Land Reform, Red Style

By S. T. TUNG

"Agrarian reform" in China is sheer theft, says a Chinese writer, and is creating the chaos to be followed by collectivization.

The rosy illusion that depicted the Chinese Communists as mere "agrarian reformers" has been shattered by their aggression in Korea. Yet many misinformed people still think that Mao's government is engaged in land reform, and owes to this its military and political successes. Some even believe that massacre, extortion and other crimes carried out in connection with the Communist agrarian policy are justified because land reform is a good thing for the masses, even if it hurts the "wealthy few." They conceive of Nationalist China as a country where a handful of feudal landlords ruthlessly exploited and oppressed the poor tenant farmers.

In their opinion the most effective way to fight communism is to imitate the Communists by enforcing land reform. Such an attitude is as dangerous as it is widespread, since the false land reformers have won control over 470 million people in China and are trying to capture the other Asiatic countries by the same hoax.

This misunderstanding arises not only from ignorance, but from persistent and widely circulated propaganda. In the foreword of the Chinese Communist land law and in the speeches of Mao and his henchmen appears the following statement, which contains as little truth as their assertion that the United States is entirely controlled by a few Wall Street capitalists:

> The landlords and rich farmers who constitute less than 10 per cent of the rural population own from 70 to 80 per cent of the agricultural land [of China], and ruthlessly exploit the farmers. The farm laborers, poor farmers, middle farmers and other people, who constitute over 90 per cent of the rural population, own together only from 20 to 30 per cent of the agricultural land.

Not only are the percentages fabricated, but the terms used to classify the rural population are purely Communist inventions. There has never been a census of the ownership of farm land; never has the rural population been classified, or classifiable, into these categories. China has no "landlord" class; no such word is in our dictionary.

As far as scattered investigations by government offices and private and public institutions show, land distribution in China presents a very different picture. The most ambitious attempt to determine the distribution of land ownership was undertaken by the Land Commission of the Nationalist Central Government before the war with Japan. It covered 1,750,000 families in 163 *hsien* over 12 provinces. Nearly 80 per cent of the land was shown to be in the hands of owners of less than 100 *mou* (about 16 acres). Almost 99 per cent of the families were such small owners, while only 1.34 per cent of the families owned 100 *mou* or more, and only 18.32 per cent of the land belonged to such owners. In contrast, about four-sevenths of the land in Great Britain belongs to big landowners who have 1000 acres or more each.

From the Poor to the Poor

Most of the landowners in China are the common people—farmers, small merchants, artisans, workmen. There are, to be sure, a good many rich people in China, but very few of them own much land. The bulk of their wealth is in city real estate, bank deposits, shares and interests in business, gold bars, etc. Land is so minutely divided and its ownership so widely diffused that it is technically difficult to buy large tracts, even if one has the money. Collection of rents from a large number of small tenants widely scattered over bandit-infested country is no easy matter; that is why many city people having some land in the country were eager to sell it even at a loss.

The objective of the "land reform" carried out by the Communists is not the breaking up of large estates and their division among the farmers. It is the indiscriminate confiscation and redistribution of the land of all the people—not only the few big estates, but also the tiny properties of small owners who have earned them by the hardest and meanest labor. It is this great majority of the landowning population that is really hurt by the "land reform," because their little farms are all they have. These small owners are the most industrious, thrifty, resourceful and competent elements of society.

The Communist Land Law provides that all land is to be redistributed equally to all the people, irrespective of age, sex and other distinctions. And the property to be confiscated includes work animals, farm tools, "surplus food" and "surplus rooms." This law is rendered more drastic by the provincial governments in the regulations governing its application, which greatly increase the list of confiscable things. "Food" is interpreted to include such products as cotton, tobacco, hemp, tung oil and teak; "work animals" to include chickens and ducks; "room" to include furniture, books, clothes, also bricks, timber and stones not yet used in construction. No one would dare to question the regulations.

To state it plainly, Communist land reform is just another name for robbery. No wonder the people resort to sabotage—cut their trees, tear down their houses, kill or maim their animals, destroy their furniture and tools, burn their grain and other products, and even destroy canals and dikes and permit water to flood their fields. Faced with this desperate revolt and sabotage, the Communists resort to the most ruthless punitive measures. This is one reason why so many people have been arrested and executed.

The landless and propertyless elements, including the idlers, spendthrifts and incompetents, have obtained something at the expense of the industrious and thrifty; but their gain is neither permanent nor without a price. Judging the Communists by deeds rather than words, it is clear that their "land reform" is not meant to help the poor. If that were their intention, they would better give cash, silver, gold or goods, which the poor most need and could actually spend or consume, and which the Communists have in plenty. Many poor people wonder why the Communists don't give them such things, instead of things both unsaleable and unconsumable. It is because the Communists want these things for themselves. If the land and its improvements could be carried away, or easily converted into cash, the Communists would want them, too. The furniture and tools of the country people are clumsy and of little value—that is why they are given to the poor. But farm products are all commandeered by the Communists, who either take them to the cities for their own consumption or send them to Russia and other countries in exchange for munitions and other commodities.

This is why Communist "land reform" is secretly called the "bone policy." The Communists take all the meat and leave only the bone to the poor. And for your piece of bone you must obey orders, go to meetings and rallies, spy for the Communists, even become cannon fodder for them.

If the poor could retain the land, there might be some benefit for them in Communist land reform. But the Communists have made it plain that they intend nationalization of land and collectivization of agriculture.

Facts *vs* Propaganda

Even now, when the land still belongs nominally to the people, they get no real benefit from it. Taxes, assessments and "voluntary contributions" are extraordinarily heavy and diverse. After the greed of the Communists has been satisfied, little is left for the use of the cultivators. They will be kept alive, just as the farm animals are, as long as there is sufficient food after the needs of the Communists have been met. To give them land is, in fact, to assign them only to compulsory labor on the land.

Communist propaganda maintains that "land reform" has increased production since the farmers, no longer subject to "feudalistic exploitation," are willing to work harder. The truth is that the Chinese farmer has always been peculiarly hard-working. Now, on the contrary, the farmers can not and will not work to their full capacities. There is a shortage of farm equipment and animals because of sabotage. There is a shortage of manpower because the Communists maintain a large army and "people's militia" and draft millions of men for public works. And then, the farmers no longer have any incentive to produce. Who would want or dare to make money, now that the Communists have denounced wealthy landowners as enemies of the people? Moreover, the prospect of collectivization has become common knowledge through the Communists' own propaganda.

The Communists have pictured the tenant farmer as a miserable victim of the landlord, who bled him white. If this were so, why did so many tenant farmers solicit the privilege of being exploited? The truth is that they rented the land with the object of making money, and generally they succeeded. They were willing to work hard to obtain high yields, for the land rent in the majority of cases was a fixed amount. Sharecropping was limited to some of the farms of the very small landowners, and the more the tenant produced, the more he would get proportionally. Where the fields of owner farmers and tenant farmers adjoined, not even an agricultural expert could tell the difference.

Under the Communists the farmer's economic status has not improved, even though he does not have to pay rent. In accordance with the "land reform" program, each person receives from one to two *mou* of land, the average family getting about seven or eight *mou*. From the produce of this area the farmer has to pay taxes. Now, the tenant farmer of the past commonly cultivated about thirty *mou*. Even if he had to pay one-half of his harvest for rent, he still had the produce of fifteen *mou* for his own use.

The Communists redistributed the land on the basis of persons per family, irrespective of working capacity. As a result, some families have too little land to keep everyone fully occupied, so labor is wasted; others do not have sufficient manpower, so the land is wasted

In pursuing the policies of land confiscation and agricultural collectivization, Mao's government is simply following the Soviet Union blindly without understanding China's real land problem. The most serious aspect of this problem is not the unequal distribution of the ownership of land, but the lack of enough land to take care of all the people. This is the root of the poverty of the Chinese farmers. No matter how the Communists redistribute the land, they can not find a way out of the dilemma. Nor will collectivization provide a solution.