

The Theory of Peasant Economy and Involution and De-involution

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小农经济理论与内卷化和去内卷化

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Abstract

Today, thirty-five years after this author first wrote about involution, and at a time when that term and concept have come to be commonly used by many people, this article revisits that term to explain more clearly and succinctly its meaning and also to add to it contributions made by other scholars as well as by this author's own further research, including new research on the de-involution of the past few decades in China, and analyses of the mechanisms and theoretical logics contained therein. Because China's peasant economy has been the longest-lasting and

largest in the world, perhaps also the most highly involuted, and its recent changes, including de-involution, make up the most dramatic example of the modernization of a peasant economy, it serves to explain most clearly the principles and mechanisms of change, and shows just how different those are from the Western historical experience of transition from feudalism to capitalism. Furthermore, peasant economy, not just in China but also in many other developing countries, has been the source most recently of the rise globally of an enormous informal economy—of labor that has little or no legal protection or benefits, according to the definition of the International Labor Organization—now reaching one-half to three-quarters of all urban employment in many developing countries, and more in China than anywhere else. That too is directly connected to the peasant economy and its background of involution and de-involution. At the moment, China's future direction on this matter is at once full of uncertainties and of exciting promises.

Keywords

involution, de-involution, the theory of peasant economy, the rise of the informal economy, future directions

摘要

今天，在笔者在最初提出内卷化概念的 35 年之后，并在其已经成为常被人们使用的用词和概括时，来重访此课题，为的是要更清晰简约地说明这个现象和小农经济理论的关联，也是借助多位其他学者和笔者自身所增添的有用概括来进一步澄清内卷的实质含义。同时，加上笔者关于中国农业经过近几十年的一定程度的去内卷化过程之后所凸显的演变机制和理论逻辑的研究。由于中国的小农经济乃是全球最长久存在和最大的小农经济体，也

是比较最高度内卷化的经济体，而其新近的演变，包括去内卷化，又是比较最突出的小农经济现代化实例，足可更明晰地说明其中的原理和演变机制，并澄清其与西方从封建到资本主义经济历史经验的不同。更有进者，小农经济，不仅在中国也在诸多其他发展中国家，最近几十年乃是全球化中大规模兴起的非正规经济——即，根据国际劳工组织的定义，没有或少有法律保护和社会福利的劳动者——的主要来源，如今已经达到大部分发展中国家城镇劳动力的一半到四分之三以上，並在中国多于任何其他地方。它和小农经济以及内卷化和去内卷化演变直接关联。目前，中国这方面的未来走向既充满疑问又充满希望。

关键词

内卷化、去内卷化、小农经济理论、非正规经济的兴起、未来的发展方向

Today, thirty-five years after this author first wrote about involution, and at a time when that term and concept have come to be commonly used by many people, this article revisits that term to explain more clearly and succinctly its meaning and also to add to it contributions made by other scholars as well as by this author's own further research, including new research on the de-involution process of the past few decades in China, and analyses of the mechanisms and theoretical logics contained therein.¹ Because China's peasant economy has been the longest-

¹ The empirical parts of this article come mainly from the author's four-volume study (including the newly published fourth volume) of China's peasant economy, the newly published study of

lasting and largest in the world, perhaps also the most highly involuted economic system, and its recent changes, including de-involution, are the most dramatic example of the modernization of a peasant economy, its case serves to explain most clearly the principles and mechanisms of change, and shows just how different those are from the Western historical experience of transition from feudalism to capitalism. Furthermore, peasant economy, not just in China but also in many other late developing countries, has been the source globally of an enormous informal economy—of labor that has little or no legal protection or benefits, according to the definition of the International Labor Organization—now reaching one-half to three-quarters of all urban employment, and more in China than anywhere else. That too is directly connected to the involution and de-involution of the peasant economy. At the moment, China’s future direction on this matter is at once full of uncertainties and of exciting promises.

Two Basic Empirical Examples of Involution

Here, we begin once more with the approach first articulated in the author’s book of thirty-five years ago: “to look to the most basic of historical realities to search for the most important of conceptualizations” (Huang Zongzhi, 1986: Preface to the Chinese edition). Looking back on China’s agricultural history of the six centuries between 1350 and 1950, the most dramatic

China’s new informal economy, and also the four-volume study of China’s justice system (including the newly published fourth volume) (Huang Zongzhi, 2020a, b, c; Huang Zongzhi, 2014a, b, c). Substantial portions of the content can be found in the English- and Chinese-language articles published separately in the past fifteen years. They have been included in the citations and references for the convenience of readers.

change was no doubt the involution that accompanied the rise of the cotton economy: before then, no one wore cotton cloth; afterward, everyone did. (The expansion of the silk economy was of course also important, but the wearing of silk garments was limited to the upper classes.) If we examine in detail the production process of cotton, yarn, and cloth, we will see that in the Yangzi delta, one mu of cotton-yarn-cloth required 180 days of labor input (the most time-consuming and lowest return part being spinning the raw cotton into yarn, accounting for about half of the total), fully eighteen times that of wet-rice, but it produced the value of only several times that of rice cropping, which is to say, at severely reduced returns per labor day. That is the core reality of what this author meant by the term “involution” in agricultural production (Huang, 1990). It shows how the rise of the cotton economy came at the cost of reduced marginal returns per day of labor input. That labor input was largely absorbed by the auxiliary labor of the family—of the women, the elderly, and the children (a process that the author termed “the familization of agricultural production”). And a major impetus behind the switch from wet-rice to cotton production was the population pressure on the land: in the Yangzi delta in 1393, each person worked an average of 3–4 mu of land (1 mu equals 0.167 acre); by 1816, that was reduced to just 1–2 mu (Huang, 1990: see esp. Appendix B). Which is to say, the land each peasant household farmed went from 15–20 mu down to just 5–10 mu (compared to about 750 mu for the average English farm household of the time, and 2,700 mu of the present-day American farm). At the time, a farm household cultivating simply rice (on an average or lesser amount of land) could no longer support itself.

To be sure, this change brought nevertheless a definite degree of commercialization, leading to a certain amount of market development and regional “division of labor,” as is evidenced in the saying that Songjiang prefecture “clothes the empire,” though it did not lead to

the kind of division of labor in manufacturing that Adam Smith spotlighted at the very start of his book: producing a pin required a total of eighteen different steps of production: ten workers or so dividing the labor could produce tens of thousands of pins in a day, but a single person working alone may not be able to produce even one in a day—thereby lending concrete meaning to enhanced labor productivity, which lies at the core of what we mean by “development” or “modernization” (Smith, 1976 [1776]). Smith, however, never considered the kind of population pressure on the land that lay behind the rise of cotton production in the Yangzi delta. This author termed that combining of the two processes of commercialization and involution “involutionary commercialization.” It was a process that, in China, came with a certain division of labor between regions, but not at all the kind of division of labor and enhanced labor productivity that accompanied manufacturing. What happened in China was not so much enhanced labor productivity (which is the core meaning of the term “modern economic development”) as “involutionary commercialization” driven by the needs of survival under population pressure and by reduced productivity per day of labor.

Later, in the 1960s, we can see in the same region an even more dramatic concrete illustration of involution. Under mounting population pressures (in large measure from the substantial drop in death rates as the consequence of the establishment of semi-modernized health services), the government sought to raise per unit land rice output by pushing so-called double-cropped rice 双季稻 (namely, early rice + late rice + winter wheat) capsuled by the slogan “wipe out single-cropped rice!” The logic seemed simple enough: double cropping should

double output.² But the problem was that, to add one crop of rice required doubling the necessary inputs (of labor and fertilizer) but could only bring diminished marginal returns, far from an actual doubling of the rice output. That was first because of “land productive capacity” 地力: an additional cropping brought diminished marginal returns from the land. There was also the problem of the lower value of early and late rice compared with single-cropped rice (even the straw of double cropped rice was less useful for making side products such as rope, baskets, and shoes). What’s more, peasants preferred the taste and texture of single-cropped rice over double-cropped rice. The combined result was once more diminished marginal returns per labor day. After the coming of the Reform period, many peasants gained the right to make their own production decisions, and all chose to go back to single-cropping of rice. Even so, today the government is still pushing strongly double cropping in its so-called one thousand big grain-producing counties (out of a total of 2,862 counties). This tells about the continued importance of involution to this day (Huang, 1990; Huang Zongzhi, 2020a; Huang Zongzhi, Gong Weigang, and Gao Yuan, 2014).

Today, the term “involution” has come to be used widely well outside the boundaries of agriculture, to mean any kind of merely quantitative change resulting from the intensification of labor (with diminished marginal returns) without qualitative change, including economic

² Double cropping imposes a very tight schedule in the two weeks before August 10 each year, termed the “double rush” 双抢 period, during which the early rice must be harvested, the land plowed, and the late rice planted. Paradoxically, the coming of tractors to rice farming in this area did not so much save labor as enable the completion of double cropping during that intense rush period, contributing in effect to further involution, rather than to de-involution.

phenomena outside of agriculture, and also administrative involution, policy involution, social involution, and even (under the examination-obsessed education system of China) academic involution. The subject of this article, however, is the basic meaning and operative mechanisms of the original concept as applied to agricultural production.

The Content of the Concept of Involution

The author's concept of involution was influenced to some degree by Clifford Geertz's conceptualization of rice agriculture in Indonesia, though mainly just at the level of use of terminology. Geertz compared swidden (slash and burn) in the sparsely populated peripheral regions of Indonesia and sawah (wet-rice) agriculture in its densely populated core areas, pointing out how much more labor intensive the latter was, giving much higher yields, though not greater returns per unit labor. He thus spotlighted the high degree of labor intensification of rice production and the inflatability of rice yields. But he paid little attention to the issue of declining returns per unit labor, or the involution that accompanies a switch from rice to other, even more highly intensified crops (Geertz, 1963). This author has employed Geertz's term "agricultural involution" but, for its substance, has incorporated during these past years more the concepts of the following other theorists of agricultural production.

First is the economic historian and theorist E. Anthony Wrigley. He pointed out insightfully the great difference between agriculture and industry: the former is constrained by its access to energy, the "organic energy" of human power and animal power, with a limit represented by horsepower, the equal of up to seven humans; the latter, however, by use of "inorganic mineral-based energy," most especially coal (and the steam engine using that energy)—a coal miner could produce 200 tons of coal in one year, hundreds of times the energy

generated by human and animal power (today most clearly shown by the common use of passenger cars of dozens to hundreds of horsepower) (Wrigley, 1988). What Wrigley thus lifted out were the fundamental differences between agricultural and industrial economies: clearly, involution happens much more easily in agriculture than in industry, given the limitations of its organic energy base. By extension, one must be careful about applying principles based on industrial economies to the study of agriculture, and vice versa.

For example, the simple application of principles from neoclassical economics to agriculture, such as that by Theodore Schultz who, proceeding from the premise that the operation of market mechanisms will of necessity result in an optimal allocation of resources, including labor, argued that there can therefore be no such thing as “surplus labor” in a marketized agricultural economy. Thus did he simply eliminate the factor of population from consideration in his study of “transforming traditional agriculture,” to argue that all that would be needed for the modern transformation of agriculture would be modern inputs to promote sustained development. He did not consider at all how in China (or India or other high-density-population agricultural economies), a high degree of involution would prove to be resistant to the use of labor-saving agricultural machinery and result in fundamental differences from land-abundant (and labor-scarce) agricultural economies, such as that of the New World United States (Schultz, 1964; Huang Zongzhi, 2014a: vol. 3, see especially chap. 7) (more below).

Second is Pei Xiaolin, who in addition to his acquaintance with the realities of Chinese agriculture (plus his former experience in China’s Planning Commission), accompanied by his knowledge of Western economic theory, pointed out with much insight that land, like humans, is also an organic entity, with finite limits on its productive power, and simply cannot be inflated without limit. In my personal understanding, this is tantamount to lending the concept of “the

productive power of land” 地力, which has a long tradition in the highly developed field of Chinese preindustrial agronomy, the systematization and graphic representation of modern economics, to explain how and why Chinese agriculture would become highly involuted, approaching close to its finite limits. Pei’s theory helps us to understand how the “lots of people and little land” 人多地少 “basic national condition” 基本国情 of China has dictated that its history and path of modern development would be very different from that of the “lots of land and few people” West, especially England after the fourteenth-century Black Death caused a reduction in population by half (and of course also the New World United States) (Pei, 2017, 2020; Pei Xiaolin, 2008).

Third is the agricultural economics theorist Ester Boserup. She pointed out with crystal clarity how, in preindustrial agriculture, population pressure on the land was the key factor driving technological change and innovation. The system of slash and burn agriculture (twenty-five years a cropping in forest slash and burn until the forest has regrown, and six to ten years a cropping in bush slash and burn), required the least labor input for relatively high yields; there was no incentive for the use or invention of the hoe and the plow. It was only when population pressure dictated sedentary farming, from one crop in two or more years (with fallow) to annual cropping and multiple cropping, that there was an incentive for the invention of all kinds of agricultural tools and methods. Which is to say, only with diminishing returns per cropping would there come incentives for technological innovation. This is an insight that is particularly helpful for understanding how traditional preindustrial Chinese agriculture attained such a highly sophisticated level of technical development along with labor intensification; at the same time, it also enables us to understand why Chinese agriculture would later resist relying mainly on mechanization to save labor as its path of modernization (Boserup, 1965; Boserup, 2015 [1965]).

In American China research, three generations of the best social-economic scholarship—from John Lossing Buck (1937a, b) to Ping-ti Ho (1959) to Dwight Perkins (1969)—focused on the fundamental issue of China’s population. They traced the basic empirical outlines of China’s population and agricultural history. Their research may be seen as lending basic evidentiary support for the insights of the theorists mentioned above.

Those insights and research are very much a part of this author’s understanding of peasant economy, involution, and involutory commercialization, all necessary for grasping China’s agricultural history, its dynamics of change and its problems. What they together demonstrate is how very wrong it is for Theodore Schultz and his ideologized neoclassical theory to rule out population pressure from consideration, to the complete disregard of three generations of the best empirical American research on the Chinese economy, by insisting that the operation of market mechanisms would eliminate the relevance of population pressures on the land.

After Schultz, there have been others who continued in the same vein, also with considerable influence. Their reasoning was, if the degree of commercialization/market development in China and in the West were roughly comparable, then the two must have been roughly equal in standard of living and level of economic development, regardless of the degree of population pressure on the land. They applied this reasoning to comparing eighteenth-century China and England, by generating “empirical evidence” contrived from their theoretical premises including, for example, the preposterous “estimate” that the average Chinese peasant each had two sets of silk garments, in addition to ten cotton outfits. Or that the differential fertility rates between China and England would disappear if one took into account the incidence of Chinese practices of so-called post-natal abortion (i.e., female infanticide, generally driven by poverty) which, according to them, should be understood as a rational birth control measure comparable

to relatively late marriage in Europe, erasing thereby any differences between Chinese and European population history. Their argument that the economies of China and England were roughly equivalent in the eighteenth century (couched in terms of the vogue slogan of “decentering the West”) not only ran counter to the earlier empirical research on Chinese population and agriculture, but has also now all been directly disproven by later and better empirical scholarship (e.g., Maddison 2001, 2007; Allen et al., 2011; Vries, 2015). There is no need to belabor the point here (for a fuller discussion, see Huang, 2002, and 2016a).

De-involution: Agricultural Modernization under High Population Pressure on the Land

Moreover, looking across different empirical patterns of agricultural modernization in the world, we can clearly distinguish between two models: one is that of the people-scarce land-plentiful countries and areas, especially the New World pattern of American agriculture, distinguished by its main characteristic of large-scale use of farm machinery. Its main concern is not to save land, but rather relatively scarce labor, and the best way to do that is to use farm machinery (especially big tractors). For that reason, by 1970, there was already one tractor for every male farm labor unit in the United States, but only one for 45 in Japan, and one for 960 in China (Huang, 2014: table 1; see also Huang Zongzhi, 2020a). (To be sure, use of chemical fertilizers to enhance land productivity and weed killers to save labor also played a role, but the use of big tractors was its basic distinguishing characteristic.) Tractors used in the United States in 1970 could plow 240 mu (40 acres) in one day; by 2005, the commonly used tractor could plow 2,520 mu (420 acres) per day, and in 2010, 5,670 mu (945 acres), or twenty-four times the capacity of the 1970 tractors. The newest and biggest tractors cost as much as US\$500,000 each. That same year,

harvesters reached twelve times the capacity of those in 1970 (USDA, 2013: 23). The distinguishing characteristic of such agriculture is abundance of land, to make for comparatively land-intensive agriculture (as opposed to labor-intensive agriculture), such as (land-intensive) “big-field” soybeans and wheat, which accounts for their relatively low price, which is of course also why China has been importing large quantities of those from the United States. They are exemplary of what this author has termed the “big and coarse” 大而粗 model of agricultural modernization (Huang Zongzhi and Gao Yuan, 2014; Huang Zongzhi, 2020a).

By contrast, the modernization of China’s agriculture up to now has been driven mainly by “small and fine” 小而精 farming, especially in the four decades since 1980, in what this author has termed the “new agriculture” of the “hidden agricultural revolution”: such as tented vegetable farming of one, three, five mu in size, fruit orchards of one to several mu, and the small (about ten mu) farms that combine cropping and animal husbandry (such as wheat and hog farming). All of them are what this author terms “labor and modern inputs [“capital”] dual intensifying” new agriculture. Today, such new agriculture has come to account for fully two-thirds of the total output value of Chinese agriculture and make up the core of the “hidden agricultural revolution” of recent decades (“hidden” because the change is unlike earlier agricultural revolutions in which there were dramatic increases in output per unit land in certain crops, but rather consists of a fundamental restructuring of agricultural output, and therefore has been rather difficult to discern) (Huang Zongzhi, 2010; see also Huang, 2016b).

The driving force behind the new agricultural revolution has come from the confluence of three historic tendencies: first is the vigorous implementation of planned birth control beginning in 1980, leading to significant declines in the numbers of new people joining the labor force by year 2000; second is the spread of off-farm employment of peasant household members, such

that virtually every peasant household in China has become a “ part cultivator part worker” 半耕半工 unit, containing one or more members employed off-farm, thereby substantially lowering the pressure on the land; third is the overall restructuring of food consumption that has come with economic development and increased incomes: from an 8:1:1 structure of grain, vegetables, and meats, to a 4:3:3 structure of the urban middle classes (and of the Taiwan area), thereby creating the consumption demands, especially of higher-value vegetables-fruits and meats, that have driven the restructuring of agricultural production (Huang Zongzhi and Peng Yusheng, 2007).

It is precisely the new agriculture of the hidden agricultural revolution, a relatively highly labor-intensive new agriculture, that has made up the heart of the modernization of China’s involuted agriculture. Compared to the older grain growing, cotton-yarn-cloth, and sericulture (mulberries-silkworms-silk thread), the new agriculture is even more labor intensive, as well as modern inputs (“capital”) intensifying (i.e., the use of chemical fertilizer and scientific seed selection). It has been able to absorb even more labor per unit land, while also increasing significantly the returns per workday for agricultural production. Which is to say, it has brought a significant degree of de-involution to Chinese agriculture, an important new development in the modernization of Chinese agriculture.

Even so, when compared with agriculture in the United States, it is still very much a highly labor-intensive small but fine agriculture, and not the much more highly capital-intensive (especially in the use of machinery) agriculture. The differences between the two are sharp. We must not imagine that agricultural modernization can only be American-style big-farm mechanized farming, nor should we imagine that small peasant economy can only disappear

completely with modernization. The difference between the two is that one is mechanized big-farming while the other is a new-style modernized high-value-added small farming.

However, compared to the fast-developing urban economy, China's agriculture and rural people's incomes still lag far behind. And, with the widespread entrance of rural people into urban employment, the originally close-knit village communities have become more and more atomized. It is for these reasons that the Party Central has for sixteen consecutive years placed the so-called triple rural problem 三农问题 (rural agriculture, rural people, and rural villages) front and center of its annual "Number One Document."

Close reading of those successive Number One Documents shows us, however, that until the last two or three years, the Party Central had clearly been deeply influenced by the Western model of "transition" (from feudalism to capitalism), and long assumed that the key to the modernization of agriculture was a matter of scale-economy—that China must employ economies of scale in order to overcome rural backwardness and poverty. For that reason, the successive documents all focused on the promotion and development of large-scale "dragon head" enterprises and "big households," and, in 2013, added also the emphasis on developing large-scale so-called family farms (of over 100 mu). Not until 2018 and 2019 did the Number One Document give full attention to the importance of small-scale agriculture, and acknowledge the great importance of small peasant economy for Chinese agriculture and society. From here on, we should expect to see more and more policies addressing small farming—what China actually needs the most (Huang Zongzhi, 2020a).

Theoretical Traditions

The English-language academic world's theorizing has concentrated mainly on the Western feudal peasant to modern capitalist farmer transition, mainly from the point of view of the neoclassical and Marxist theoretical traditions. They both take for granted that the small peasant will disappear with modernization/capitalist development, and that agriculture will give way to a system of entrepreneurial farmers hiring workers. But that is not at all the realities of China's present-day agricultural economy—to this day, hired long-term and short-term workers amount to a mere 3 percent of all labor input into agriculture, the rest being from small peasant households (Huang, Gao, and Peng, 2012; Huang Zongzhi, 2020a).

The most powerful theoretical analysis that accords with non-Western preindustrial agricultural economies to date is neither neoclassical economics nor Marxist theory, but the theory of peasant economy. Its originator was Russia's A. V. Chayanov, in studies that focused on the agriculture of the free peasantry in Russia after the emancipation of the serfs in 1861. It was a substantially commercialized agricultural economy, one that coexisted with the quasi-capitalist rich peasant economy analyzed by Lenin in his *The Development of Capitalism in Russia* (Lenin, 1956 [1907]).

Chayanov's contribution was precisely in pointing out the contrasting logics of the capitalist enterprise as opposed to the small peasant farm, the former being based mainly on hired labor and concerned principally with earning a profit, while the latter relied mainly on family labor and was concerned principally with subsistence, even if partially concerned also with earning a profit, but was rarely completely detached from the concerns of family subsistence. The latter's production decisions were therefore shaped at once by the concerns of profit and of consumption. In the latter part of the nineteenth century in Russia, and far more so in the West, the capitalist entities that arose rapidly were almost entirely concerned with profit-

making, not the family's own subsistence. That was the fundamental difference between the two kinds of economic entities. For the majority of the less developed countries, Chayanov's analysis accorded far more with the realities of their farm economy than the analyses of either neoclassical or Marxist economics (Chayanov, 1986 [1925]).

Further, Chayanov observed keenly that in his contemporary Russia, in some regions of strong population pressures on the land, the peasants put almost limitless amounts of labor into land to try to increase its output, nearly to the extent of zero marginal increases, that because of the dictates of subsistence pressures. Capitalist farms, by contrast, ceased to put in more labor when its marginal returns fell below the cost of that labor, because that amounted to incurring losses. Such phenomena were as yet limited in Chayanov's contemporary Russia, and Chayanov only noted them in passing, and did not place them at the center of his analysis (Chayanov, 1986 [1925]: chap. 3). He never imagined that, in the Yangzi delta of China's Ming-Qing era, this phenomenon that he observed in limited areas in Russia had become the predominant reality of the agricultural economy. It was such a tendency (to drive labor input per unit land toward the maximum possible output per unit land) that enabled small peasant farms to bear much higher land rents (set at a fixed rate of output value, of 40 to 50 percent), which is also to say, land prices, than the capitalist farms could bear. It was such a basic organizational tendency toward involution of the small farm that illustrates graphically the crucial contrasting logics between small peasant farming and capitalist farming.

This author's research has demonstrated that, in the Yangzi delta of the Ming-Qing period, this was in fact a basic long-term change. By the time of the Ming-Qing transition, the capitalist-like labor-hiring managerial farms had already begun to decline, becoming by the nineteenth and twentieth centuries entirely extinct in the region (Huang, 1990). Such a historical

reality demonstrates the power of Chayanov's theoretical analysis. This was so even though, in the Russia that Chayanov was himself most concerned about, no such gigantic historical reality appeared to demonstrate so dramatically the very different logic of peasant economy as opposed to capitalist economy—because in most regions in Russia population pressures had not reached such a degree of intensity.

Because Chayanov's theory could not be empirically illustrated in the areas he studied, and also because his theory was clearly inapplicable to the transition from feudalism to capitalism in the West, it never became as influential in the West as the two mainstream economic theories of neoclassical and Marxist economics. That was because Chayanov's theoretical analyses, though very applicable to China and other less developed countries under severe population-to-land pressures, were not as relevant to the land-abundant West. Moreover, in the Soviet Union that he was most deeply concerned about, the small peasant economy was forcibly organized out of existence by Stalin's imposition of collectivized agriculture, and Chayanov himself was simply killed.

Even so, in the Western academic world, Chayanov's theory has been preserved. He came to be widely acknowledged as the founder of the theory of peasant economy. The empirical basis for his theory was Russian agriculture and its free peasants of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Its fundamental organizational logic was that the peasant farm united the dual concerns of production and of consumption, and was based mainly on family labor rather than hired labor, its production decisions being shaped by both—a basic reality and indisputable theoretical insight, and one that is applicable to the peasant economies of most of the less developed countries.

In addition, the vigorous efforts of a number of important scholars, including especially the British sociologist (of Russian origin) Teodor Shanin, who saw to the publication of Chayanov's major works as well as the founding and sustaining of the *Journal of Peasant Studies*, have done much to ensure the continued influence of Chayanov's theory. In post-Communist Russia, it has also gained renewed influence. However, it has of course not been able to overshadow the influences of neoliberal and Marxist theory when it comes to studies of the West, which is one reason so many people today continue to insist on applying the Western framework of a transition from feudal peasants to modern capitalist farmers even to characterize China's experience.

In the opinion of this author, we need to adopt the term "peasant economy" and the theoretical insights that come with that term to think about and understand the agricultural economy of China (as well as of other similar developing nations), past, present, and future, to grasp its immense differences from the pattern of change of Western countries. We must reject the forced stuffing of China completely into Western historical frameworks. In fact, Chayanov's analysis of the distinctive nature of peasant economies has been demonstrated most clearly and completely in China, even if it has been overwhelmed in the West by the rise of capitalist economies and their theories.

For these reasons, when we study China (or similar peasant societies), we should insist on using the term "peasant" to discuss its historical realities, because that term calls to mind the theory of peasant economy and its far greater grasp of those realities than neoliberal economic theory, based on the Western experience of transition from feudalism to capitalism and the replacement of feudal economies by capitalist production. The same applies to conventional Marxist economic theory. They both expect and assume the complete disappearance of peasant

economy, which simply does not accord with the realities of China's past and present. The application of those theories to China is in fact very misleading, whereas the theory of peasant economy can help greatly to explain the gigantic long-term historical trends of involution and deinvolution in Chinese agriculture.

We should not confuse the peasantry of imperial China with those of feudal Europe. Peasants in China's long post-feudal imperial era were in fact very different from the Western feudal peasants that saw relationships of personal dependence to the manorial or feudal lord. Imperial-era Chinese peasants, by contrast, were largely freeholders. And their landlords were generally commoners, not feudal lords. They were more like the free peasants of the West from the decline of the feudal system in the mid-Middle Ages to the rise of industrialization.

At the same time, we should resist the present trend to use the term "farmers" to describe present-day Chinese small peasants, to suggest implicitly that the past and present of Chinese agriculture should be understood in the same terms as the West's experience of feudalism to capitalism. In fact, contemporary Chinese peasants resemble far more the peasants of the past than the capitalist farmers of the modern West: they are still farming small parcels; they are still living in relatively close-knit communities; they are still mainly self-managing cultivators and are not labor-hiring; and they are still living under China's fundamental national condition of lots of people and little land.

This author's research has further shown that, with the coming of modern industrial inputs, small peasant households will follow an entirely different path of change from that of Western capitalist agriculture, relying mainly on land-productivity-enhancing chemical fertilizers (and scientific seed selection), to bring forth a new agriculture that is both labor and modern inputs ("capital") intensifying, rather than the Anglo-American/Western patterns of labor-

productivity-enhancing mechanized capitalist farming. In 1970, we have seen, there was one tractor for each American male farm labor unit; but only 1/45 for Japan, 1/960 for China. And in that same year, American farms used only 89 kilograms of land-productivity enhancing chemical fertilizer per hectare, compared to 386 kilograms in Japanese farming of the same time, and 157 kilograms in Chinese farming (Huang, 2014: table 1). Today, even the big agribusinesses in China rely mainly on contracts or agreements with small peasant households to do the actual farming with their cheap labor, rather than operate the farms themselves with hired laborers. They are in truth not so much capitalist farming enterprises as commercial and processing and marketing enterprises. That is what is commonly referred to today as the enterprise + peasants 公司 + 农户 model of farm enterprises (Huang Zongzhi, 2020a). They are most unlike contemporary labor-employing capitalist Western farmers: to date, hired rural labor, long and short-term, still amount to a mere 3 percent of all farm labor input in China, as we have seen.

These are differences both in the past and present, as well as in the prospective future directions of change, and must not be confounded with the simplistic equation of Chinese experience with the Western feudalism-to-capitalism pattern. To apply the latter framework to China can only lead to a complete misunderstanding of the fundamental characteristics of Chinese agricultural production, which is of course also the very bedrock of traditional Chinese society and culture. To err thus would be to completely misunderstand the agricultural history of China as well as that of other developing countries of similar historical backgrounds.

A New Peasant Economy: A Third Way

Chayanov's analysis of peasant economy not only established an entirely different way to think about the operative mechanisms of peasant agriculture than those highlighted by neoliberalism

and Marxism, but also pointed to a very different prospective path for change. As someone who was deeply concerned about the common people (a democratic “populist,” to be distinguished from the kind of populist who comes with strongly emotional racial or ethnic sentiments, and often also propensities toward acceptance of charismatic authority), Chayanov, in addition to articulating the powerful theoretical insights discussed above, also attempted to identify a path of development different from both capitalism and socialist planned economy. Unlike neoliberal scholars, he considered capitalism an ideology of entirely self-seeking pursuit of gain (sharing much in common with Marxists in that regard), while he himself was more interested in the ideal of the well-being of the majority of the common people (“populism” in that sense). At the same time, he was also deeply critical of a planned economy, of complete state control of the people’s economic actions. Precisely for those reasons, he proposed a path of development that was different from both capitalism and Marxist planned economy. He saw in a preliminary way how small peasants would be left at the mercy of the big market dominated by merchants and capitalists, and would lose to them the bulk of the returns from their output. For that reason, he proposed that peasants form cooperatives to process and market (“vertical integration” for the market) their products, so as to preserve as much as possible market gains for themselves, rather than have them captured by merchants or capitalists.

That ideal has always drawn considerable attention in the West but it seems never to have been actualized to any substantial degree in any country or area, and is therefore often seen as, though not a bad ideal, one that is unrealistic and very hard to actualize.

What is generally overlooked is that agricultural cooperatives that closely approximate Chayanov’s ideal have actually, following upon a host of coincidental historical developments, been realized in Japan, Korea, and the Taiwan area (“East Asia”), and contributed crucially to

their development experience. The origins of such co-ops lay first in Japanese local governments of the late Meiji period: their assigned task was above all to help modernize agriculture, by providing modern inputs for Japanese peasants, most especially chemical fertilizer (and scientific seed selection). They proved to be effective in promoting modern agricultural development, not just in Japan (Hayami and Yamada, 1991), but through Japanese occupation also in Korea and the Taiwan area (Ban, 1979: 92–93; cf. Kang and Ramachandran, 1999: esp.792, table 6; Lee and Chen, 1979: 78; see also Ho, 1968, and Amsden, 1979).

To be sure, that had been entirely a top-down matter by administrative fiat, but later, with the end of the Second World War, there was the historical coincidence that the officials in charge of agricultural policy of the American occupation were a group of progressive individuals who identified with the legacy of President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal policies (see especially Cohen, 1987; cf. Huang Zongzhi, 2020a: 282–83)—they came forth with the plan to establish in Japan an agricultural economy of independent small peasant owner-cultivators and to terminate the old landlord economy. They legislated that no peasant was to own more than forty-five mu of land, and that no outside capital would be allowed to own farmland. At the same time, they commanded the local governments to turn over the agricultural resources under them to newly founded peasant cooperatives that would organize and provide processing and marketing for farm products. In addition, higher-level wholesale markets were to be established, to set farm prices through open competitive bidding. Those wholesale markets were to provide modern services (for storage, refrigeration, and later, also electronic information services). On that basis, Japanese agriculture developed a system that managed to preserve the bulk of agricultural earnings for the peasants rather than merchants or capitalists (Huang Zongzhi, 2015, 2018, 2020a).

The starting point of this system, namely, the provision of modern agricultural inputs by the local governments, was first set up in Korea and Taiwan because of Japanese occupation, and then was later transformed in the same way as in occupied Japan (the termination of the landlord economy and the establishment of an economy of smallholding peasants, and also similar basic-level farm cooperatives as well as modern wholesale markets), due to the decisive influence of the United States in Korea and Taiwan.

The result was to protect small peasants' interests in Japan, Korea, and Taiwan, and avoid the large gaps that commonly exist between urban and rural areas, thereby helping those places to attain relatively positive measures of (social equity) Gini coefficients, to rank among the more socially equal globally. At the same time, not only at the level of social equity, but also at the level of popular participation in government, the co-ops have contributed a definite degree of "democratization," which had been precisely the purpose of the progressive American occupation officials. Without doubt, these three East Asian places have attained relative success in agricultural modernization, which became in turn an important reason for their successful entrance into the ranks of "developed countries" during the 1970s to 1990s. It is of course also the reason for their relative social equity as well as the fundamental reason that the informal economy today occupies only a relatively low proportion of their overall employment structure when compared to China.

To be sure, after Japan's golden period of agricultural development (between 1945 and 1970) and the steady shrinking of the agricultural sector in its overall economy (to just 1.2 percent of total GDP by 2013), there have come gradual contractions in the numbers of small peasant farms, enlargement of farm scales, and the original small peasant co-ops have faced a

host of challenges, gradually compelling their merger into larger units, as well as a host of other changes different from their original design. But their historical success is beyond question.

In today's China, the logistical system of agricultural products (from effective community co-ops to the transparency and efficient service provided by the state-run wholesale markets) falls way short by comparison, consisting as it does of profit-seeking wholesale markets established by different governmental entities that are looking to turn a profit more than to provide modern services and supports. The official state-run supply and marketing co-ops 供销社 that date back to the collective era, of course, also fall way short of the East Asian peasant-operated co-ops. The worst problem is the severe social inequities that have arisen: according not just to the measures of international entities, but also to China's own computations of the Gini coefficient, China today ranks twenty-seventh from the bottom of 141 countries in terms of degree of social equity—telling us thereby about the core of the triple rural problem identified by China's Party Central. The East Asian co-ops experience is clearly something that China can learn a great deal from (Huang Zongzhi, 2020a).

Involution and De-involution of the Peasant Economy, and the Rise of the Informal Economy

It is apparent that, whether an agricultural economy is involuted or not, and whether its process of de-involution is accompanied by a high degree of social inequity, are directly related to the rise and spread of informal employment in the global economy. Here China is once more among the most graphic examples. Precisely because its rural economy has long labored under heavy population pressures on the land and large numbers of surplus laborers and cheap wages, it has furnished immense quantities of labor for the country's industrial transition. "Peasant workers"

(i.e., urban workers with rural registration status) have now reached more than 300 million, accounting for more than 75 percent of the total of nearly 400 million urban employed (Huang Zongzhi, 2020a, c; Huang, 2011a). They have provided cheap labor for globalized enterprises (which has been of course a major reason for China's appeal as a destination for global capital), as well as for domestic Chinese enterprises. They have become an integral and fundamental component of the present-day globalized economic system. All this is directly related to the background of China's high degree of agricultural involution.

Comparing the past involution that had set the course of de-involution by means of the small and fine pattern, with the big and coarse mode of agricultural modernization of land-abundant Western countries, the crucial difference consists in different rates of return to labor. China's de-involution has most certainly increased returns to labor, by means of growing higher-value-added farm products using more chemical fertilizer (and scientifically selected seeds) in the labor and modern inputs dual intensifying hidden agricultural revolution. In addition, because of the rigorous birth control program and the explosion of non-farm employment for peasants, cultivated land per unit labor has actually increased from roughly 6–7 mu per labor unit on average to about 10 mu per labor unit. That too has contributed to increased farm incomes and by extension also peasant-worker incomes. However, those are still a far cry from the American farm household, which works 2,700 mu on average and employs large farm machinery to raise labor productivity. Those higher returns and living standards of American farmers largely rule out the possibility of their providing cheap labor for globalized capital—making for a further fundamental difference between American farmers and Chinese peasants.

The informal-economy workers of China, unlike formal workers, have little or no labor protection in terms of legally set numbers of hours worked, overtime pay, work environment

safety, or health-care coverage and retirement pay. They have been placed under the 2007 Labor Contract Law, ostensibly applicable only to “temporary, auxiliary or substitute workers,” who are contracted for by intermediary “employment agencies” rather than the actual producing entity—legally speaking, the latter are only the entities that use the labor 用工单位, but not the entity hiring the laborer’s person 用人单位, as the legal jargon goes, and hence need not bear responsibility for the laborer’s benefits. That is the new legal framework that has largely eliminated the old labor law’s requirements on obligations of the employer toward the worker, allowing thereby the large-scale use of cheap labor by enterprises, including long-term workers (and not just the theoretical temporary or part-time laborers). Yet even those conditions of employment, so long as the pay proffered exceeds what is commonly obtainable from farming, have been enough to draw large numbers of members of part cultivator part worker peasant households to take on informal employment (Huang Zongzhi, 2020c; Huang, 2017).

From the above, we can see how the theoretical conception of peasant households as distinctive entities that combine production and consumption concerns helps us understand how they became so highly involuted in China, as well as how they came to set the pattern of later de-involution, and further, how the surplus labor of the countryside came to provide cheap labor for industrial development (and how the incomes from that employment have helped fund the labor and modern inputs dual intensifying hidden agricultural revolution). Those developments are all closely related to the rise of the gigantic informal economy. For that very reason, today, not just in China, but also in numerous other less developed countries—in Asia, Africa, and Latin America—the informal economy has come to account for one-half to three-quarters of all urban employment (Huang, 2009; Huang Zongzhi, 2020c).

Compared to those, the East Asian economies that saw the successful development of peasant co-ops for the vertical integration advocated by Chayanov, managed to enter the ranks of developed economies by the latter part of the last century, and have shown high degrees of social equity. The proportion that the informal economy occupies in their total employment structure has remained relatively low, far lower than in mainland China. This shows us once more how very perspicacious was the suggestion that Chayanov made for peasants themselves to organize co-ops for processing and marketing vertical integration. Even though his suggestions (though influential among perhaps half of rural Russia before the coming of Stalinist collectivization—Shanin, 2009) were not implemented in Russia over the long term, they managed paradoxically to have played a critically important role in the modernization of the East Asian economies of Japan, Korea, and Taiwan.

China's Future?

China's present informal economy and related legislation clearly are a temporary expedient, and for that reason, have not been included in the current efforts to promulgate a lasting civil code. To be sure, the main tendency of the past four decades has been unquestionably that of “de-formalization”—to substitute ever more the informal “[agency or] dispatch-labor relations” 劳务关系 and contracts for the erstwhile formal “labor relations” 劳动关系 protected by the old socialist labor laws. Nevertheless, the state Constitution (as well as the Communist Party's constitution) has reaffirmed again and again the foundational principle that the highest ideal of the party-state is “the fundamental interests of the overwhelming majority of the people,” not “let some of the people get rich first.” Replacing the old socialist labor laws with temporary dispatch labor contracts under the Labor Contract Law can only be seen as a temporary measure for the

sake of integrating China's economy into the global economy, not the long-term goal of the party-state. We can expect that sooner or later China will address this part of the issue of what has been singled out by the Party Central for special emphasis as the triple rural problem.

On the basis of the above discussion, we can attempt to delineate the outlines of a possible future path for China's development. Compared to the East Asian capitalist "developmental states (and governments)," though China has not yet attained their developed country (or area) status but, in terms of the structure of its economic system and its "state capacity," it in fact has the potential to do even more than the East Asian model. At the level of the economic system, China's own characterization is a "socialist market economy," as compared to the East Asian developmental state/government (for Japan, see Johnson, 1982, 1999; Korea, Amsden, 1989; Taiwan, Wade, 1990), with greater emphasis on social equity, at least at the level of theoretical ideal. And, in terms of actual practice, because under China's so-called socialist market economy, 40 percent of nonagricultural GDP still comes from state-owned enterprises, and because the state is basically the ultimate owner of all land, its capacity and power for social change is much greater than that of the governments of the East Asian model. For example, the state can use the profits from state enterprises to lift the incomes of the lower levels of society, to expand thereby the domestic market and achieve more sustainable development—we have already seen this done successfully in one directly administered municipality (Chongqing) as a "test point" "experiment" (Huang, 2011b). For another example, local governments have in the past relied greatly on appreciated values of land from urban development to fund ("land financing" 土地财政) urban infrastructural development; in the future, they could use that method to fund rural public services, as can be seen from the example of Chengdu city. We have also already seen the promising suggestion of turning the ownership

of some state enterprises over to the local people's congresses, to ensure that their profits would be used for people's livelihood and public services (Huang Zongzhi, 2019, 2020c).

Perhaps, China's involuted peasant economy may yet be able to provide for Chayanov's theory of peasant economy, and the associated suggestion for co-ops for vertical integration, their most thoroughgoing empirical demonstration and further development. China's socialist market economy might also be able to provide for Chayanov what he had not been able to concretize in the way of an alternative path for modern development outside of neoliberalism and Marxism, one that is powered by high moral ideals and greater social equity. Precisely for that reason, we need to insist on succeeding to the insights of Chayanov's theory of peasant economy, to insist on using the term "peasant" (not "farmer"), which accords the most with Chinese realities past and present, and to adopt the term "new peasant economy" in both English and Chinese to express our vision for the future of China's ruralities and their people. That would be a new-pattern peasant economy and rural co-ops + new-style logistical system for agricultural products, under the larger framework of a socialist market economy, which would be tantamount to the actual implementation, improvement, and advancement of what Chayanov had wished for and envisioned. Perhaps, the cooperativized new peasant economy and new rural communities could join with the overarching rubric of a socialist market economy to represent a new way of modern development that is different from the West's capitalism + imperialism + hegemonic globalization, to open up for small peasant households of the developing world and their family members working in the informal economy, a new pathway of industrialization and modernization that sees to peasants' well-being and dignity.

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Philip Huang's four new books are finally coming out—from the Guangxi Shifan Daxue Chubanshe 广西师范大学出版社. The first is on the present-day peasant economy, in effect the fourth volume of his earlier three-volume study; the second is on the present-day justice system, in effect also the fourth volume of his earlier three-volume study; the third is on the new subject of “informal economy” (i.e., peasant workers). The fourth is on theory and method, a continuation of two earlier volumes.