

Philip Huang, *The Peasant Family and Rural Development in the Yangzi Delta, 1350-1988*.

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The central problematic of Philip Huang's path-breaking book concerns how to explain China's lack of transformative development towards capitalism in the late imperial period despite its highly commercialized economy. Huang intervenes in a long-standing discussion of the late-imperial Chinese economy within English-language scholarship that compared China's lack of capitalist development to its positive development in Europe. At the same time, notably, Huang attends to debates within China concerning the same issues notwithstanding their different ideological ramifications. Within both discussions, scholars have tended to conflate commercialization with the growth of capitalism. It is this classical assumption—held, for example, by both Marx and Smith—that is Huang's main target of criticism, and the site of his theoretical innovation. Since its publication in 1990, *The Peasant Family and Rural Development in the Yangzi Delta, 1350-1988* has become a book to which scholars debating the long-term historical development of rural China's economy and its relationship to the Chinese economy as a whole have had to respond. This review will focus more in the historico-political implications of Huang's work than the recent debate on its empirical foundation.

Chinese historical studies during the Maoist period argued that rural China was dominated by a pre-commercial "feudal economy," but that during the late imperial period commercialization represented an "incipient capitalism." These capitalist sprouts, however, were snuffed out by Western imperialist intervention. Here the historical narrative is also clearly a political argument for the necessity of revolutionary action and the communist controlled state, in which the theoretical conflation of commercialization and capitalism played an important role. Huang points to Wu Chengming (1985) as most developed outcome of this line of historical argument. During the reform period, in contrast, other scholars, most famously Li Bozhong (1998), focused their research on finding evidence for a rise in productivity accompanying Ming-Qing commercialization. Huang argues that the first scholarly tendency is correct in noting the commercialization of the late imperial period, but, contrary to the second tendency, it was not the case that there was a transformative rise in rural labor productivity. Yet both treat commercialization as inevitably leading to capitalism, an assumption that Huang states is "simply wrong" (5).

Drawing on Robert Brenner's (1982) important thesis linking England's capitalist development to an agrarian revolution and on Clifford Gertz's (1963) notion of involution, Huang argued that labor productivity in China's rural economy was largely stagnant and agricultural output only increased through continued labor intensification despite decreasing marginal productivity. Thus, although late imperial China was a highly commercialized society, it did not undergo the agrarian revolution that Brenner saw as rising productivity in rural England, instead of rising productivity (transformative development) the productivity of labor actually went down as production increased

(involution)—growth without development. China only broke with this involutory trajectory with the emergence of the TVEs (township-village industries) in the 1980s, as labor moved out of the agricultural sphere and agricultural productivity rose.

In Huang's historical narrative, growing population pressure and an oversupplied labor market meant that family farms did not operate according to a capitalist logic of profit, as without outside employment opportunities peasants would continue to add labor inputs until household consumption was met even though this would significantly reduce their marginal labor productivity. In other words, population pressure meant that late-imperial commercialization did not lead to increased labor productivity and capitalism—transformative growth—but to labor intensification and involution. Here Huang takes a modified Chayanovian or substantivist position, in which decision making within the peasant economy cannot be understood as formally the same as that of capitalism. Peasant rationality “was the rationality of survival, not of profit maximization” (105). Huang links population increase and commercialization, mediated by “the distinctive properties of the peasant family farm” (11), to explain China's involutory late-imperial economy, hence lack of capitalist development. Production could be involutory in two senses: social involution indicates a situation in which a growth in production does not lead to a new social organization of production; economic involution indicates a situation in which a growth in production does not lead to increased economic productivity.

Under the pressure of commercialization, Chinese farmers in the Yangzi delta region often switched from growing rice to growing cotton in order to raise output per unit of land, but they did so at the expense of falling output per workday. As Huang says, “cotton lies at the heart of the story of commercialization in the Ming-Qing Yangzi delta” (44). In turn, cotton and mulberry cultivation led to a further commercialization of grain. Furthermore, cheap family labor meant that it was hard for wage labor-based managerial farms as well as handicraft industries to compete. Huang states that “wage labor-based rich peasant and managerial agriculture was probably less widespread in the delta in the 1930s than in the Ming” (60). In addition, Huang finds that the familization was more developed in the commercialized Yangzi delta than in the less commercialized North China plain. The trend of commercialization, therefore, was linked to further familization of rural production, not to concentrated industrialization.

Likewise, Huang argues that sideline activities, particularly those taken up by women, children, and the elderly, increased with commercialization, but yet again they represented a drop in labor productivity or another example of involutory growth. “An enterprise using hired adult male labor,” Huang argues, “simply could not compete against a household production unit like this” (85). In addition, changing production patterns, such as augmenting rice production with sericulture, reduced the per-day productivity of family labor but increased the overall yearly returns—another case of involutory intensification (79).

Contrary to much Maoist-period historiography, Huang argues that imperialism did not intervene to suppress the “sprouts of capitalism” so much as integrate with this involutory peasant economy, producing a new economy that led to a widening of the

rural-urban gap (143). Employing familial peasant labor to hand-weave cotton cloth made with machine-spun yarn is one example of this process at work. While growing cotton, spinning yarn, and weaving cloth were now disaggregated from within a single family productive unit (120-121), leading to further commercialization, no transformative breakthrough in productivity emerged. The economy maintained its involutory path even as commercialization, urbanization, and integration with world capitalism continued a pace.

Significantly, Huang does not see the Maoist period as a break from involutory growth, although it clearly broke with the earlier commercializing trend. The reason for this is that collectivization basically recreated the labor-allocation logic of family farming on a larger scale: as Huang states, “the collective farm was in some respects a mere enlargement of the old family farm” (199). All labor power was used within the collective whether it was needed or not—there was no reason or way to reduce its labor force. What mattered to state planners was “the absolute level of output” (200). In some ways, however, the state had a harder time than the family in organizing spare-time household labor (218). Under these conditions labor use was intensified and there was no real pressure towards increasing labor productivity—a case of “state imposed involution,” in Huang’s words (200). The continued expansion of the labor supply compounded this problem.

The Maoist period, therefore, does not represent an agricultural revolution for Huang, although his argument does not preclude the possibility that the Maoist period set the stage for later developments through increased agricultural inputs and new infrastructure projects. Here we could note that a too narrow focus on involution and peasant income might hide a transformational trajectory in the overall Chinese economy, one that might have led in the long run to a radical change in the agrarian sphere as well. Huang himself argues that “we should not confuse the stagnation in per capita peasant incomes... with stagnation in crop yields, which apart from the setbacks during the post-Leap years, advanced steadily throughout the collectivized years” (285). Moreover, collectivization was not primarily about overcoming agrarian involution but part of a larger economic strategy that necessitated labor intensification in the countryside at least for the short term in order to extract a larger surplus in absolute terms. Anyhow, at many points in the book Huang attempts to argue that the collective period has come under unfair and misleading attack, and that collectivized agriculture was not irrational in and of itself (see for example 275 and 285).

The reform period, on the other hand, finally represents a break from involutory growth. It does so not because of the marketization (commercialization) of agricultural products or even decollectivization so much as because of the diversification of the rural economy and extra-agricultural employment offered by rural industrialization and the TVEs. Many of the TVEs were actually founded during the Maoist period but expanded greatly during the 1980s.* Here Huang explicitly argues against much of the pro-marketization cheerleading from the west that interprets a rise in productivity as the result of commercialization—a reappearance of the classical assumption of capitalist development that is the main target Huang’s book. To this Huang responds: “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. To put it bluntly, 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” (17). Furthermore, as peasant labor moved into the expanded rural industrial sphere agricultural labor productivity began to rise, a situation of development (of labor productivity) without growth (of absolute agricultural output) (246). None of this, Huang states, was caused by market incentives.

The political lesson is not whether capitalism or socialism is the best paths for rural development, but concerns how to break with involutory growth. In England it was capitalism that brought about that agrarian revolution, in China it was the TVEs of market socialism. In the years that followed the publication of Huang’s book, the TVEs were privatized and many went into bankruptcy. The “sannong wenti” (three rural problems: the poverty of the peasantry, the disintegration of rural society, and the crisis in agriculture) that emerged in the late 1990s could be interpreted as a return to involution after a brief period of development; as rural surplus labor had a harder time finding outlets in the countryside it either had to migrate to the urban sphere or fall further into poverty. The late 1990s into the early 2000s was a period of rural decline, and Wen Tiejun, among others, sees this in part as a response to the weakening of the TVE sector. Wen’s Rural Reconstruction projects, especially his new cooperatives, are attempts to correct this problem. Wen and Huang further converge in that both take a substantivist position on peasant behavior: peasant family farms do not operate along the same logic as capitalist enterprises. This Polanyian formulation implies that land, labor, and capital cannot be treated as simple commodities without precarious consequences. Here Huang’s long historical narrative is a useful antidote to the market utopianism that dominates much of the discourse on rural Chinese development both in China and in the west.

Huang’s book, however, has recently come under increased scrutiny, and the notion that China’s rural sphere was involutory during the late imperial period has been the focus of critique. Kenneth Pomeranz, notably working off of the tradition of Li Bozhong, argues in *The Great Divergence: China, Europe, and the Making of the Modern World Economy* (2000) that Huang misreads the evidence from the late imperial period and that China’s rural economy was no more involutory than that of England. Pomeranz asks if China was undergoing as much of an agrarian transformation as England, why did England develop industrial capitalism and not China. Pomeranz, consequently, looks outside of the rural economy itself for answers, citing contingent differences in coal use and the economic core-periphery relationship as crucial to the divergence between England and the Yangzi delta. Pomeranz and others, therefore, view Brenner’s agrarian revolution in England as an insufficient—though likely necessary—cause for capitalist development. This push towards a more complex narrative of contingency and multiple causality has its political implications as well. On the one hand, concurrent with a new stress on colonialism within English-language scholarship, Pomeranz’s work refocuses attention on the importance of core-periphery relations to the making of the modern world—this is no surprise as Pomeranz himself is influenced by world systems theory.

On the other hand, the relationship between rural class and rural agricultural production is deemphasized. Interestingly, we could note a similar theoretical prioritization amongst the Chinese left, for whom world systems theory is likewise an influence. Unlike Huang's work, Pomeranz's book does not bring us up to the contemporary period, but, as his future work moves more in that direction, involution—arguably useful for understanding the vicissitudes of the rural economy in the 1990s—may make an appearance.

Ho-fung Hung also accepts that China had an agrarian revolution comparative to that of England, yet in contrast to Pomeranz he focuses on class relations as the key to understanding how such an agrarian development becomes the engine for capitalist development (2008). According to Hung, an agrarian revolution needs a strong urban entrepreneurial elite to turn rural surplus into capitalist development. China lacked just such an urban entrepreneurial elite, a necessary component for capitalist development, Hung argues. While bringing class back in bucks the recent trend, Hung's work has the benefit of paying attention to how different classes act within the structural dynamics of historical development. In this sense, it has more in common with the work of Brenner and Huang than that of Pomeranz.

Whatever the outcome of the empirical debate on the late imperial period, “agrarian involution” remains an important and telling analytical category for the later period. More to the point, *The Peasant Family and Rural Development in the Yangzi Delta, 1350-1988* is a foundational book for the discussion of the long-term economic development of China. In this contemporary moment of economic crisis, for which the relationship between the US and Chinese economy is so central, these debates and Huang's book deserve a close reading. The future of the world economy is tied up with the future of the Chinese peasant. Understanding rural poverty and the origins of the still-widening urban-rural income gap (a difference of 3.3 times in the latest year) are crucial to finding a way to break from the unsustainable imbalance of global capitalism.

* Contrary to most observers, Yasheng Huang (2008) has recently argued in a widely hailed book that the TVEs of the 1980s should be understood as private enterprises and a form of Chinese capitalism. This is sure to set off a new debate on the nature of the TVEs and their role in the development of Chinese capitalism during the reform period. Philip Huang argues that in the area of the Yangzi delta he studied a vast majority of rural enterprises were collective and not private, although he suggests a marked regional variation on this question (260-61).

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