

Changju and his family's experience is not uncommon in Plough Village. Today, any person who has had an opportunity to visit the village cannot but be impressed with a jagged building pattern which interlocks small run-down cottages, old/new storied buildings and luxury villa-style houses in one place. It is evident that poor families and rich families in the village have become quite distinct from each other. This physical image thus delivers profound social information to the visitor that, after some three decades' development, the equalitarian society of the collective era has been largely destroyed.

This chapter proceeds to explore the social differentiation in Plough Village throughout the reform era. In the following sections, five groups of villagers with different means of livelihood will be focused in particular: 1. Farming households; 2. Skilled peasants and rural handicraftsmen; 3. Casual labourers and rural coolies; 4. Peasant workers; 5. Private entrepreneurs, businessmen and big farmers. By investigating different people's situations and positions in specific relations of production, I will try to present a picture of class relations which was formed in the reform era.

1. The ups and downs of farming households

1.1 Peasant-household economy with the nourishment of the community

As mentioned in the last chapter, although rural reform beginning in the late 1970s abolished the commune system and drew the village back to the peasant-household economy, the village continued to benefit from the legacies of collective economy. Local people enjoyed the already-made fruits of collective constructions which included the relatively complete water conservancy facilities, the leveled farmland and fertile soil, the inexpensive cooperative medical service as well as the cheap elementary education in village school (the latter two were funded by incomes from the collective forestry). The rapid development of the village in the first years of the rural reform, as it were, was directly nourished by the long-time constructions and accumulations in the collective era.

The appearance of prosperity in agriculture and rural life during the initial years of the reform era, in accordance, rooted in the reassignment of interest between the collective and individual households. First, and the most

obvious, the dismemberment of collective property laid the foundation of primary capital accumulation for several families in the village. Those families who obtained the management rights of the brigade pasture, the small plastic factory, collective tea hills and orange gardens from the villagers' committee got rich first. They settled in the new storied houses earlier than any other villagers. The "new rich" emerging in the rural reform was set up as good examples for the villagers to pursue their happy lives in an increasingly commoditized world. They were showcases of the success of the rural reform. Without question, it also signified the beginning of social differentiation. Furthermore, both the labour previously invested in collective constructions and the income used for the collective accumulation was transformed to family production and personal consumption.

1.2 The disintegration of peasant-household economy

As a general rule, peasant economy—or the petty landed proprietors' social production, in more formal wording—presupposes rural domestic industries, e.g. household handicrafts, petty manufactures and other family sideline productions, as complementary activities to agriculture. In other words, peasant economy in itself constitutes "a system of simple commodity production both in agriculture and trade" (Luxemburg, 1951: 368). Just as Marx put it, "[the] existence of domestic handicrafts and manufacture as an ancillary pursuit to agriculture, which forms the basis, is the condition for the mode of production on which [the] natural economy is based..." (Marx, 1981: 922). One of the major socio-economic effects of capitalism thus is the abolishment of the organic connection between agriculture and rural subsidiary businesses. With regard to China, the combination of crop farming and family sideline has been the basic economic form in the countryside for a long time. In a traditional rural society, the "mutually supplement between agriculture and industry" (*nonggong hubu*) was

normally seen as the healthy state of the natural economy (Fei, 1953:119).

The so-called “genuine natural economy”, as Marx defined in the third volume of *Capital*, refers to a mode of production which contains two distinguishing features: First, in this economic mode, the possession of the land is a prerequisite for the producer’s ownership over the product of his own labour; second, the producer under this mode of production, whether he is a free tiller or not, has to work as an isolated labourer (with his family) and produce the means of subsistence for himself (Marx, 1981: 943). Now that the ownership of farmland still belongs to the collective¹ in a legal sense (and at least in name), moreover, the economic aspirations cover not merely personal/family consumption but always cash income for extending reproduction, so it is not very precise to consider the peasant-household economy established in the rural reform as identical to a “genuine natural economy”. Even though, the peasant-household economy still has similar characteristics with the classical peasant economy.

Peasant-household economy in Plough Village, as discussed before, always stood on the foundation of collective economy. The transient flourishing of peasant economy in the reform era presupposed the maintenance of village community in which local people’s productive skills, life styles and values could be preserved. Moreover, social mutual assistance among relatives and neighbours also helped to maintain the community. It is clear that, the maintenance of village community nourished the peasant economy. However, only this was still not sufficient to support the economic prosperity. Villagers also received benefit from the adjustment of the crop structure in the initial years of the reform. What is most obvious was the dramatic expansion of cash crop cultivation. One of the most popular cash

¹ Paddy fields and hilly land in Plough Village are ultimately possessed by the villagers’ committee.

crops was watermelon. From the early 1980s to the middle 1990s, as the local villagers recollected, nearly all families planted watermelons (as well as various muskmelons) in spring and summer. The annual planting areas for melons doubled within fifteen years, rising from slightly less than 150 *mu* to about 300 *mu*. Calculating the average output of watermelons as 7,500 catties per *mu*, the gross output increased from 1,125,000 catties to 2,250,000 catties¹. The similar situation also happened in the plantation of rape seeds and water bamboos. As for the water bamboo, its planting areas even expanded in the mid-1990s while other cash crops were all in a rapid shrinkage.

The enlargement of planting areas of cash crops indicated the development of commercial agriculture. The latter further boosted local people's money income. As the village production was increasingly integrated into commodity market, production risks and uncertainties have also risen and finally led to a disintegration of the peasant-household economy.

One of the most obvious instances for the disintegration of peasant-household economy in Plough Village was the collapse of the family pig husbandry in the middle 1990s. Pig husbandry, as a crucial supplementary business to crop farming, was quite popular in the village fifteen years ago. In the conventional understanding, household pig raising was usually regarded as a money-losing business. For pig raisers, the benefit of this business was indirect (Cao Jinqing et al, 1995: 185-187): In the first place, it produced manures for the peasant household. Normally, a pig which weighed more than 100 catties could produce 20~30 catties excrement per day. Since local people were used to bedding their pigsties with rice straws,

¹ Since there are no official records about the yields of watermelons in the village, these figures are only estimated by the locals. Although they are not very precise, it still does not prevent us from getting a general picture from these figures.

a peasant annually could store compost more than 10,000 catties from a pig (FLSC, 1979: 33). Hence, feeding pigs became a most important source of fertilizers. Another advantage of pig husbandry was that it could make productive use of waste materials from people's everyday life. All leftovers, surplus vegetables, potatoes and melons could be used to feed pigs. In this way, pig husbandry minimized waste for the raiser. What is more, this petty industry also served as a way of saving for a peasant family. It was said that, by investing scattered money into pig husbandry during a breeding period, the pig raiser would obtain a tidy sum of cash when he sold out his hogs. With this money, he could pay the debt, repair a house or do some important events of his family (Cao Jinqing et al, 1995: 186).

However, the issue in Plough Village assumed a different feature. The main objective of pig raising for the locals was not saving money but rather getting more cash income. Indeed, it was a profitable business in most years before the mid-1990s. Under normal circumstances, the raiser could reap a profit of about 150 *yuan* from a porker and about 200 *yuan* from a sow in the early 1990s¹. As a result, the breeding scale of pigs expanded rapidly. Qiqiang, a previous pig-raiser in Rice Side, said:

"... [In the early 1990s] Nearly all the families in Rise Side raised pigs; porkers, sows, or both. Of course, there were some exceptions but they were in the minority. Usually older people who lacked labour force didn't feed pigs by themselves, but some of them who were strong enough still helped to take care of their sons' pigs. Others who didn't keep pigs were those specialized households like Chunde's family.² They all did other serious work... All in all, seven or eight out of ten families were engaged in this business... Raising pigs once brought about goodness in many ways. Most obviously, it could increase our income. When the market was strong, a pig was worth more than 800 *yuan*. My net income from the pig often reached more than 200

¹ I got these figures from the interview with Qiqiang. See below.

² Chunde was a well-known rich villager in Plough Village. He amassed a large fortune by keeping bees and selling honey and bee milk throughout the mid-1980s to mid-1990s.

yuan. At that time, ‘200 *yuan*’ was not a small deal of money. It was at least equal to today’s 2,000 *yuan*, I think. Then I also got pig manures. Unlike now, those days we still used the pig soil to fertilize our rice fields... Besides, we also ate pig’s blood. Some kind butchers might leave us some internal organs, like intestines and lungs, and sometimes they even gave a small piece of pork head meat to us...”

It is worth noting that the transformation of pig husbandry from a losing business to the profitable one mainly resulted from the contraction of the breeding period and especially the brisk market. Through applying plenty of concentrated feeds, pigs grew much faster than before and hence the raising course was cut from more than eight months to only five months. The prevalence of credit sale between the peasant raisers and feeds stores further made the circuit and turnover of capital smoother. Viewed from this angle, pig raising surging in the initial years of the 1990s had distinguished itself from the same business in those earlier years. It was no longer merely a kind of sideline business that was bound to the household farming organically. On the contrary, it had been broken away from agricultural production and increasingly subsumed into the market.

The commoditization of pig husbandry in Plough Village finally weakened local people’s control over the business. Due to the soaring of feed prices and serious falling of pork prices, raisers in the village suffered a serious loss after the mid-1990s. According to a national tracking survey, there are three periods of serious “pig puzzles” (*mai zhu nan*) from 1995 to 2004:

Year PGPR	1995 (~1997)	1998 (~2000)	2001 (~2004)
<1:5.5	22 months	17 months	22 months
(including) <1:5	17 months	12 months	6 months

Notes: 1. PGPR=pig-grain price ratio; 2. PGPR<1:5.5 means “loss”; 3. PGPR <1:5 means “serious loss”.

Sources: Shi Youlong, 2008: 4-6.

Qiqiang told me that, before the mid-1990s, the pig price was relatively stable, and most raisers in Plough Village made a good profit from this business. His breeding scale hence extended from only one sow in the late 1980s to four sows and thirteen large porkers in 1996. Then his family became the biggest pig raiser in Rice Side. Unexpectedly, in just one year, he lost more than 8,000 *yuan* in the deal. In early 1997, he had to dispose of all his pigs, both porkers and sows and piglets, at very low prices.

“A beautiful sow was only worth 200 *yuan*.” He said with a bitter smile, “My sixteen little pigs were almost taken away by the pig-mongers for free. I really lost all my money and can’t regain even my original capitals (*xue ben wu gui*)!” Even so, he still had to use a considerable part of family savings to pay debts to feeds stores. It was most pig raisers’ destiny in those years. Nowadays, except a private pig farm which keeps about 80 pigs at the foot of western hills¹, there are no more than 15 individual families still raising pigs as before. Under pressure of the external market which is always unpredictable for scattered peasantry, the traditional peasant economy of “swine-grain type” (*liang zhu xing*) (Wen Tiejun, 2000: 338-339) in the locality has largely collapsed.

As regards to the decline of family stock raising in Plough Village, the collapse of pig husbandry undoubtedly is the most marked event. Beyond that, other domestic live stocks, such as chicken, goose, duck, rabbit, goat and so forth, which were all fairly common animals and often grazed around rural cottages, have gradually disappeared and become the “rare animals”. All these facts signify a systematic transformation in the peasant economy formed in rural reform. If we take the family farming and family sideline production as the two legs of the peasant economy, obviously that the

¹ Indeed this pig farm was transformed from the collective herding pasture of Plough Brigade after the rural reform.

process of commodification has broken one of its legs.

As for the other leg, the rapid marketization also badly disabled agricultural production. In the last chapter when we analyzed the impoverishment of soil fertility, we discussed the phenomena of “decommodification” in the production of field cash crops (e.g. rape seeds, shell-less barleys, water melons, water bamboos and so on). It manifested Plough people’s failure in the market competition when they tried to integrate their scattered peasant-household production to the larger commodity economy after the rural reform.

1.3 The income level of purely-farming households in Plough Village

The so-called “purely-farming households”, or *nongmin hu*, as local people would say, are the families who totally or mainly get income from agriculture. Before the middle 1990s, they were the predominant population in the village. Yet, after about ten years, they have become the minority. As some villagers’ estimate, today only less than one tenth families still make their living by farming, and most of them are aged families. Except several particularly poor households who are stuck in serious predicaments, the so-called *nongmin hu* virtually constitute the most disadvantaged group in the village. Compare with other people, their income is quite slender. In March 2010, a local villager made out a bill for me. In an ordinary family of three people including, say, a couple and a child, if they cultivated 4.5 *mu* paddy fields and 0.3 *mu* dry land and fed some domestic birds for their own consumption, their life must fall into a straitened circumstance. In a good year, the family could harvest early rice about 850 catties per *mu* and late

rice 950 catties per *mu*¹. So their paddy fields could annually yield early rice 3,825 catties and late rice 4,275 catties in total. In the light of local people's eating habits, every year, about 400 catties early rice and 600 catties late rice must be left for the family consumption. Another 900 catties early rice should be set aside to feed chickens and ducks². Besides, about 55 catties early paddy (12 catties per *mu*) and 60 catties late paddy (13 catties per *mu*) should be deducted as seeds for the following farming season. In the end, this family could sell 2,470 catties early rice and 3,615 catties late rice to the market. In 2009, the procurement prices of early rice and late rice were 1.18 *yuan*/cattie and 1.14 *yuan*/cattie respectively. On the basis of above calculation, the family could obtain about 7,350 *yuan* in cash³. As for the cost of production, since those villagers usually worked for themselves and hence did not need to pay themselves wages, their cost primarily concentrated on rental charges for agricultural machinery and expenses on terms of chemical fertilizers and pesticides. In 2009, the fee for tractor-ploughing was 70 *yuan* per *mu* in each season, the same as the fee for reaping machines. In order to maintain the double cropping system in their own fields, the family must pay the tractor drivers and harvester drivers totally 1,260 *yuan* a year⁴. Another big outlay is for the farming chemicals. Annually and on each *mu* of paddy land, the family must spend about 150 *yuan* and 250 *yuan* respectively on pesticides and chemical fertilizers. So their total cost on chemicals reached 1,800 *yuan*⁵. After the deduction of production cost, the cash income from farming was about 4,290 *yuan*⁶. (If we convert their self-consumed rice all to money at the

¹ In this section, "rice" always refers to the unhusked paddy.

² Normally, Plough Villagers use unhusked early rice to feed domestic animals, because early rice is often cheaper than late rice. Of course, it is not always the case. In 2009, for instance, the price of early rice is a little higher than that of late rice.

³ $2,470 \times 1.18 + 3,615 \times 1.14 = 7,354.3$ (yuan)

⁴ $(70 \times 2 + 70 \times 2) \times 4.5 = 1,260$ (yuan)

⁵ $150 \times 4 + 250 \times 4 = 1,800$ (yuan)

⁶ $7,354.3 - 1,260 - 1,800 = 4,294.3$ (yuan)

market price, another 2,340 *yuan* could be added¹. In addition, the family can also get a grain subsidy from the government which is about 40 *yuan* per *mu*-season. Hence they might obtain an income of 6,990 *yuan* from household farming work.) In addition, they might also cultivate the small plot of dry land to grow seasonal vegetables for self consumption.

Then what does an income of “4,290 *yuan*” to this family? In order to answer this question, it is best to look at other families’ daily expenses first. In a moderate-income family, the expenditure on food and drink usually amounts to more than 600 *yuan* a month. My own family, for example, is a typical lower middle-income in Plough Village. When I was doing my field work in summer 2009, I recorded our expenses on food in two months. In September, the cost was 536.7 *yuan*, and in October, it reached 673.4 *yuan*. Because of my being there, my parents’ everyday cost became much higher than before. In normal days, my parents’ outlay on food was often less than 15 *yuan* per day. In this way, they would spend about 5,000 *yuan* on food annually (leaving out of costs of rice, fruit, snacks, and necessary big expenses on family parties). In this way, my parents maintained an austere life. Thus we can see that “4,290 *yuan*” is a very meager income in the locality, barely enough to support a hand-to-mouth way of life for a family.

It is evident that, merely relying on products from their land, most villagers are not able to maintain even a minimum standard of living in the village. The increasing pressure to acquire money has been forcing local people to look for supplementary employment outside their family farms.

¹ $(400+900+55) \times 1.18 + (600+60) \times 1.14 = 2,341.3$ (*yuan*); NOTE: since the rice for self use is not exchanged in the market—in other words, it is not the real commodity, “2,341.3 *yuan*” is nothing but a theoretical value. This figure can only be used by us to estimate the income the family gets from agriculture.

2. Livelihood diversification in the village

Rural livelihood diversification, as defined by Frank Ellis (1998: 4), is “the process by which rural families construct a diverse portfolio of activities and social support capabilities in their struggle for survival and in order to improve their standards of living”. It primarily includes three categories of income sources, including

1. *Farm income*: output-sold of crop and livestock;
2. *Off-farm income*: wage or exchange labour on other farms;
3. *Non-farm income*: non-agricultural income sources. (Ellis, 1998: 5)

The diversification of peasant livelihood not only reflects changes in villagers’ household strategies, but signifies a profound transformation in the structure of peasant-household economy. Most importantly, it provides a proper access to the research on those extremely important trends in the changes of class structure in specific rural societies.

This section proceeds to discuss the livelihood diversification in Plough Village. Unlike some conventional understanding which simply interprets livelihood diversification in Chinese rural societies as a striking expression of the vitality of rural economy promoted by the rural reform, my discussion will be focused more on the interconnections between different peasant groups in the spectrum of social strata. I will avoid treating the country people as a homogeneous entity but rather giving my close attention to the stratification which has been existing in the peasant households.

In accordance with Ellis’s categorization of rural income sources, two major types of peasants will be underscored: one is casual labourers, or “patch

workers” who undertake different kinds of temporary employments, both off-farm and non-farm, to support the household reproduction; and the other is peasant workers, namely the villagers who obtain steady wage income from factory labour. By investigating these two sorts of rural residents (who combine to occupy the majority of the population indeed), a scenario of class relationships in Plough Village will be delineated in the following texts.

2.1 Why diversify?

Prior to the concrete discussion of the livelihood diversification in Plough Village, a prerequisite question should be answered first, that is, why are the local people able to diversify their income sources? The final cause without question lays in the vast upsurge of commodity economy in national economy since the rural reform. The commodification of means of subsistence and production poses a very “simple reproduction squeeze” to rural producers, especially to the poor peasants (Bernstein, 1979; 2006). Another cause is the idle labour created by the rural reform. Leaving these two general issues aside, we should bring several conditions into our field of vision:

The first condition is the popularization of farming machinery. As mentioned in the previous chapter, before the Liberation, the chief-tillage tool in the locality was the pronged drag-hoe (*tieda*), and only a small number of villager gentries, lords and rich farmers possessed the traditional type of ploughs, named “old wooden ploughs” (*lao mu li*). By the mid-1960s, a type of reformed iron ploughs—“five-one ploughs” (*wu yi li*)—were popularized in Plough Village and took the place of “old wooden ploughs”. It is clear, before this, the work of land preparation in the village was mainly completed by human hands and draught animals. The farming

efficiency was relatively weak. Using a pronged drag-hoe, for example, an adult male peasant needed about four days to prepare one *mu* of paddy land (Fei, 1939: 160). Using an old-type plough, he could plow no more than three *mu* per day, while employing a reformed iron plough he could till about five *mu* per day. The real breakthrough of farming technology consisted in the wide use of large agricultural machinery. As already observed in Plough Village, by the late 1970s, more than half of paddy fields had been ploughed by tractors (see Chapter 3, 2.3). Nowadays, there are four wheel-type tractors using for land tillage in the village. Tractors' working efficiency is much higher than ploughs and human hands¹. In addition, the introduction of combine harvesters reduces labour time in harvest season dramatically. A combine harvester combines hooks, rice threshers and electric fans in one machine and replaces manual work of rice reaping, threshing and winnowing. As a result, it can reap and process about fifteen *mu* paddy everyday whereas an adult peasant can only reap less than 1.5 *mu*.

Similarly, the improvement of cultivation technology also helps to increase farming efficiency. As the local tillers might hold, the most significant improvement in agriculture is the introducing of techniques of paddy direct and throwing-seedling. With the popularization of these farming techniques in the late 1990s, the unit farming time has been dramatically shortened. As Lichang, a senior villager in Rice Side estimated, for paddy cultivation, an experienced adult labourer can plant more than 3 *mu* of paddy fields per day by direct seedling and about 2.5 *mu* by throwing seedling, whereas by hand s/he could only transplant about 0.5 *mu* from dawn to dusk. In other words, with the new techniques, production efficiency has been multiplied 5 to 6 times. Moreover, as the direct seedling becomes a popular way, villagers

¹ Normally, a tractor can till more than ten *mu* of paddy land every day.

reduce the traditional procedure of seedling nursing in plastic-film sheds. It further decreases labour time.

In the first years of rural reform, local people usually invested more than 20 man-days into cultivate one *mu* of rice fields in a farming year; however, now they only spend no more than 10 days in doing so. In brief, the wide use of agricultural machines and new farming techniques brings about a tremendous liberation to Plough Villagers and frees them from their backbreaking labour.

Apart from technical factors, the development of industry in the locality provides a significant way out for the idle labourers. Today, more than a third of villagers are working in various factories and companies nearby.

2.2 Casual labourers (or “patch workers”)

In today’s Plough Village, most families getting an independent livelihood on dwarf farms have earnings on the side. Villagers of this kind occupy about 90% of the total working population. Among these people, about half of them who are generally younger and more vigorous seek jobs in vicinal factories or work for some commercial organizations; the other half obtain supplementary incomes from various temporary occupations which are either off-farming or non-farming, or both. Of course, the boundary between these two categories is not absolute. Factory workers might become casual labourers if they are unfortunately lose their jobs for a variety of reasons. Some rural casual labourers might also look for job in towns even though the restrictions are many and hence the chances are rare. Moreover, it is not unusual that, in a family, some members work in factories and others work as casual labourers. In this sub-section, I will look into the second half of villagers first while leave the former half being discussed in the next one.

In the village, local people often juxtapose “*lingong*” (casual labourers) against “*kugong*” (literally, “bitter labourers” or, to use an “old” term, “coolies”). Indeed, they do not point to two different groups of people with distinct labour characteristics, but rather refer to a kind of villagers who unite two evident features. On one hand, this large crowd group of people normally makes their living by doing contingent jobs on the basis of verbal agreements rather than any normal contracts (to supplement their family incomes from agricultural production). Therefore, they are always casual labourers with temporary employment. On the other hand, these people most of the time undertake laborious work and perform as humble coolies in the countryside.

Since they are casual labourers and as ignoble as a group of agrarian coolies, these villagers are ready to do every kind of peasant supplementary employment. Indeed it is difficult to convey the sheer complexity of their occupation status. As far as I have observed in the village, they are often devoted themselves to, at least, repairing village roads, dredging and making irrigation ditches, transporting building materials, collecting rubbish, cleaning village toilets, constructing refuse rooms, chopping firewood, raising pigs, butchering chickens/dugs/hugs/goats/dogs, carrying coffins, reclaiming wasteland, and all sorts of farming work. Accordingly, these villagers sell their labour force and workmanship to all sorts of employers including private bosses, rich farmers, businessmen, peasant workers, rural handicraftsmen, tractor/harvester drivers, common households who lack labour, and village collective.

The diversity of employment of casual labourers implies the state of labour market in the locality which is flexible and fragmented. Thus it seems

impossible to find out any explicit line running through the market. One thing, nonetheless, is still clear that most job opportunities welling up in Plough Village (and neighbouring villages) involve a twofold reason: one is labour shortage caused by the exodus of working population who are drained off by urban industries; the other lies in the development of commercial agriculture and the revival of rural infrastructural construction in recent years—obviously, rural infrastructural constructions as a central element part of the “new socialist countryside construction” launched by the authorities also serve as a way to reinvigorate the commercial economy in the countryside. In essence, the thriving of peasant casual employment in the village is largely made by the running mechanism of commodity markets which spans rural and urban, agriculture and industry.

The casual labourers themselves very aptly and strikingly describe their own work with the term “hitting patches” (*ding buding*). A peasant devotes himself to the scattered occupations left over by commodity economy as if a needleman puts numerous patches on a rag. His labour experiences demonstrate the utter fragmentation of labour in peasant-household economy. Even so, it is still undeniable that a vast group of Plough Villagers rely firmly on incomes from auxiliary employment.

In order to understand those patch labourers’ situation, I investigated a group of casual collies in Plough Village. This labour team is an informal work team established in the middle of 2004. Usually it has a membership of eight to ten, while its core members are five peasants respectively from Pot Hill, Rice Side (two members), Upper Brook and Grand Field. They are all middle and old aged people whose average age is 59.2; among them, the eldest Minghua is 61 years old, and the youngest Lianqiang is 57 years old. Moreover, Lianqiang performs as the leader of the team and plays a variety

of roles in the team including the organizer, coordinator, accountant and supervisor.

In March 2010, I got an account book from Lianqiang which recorded the team's labour state in a whole year (specifically from February 20, 2009 to February 22, 2010).

Time Name	Feb. (2009)	Mar.	Apr.	May	Jun.	July	Aug.	Sep.	Oct.	Nov.	Dec.	Jan. (2010)	Feb.	Total
LQ	3.5	14	13.5	13	13	4.5	8.5	21.5	6	18.5	20	6	0	142
MH	2	3	5	1	15.5	4	3	20.5	5	13	18.5	4.5	7.5	102.5
HY	0	12	0	12	12.5	0	2.5	21.5	3	19.5	18	6.5	1	107.5
WL	2	12.5	13.5	1.5	13	3.5	1.5	22	6	16.5	13	1.5	0	106.5
YM	2.5	1.5	14	4	15.5	4	3	18.5	5	16	16.5	5	5	110.5
Total	10	43	46	31.5	69.5	16	18.5	104	25	83.5	86	23.5	13.5	569

Note: LQ=Lianqiang; MH=Minghua; HY=Hongyue; WL=Weilie; YM=Yimin.

Unit: Day.

From the table, it is not hard to perceive that the team members each spends more than 100 days on casual work (113.8 days on average)¹. In this process, Lianqiang, as the team leader, obtains the most employment opportunities (142 days) comparing with his fellows (around 105 days). Moreover, the members' labour quantity in different times of the year is also different. It generally corresponds with slack and busyness of farming. As illustrated in the table, in July and August which cover the "double rush for harvesting and sowing" (*shuangqiang*), these five people merely work 34.5 days in total. In April and May, since they are occupied by land preparation, early rice sowing and field management, they also spend less time on casual work. In October when it is in the harvest season of late rice, they go back to their paddy fields again. After busy seasons, their labour opportunity usually

¹ 569 ÷ 5 = 113.8

increases dramatically (June, September, November and December). In other words, casual employment, as it were, is tightly bound to the agricultural production.

As we turn to consider the incomes from doing rural supplementary work, the significance of casual employment will become more obvious. During 2009 and early 2010, wages for these patch workers was 50 to 70 *yuan* per day. Under normal circumstances, scattered journey workers' earning was relatively lower. They were often paid 50 *yuan* for each man-day. Yet, for Lianqiang's team, their daily wage was always a bit higher than scattered labourers because, as a work team, they possessed more bargaining power and could organize themselves to undertake some small (or "bigger") projects. Their income therefore often reached 60 *yuan* per day¹. Hence it can be calculated that a team member's annual income reached about 6,828 *yuan*, or 569 *yuan* per month². This income is largely equal to the income from family farming as we calculated before (6,990 *yuan*). For patch labourers, it constitutes a necessary supplementation to agricultural production.

In these temporary labourers' own eyes, they are all the most humble people in the village. As the eldest team member, Old Minghua stated,

"We are really the low-grade people (*xia dang ren*)³ because we all take the most ignoble and heaviest work but obtain a lowest earning... This is life. When others are eating meat, we walk through their doorway. Then with a great mercy they throw a bone to us. We gnaw bones, while they eat meat. The gap between the rich and the poor is so wide..."

¹ In several occasions, they earned 70 or 80 per day when they did some extremely labourious work.

² $113.8 \times 60 = 6,828$; $6,828 \div 12 = 569$. Noticeably, Lianqiang's earning was much higher than others amounting to 8,520 *yuan* per annum, or 710 *yuan* per month.

³ *Xia dang ren*: 下档人; *zhong dang ren*: 中档人; *gao dang ren*: 高档人.

Indeed Old Minghua divides local families into three grades. In his eyes, the low-grade people are comprised by the casual labourers as mentioned above. The moderate-grade people (*zhong dang ren*) are comprised by the villagers whose family income mainly comes from industrial work. The upper grade (*gao dang ren*) are the several richest families. Along his categorization, I turn my focus to the moderate grade first. After discussing all these grades, I will turn back to this categorization and make a detailed analysis.

2.3 Peasant workers

“Peasant worker” which combines industry and agriculture in a production (and consumption) unit is another primary economic form in Plough Village. Due to the development of industry in this region, local people do not need to leave their homeland for distant towns and cities, as hundreds of millions of China’s rural migrant labourers do, to pursue their factory employment. More than four hundred factories situated in Master Hill, Mercy Town and surrounding areas provide hundreds of jobs to Plough Villagers. In the village, a couple who are both factory workers and retain their family contracted land tend to be well-to-do in Plough Village.

Income differential between peasant workers and patch labourers indicates the ascendant position of the former in economy. Although it is not easy to get an account book which records in detail the income state of peasant workers as we have done for the patch workers, it is still not difficult for us to evaluate their economic conditions. One of the most evident phenomena is that, in the village, most newly-built multi-storey houses are owned by the families who get comfortable incomes from enterprises, while a fair proportion of patch labourers are living in the obsolete cottages and unadorned stored buildings. Moreover, a peasant worker’s income is usually envied by patch labourers. Take a peasant worker’s income level for

instance. Ciying, a 55 years-old woman in Rice Side, serves as an odd-job lady in Green Farm¹. Her monthly salary is 900 *yuan*. From July to September, she can obtain an allowance for high temperature, normally 110 *yuan* per month. Besides, she can also get about 2,000 *yuan* as her annual bonus at the end of the year. All in all, after a whole year's hard work, her annual gross income from Green Farm amounts to 13,130 *yuan*. Obviously, her annual income is much higher than a male patch labourer's yearly earning. It is worth noting that, compared with most peasant workers in Plough Village, Ciying's occupation is still very humble. Quite a few people make more than 2,000 *yuan* per month. As the case stands, becoming a peasant worker who keeps a secure job in a qualified company and hence obtains a steady income is a fond dream that most local patch labourers cannot reach.

However, the income distribution is quite unequal between different peasant workers. The gap between low-income workers and high-income workers is not narrower than the gap between patch labourers and peasant workers. Guofang, the owner of the villa-like house in Rice Side as we analysed at the beginning of this chapter, is one of the richest peasant workers in Plough Village. As an excellent mechanic, he works alternately for several hardware factories and machine shops in Master Hill, and gains more than 5,000 *yuan* per month. His wife, Aimin, is a foreman in a large-scale nonferrous metal processing company. Her monthly wage reaches about 3,000 *yuan*. With a steady non-farm income of more than 8,000 *yuan* per month, Guofang's family obtains a comfortable living that is envied by their neighbourhood. One of his neighbour, Fujun, also works in the metal processing company. His income, in contrast, is merely 870 *yuan* per month. This earning is less

¹ Green Farm is a small-scale tourist resort located in the cove closed to Lute Valley and Upper Brook. It is a joint venture co-founded by the village and a private corporation in 2000.

than a third of Aimin's income and even less than his wife's. Fujun's wife, Xiaolin, is hired as a nanny by residents in Mercy Town. As an experienced nursery maid, she can gain a little more than 1,000 *yuan* per month. It is clear that Guofang's family income from non-agricultural employment is three times more than that of Fujun's family.

Noticeably, high-income workers are less dependent on the in-gathering from household farming. It is best demonstrated by the cultivation of single-season rice in the village. Fortunately, during my fieldwork, I got a statistical table of grain subsidy from the leader of the No. 2-1 Production Team which recorded in detail such cultivated condition in Rice Side. As the table shows, in 2008, the Team had 34 households and 163.94 *mu* of paddy land. During that year, the whole Team totally cultivated 88.1 *mu* of early rice, 152.442 *mu* of late rice (including glutinous rice) and about 11.5 *mu* of camphor trees. As will be readily seen, about 64.34 *mu* of paddy fields were left unused in the early rice season, making up nearly 40% of total land area. The cause lay in the fact that most of these fields were devoted to planting single-season rice. The table demonstrates that thirteen households did not plant any early rice. Among those households, twelve families (occupying 55.006 *mu*) got their major earnings from factory work, and the rest one family (occupying 2.407 *mu*) was an old widower who faced labour shortage. Of course, these twelve households are all well-to-do families. They rely on farming only as the source of staple food. Unlike patch workers and other low-income villagers, they have no interest in it as a money-making business.

Except for planting single cropping rice, peasant workers, in particular those from high-income families were also more accustomed to hire patch labourers to do farming work for them. Among the twelve families who

cultivated single-season crops, five families employed other villagers to do farm work—including sowing, harvest, fertilization, chemical spraying, grain transporting, and so forth. Three of them contracted most farm work to others. Beside these five families, only one family hired some labour to do farm work. That was the tractor driver, Master Li's family who lacked labour force when Master Li was busy plowing fields for the Production Team members. Families who were disadvantaged as Fujun's always lacked material capabilities to hire any wage labour. Furthermore, they were more apt to grow double cropping rice and hence often sandwiched between factory work and farming.

3. “Masters” in Plough Village: skilled peasants and handicraftsmen

In Plough Village, “Master”, or *Shifu*, is an honorary form of address to people who have the expertise in specific lines. Loosely, there are five sorts of villagers who are titled as “Master”: carpenters, bricklayers, lacquerers, bamboo weavers (*dianjiang*)¹, electricians, and tractor drivers². These villagers are held in esteem by others because they provide necessary services to villagers' daily life and production.

3.1 Handicraftsmen

By virtue of their workmanship and professional skills, handicraftsmen including carpenters, bricklayers and lacquerers often obtain comfortable incomes. For example, an experienced bricklayer who is skilled in building designs is able to earn more than 150 *yuan* a day. A good lacquerer's daily

¹ *Dianjiang*: 篾匠, the craftsmen who make articles from bamboo strips.

² Sometimes some experienced combine-harvester drivers are also called as *shifu*.

income is even higher and usually reaches 200 *yuan*. As for carpenters, the one who is good at house decoration can also earn no less than a bricklayer. It is no exaggeration to say that these skilled craftsmen are the very well-to-do people in the village although they are still not the richest.

Yet, not all Masters enjoy such high incomes. The following table demonstrates the changes in the number of different kinds of skilled craftsmen in Plough Village between the early 1990s and 2009:

Masters Time	Capenters	Bricklayers	Lacquerers	Bamboo Weavers	Electrians	Tractor Drivers
Early 1990s	4 (1)	2 (1)	1	3	2	3
Late 2000s	3	3	1	0	2[1]	4

Note: The figure in round brackets refers to the number of apprentices while the figure in square brackets means the number of amateurs.

From the table, the most remarkable change we can get is that *dianjiang* have vanished completely during the past fifteen to twenty years. Indeed those handicraftsmen who made bamboo articles for the village were once indispensable to local people's life and production. Before the mid-1990s when Plough Village was still largely predominated by the peasant-household production, every family invited *dianjiang* to weave bamboo articles in slack seasons. Those articles including bamboo baskets, soil hampers (*tusi*), dust pans, rice sieves (*misi*), bamboo-plated crates, bamboo chairs, and bamboo mats for grain-sunning (*zhudian*), were all necessities of life. Villagers' sufficient demand provided bamboo weavers a steady income. Yet, changes in the mode of production and social life—that is the increasing commodification in people's life and production—destroyed the demand for bamboo articles and eventually dispenses with *dianjiang's* handicraft. As the former bamboo weaver in Rice Side, Old Zhongde, said:

“...Actually *dianjiang* were different from carpenters or brickies, because our business was more periodical and more stable. Every autumn, in September or October, every family was distributed hundreds of catties of bamboo by the Hill and Forest Team¹. In early winter, when we finished our harvest, commune members would invite me to repair their outworn bamboo mats, baskets and dust pans. Some might ask me to make new mats or crates. Others might need some new bamboo chairs. I would do various kinds of work for them... Of course, *dianjiang* were important persons in the village, because we made many necessary tools for commune members. Without us, who could mend your broken bamboo mats, and without bamboo mats, how could you sun your rice? So when I worked in a commune member’s home, they must prepare cigarettes, pastries and a rich lunch for me. Moreover, they should call me a ‘*shifu*’ politely and paid me five *yuan* per day at first, then eight or ten *yuan* every day. If they asked me to make chairs, the reward would be often doubled. My income was not very high, but for me it was much better than farming... But we have become useless now. Younger children even don’t know what a *dianjiang* does. Indeed this profession is out of date. Today very few families still use bamboo mats to sun their grain because they all have concrete ground. Also very few people need bamboo chairs because they prefer sofas. What I can manufacture all can be bought from the market. My rice bowl has been broken...”

Indeed all the craftsmen in Plough Village experienced a great shift after the mid-1990s. Before that time, they mainly worked for peasant families within or around the village. Their skills catered to local people’s basic needs. In other words, these skilled peasants existed as an organic part of the village. However, the violent expansion of market economy since the mid-1990s took over markets originally for the local handicraftsmen and compelled them to connect with the markets beyond the countryside. Bamboo weavers failed in this process because they were unable to open up new markets. Carpenters, brickies, lacquerers and electricians on the contrary completed the transformation and blended into a greater market. Those

¹ Here “the Hill and Forest Team” stands for the villagers’ committee. In Plough Village, the official building of the committee is located at the foot of northwestern hills where once stood the Hill and Forest Team of Plough Brigade, so villagers often use the Team to refer to the committee.

“successful” handicraftsmen channel their most energy into urban market and rich families in surrounding villages but often ignore local people’s primary needs. When I lived in the village, I often heard villagers’ complaints about the bricklayers and lacquerers because they are busy in working for big projects in towns and cities and hence disclaim working for the local poor families who cannot pay enough wages. To a great degree, these Masters are largely disconnected with the village.

3.2 Tractor drivers

As the handicraftsmen extended their business scope to urban areas, another kind of skilled peasants—tractor drivers also accomplished economic restructuring. However, their transformation method is quite different.

Tractor drivers are key persons in the village. They cultivate land as other peasants, but employ their own tractors to plough land for others and obtain an important part of income from this business. They are most familiar with the land. While running their tractors, they always make good efforts to capture the temperaments of different fields, although even a highly skilled driver still often makes his cart stuck into deep mire on a perennially muddy farm. Due to the service they provide, drivers establish wide relations with other villagers, socially and economically. Their home yards often gather a group of chatting people and, thus, become the communication centers for the locals. Drivers themselves are often seen as the public figures by local people. Also through their tractors, they connect themselves with the distant market and relate their cardiac rate with the enigmatic curves and numbers in the LED screen of the international oil futures market. In effect, they are “ties” of a variety of social, economical, as well as political relations in the countryside.

After land allocation in the rural reform, tractors in Plough Village were kept as collective property for about ten years. During that period, the Village employed three drivers to operate the machines and collected fees from every household who enjoyed the service. As agricultural wage labour, the tractor drivers were paid by the collective employer twice a year. Their income deserved and offset the amount of labour-power socially necessary they used on the machine operation and field tillage. As village members, they also contracted a small plot of land (about 1.5 *mu* per capita) from the collective under the household responsibility system. In busy seasons, when the tractor drivers were busy in plowing fields for others, their families, normally their wives and elder children must take on more farming labour. Occasionally, they got hands from relatives and neighborhoods. Like a few families who lacked labour power, they might also hire other people to finish a part of agricultural work. Yet in those days wage-labour was still quite sporadic. Relying on the collective employment and the equalitarian land distribution, drivers maintained an equal relationship with other villagers. There was no exploitation between the two sides.

As the collective tractors were all sold to individuals in 1993, the relationship between the tractor drivers and villagers changed. Land tillage became a money-making business, resulting in various odd phenomena in later days. In order to keep Plough Village to themselves and, most importantly, to maintain a respectable profit level, the drivers associated with each other tightly to keep out outside drivers and, at the same time, tightened their hold on their own turfs. A common method was to make the agency-client relationship—between the drivers and villagers—as an “once-never” way. That, once a village dared to ask other drivers to plow their fields, the driver who was the service provider in convention would refuse to till the villager’s land for ever. A good example came from Master

Li, the old driver in Rice Side. As a convention, Master Li undertook all the land of the No. 2-1 Production Team in Rice Side and part of land of Team 2-2 in Pot Hill. But he would never provide service for Guoding, a villager of Rice Side, because Guoding asked the driver from Pot Hill to till one of his fields in the summer busy season, 2001.

“It is a law.” Explained Master Li,

“If you broke the law, then you must bear the bitter pill. We all have our own options. You can ask others to plow your land. You spend your own money from your own pockets. That’s no problem. So I can refuse to plow your land, because I own my own tractor, because I use my own tractor to make my own money. I have never cared about your little pots of land. Is it unfair? Absolutely fair!”

For Guoding such a “fair” business really brought numerous troubles to him. Those years he shifted several drivers to plow his land. But it was not an easy thing. For many times, he must wait the driver to plough others’ land first and make his land prepared several days later. Sometimes he even could not find anyone to plough his land. Finally, this poor “violator” had to implore Master Li to forgive him. But all his entreaties were rejected mercilessly. Then he got involved in a violent quarrel with Master Li. At last they broke off relationships thoroughly. Until today, the two families did not speak to each other at all.

In fact, it is not an isolated case in Plough Village. In every busy season, there are quite a few conflicts and clashes between villagers and tractor drivers. In some extreme cases, some villagers—very often the once “violators”—take off the bridge decks, dig deep pits on the road, and even lay themselves in front of wheels of the tractor so as to compel the driver to till their land.

However, it is still unfair to blame the drivers for their cold heart. Take the driver of Rice Side as an example again. In the village, Master Li is always reputed as a veteran driver with the best skills and a warm heart. In most villagers' eyes, he is quite a responsible and honest person. "Master Li seldom scamps sloppy jobs." It is a public praise given by the villagers. Except for him, other drivers are all not particularly selfish person in the village. So it is not reasonable to ascribe all to the drivers' personalities.

A broad vision is necessary for us to see the social and structural determinations. In this way, the individual drivers should be placed in a specific benefit and class structure. Looked from this angle, a tractor driver normally combines two class positions: capitalist and wage-labour. As the owner of a tractor, he takes the role of a petty capitalist. As a capitalist, on the other hand, he also employs labour working for him. The labour, obviously, is always himself. By this token, the driver looks the same as an "independent peasant" or an "independent handicraftsman" in Marx's wording and purport (Marx, 1963:408)¹.

As a matter of fact, tractor drivers, peasants and the market comprise the chain of exploitation in which the tractor drivers take a central link. When a peasant purchases a new tractor, the market will swallow a good part—sometimes even most—of the his domestic savings. It usually takes a driver 2—3 years to recover the original investment he paid to the tractor factory—now a machinery company controlled by the transnational corporation, Deere & Company. In other words, in order to possess the machine, he must work 2—3 years for the factory without any payment. Even after he buys up

¹ "As capitalist he therefore pays himself his wages and draws his profit on his capital; that is to say, he exploits himself as wage-labourer, and pays himself, in the surplus-value, the tribute that labour owes to capital." Marx, Karl. 1963. *Theories of Surplus-Value* (Part 1). Moscow: Progress Publishers.

the tractor, he must share half of the gross income with petrochemical corporations and machinery plants, as well as their retail departments and repair shops. Sandwiched between the land and market, the drivers must use their tractors to squeeze money from the soil and from other villagers.

Nowadays, drivers all run a kind of reformed tractor with more advanced technology and more powerful engines than before. Such a tractor is worth more than 36,000 *yuan*. It largely takes 5~8 years for a medium family to accumulate this amount of money. But if a villager purchases the machine from the municipal tractor factory, according to the local policies, he might get agro-machine subsidy from the government, which is normally 30% of the price of tractor. So, he could receive about 10,000 *yuan* from the government. However, not every peasant has access to this preferential policy. In fact, only big farmers who have contracted more than 100 *mu* of farmland can enjoy the subsidy. Although there have been several cases of land circulation in recent years, no family owns more than fifty *mu* land in Plough Village. Thus, according to the local policies, no one in the village can enjoy such subsidy. In order to qualify for subsidy, the prospective driver has to fall back on a big farmer somewhere. Actually, as it is not easy for an ordinary peasant to establish ties with a rich farmer who has high social and economic status, he must mobilize all his personal relations. Even when he establishes a relationship with the big farmer, there is still no free meal waiting for him. As an unwritten rule, the buyer who “borrows” the quota must share half of the subsidy with the big farmer. It means that at most he can only get some 5,000 *yuan* from the government to support his purchase. Then he must pay the rest 31,000 *yuan* by himself. Under normal circumstances, every year, the driver uses his tractor for two seasons, each lasting about two weeks. Each season, he can till about 200 *mu* of land. So about 400 *mu* per year. The service fee paid to him is 70 *yuan* per *mu*. Each

year he gets a gross income of 28,000 *yuan*. With respect to the expense, a tractor consumes five barrels of diesel oil each year. It costs the owner about 7,000 *yuan*. In addition, charges for engine oil, lubricating oil, maintenance and repairs often amounts to another 7,000 *yuan*. If not including the costs of labour and machine depreciation, as the driver usually does not, he earns 14,000 *yuan* per year or 35 *yuan* per *mu*. In his eyes, the gross profit margin reaches 50%—it is really a profitable business for a peasant.

As a petty capitalist, the driver always tries his best to maximize earnings; but as his own wage-labour, he is also exploited cruelly. A driver always works much longer but rests much less than other agricultural hirelings. Unlike other peasants who usually labour from dawn to dusk and have a mid-day nap even in busy season, the tractor driver has to work all day without any rest¹ and often work during night shift by the lamplight. Moreover, operating the tilling machine is an extremely arduous and painful work, especially in the burning summer. In 2009, after the farming season, I visited Master Li in Rice Side. He opened his clothes, exposed his dead-brown chest and craned his neck. He tried hard to pattern himself upon a duck suffering agonies in a burning oven and described the situation as follows:

“I think the temperature in the tractor reached at least 100°C! Many times I had to shut down the machine. It’s too hot, and I was afraid the cylinders would burn and explode... Do you know the feeling (as a driver) in the tractor (in summer)? It’s great! But you college student with a baby’s bottom is not fortunate enough to appreciate it... I see, you like eating roast-duck, right? But do you know what’s the duck thinking about when it’s hung in the roaster? Ha-ha, it hopes to peel its skin off. When I was sitting in the tractor, I felt I was just a roast duck. The pain is more than ordinary people can stand.”

¹ Drivers in Plough Village often have lunch (prepared by their families) on their tractors.

4. The development of capitalist agriculture: the rich vs. the poor

Having made a concrete survey of farming households, skilled peasants, patch labourers and factory workers, we are now in a position to study the last category of villagers, or the “upper-grade people”, as Old Minghua and other lower-income people would say. I shall begin my investigation with an enumeration of the rich villagers. It is generally accepted that three families are the richest in the village: Jiancheng’s family, Hongxiang’s family and Dexin’s family. The first family mainly runs a business in flowering wood and landscape trees in Pot Hill; the second family possesses a small plastic molding factory in Lute Valley; and the last family similarly operates a small hardware factory in Grand Field. For outsiders, it seems impossible to learn of the exact details of their family wealth. However, since they are all recognized as “millionaires” by the locals, that they are much richer than any other villagers is beyond the question. In addition, the second richest households include the successful businessmen and the department managers employed by some private enterprises in the cities. These households number about ten. Their family wealth is usually estimated as hundreds of thousand *yuan*.

Indeed it is not necessary for us to inquire about their accurate income information. The significance of these new rich families lies in the fact that their formation marks the being mature of capitalist relations of production in the village. In this section, I will proceed to analyse the development of capitalist mode of production in Plough Village. My focus will be on the petty plantations surged in recent years, in particular, on different economic

performances and inter-relations between rich cultivators and poor cultivators.

As already mentioned in the previous chapter, since the early 2000s, Plough Villagers have planted more than 200 *mu* of landscape trees. Based on family farms, a series of small-scale plantations have been established. We further mentioned that the development of horticulture in the locality is mainly engendered by the booming of urban real estate industry. In other words, the upsurge of petty plantations in the village and neighbouring countryside represents the increasing dependency of agriculture on industry, the countryside on the towns, and furthermore the agrarian petty capital on the large urban capital (both industrial and financial).

Underlying the systematic subjection of the rural to the urban, as just mentioned above, there exists a set of exploitative relations of production in specific workplaces. Only relying on the predatory relations, can the plundering of rural wealth, e.g. the fertile paddy soil, labour force, capital, be possible.

As I will analyse below, one of the significant factors which promotes the forming of these relations is the rural subsidies from the government. On the whole, there are four kinds of subsidies (and benefits) for the local villagers: 1. agricultural basic subsidies¹; 2. the subsidies for cultivating cash crops; 3. the rural basic pension insurance; 4. financial allowance for the new-type cooperative medical services. Within these subsidies, the first two sorts are both material benefits for production, while the other two sorts are welfare principally for reproduction.

¹ According to the official definition, agricultural basic subsidies normally include the direct subsidies for grain producers, the general subsidies for agricultural supplies, the subsidies for cultivators who grow superior grain, and the subsidies for the purchase of agricultural machinery and tools.

Nominally and in theory, these subsidies are beneficent to all the rural people in the coverage area. However, in practice, not every villager has access to all the subsidies. Like the subsidies for agricultural machinery purchase as we discussed in the section 2.2, it is also difficult for disadvantaged households to get the subsidies for cash crops cultivation. The reason is straightforward. Those poor families including the pure farming households and low-income patch labourers by and large do not have sufficient material capacities to hire labour needed for cultivating cash crops. What is more, they also cannot withstand the long growth cycle of landscape trees which usually persists for three to five years. Since they are highly dependent on the cash income from farm work to ensure their basic needs for commodities, those families might have landed in a substantial predicament if they discard staple crops and turn to plant landscape trees. Virtually all the landscape trees in Plough Village are possessed by moderate and high-income families. In consequence, the subsidies for cash crops are almost occupied by the well-to-do families. For those families, subsidies from the government, which reach about 300 *yuan* per *mu*, become a significant part of the initial fund for this business.

Although these well-off villagers as a whole (largely) “monopoly” the cultivation of landscape trees, their final destinies nevertheless go to diverge in accordance with their distinct economic capabilities which are principally conditioned by their family possessions. In other words, planting commercial trees is far from a fair business that is beneficial to everyone involved. As observed from Plough Village, the main beneficiary of this business is the so-called “upper-grade people”.

From the spring 2006, several households start to dispose of their trees,

cutting off all or part of their trees and selling them as firewood with an extremely low price¹, since they cannot find a market for them. The first quitters are the relatively low-income families, because these families cannot get hold of sufficient marketing information and social relations which play a vital role in the business. More importantly, they usually do not possess enough material strength to get through marketing troughs and thus always sink into the economic plight before the upturn in market. The richer planters, in contrast, usually do not have these problems.

Between the poor tree planters and the rich planters, there also exists an exploitative relation. In Plough Village, rich planters often perform the role of tree mongers. As a group of middlemen, the tree mongers manipulate almost all the tree transactions in Plough Village. As far as I have investigated, through switch trades, these mongers are able to reap fabulous profits. This can be illustrated in the following instance. In October 17, 2009, Jiancheng, one of the richest villagers in the village, purchased 40 camphor trees from Lihua² in Rice Side. Thanks to their over thirty years' friendship, Lihua obtained a very good price. According to his narration, Jiancheng bought his trees with a unit price of 150 *yuan*. However, as a middleman between Lihua and the end-client in urban, Jiancheng took 75 *yuan* from every tree (half of the price). For Lihua, nevertheless, he had to undertake not only the wages of patch labourers but also all the transport costs. In this transaction, Lihua totally hired seven villagers to dig trees and spent 560 *yuan* on wages and 330 *yuan* on transportation. Moreover, he further spent about 150 *yuan* on the labourers' lunch and snacks. In other words, after several years' investment (saplings, fertilizers, chemicals, labour, etc.), Lihua gained a gross income of 1,960 *yuan* by selling 40 trees, whereas the

¹ For instance, in the summer 2009, one cattie of firewood only wealthy 2 fen, so a three-year tree only wealthy no more than 1.5 *yuan*.

² In fact, Lihua is my Uncle. Just through this personal relation, can I get the inside stories in the tree transactions.

monger, without investing anything in growing the trees, got a net earnings of 3,000 *yuan* from this transaction. Even so, Lihua were grateful to his old friendt, because his selling price was still much higher than others. Under “normal” circumstances, the net income from each tree of the same scale as Lihua’s was only 20~25 *yuan*¹. Perhaps Lihua’s case is just the tip of the whole iceberg. Yet, it is enough for us to get a general impression on the grievous exploitations in tree transactions.

As a rule, capitalist production always has two legs: commodity and wage labour. Having investigated the first leg of commodity, it is time for us to turn to the other leg. As for the wage labour, the petty plantations are primarily established on the base of labour provided by temporary labourers and peasant coolies. Few families, whether rich or poor, can support a small plantation without relying on any hired labour. In a general way, in order to dig out one *mu* of landscape trees which contain about 400 camphor trees (supposing the mean diameter at breast height is 10 cm), at least 100 man-days should be employed². It is thus evident that more than 20,000 man-days will be used in total so as to dispose with all the 200 *mu* of camphor trees in Plough Village.

In the classical understanding, the development of capital-relation is based on two prerequisites. One is the *complete* separation between of labour from the conditions of its realization, that is, from the means of subsistence and production; the other is the transformation of immediate producers into wage labour and the exchange of free labour against money (Marx, 1965: 67; 1976: 874-875). Of course, it is not very sensible for us, as Lenin warned, to hold “too stereotyped an understanding of the theoretical proposition that

¹ Lihua’s net income per unit in this transaction was 49 yuan: $(75 \times 40 - 560 - 330 - 150) \div 40 = 49$

² In practice, everyday a male adult labourer can dig no more than four such trees.

capitalism requires the free, landless worker” (Lenin, 1956: 178-179). The very essential thing is that the labour with/without an allotment of land has been subsumed into the capitalist relations of production and taken the role of rural proletariat, that “the mass of the ‘peasantry’ have already taken a quite definite place in the general system of capitalist production, namely, as agricultural and industrial wage-workers” (Ibid, 180). In the system, as Karl Kautsky (1988: 175) very pointedly suggested, the enormous number of dwarf farms serve as a prop for the large landed property—and in Plough Village specifically, for the relatively small size but highly capital-intensified plantations. Just as Lenin assigned indigent but small-holding peasants to the agrarian proletariat, it is not very far off the point for us to classify the Plough needy patch labourers as rural wage workers.

In brief, only relying on a triple exploitation of rural coolies (wage labour), poor tree cultivators (commodity exchange) and a mass of fertile soil (nature), can the big tree cultivators and mongers amass their large fortunes.

5. Class differentiation within social differentiation: a kind of summary

Now we have surveyed people of all ranks in Plough Village, I will use the last section to explore the class relations embedded in the social differentiation and make attempt to draw an outline of class schema in the village.

The foregoing text highlights the occupational differentiation in the village

and, on this basis, divides Plough Villagers into five categories (or “strata”). Borrowing Old Minghua’s categorization, I divide the main body of Plough Villagers into three “grades”, sequentially patch labourers, factory workers and rich farmers. Before this, I also investigate the changed circumstances of purely-farming households and local skilled peasants. These five groups of villagers comprise the whole schema of the social differentiation in the village.

In this schema, two logic tracks have been unfolded in parallel. The first track is the social division of labour which has been formulated explicitly in preceding sections. The other track, in contract, is an implicit line which points to the class differentiation and in particular the exploitative relations of production in the progressively commercialized and capitalized world. In practice, these two lines interlock tightly. The deepening of social division of labour in the village directly causes the differentiation of rural households and hence splits them into specific groups of persons. The class relations, on the other side, interweave these divided groups with each other and integrate them into a specific mode of production.

As we bring the perspective of class relations into the analysis of social differentiation in the village, the original categorization (division) must be revised, some categories should be redefined, and thus a more elaborate schema will be presented. In the revised schema, neither occupational differentiation nor income disparity is treated as the principal criterion of classification but rather as the extrinsic manifestation and auxiliary indication. People’s statuses in the social structure are primarily demarcated by their positions in the class structure. Specifically, the new categorization is established in terms of relations of production and capacities of reproduction, in particular the employer-employee relationships. In this way,

I sketch the social-economic structure of Plough Village as follows:

1. *Impoverished peasants*: this group comprises most patch labourers and low-income factory workers. For these people, both incomes from family farming and off-farm/non-farm occupations are also indispensable for their living. An impoverished peasant is, to use Kautsky's term, a petty commodity producer. As a temporary labourer or a low-grade worker in a factory, the peasant sells surplus labour-power to market and earns wages as a wage-worker; yet, as a land tiller, s/he works on the family farm and sells agricultural produce to meet cash needs (Kautsky, 1988: 168-170). The poor earning nevertheless is merely enough for the family's subsistence and limited extended reproduction.

2. *Moderate peasants*: this group is mainly constituted by the majority of factory workers, skilled peasants and a small number of high-income patch labourers in the village. These people earn main incomes from selling labour-forces or services, whereas earnings from family farm only play the auxiliary and secondary role in their family economic life. Moreover, the relatively comfortable incomes make them often possible to hire local patch labourers to do a part of farming work for them.

3. *Rich farmers*: indeed, they are the most well-to-do villagers in Plough Village, including big plantation owners, private entrepreneurs, and successful businessmen. Normally, they possess (relatively) large industries and estates in the village and employ villagers to work for them. The vast majority of their income is from big businesses, even though as village members they still hold a piece of family farms.

Beside the above three kinds of peasants in the village, there is another

group of people we have discussed before. This small group of people is made up by most purely-farming households, sporadic disadvantaged families who are squeezed by particular reasons (disease, disasters...), as well as some patch labourers who lack employment opportunities. They earn their survival mainly by family farming, and a few of them get material aid from public sectors. Since they are all living in the periphery of the village, we might call them “*Marginalized peasants*”.

To sum up, social differentiation in Plough Village corresponds to the subsumption of local villager to the commodity market. In this process, different families (and in the meantime different members in the same family) are distinguished with each other and divided into specific groups (grades, categories, strata). Through the occupational differentiation, a new structure of the labour division comes to being in which different villagers are attached to distinct forms of production. Thereafter, the petty peasant-household economy which dominated the village during the early 1980s and the mid-1990s finally falls to disintegration.

The collapse of peasant economy as a specific mode of agrarian production, as we have observed, leads to the complication of class structure¹ of the

¹ I prefer to use the term “complication of class structure” to capsule the conditions of class differentiation in Plough Village rather than, as some others might be inclined, “fragmentation of class of labour”. The latter term, which is regarded as “a central feature of globalization”, generalizes “the effects of how classes of labour in global capitalism... pursue their means of livelihood/reproduction across different sites of the social division of labour: urban and rural, agricultural and non-agricultural, wage employment and self-employment” (Bernstein, 2006: 455-456). By doing “insecure and oppressive—and in many places increasingly scarce—wage employment, often combined with a range of likewise precarious small-scale farming and insecure ‘informal sector’ (‘survival’) activity”, these classes are subject to the “forms of differentiation and oppression along intersecting lines of class, gender, generation, caste, and ethnicity” (Ibid, 455). This discourse quite rightly reveals a distinguishing feature of class differentiation in the so-called global age. Yet, basing on the experiences from Plough Village, I am inclined to treat the term as an in-depth description of class differentiation of the peasantry. As to me, “fragmentation of labour” might become an important avenue on which the peasantry rely to realize the reforging of class structure (and, tautologically, become a way for the capital to put the

peasantry in the village. The once largely homogeneous production units have been taken apart and integrated into different “groups”. Within a specific “group”, people share a very similar if not identical position in specific relations of production—employer or employee, product seller or labour seller, agricultural or non-agricultural, exploiter or exploited, ect.—although some of them might have not perceived their structural situation and thus work in themselves; between different “groups”, there exists evident bonds that interlock them organically. The vital bond beyond question is employment relations. With this exploitative bond, different groups of villagers are bundled and linked with each other (in the Marxist sense).

In my own categorization, I use the term “group” rather than “class” to refer to the categories of villagers with distinct class positions. I never think a limited number of people in a tiny village can make up of a class; or, all groups of people in the village can institute a complete class structure. By using the hackneyed word, “group”, I just intend to bring out the fact that, due to the development of employment and commodity relations in the countryside, Plough Village has been incorporated in the whole capitalist economy in China. In other words, going through the complication of class structure, different economic forms in the village have been integrated and subordinated to the whole mode of capitalist production.

peasantry under its control) .

CHAPTER 5

By Way of Conclusion

In the main body of this thesis, I explicate two key issues of agrarian change in Plough Village. The first issue refers to the transformation of human-land relationships, and the other falls on the social differentiation and the up-growth of class relations. Although they are discussed in two chapters separately, these two issues are interdependent and subject to the same dynamics of capitalist production. In this final chapter, I will give prominence to the inherent relations between them.

By comparing the nutrient circulations of the soil before and after rural reform in the third chapter, we have revealed that, in virtue of three decades' transmutation, the benign human-land relationship established in the collective era has been completely reversed. The tendency of agricultural commodification and the commercialized produce—in the nature of capital intensification—promoted the spoilage of the soil. As a socio-ecologic consequence, it causes a deep metabolic rift of society and nature which further signifies the multiple antagonisms between peasantry and land, rural and urban, agriculture and industry.

All these contradictory relations presuppose a twofold expropriation.

The first dispossession is the destruction of conditions of production and life corresponding to the petty peasant-household economy established in the

rural reform. It encapsulates a tripartite content:

1. *The dismemberment of collective property and the collapse of collective cooperation.* As we have seen in Chapter 3, rural reform started in the late 1970s was based on the dissipation of collective wealth which had been accumulated arduously by Plough Villagers over a long period of time. It further promotes the transformation of accumulative mechanism from collective accumulation to individual household accumulation. The decline of collective economy and hence the weakening of collective abilities in mobilization and organization makes the comprehensive land amelioration impossible. Without the nourishment and support from collective economy, separated households become more vulnerable to the unpredictable market economy.

2. *The disintegration of peasant-household economy.* The most obvious thing, as observed from the village, is the vanishment of stock raising on the household base. The disappearance of this subsidiary occupation puts an end to the so-called “swine - grain type” economy and causes the collapse of the petty ecosystem attached to this economic form. Due to the soaring consumption of agricultural supplies purchased from the market, the household production is deeply absorbed into commodity chains.

3. *The disappearance of traditional farming skills.* The exclusion of traditional farming technology was one of the most striking social consequences engendered by the disintegration of collective economy and household economy. As family farming has been subsumed in the commodity economy and capital market, local knowledge and techniques are increasingly degraded and abandoned. By nature, this tendency results from the structural change of agrarian capital in which the development of

capital-intensive agriculture accelerates the substitution of constant capitals (chemical fertilizers, farm insecticides, pesticides, improved grains, agricultural machines, etc) for variable capitals (human labour).

The other crucial precondition consists in the transformation of productive structure in the village. Owing to the disintegration of the household economy from which Plough Villagers once reaped largely sufficient earnings to support their (simple) reproduction, local cultivators have been involved in the capitalist commodity market and become the “petty commodity producers” (Kautsky). The ever-increasing appetites and demands for industrial commodities, stimulated by the capital-intensive farming and the urbanized lifestyle, further push the villagers into a reproduction squeeze, and a part of them even into a “simple reproduction squeeze” (Bernstein, 1979: 427-429). These agrarian tillers, sandwiched between the land and market, either find themselves squeezing money from the soil by investing more and more constant capitals, or fleeing from the land to pursue non-/off-farm incomes. As the diversification of livelihood becomes ever so prevalent, these two tendencies interlace with each other and intensify mutually. It is a very common issue in today’s Plough Village that the steep rise of chemical application and rapid obsolescence of paddy fields are running parallel. Both deteriorate the vitality of the soil. The most extreme deprivation, as already analyzed in detail, is the freebooting of the soil in the transactions of landscape trees. The loss of the massive amount of fertile soil, as a matter of fact, spells nothing but the depletion of value embodied in the soil which has been created and accumulated by generations of peasants for hundreds of years¹. As mentioned before, it corresponds to the outflow of value from the rural to the urban.

¹ “Capital may be fixed in the earth, incorporated into it, both in a more transient way, as is the case with improvement of chemical kind, application of fertilizers, etc., and more permanently, as with drainage ditches, the provision of irrigation, leveling of land, farm building, etc.” (Marx, 1976: 756)

Noticeably, the metabolic rift, as it were, does not signify merely an ecological crisis emerged in the countryside, but rather the structural disease inherent to the capitalist agriculture. The transformation of the mode of agricultural production has changed the property and functions of the land. To put it more specifically, the capitalization of farming in Plough Village, that is, the wide cultivation of landscape trees, transforms the land from the simple source of food and clothing to a component element of the *quid pro quo* for cash income. In other words, the soil in the capitalist agriculture is not merely a kind of natural (or man-made natural) substance which provides chemical nutrients for crops rooted in it, but, more importantly, an inalienable part of the commodity which is sold to the market, just as the soil balls attached to the camphor trees are transported to the urban.

The above account of the transformation of human-land relations has clearly revealed that the depletion of soil fertility as well as the spoilage of the soil is not one of the isolated or accidental phenomena going with the rural transformation in the village, but rather an inherent character of the transformed mode of production. In a materialist conception of history, the break of soil nutrient circling constitutes a crucial element of “the natural course of capitalist development” (Foster, 2000: 156).

Beside the metabolic rift, another vital aspect of agrarian change in Plough Village is the social differentiation and class formation. As analyzed in Chapter 4, after some thirty years’ evolution, the once very egalitarian village constituted by the largely identical peasant-households has experienced a profound differentiation. The relatively integrated peasant-household economy divided into multiple economic forms. Local people accordingly divided into three (or four) “classes”. The development

of social division of labour and in particular the growth of employment relations, on the other side, reintegrate the scattered economic forms to an exploitative structure—the capitalist mode of production—whereby these “classes” can be interknitted with each other and linked to the whole commodity market socially and economically.

As summarized in the third chapter, the maintenance or breakage of the nutrient circulation in the soil is determined by different social-economic contradictions. Seeing from today’s perspective, the class relations with exploitative and even predatory nature have become a key factor, not only conditioning the material circling of the soil but also shaping the conditions of agrarian production and life in general. The deterioration of land fertility, the plundering of the soil, the immoderate capital intensification in crop cultivation, and the outflow of agrarian value in the forms of commodity, labour and capital are all realized in tandem with the social differentiation and class formation in the village.

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