

Unplanned and Unauthorized Prosperity under the Planned Economy: A County-Level Revisit of Chinese Peasants' Participation in Illegal Markets during the Cultural Revolution*

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In today's China, legacies of the centrally planned economy under Mao Zedong's rule are being rejuvenated, which coincides with the trend of reevaluating Mao-era history more positively. For example, Supply and Marketing Cooperatives, the forces of the planned economy that dominated Chinese peasants' marketing and purchase of products, are regaining influence in rural China. Opposite to the Supply and Marketing Cooperatives were free businesses, which faced serious restrictions and crackdowns throughout the planned economy era. Although China deviated from the model of the planned economy decades ago, a lack of sufficient bottom-up evidence has prevented researchers from presenting a clear picture of rural residents' experiences under the planned economy, such as how they suffered from and responded to the minimization of free rural markets. This deficiency in research foreshadows the revival of the Supply and Marketing Cooperatives in a glamorized form. Based on large numbers of primary and archival sources, this article pays a county-level revisit to Chinese peasants' continuous attempts to trade their harvest freely, especially through participating in illegal markets, during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). Through exploring the unplanned and unauthorized prosperity in rural commerce that went beyond lawful boundaries, the research aims to reassess Chinese peasants' authentic marketing experiences under the planned economy, so as to provide evidence-based references for reconsidering today's popular reevaluation of Mao-era legacies molded by the planned economy.

Keywords planned economy, rural business, black market, Cultural Revolution

I. Introduction

Recent years have witnessed the mushrooming reemergence of Supply and Marketing Cooperatives (供销社) across rural China. As of 2021, their

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national branches numbered 37,700, achieving total gross sales of RMB 6.26 trillion (Ren et al., 2022). Based on the plan of officials, through building at least 1,000 new branches of Supply and Marketing Cooperatives every year, a three-layer system will be established across the nation by 2025, covering county seats, townships, and villages (Hou, 2021). As one of the most representative symbols of the centrally planned economy in Mao's China, if the Cooperatives behoove regaining a major role in rural businesses, then the following question arises: Was the service they provided during the Mao era — covering the acquisition of agricultural products and sale of daily goods — satisfying and sufficient for most Chinese peasants? If this was the case, then there should not have been black markets that went beyond the state's plans and restrictions. Yet, there is almost no need to argue for the persistence of Mao-era peasants' illegal marketing activities, although due to a severe lack of written records, many researchers failed to present a clear picture of it.

This article is based on large numbers of reliable primary sources collected from Hechuan County, in addition to nearby regions in Sichuan and Chongqing areas.¹ They included not only archives, gazetteers, internally issued materials but also personal records, such as work notes, account books, unpublished memoirs, and informal discussions with local informants.² This article presents a county-level case study of peasants' participation in unlawful free trade during the decade of the Cultural

¹ As the founding of Chongqing Municipality under the Central Government 重庆直辖市 that no longer belonged to Sichuan Province in 1997, Hechuan County has become a part of Chongqing and now is a suburban district of the city.

² In today's China, individuals or institutions with foreign background are often described as overseas hostile forces (境外敌对势力). Chinese people are taught to be very cautious when communicating with them. Asking them to sign the consent form for an international project may scare or even endanger them. For not bringing any trouble to my informants, I chose to discuss with them informally, in which way a consent form is not needed.

Revolution (1966–1976), the most politicized and rigid period of the Mao era.

In this article, the term “rural business” includes businesses in township-level markets, which most peasants rely on for selling agricultural products and buying everyday necessities. It also refers to markets in county seats, where the regular sellers include a notable number of peasants, especially those from nearby villages. With a considerable amount of new evidences, this article provides a vivid and authentic contribution to the established argumentation on the failure of China’s planned economy in rural business, where the Supply and Marketing Cooperatives functioned as the major legal force for the monopoly of Chinese peasants’ selling and purchasing activities.

II. Research Background

As significant and interesting parts of most Chinese rural residents’ daily lives in the Mao era, the experiences of illegal marketing should have been commonly described by researchers who observe the countryside of Mao’s China. Unfortunately, across international academia, a severe lack of relevant sources has hampered most scholars’ work, even from the 1980s onward when entering China to conduct fieldwork became possible. Although some researchers have managed to include fragmentary information, what remains scarce are in-depth and careful reviews of Mao-era illegal rural trade against the commercial backgrounds of certain regions. Examinations of whether some local traditions continued in spite of the limitations and crackdowns under the planned economy are also lacking.

G. William Skinner is one of the very few scholars who have continuously paid attention to the extension and transformations of rural marketing from

China's late imperial period to the communist era. His two explorations (1964: 3-43; 1965: 195-228), with the rural markets of Sichuan as a research focus, provided a classical model for later studies. The discontinuation of accessibility to onsite sources after 1949 significantly impeded Skinner's further research on the unprecedented changes that were occurring under communism. Mainly based on materials obtained from open sources published in newspapers, his 1965 research presented not so much a picture of local realities as the vision that the upper-level authorities sought to propagate. Apart from the official vision, data related to peasants' unlawful trading activities would seldom have been reported in public news.

Parallel to Skinner's studies, Philip C. Huang has also worked on the Chinese rural economy and society over a large time span. His research focused on families and development in the Yangzi Delta countryside from the 14th century to the 1980s, presenting a spectacular picture of rural China, including the radical transformations in the Mao era (1990). He devoted substantial attention to the family-based economy, such as private plots and side-line production; however, Huang did not discuss whether peasants actively participated in rural markets in much depth, either through selling their products or buying everyday necessities, although they are reasonable results of rural families' production activities.

From the 1980s onward, while primary sources in China were becoming much more accessible to foreign scholars, a series of more monographs on rural China emerged, including those focusing on the Mao period. However, almost none of them concentrated on rural marketing during that era, especially peasants' illegal trade beyond the planned economy. An exception is Anita Chan and Jonathan Unger's short article (1982: 452-471), which targeted the hidden economy in rural China from the Mao period to the Deng period. They included peasants' marketing activities that were

illegal (black) and semi-illegal (grey) in their work. The limited results of their pioneering research were based on finite sources, mainly from interviews with (China mainland) emigrants settled in Hong Kong, and should have been extended and enriched by Chan and her colleagues' later research (Chan et al., 1992); however, besides briefly mentioning the villagers' cash income from selling vegetables and livestock (Chan et al., 1992: 248), the three authors provided no more information on the specific process of peasants' businesses. In fact, by the mid-1970s, according to the CCP (Chinese Communist Party)'s policies, raising and selling livestock for private money-making were still seriously restricted.

Comparatively speaking, Edward Friedman and his co-authors, in their second monograph (Friedman et al., 2005) dealing with Northern China's rural history after 1949, included more stories related to villagers' marketing activities that cross lawful boundaries. "In almost every village, including Wugong, a handful of young men found ways to flee the collective and earn money" (Friedman et al., 2005: 126). In the meantime, the peasants had an unavoidable need for money for reciprocity, such as weddings, funerals, and New Year feasts. An inevitable consequence was the growth of a large black market (Friedman et al., 2005: 207). In addition to their first book (Friedman et al., 1991) which is also a detailed village-level exploration, however, such contents that directly depict villagers' illegal trade under the planned economy is not common, not to mention the lack of a comprehensive discussion of the black market. A similar noticeable deficiency exists in Kate Zhou Xiao's publication on Chinese farmers' power in changing China (1996). Although one chapter (Zhou, 1996: 76–105) specifically discusses the issues of rural marketing, the author pays most attention to Chinese peasants' trading activities from the 1980s onward, leaving their attempts on free businesses in earlier stages nearly blank.

In recent years, researchers' increasing access to richer and fresher

sources has enabled them to re-examine the history of Mao's China, paying more attention to the lives of people at the grassroots level; nevertheless, the gap in research on Mao-era black markets in the countryside is still yet to be markedly filled. Edited by Jeremy Brown and Matthew D. Johnson (2015), in the volume that contains a number of inspiring articles uncovering grassroots experiences in the Mao era, no scholar discussed rural business during that period, including illegal trade. By contrast, Frank Dikötter exhibited more interest in exposing what happened in China's rural markets during the Cultural Revolution, highlighting its significance in undermining the planned economy in rural areas (2016). Benefiting from newly exposed archival sources from various locations, one of the essential contributions of this article is to confirm the prevalence of black markets across different parts of rural China under Mao. However, readers are scarcely informed of any local background of a rural area where unlawful business prevailed. Yet, as admitted by Skinner at the end of his prolonged studies on rural markets in China (1965: 195-228), "traditional marketing communities have given shape to the Communists' chosen instrument for rural transformation," in addition to their influences in preventing Chinese rural dwellers abruptly abandoning the everlasting demand to participate in buying and selling activities freely.

In addition to Dikötter's exploration, the latest contribution in the English literature that directly deals with illegal rural markets in Mao's China is made by Chunying Wang and Y. Yvon Wang (2022). Through a county-level case study concentrating on 1958–1960, the serious famine period, this new paper presents a detailed picture of the unlawful activities of rural residents in Liangshan County, Shandong Province. The two authors especially emphasize the negotiation between Liangshan peasants and some basic-level cadres, whose acquiescence and even support contributed to the existence of illegal rural trade, despite top-down restrictions and

crackdowns. Inspired by this newly exposed county-level story concurrent with great famine, expressing curiosity in black-market stories from other stages of Mao's rural China is reasonable, such as those during the Cultural Revolution. In that decade, while the recovery of farming made peasants' free businesses more feasible, the highly politicized environment opposed any personal attempts to obtain private benefits. Therefore, whether and how the black markets continued to operate during the Cultural Revolution is of even greater interest to researchers.

As for academicians in China, despite enjoying much greater access to first-hand sources, they are circumscribed by lasting restrictions on any free discussion related to Mao-era history. Very few have managed to expose many details regarding Chinese peasants' participation in Mao-era markets, especially illegal ones. One of the limited research achievements is a nearly 200-page Ph.D. dissertation dealing with the rural markets in Northern Jiangsu Province between 1949 and 1966 (Ma, 2005); however, in the dissertation, only one page concentrates on the black business in the countryside. In another monograph focusing on Chinese peasants' resistance during the late 1950s under the People's Communization Movement,³ the author devoted only three pages to discussing the rural economy that went beyond lawful boundaries (Gao, 2006). Probably touching the bottom line of the CCP's tolerance for criticism, this author then could only publish his further work in Hong Kong, expanding his research to Chinese peasants' resistance throughout the entire Mao era (Gao, 2013). In this new monograph, however, rural markets that lacked official permission

³ After the Movement of People's Communization 公社化运动 in rural China in the late 1950s, under the scheme of people's communes 人民公社, production teams were the most basic level of collective farming across the nation. Normally speaking, a commune consisted of a number of brigades that were equal to traditional villages, and a brigade was divided into several production teams.

were still not a major topic. Across Chinese academia, the near-absence of detailed explorations of Mao-era black markets has left considerable space for defending the planned economy's rationality in Mao's China, which matches the CCP-promoted trend of narrating Mao-era history more positively.⁴ As is typical of this trend among Chinese scholars, a 2016 monograph thoroughly reevaluated China's centrally planned economy, under which black-market business seemed never to have existed during the Mao era (Cheng).

On the basis of all available scholarship in the international and Chinese literature to date, the present article explores Chinese peasants' persistence in illegal trade under the lengthy and intensive politicization of the Cultural Revolution; thus, the aim is to remedy the long-existing deficiency in research to rediscover Chinese peasants' experiences under the planned economy. Differing from Wang and Wang's (2022) highlighting of the role that local cadres played in the process, this article maintains its focus on rural dwellers, who were always both the major sellers and buyers in rural markets, although in many cases it was possible that top-down constraints were negotiable at the local level.

Mainly based on materials from Hechuan, a typical county in the Sichuan Basin, this paper is not limited to peasants' participation in illegal trade from townships to the county seat during the Cultural Revolution; rather, it also pays attention to the local traditions and continuities of rural markets in this county. Therefore, in addition to revisiting the realities of the unplanned and unauthorized business conducted by Chinese peasants

⁴ From 2013, after Xi Jinping pointed out that the history of the CCP from 1949 to 1979 and after 1979 are not contradictory (前后两个三十年互不否定), more and more opinions re-evaluating the Mao era positively appeared both in Chinese academia and social media. From 2021, when the center of the CCP launched the Movement of Learning the History of the Party (党史学习教育运动), the trend of eulogizing the Mao era has been overwhelming in China.

driven by the planned economy, this article helps locate the roots and prospects of the rural business that uncontrollably deviated from the planned economy's confinement, which have mostly been overlooked by scholarship.

III. The Local Traditions of Rural Markets

Since the ancient period, both urban and rural regions in the Sichuan Basin along the Yangtze River and its tributaries have greatly benefited from the convenience of water transportation. In addition to suitable natural conditions for agriculture, if only the social order allowed, the basin areas maintained prosperity in commerce, with diverse varieties of local agricultural products as the major commodities. During the Qing Dynasty (1644–1911), there were 29 regional cities in Sichuan, all of which were centers of commercial activities among nearby areas, and 27 of them were reachable by water (Skinner, 1977: 288–298). Trading activities not only expanded in urban areas. Between 1796 and 1820, there were over 2,300 rural markets in the basin too (Wang, 1991: 784–785). Benefitting from the convergence of the Yangtze River's three tributaries, Hechuan — with only a county-level size — was one of the key business centers in East Sichuan (see Figure 1). At that time, urban and rural markets across the entire county numbered 73 (Wang, 1993: 237).

Behind the prosperous trading activities was the well-developed agriculture in the Sichuan Basin, where natural conditions such as the climate, soil, and water resources are all suitable for farming. Rural families in Sichuan have, since ancient times, diversified their agricultural tasks and products. Many of the activities purely aiming at making profit, as opposed to feeding family members, have been significant parts of rural



Figure 1

Sichuan's family-based economy for at least 200 years. As a popular saying went in Northern Sichuan during the Qing Dynasty, "by raising pigs and spinning cotton, you can earn money effortlessly (喂猪纺棉, 坐地赚钱)." In the same period, sweet potatoes and maize were introduced by immigrants and promoted in the Sichuan Basin. Consequently, planting extra sweet potatoes and maize to feed pigs and then making profit by selling them became one more prevalent money-making method for Sichuan peasants.

From the late 19th to the early 20th century, with the opening of the Port of Chongqing, many Sichuan peasants' special products entered and were well-received in international markets, such as tung oil, goatskin, and hog bristles. With the local traditions of producing these specialty products, even rural dwellers in remote and marginal regions of Sichuan became involved in distant trade with foreign countries. In the meantime, the network of urban and rural markets across the whole Sichuan Basin became much denser, which, based on Skinner's statistics, exceeded the density of markets in many other areas of China during the same period

(1977: 298).

However, the long-lasting development of rural commerce in Sichuan — in addition to its participation in international trade, which had not been suspended despite World War Two — almost came to a sudden end in only a few years under the CCP's new regime from 1949.

As necessary elements of establishing the centrally planned economy in rural China, although peasants were temporarily allocated pieces of lands that were confiscated from landlords, soon the promotion of agricultural cooperatives (农业合作社) and the state's monopoly over the procurement and marketing of agricultural products (统购统销) largely removed the legal free space for peasants' production, selling, and consumption.⁵ The Supply and Marketing Cooperatives, the implementors of these top-down arrangements across China's vast countryside, were nationally and systematically founded. Aimed at dominating the sale and purchase of agricultural products in rural areas, the Supply and Marketing Cooperatives commenced work in each town, targeting all villagers nearby. In Hechuan County, by only 1953, 18 branches of the Cooperatives had opened along with 132 retail stores. While the number of branches remained stable according to the township-level administrative division, their retail stores across Hechuan County numbered 489 by 1957 (Hechuanxian gongxiao hezuo lianshe, 1989: 167). Along with the Cooperatives' swift expansion, private commerce in the countryside dramatically shrank. In only three years after 1949, private businesses across the county, including those in rural areas, had reduced

⁵ Between 1954 and 1956, Chinese peasants were mobilized to join in the agricultural cooperatives with the land they received. From then on, they were no longer individual farmers and needed to participate in collective farming to make a living. As a basis of the establishment of China's centrally planned economy, the policy of monopoly over the procurement and marketing of agricultural products started even one year earlier. By 1954, all major agricultural goods, such as grain, oil, and cotton, had been included in the monopoly policy.

by 43.5% (Hechuanxian gongxiao hezuo lianshe, 1989: 230). Yet, this was just a prelude to the CCP's Socialist Transformation (社会主义改造) that aimed at comprehensively nationalizing private industry, agriculture and commerce. During the tide of the Socialist Transformation in 1956, 84.19% of the private merchants who had dealt with the acquisition of agricultural products, plus the wholesale and retail of everyday goods in rural Hechuan, had been nationalized. For the rest, including mobile vendors who peddled from one village to another, authorities imposed strict regulations, limitations, and supervision of their businesses. Besides, one more year's ideological work finally produced the goal of nationalizing all of them (Hechuanxian gongxiao hezuo lianshe, 1989: 226).

Thus, from then on, Hechuan peasants' daily needs for trade and consumption were all to be satisfied by the Supply and Marketing Cooperatives, in principle. They no longer needed to participate in free markets, unless they intended to make a profit privately, which had been politically incorrect since then too. As a result, it was not strange that by the late 1950s, at least one-fifth of the markets across Hechuan's county seat and townships were closed. For the rest, while the traditional model had been having three market days every week, the frequency was changed to only one market day every five or even seven days (Hechuan xianzhi bianzhuang weiyuanhui, 1996: 448-449). Making the situation even worse were restrictions on what could be traded. Based on the state's monopoly over the procurement and marketing of agricultural products, from 1957, only a few items such as vegetables, fruits, and several kinds of small poultry remained legal for peasants to sell freely. For market participants in Hechuan, at the end of the 1950s, just six kinds of commodities were lawfully available in county-seat markets (Hechuan xianzhi bianzhuang weiyuanhui, 1996: 449), not to mention those at the township level.

Notwithstanding, Hechuan peasants' involvement in private business per-

sisted, despite the vanishing of rural merchants as intermediaries, the minimization of markets with official permissions, and the constraints that were repeatedly strengthened, as indicated by the annual number of reported cases investigated and punished by the county-level authority. In 1957, the first year when only a few kinds of rural products were allowed to be traded privately, 103 cases of violations of the new policies were recorded. During the next five years, including the Great Famine period,⁶ the annual number of reported cases in Hechuan County drastically increased to 1,700 on average. In 1963, the central level of the CCP promoted modifications to loosen the confinement of peasants' economic activities, including both the production and trade of side-line products.⁷ Some closed markets were reopened and free businesses returned to operating for three days a week (Hechuanxian gongshang xingzheng guanli ju, 1989: 17). Theoretically, there should have been fewer cases of violations of the slightly widened boundaries. However, Hechuan officials in charge of supervising markets seemed to be even busier than in previous years, since they investigated and dealt with 3,829 cases throughout 1963 (Hechuan xianzhi bianzhuang weiyuanhui, 1996: 298).

In a nutshell, this is the commercial traditions and local background of black markets in rural Hechuan before the commencement of the Cultural Revolution. Regardless of whether the rigid top-down restrictions and crackdowns driven by the planned economy were maintained, bottom-up spontaneous businesses run by local peasants continued to grow beyond

⁶ From 1958 to 1961 (in some regions, to 1962), Chinese peasants suffered from serious famine that caused tens of millions of deaths. Although the CCP always attributes the famine to natural hazard and international tensions, the failure of the CCP's transformation of agricultural production relations played the major role.

⁷ Under the planned economy and collective farming, peasants were allowed to keep private plots and family side-line production at a limited and unstable scale. Once the political environment became tenser, the scale that could be tolerated further contracted.

control. Thus, the following questions arises: What was the situation during the Cultural Revolution period, which witnessed not only the most politicized atmosphere but also the most chaotic phase of the Mao era? The remainder of this paper revisits the realities of Hechuan peasants' illegal marketing experiences during the decade of the Cultural Revolution.

IV. Ubiquitous Fetters: Restrictions on Free Rural Markets Associated with the Progress of the Cultural Revolution

Throughout the Cultural Revolution decade, except the couple of years between 1967 and 1969, officials' restrictions on the products categories, the trading areas, and the marketing frequency of rural free business remained and kept pace with the progress of the political campaign. In rural Hechuan, that was also the case, despite its long distance from China's political center.

Upon the initiation of the Cultural Revolution, in the summer of 1966, the violence and the factional conflicts of the Red Guards (红卫兵) in Beijing placed the Capital City in serious chaos, almost resulting in the suspension of the CCP's ordered rule at the central level.⁸ At the regional levels, however, authorities continuously carried on restrictive policies and exerted pressure on peasants' freedom in markets. For local cadres without a clear understanding of what the Cultural Revolution, a new political campaign, meant for them, further tightening the constraints on free trade might have

⁸ In June 1966, organizations of Red Guards firstly appeared among high school and college students in Beijing. Their rebellion toward authorities were endorsed by Mao Zedong. In August that year, Beijing Red Guards attacked both elites and ordinary people, causing thousands of deaths. In addition, many more families' houses were illegally searched and their properties were confiscated by Red Guards.

provided them with a sense of political safety, regardless of the effects on residents.

In Hechuan, from October 1966, many types of economic crops that had remained on the list of lawfully marketable commodities until that year, especially local products such as oranges, mandarins, and sugar cane, were suddenly removed (Hechuanxian gongshang xingzheng guanli ju, 1989: 28). This was just one signal of the politicized context that persisted throughout the following decade. Between 1967 and 1968, when the continuation of the Cultural Revolution had led the whole country into disorder and factional conflicts, the authorities in Hechuan still wanted to maintain their control over rural markets. As highlighted in their notices issued repetitively in 1967 and 1968, any kind of grain and oil crops should not appear in markets so as to guarantee the state's acquisition of them (Hechuanxian gongshang xingzheng guanli ju, 1989: 28-29). Until February 1976, the last year of the Cultural Revolution, based on a notice from the prefecture-level authority that administered Hechuan County, grain and oil, as well as cotton, sugar, and tea, were still among the key goods prohibited for marketing. Even to sell the limited types of marketable products, such as woodwork or bamboo wares made by peasants, they first needed to obtain certificates from the brigades to which they belonged (Hechuanxian gongshang xingzheng guanli ju, 1989: 28-29).

Hechuan peasants received no good news until the provincial authority of Sichuan released some policies in July 1976, the last but two months of the Cultural Revolution era. According to Sichuan's updated regulations, a few types of side-line products became freely marketable after the state acquisition quotas had been met. However, this relaxation did not include any of the essential agricultural products, such as grain, oil, sugar, or pork, which were still rigidly forbidden from markets, even if the state quota had already been met (Hechuanxian gongshang xingzheng guanli ju, 1989: 28-29).

Apart from the continued restrictions on the categories of commodities permitted in rural markets, the same decade witnessed no less powerful constraints remain in place on where and when Hechuan peasants could trade lawfully. Most of them were closely associated with the progress of the Cultural Revolution in rural China.

In the early 1950s, as a regional center city based on the commercial traditions of Sichuan, Hechuan had a total of 35 markets that focused on one or several specific types of goods. Between the 1950s and 1960s, despite the authorities' constant control over market affairs, some markets in Hechuan were refurbished and even enlarged, especially a vegetable market located in the central areas of the county seat (Hechuan xianzhi bianzhuang weiyuanhui, 1996: 448). However, from the early 1970s onward, as the progress of the Cultural Revolution, political atmosphere was re-tightened. As a specific signal, 1970 witnessed the launch of the One Strike-Three Anti Campaign (一打三反运动) by regional governments across the nation, in which *touji daoba* (投机倒把 - profiteering activities) was one of the main targets. In Hechuan, the county-level authority's decision in 1971 was to significantly re-plan all the long-existing marketing areas, as a powerful way of eliminating profiteering activities. In consequence, over three-quarters of the marketing areas were no longer legally available for county-seat dwellers, in addition to the peasants nearby who had grown used to visiting the county seat to sell their products at a favorable price. This situation continued for the next 10 years until 1982 (Hechuanxian gongshang xingzheng guanli ju, 1989: 22-23).

Beyond the interference in where people could trade, as one more attempt to promote the One Strike-Three Anti Campaign, so as to carry on the Cultural Revolution in rural Hechuan, 1971 also witnessed the county-level administrative force reshaping the marketing schedule at an unprecedented scale. Before 1971, due to the aforementioned modifications of 1963, Hechuan peasants could lawfully participate in free business every

three days. Furthermore, since different towns nearby could stagger the dates of markets, peasants could legally trade at different markets almost every day if they liked (Hechuanxian gongshang xingzheng guanli ju, 1989: 17). Notwithstanding, from 1971, the frequency of marketing was again deemed a major target in “cutting off the tail of capitalism” (割资本主义尾巴). In Hechuan, it resulted in the mandated gap between two market days being increased from two days to one week. Sunday became the only market day for all towns. The time conflict prevented Hechuan peasants from attending different markets each week. More discouragingly, during the busy season for farming, no officially allowed market existed across the whole county. To guarantee the disappearance of free business from residents’ lives, groups of officials in Hechuan were dispatched to block the routes to previously prosperous markets. Their assignment was to persuade peasants to give up their attempts to walk along a capitalist road (走资本主义道路) by making money through selling side-line products freely (Hechuanxian gongshang xingzheng guanli ju, 1989: 17).

Yet, the One Strike-Three Anti Campaign in 1971 was far from the last political movement that was top-down launched and nationally conducted during the Cultural Revolution. For instance, in 1975, the penultimate year of the Cultural Revolution decade, associated with the power struggle at the CCP’s central level, especially the criticism toward Deng Xiaoping, the political environment in rural China was tightened again. In the countryside of Hechuan, the comprehensive restrictions on peasants’ free business were reinforced and remained in place even after Mao’s death in 1976.

Even in the shrinking market areas and schedules with permissions, based on the official goal mentioned in the 1970s’ work notes of a cadre managing the marketing affairs in Chongqing City, 80 kilometers from Hechuan, the Supply and Marketing Cooperatives should not be absent. Instead, the Cooperatives’ goods should take at least 70% of the trading

volume (Work notes of a Chongqing cadre in the 1970s). Driven by the state's monopoly, the majority of these goods were agricultural products purchased from peasants at a low price. To achieve the expected market occupancy, officials unavoidably had to maximize the amount of acquisition of products from peasants and minimize the free trade space left for them.

Undeniably, a power vacuum existed for the county- and commune-level authorities between 1967 and 1969, when the Cultural Revolution chaos and factional fighting actually suspended the operation of the CCP's regional regimes. Throughout the rest parts of the Cultural Revolution decade, top-down restrictions on Hechuan peasants' involvement in free trade did persist as ubiquitous fetters. Yet, Hechuan peasants' enthusiasm and resilience for participating in free markets were never extinguished.

V. A Cat-and-Mouse Game and the Unlawful Prosperity

Undoubtedly, the aforementioned power vacuum of 1967–1969 was a happy period for peasants in Hechuan. On the part of Hechuan officials, however, it was not happy at all. This was because all market management work almost reached a standstill soon after local residents became involved in the Cultural Revolution. In addition, the official department in charge of marketing affairs was directly attacked by rebellious factions. As described in the gazetteer, some officials were abused or even beaten (Hechuanxian gongshang xingzheng guanli ju, 1989: 52). It was uncertain whether the impediments that those officials had previously imposed on peasants' marketing activities partially accounted for the violence. According to authorities' narrative, the suspension of management caused great inconvenience for people's marketing activities (Hechuan xianzhi bianzuan weiyuanhui, 1996: 448-449). The actual result for both rural and urban residents

in Hechuan County, however, was that they regained the right to shop and trade freely. For rural dwellers, more vitally, they reclaimed the right to make a profit through freely selling the products of their side-line work. They no longer needed to abide by the officially permitted frequency and areas for markets, and nor did they need to trade their harvest with the Supply and Marketing Cooperatives at unattractive prices.

Pitifully, officials in Hechuan failed to record any accurate statistics about the black markets throughout those chaotic years, except for the following succinct description: “A lot of black markets existed all over the county seat and major towns of Hechuan” (Hechuan xianzhi bianzuan weiyuanhui, 1996: 449). Yet, elder peasants’ recollections can assist in re-accessing parts of the realities. One informant for this research was born in rural Hechuan in the early 1960s. He was the third child of his family with three younger brothers and sisters. As he recalled, “in the first few years of the Cultural Revolution, when I became a pupil in the village primary school, it was the toughest time for my family, since all six children, aged between 1 and 10 years old, needed to be fed. Fortunately, at that time the harvest of our side-line production sold quite well in markets, timely releasing the financial pressure of my family” (Informal discussion with a resident who grew up in rural Hechuan during the Cultural Revolution, male, Hechuan, May 2020). Obviously, the absence of top-down restrictions secured their critical earnings from free business. Such striking polarization between the officials’ narrative and the personal experiences of local peasants raises an interesting question: Why did the authorities’ failure to manage Chinese peasants’ commerce under the planned economy unexpectedly and significantly ease their plight?

The temporary good days for Hechuan peasants ended no later than 1969, along with the recovery of the social order and the refunctioning of the CCP’s basic-level regime. Nevertheless, their enthusiasm and resilience for marketing were not dampened. On the contrary, stimulated by

relatively stable policies in the first half of the 1970s that tolerated side-line production on a small scale, Hechuan's rural residents were motivated to participate in free business more actively. However, although markets supervised by officials were reopened in the early 1970s for peasants to conduct lawful business, marketing areas and their frequency that were seriously curtailed failed to maintain pace with the increasing supply yielded from Hechuan peasants' side-line production. As a result, transactions usually took place beyond either the regulated time or area for marketing, known as *changwai jiaoyi* (场外交易) according to the official terminology. As reiterated by officials in Hechuan County in 1971, even if the trading goods were included in the list for legal markets, all activities of *changwai jiaoyi* would still be regarded as actions of black market (Hechuanxian gongshang xingzheng guanli ju, 1989: 23). Inevitably, a cat-and-mouse game played out between peasants involved in free trade and the cadres in charge of marketing affairs.

As the records reveal, the more the authorities attempted to play an omnipotent role in peasants' free commerce activities, the more uncontrolled the realities of free marketing in Hechuan became. Such out-of-control situations existed not only in the county seat but also in township-level markets. Even in a small town next to the northern margin of Hechuan County, apart from the lawful market once a week, there had been seven more markets in the town center, all of which were formed by peasants spontaneously. Participants of black markets would normally keep a low profile for safety. However, the reality was far beyond normal imagination. As reported officially, on every marketing day without any official permission, over 10,000 people, both buyers and sellers, would gather together (Hechuanxian gongshang xingzheng guanli ju, 1989: 53). It undoubtedly made the narrow streets in the small town as crowded, bustling, and noisy as a carnival. Such large-scale blatant illegal activities occurred regularly. The official

records indicate that these black markets were not banned until several months before the end of the Cultural Revolution, after the county-level authority repeatedly sent official teams to the town for crackdowns. Yet, once the dispatched officials left, like a cat being absent from the game of cat-and-mouse, it would be quite natural for these illegal markets to reappear immediately.

To maximize the effect of market supervision despite limited personnel in Hechuan's officials, large numbers of villagers were recruited and trained to join the cat-and-mouse game. The expanding force of the cat undoubtedly caused more trouble for the mice. For instance, tighter manhunts and encirclement of unlawful trade could occur, not just around the market areas but also across broad streets and narrow lanes. Official reports depict a vivid scene of the game, which was very common in Hechuan during those years: "Peasants were chased after along the streets, even if they only brought some sesame seeds or peanuts with themselves." If fresh produce, such as poultry and eggs, was discovered in their baskets, things would end up in a real mess. Live hens or ducks would run about, while the eggs would be scattered and crushed all over the ground (Hechuanxian gongshang xingzheng guanli ju, 1989: 52).

For the situations between the early and mid-1970s, Hechuan officials again acknowledged that they had no accurate statistics about the total number of black markets active in Hechuan (Hechuanxian gongshang xingzheng guanli ju, 1989: 28). Despite the lack of an exact sum recorded officially, some relevant data are available from county-level authorities' reports regarding the investigation and punishment of illegal business. As demonstrated in Table 1, the 1970s annual summary of the reported *touji daoba* cases in rural Hechuan was not available until 1974. Yet, what these limited statistics show was a prosperous picture, although from the authorities' perspective, the prosperity was entirely unexpected and unwanted.

In 1974, a total of 1,532 cases of *touji daoba* were reported from the townships and the county seat of Hechuan. While grain and oil occupied the major part of the illegally trading goods confiscated from the peasants, many more different commodities appeared in the confiscation list too, especially including the harvest of side-line production, like hundreds of kilograms of peanuts, poultry, and eggs. Over 10,000 RMB were confiscated too, which should have become those unfortunate peasants' income from free businesses. Moreover, it seemed that to buy their home-made products, the coupons for purchasing rationed goods were even more useful than cash,⁹ such as those for cloth and grain. In the countryside, peasants had received no coupons for grain, and the cloth rations were never sufficient for prolific rural families to make clothes. Beyond direct exchanges between one commodity and another, using these coupons to buy goods from peasants became a novel kind of barter trade that responded toward the rationed systems under the planned economy. It was surely much more efficient than the original way of barter trade.

In Chongqing, according to the work notes of a cadre in the 1970s, the exchange between agricultural goods and rationed coupons were one of the most common illegal behaviors in urban and suburban markets with large numbers of rural sellers. For instance, four kilograms of sweet potatoes were equivalent to (a coupon for) one kilogram of rice. The exchange rate between sweet potatoes and candy, which was scarcer and more precious than even staple foods under the rationing system, was five to one

⁹ Under the scheme of the planned economy, most basic goods needed in everyday life were rationed. While the residents with urban household registration could receive coupons to buy all the rationed commodities, peasants were almost excluded from the rationing system. As they were expected to earn a living through the distribution of collective farming, they could not receive the major kinds of rationed coupons, like those for grain, cooking oil, and meat.

(Work notes of a Chongqing cadre in the 1970s).

Although it is hard to exactly calculate the actual ratio of transactions based on cash and coupons in rural Hechuan, the emergence and popularity of one more way of free trade undoubtedly smoothed the process of rural trade, helping peasants conclude a more satisfying transaction with buyers, especially those from urban areas, either living in the county seat or townships of Hechuan. Enjoying relatively richer rations for daily goods, they could use the extra coupons to exchange for tasty agricultural products, although such an action went beyond the rules of both rural markets and rationing systems.

The next year, a total of 2,818 cases were reported in Hechuan County, almost double the number of the previous year. Yet, this was not the most striking transformation. The general value of confiscated goods in 1975 amounted to RMB 166,000 (Investigation Reports cited in Hechuanxian gongshang xingzheng guanli ju, 1989: 166). On average, in each case, the agricultural products for trade were worth nearly RMB 60. By contrast, in the same year, Hechuan peasants' average income from participating in a whole year's collective farming was RMB 40.23 (Hechuan xianzhi bianzhuan weiyuanhui, 1996: 269). This incredible gap in earnings evidently justifies rural dwellers' side-line production and free market endeavors, regardless of whether these behaviors accorded with official policies. Among all the cases in 1975, 19 of them were reported as the big ones, which involved either over RMB 1,000 or 500 kilograms of grain. Local police joined the investigation of these big cases and arrested four peasants (Investigation Reports cited in Hechuanxian gongshang xingzheng guanli ju, 1989: 166). A legitimate inference is that these four arrestees might have partly transformed their identity from peasants to merchants, smartly playing the role of middlemen and bringing rural dwellers' harvest to county-seat residents' dining tables.

Although the 10-year Cultural Revolution finally came to an end in fall

1976, officials' controls over free markets in Hechuan did not cease that year or next. Throughout 1976, the total number of illegal cases investigated and handled in the markets of Hechuan was 11,057, nearly four times that of the previous year. At the same time, the amounts of confiscated coupons for rationed cloth increased noticeably, implying Hechuan urban residents' much heavier consumption in the rural business. The increasing trend of reported cases continued until 1977, so did the multiplication and enrichment of commodities involved in (Investigation Reports cited in Hechuanxian gongshang xingzheng guanli ju, 1989: 167). Those newly added to the confiscation list included hundreds of kilograms of homemade liquor, over one ton of mandarins, nearly 100 carts (for the transportation of goods), and 20 cattle (Investigation Reports cited in Hechuanxian gongshang xingzheng guanli ju, 1989: 167). While the marketing of self-produced wine and mandarins confirmed the new progress of rural families' achievement in side-line work, the 100 carts indicated the unprecedented large scale of Hechuan peasants' transporting their products for free business. As for the cattle, in rural areas under the planned economy, they were normally owned and raised by production teams for plowing collective farmland. When cattle became too old to plow, as collective-owned property they were to be sold to the state at a low price, which was commonly a monopoly business of the Supply and Marketing Cooperatives. Therefore, trading cattle in free markets was likely an unlawful decision made by certain production teams, as they could obtain a much better deal.

In fact, the participation of Hechuan production teams or brigades in illegal trade as sellers was not strange at all. The continuously enlarging amount of grain and oil that was confiscated by Hechuan officials, as shown in Table 1, spoke for themselves. During the Mao era, grain crops and oil plants were never allowed in peasants' private plots. Instead, only production teams or brigades were able to sell so large amounts of grain

and oil, which were the results of collective farming that should have been either purchased by the state's monopoly or allocated among peasants. Undoubtedly, selling them at free markets, similar as the aforementioned trade of cattle, guaranteed a much more profitable deal too.

Beyond playing the role of a major seller in the illegal business, in these markets with diverse and abundant commodities, the production teams and brigades in Hechuan engaged in as heavy buyers too, no matter lawfully or not. As shown in a sheet that recorded a production team members' work points, according to which the income of collective farming was distributed, peasants were regularly assigned to shop at the free markets for the team. Finishing this task, one could earn four work points each time, as the record of a peasant's work on May 2, 1975 (A record sheet of peasants' work points of a Hechuan production team). Yet, that day was a Friday. Keep in mind that until 1976 the only market day with Hechuan officials' permission was Sunday. It means what the peasant visited on behalf of the production team was a black market. Recording the non-personal participation in a black market in the work point sheet and distributing the income based on it, it was probably a common occurrence for the collective farming units in Hechuan and no one cared if the business was legal. Given that the purchasing power of a production team or a brigade outweighed that of most individual consumers, they were surely quite welcomed at the markets.

Due to the lack of sufficient and accurate statistics, it is very difficult to conduct a comprehensive comparison between the rural trade with and without official permissions in Hechuan during the Cultural Revolution. Fortunately, the official's limited reports and records still enable us to know more about the illegal rural business from a comparative angle. For the part of the transactions beyond the policy boundaries, do not forget that just a remote town near Hechuan's northern margin accommodated seven black markets with over 10,000 attendees on each marketing day. As for

the types of commodities traded illegally, the aforementioned lists of confiscated goods were always too short to fully present the diversity of the buyable products there. Probably, each of the seven black markets focused on one or several kinds of goods respectively. As described by the local cadres, what were traded unlawfully in this town were even more various than those in the Department Store of Hechuan County (合川县百货公司), the county's largest shop operated under the planned economy (Hechuan xianzhi bianzhuang weiyuanhui, 1996: 53).

For the legal rural transactions' part, from 1965 to 1975, the annual value of Hechuan peasants' retail sales that were allowed and monitored officially enlarged from less than 2 million RMB to more than 53 million RMB (Hechuan xianzhi bianzhuang weiyuanhui, 1996: 456). This incredible growth, as mentioned previously, was realized through having the market only once a week at a strictly confined place, not to mention the lasting constraints on the categories of commodities available for free trading.

In comparison, with many more marketing areas, like the town next to the northern margin of Hechuan, many more participants, including individual peasants, urban residents, and collective brigades, many more methods of purchase, such as by cash and coupons, and much more plentiful products available, it was not surprising if the sales of the illegal rural trade achieved an expansion that was multiple times greater than the legal transactions during the same period. As an administrative evidence, in eight years after the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1976, while the collective farming scheme collapsed and almost all the limitations on peasants' free business were lifted, Hechuan's gross transactions of rural trade increased by 130% (Hechuanxian gongshang xingzheng guanli ju, 1989: 31). Given the scale of black markets in rural Hechuan during the Cultural Revolution, the notable increase of sales later on is not strange, since a comparable size of illegal business had already existed in the countryside and was surely included in

official statistics once the policies allowed.

By the end of the Cultural Revolution decade, as clarified by the insufficient official records alone, Hechuan cadres' attempt to supervise, limit, and suppress rural markets had inevitably failed. Admittedly, a part of the local cadres might turn a blind eye to the activities without permission as a consequence of private relationships or bribery. Yet, regardless of whether such tacit agreements occurred in rural Hechuan, it is doubtless that the unplanned and unauthorized prosperity of free commerce persisted in the countryside during the Cultural Revolution era.

VI. More Cash, Fewer Worries: Unlawful Income from Rural Markets

Besides the deviations from the planned economy and communist ideals, a major specific point that the authorities based their criticism of free markets on was the comparatively higher prices. According to the official viewpoint, the retail industry under the planned economy was supposed to satisfy residents' main needs for daily commodities with fixed prices. In comparison, the agricultural products in free markets were fluctuant in prices and were usually much more expensive. In fact, the higher prices were decided by supply-demand relationship. For urban residents in the Mao era, whose demands were seriously constrained under the rationed policies, almost all the harvests from peasants' side-line work — from vegetables and fruits to poultry and eggs — were in short supply. Moreover, many urban dwellers, including those at the county-seat level, enjoyed considerable purchasing power based on stable salaries. In addition to the convenience of no need to present coupons for consumption, the free-market transactions at relatively higher prices

actually benefited both sellers and buyers. Take rice, the most basic rationed staple food, as an example: Compared with the price of rationed rice, a kilogram of black-market rice in Hechuan cost at least seven times more. As for pork purchased in black markets from peasants directly or from middlemen, the price was approximately double that of rationed pork (Hechuanxian gongshang xingzheng guanli ju, 1989: 53).

Alongside the significance of enriching urban residents' menus, free business — no matter illegal or not — were equally important for peasants to earn extra money. Contrary to their annual income under collective farming, most of which was in a material form (mainly staple foods), peasants made cash from free markets. A rural household's account book found not far from Hechuan County revealed that in 1976, the family went to rural markets twice a month to sell side-line products, especially chicken eggs and various types seasonal vegetables. Each month, the family's earnings from free business exceeded RMB 5 in cash. A momentous transaction was made in December 1976 when the family sold a pig that they had raised at the market, earning RMB 26.5 in a one-shot deal (An account book of a rural family of Fuling District, Chongqing City). It is uncertain whether this transaction was lawful, since the policy at the time allowed peasants to raise two pigs and sell one of them freely. As a famous saying in rural Hechuan went, "the more cash in hand, the fewer worries in mind (钞票在手,心中不愁)." Cash income enabled rural families to do many things, including meeting the most basic needs and beyond. Being placed marginally in the rationing system, peasants had to use cash to buy indispensable kitchen ingredients from markets. As recorded in the aforementioned account book, the same rural family regularly visited free markets to purchase oil, salt, sugar, and chili paste. Once they successfully sold their homemade products at the markets, commodities related to enjoyment and life quality, such as cigarettes, alcohol, scented soap, and even body lotion, appeared on the fam-

ily's shopping list too (An account book of a rural family of Fuling District, Chongqing City).

Besides the materials from the personal records, some statistics from the Supply and Marketing Cooperatives also reflect the trend of peasants' earnings in free markets during that period. With branches at the center of each township and with peasants all over the county as target customers, Hechuan Supply and Marketing Cooperatives' sales of major daily goods, such as salt, tea, wine, and cloth, all saw notable increases by 1976 compared with 10 years previously. The highest growth was in the sale of tea, which was 10 times higher than that in 1966. Even the lowest increase of the decade was 37% for cloth sales. It was also in 1976 that wool and silk, luxurious materials for clothes in the Mao era, were bought for the first time by Hechuan peasants from the Cooperatives (Hechuanxian gongxiao hezuo lianshe, 1989: 140-145).

In addition to satisfying the purchasing needs at the basic level and beyond, the cash that peasants acquired through free trade enabled them to remain active in the reciprocal relationship. For example, they could send gifts during festivals, have parties for personal celebrations like weddings, and lend money to people in need — all activities rooted in the traditions of a society consisting of acquaintance. In the aforementioned account book, such activities were more often mentioned from the early 1970s onward, and especially frequently in 1976, when gifts were being sent or received every month (An account book of a rural family of Fuling District, Chongqing City). Parallel information is found in a 1975 report by Hechuan authorities. According to a survey, Hechuan peasants' capitalistic behaviors in need of rectifying included holding birthday parties and dinners as well as sending cash as gifts (Yang, 2013: 1-13).

In addition, banking statistics from rural Hechuan during the Cultural Revolution period further authenticate rural dwellers' substantial income

from rural commerce, the majority of which might have been illegal. Admittedly, the Credit Cooperatives (信用合作社), which were the nearest bank-like organization for Chinese peasants under the planned economy, only witnessed a 4% growth in savings from 1965 to 1975 (Hechuan xianzhi bianzhuang weiyuanhui, 1996: 343). However, compared with the data of other banks in the same county, this was more likely a result of competition to attract deposits, which the Credit Cooperatives lost. For the Hechuan Branch of the Agricultural Bank of China (中国农业银行), another major financial institution targeting peasants, between 1967 and 1975 saw an enlargement in excess of 120% of its total savings (Zhongguo nongye yinhang Hechuanxian zhihang, 1990: 193&196). As for the largest bank in Hechuan that accepted money deposits from residents of the entire county, the Hechuan Branch of the People's Bank of China (中国人民银行) more than doubled its cash savings in 1976 compared with 1966 (Hechuan xianzhi bianzhuang weiyuanhui, 1996: 343). Although county-seat dwellers might make the most major contributions here, the savings of rural people, who accounted for about 90% of Hechuan's population (Hechuan xianzhi bianzhuang weiyuanhui, 1996: 66), should not be overlooked.

Such a remarkable expansion in peasants' personal savings can never be explained under the income scheme of the planned economy. Between 1965 and 1975, while Hechuan rural residents labored collectively as per the state's plans, accordingly, the annual growth rate of their earnings was 1.7% (Hechuan xianzhi bianzhuang weiyuanhui, 1996: 269). Contrary to the near-stagnating status over a whole decade, a steady and expanding stream of cash income through free markets, especially black markets, should be the only reliable reason for the soaring trend of Hechuan peasants' bank savings.

Under the planned economy, individuals' ways of making money should have been strictly planned and regulated. As mentioned previously, during the most politicized phase of the Cultural Revolution, the compre-

hensive elimination of officially allowed markets across Hechuan County should have reduced peasants' free-business income to zero. In the CCP's recent narration of its history after 1949, however, the sharp increase in peasants' deposits, closely associating with local authorities' previous failure and neglect (in work) became a significant evidence used to demonstrate the improvement of rural people's living standards under the CCP's leadership. Since 2013, such a trend of propaganda that speaks more favorably of the Mao era has prevailed in China under Xi Jinping's rule. Yet, few people care whether the achievements actually accorded with the planned economy's initial aim of minimizing rural markets and uprooting those illegal ones. Nor has enough attention been paid to if the achievements were possible only through surviving the officials' crackdowns that continued as long as the planned economy drove the nation.

VII. Conclusion

Despite the dramatic transformations at the central level of the CCP a couple of years after Mao's death, Hechuan peasants continued to involve in rural markets as usual. Soon as restrictions were lifted on families' side-line work and free business, the market areas in the county seat of Hechuan, whether legal or not, were no longer adequate for serving the increasing needs of locals' buying and selling activities. In 1985, the county-level authority of Hechuan had to plan the establishment of a new market, in addition to widening and upgrading several old ones. Compared with the previous largest market in the county seat, the planned one was at least five times larger. Due to the high expenditure for this grand program, the construction was not completed until the mid-1990s, while Hechuan peasants and urban dwellers' demand for the trade of agricultural

products continuously grew. To satisfy the increasing needs, the newly established market was finally doubled in size compared with the original plan. Becoming the largest marketplace for agricultural goods in not only Hechuan but also nearby counties, it accommodated more than 6,000 sellers, including peasants, retailers, and wholesalers from Hechuan County and adjacent regions. With diversified commodities produced by local peasants and those transported from outside, the business conducted there covered almost anything one would want to buy from a farmers' market (Zhou, 2008: 89-92).

It was during this period that Hechuan began to regain its position as a regional center in the agriculture-based commercial network of East Sichuan, paralleling the traditional role it played from the Qing Dynasty to 1949, as Skinner determined. Concerning the situations in the Mao era, such as those during the decade of the Cultural Revolution, a thorough disruption of local traditions should have occurred. Yet, as this article has demonstrated and argued through re-accessing the unplanned and unauthorized prosperity in rural commerce, Hechuan peasants maintained their participation in and contribution to free business. Although the authorities never abandoned their attempts to restrict and remold rural markets under the planned economy, many of the long-lasting traditions survived in illegal forms and were revived as soon as the planned economy no longer dominated Chinese peasants' economic activities.

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