

Research on Chen Hansheng's Rural Surveys during the Agrarian Revolutionary War in China

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Abstract

Chen Hansheng was a well-known scholar and social activist in China. During the 1920s and 1930s, when Chen worked at the Institute of Social Studies of the Academia Sinica, he led academic teams to carry out a series of rural surveys in Northeast China, East China, North China, and South China, providing empirical support for the Communist Party of China to hold on the guidelines of the Agrarian Revolution. Under the principle of "problem-oriented," Chen Hansheng used Marxist theories and methods to study China's rural issues with rural production relations, which significantly contributed to the CPC's revolutionary victory and cultivated a group of Marxist scholars for modern China's academic research. Chen's rural surveys have significant value to China's Economics, Sociology, and Political Science.

Key Words: Chen Hansheng; rural study; social survey; Rural Sociology

1. Introduction

Chen Hansheng (1897-2004) was an honorable social scientist, revolutionary educator, and social activist in China. He had made outstanding contributions to the revolution of the Communist Party of China and China's socialist construction. Chen had a significant influence on modern China's social science development.

Chen Hansheng had received western professional education in his youth. He got his Bachelor's degree from Pomona College and a Master's degree in History from the University of Chicago in the U.S. After obtaining a doctorate from the University of Berlin in Germany, 27-year-old Chen Hansheng returned to China and became the youngest professor at Peking University in 1924. With the guidance of Li Dazhao, one of the founders of the Communist Party of China, Chen began to read "Das Kapital" and gradually believed in Marxism. After the first cooperation broke down in 1927 in China, Li was arrested by the Kuomintang government. Then, Chen was forced to go to the Soviet Union to avoid jeopardy and worked for the CPC under the cover of a learned scholar (Luzhi, 2005).

The experience of working at the Comintern made Chen aware of the importance of rural issues to China. At that time, scholars of the Comintern were arguing about the nature of Chinese society. They thought that the failure of the Great Revolution was mainly caused by the Chinese revolutionaries' misunderstanding of the nature of Chinese society. The Hungarian scholar L. Magyar, who served as deputy chief of the Oriental Secretariat of the Executive Committee, believed that China had already become a capitalist society. Magyar described Chinese society as a hydraulic society determined by the Asian mode of production. Moreover, this circular model of social development was not broken until the early 20th century. Because of Western capital penetration, the Chinese society gradually transformed into a capitalist society, while China's rural regions had already entered the era of capitalism. Chen, who worked for the International Peasant Movement Institute, totally disagreed with Magyar's opinion. He insisted that the commodity economy was not well developed yet in rural China, and the natural economy was still in dominance. Chinese society was a society with a feudal nature rather than a capitalist nature (Qingyan, 2016). However, he was lack of solid evidence to convince other scholars. To confirm his argument and understand Chinese society comprehensively, Chen determined to carry out field surveys in China to find out the true nature of Chinese rural areas with empirical research (Hansheng, 1988).

Meanwhile, the CPC learned lessons from the failure of the Great Revolution, changing revolutionary strategy from city to countryside. On August 7, 1927, the CPC Central Committee held an emergency meeting to determine the guidelines of the Agrarian Revolution, starting to explore the new path of the Chinese revolution centered on the issue of land reform. From June to July 1928, the CPC held the Sixth National Congress in Moscow, analyzing the political and economic situation after the failure of the Great Revolution. The CPC declared that China was still a semi-colonial and semi-feudal society at this meeting.

However, the CPC's assertions about the nature of China's society had faced many doubts domestically and abroad. In the 1930s, Chinese academia set off a great debate on "the nature of Chinese society." The leaders of the Communists, especially Mao Zedong, recognized that liberating rural productivity by the Agrarian Revolution and striving for the peasantry as an ally was an essential guarantee for the Anti-Japanese War and for the New Democratic Revolution. To promote the cognitive consensus of the international and domestic forces on the nature of Chinese society, the CPC was emergent to demonstrate the concept of "semi-colonial and semi-feudal society" both in theory and practice (Li, & Kun, 2019).

2. Rural surveys organized by Chen Hansheng

Chen Hansheng returned to China from the Soviet Union in May 1928. Then he served as the deputy director of the Social Research Institute of the Academia Sinica. To clarify the vital issue of China's social nature as soon as possible, he began to design large-scale social surveys. Following the Marxism principles, Chen realized that "most production relations in China belong to the countryside (Hansheng, 2002)." To correctly analyze the social nature of China, the primary thing must focus on rural areas. Chen carried out many field investigations all over the country with several research teams, mainly in the Kuomintang-authorized countryside.

2.1 Wuxi Survey, 1929

A rural economic survey focusing on the land system was conducted in Wuxi, Jiangsu Province, from July to September 1929. Twenty-two representative natural villages (9 ordinary villages and 13 particular villages) were selected for in-depth investigation in four townships of Wuxi. The whole team was divided into four groups. In addition, a summary survey was conducted in 33 surrounding villages and eight country fairs in the commercial centers of each village. Most of the investigators were from Wuxi or neighboring areas, so they were familiar with the local dialect and folk customs. About one-third of team members were students from top colleges (such as Peking University, Labor University) majoring in Agriculture or Economics. One-third was local elementary school teachers. Those skilled investigators ensured the reliability and credibility of the investigation materials and results to a certain extent because of their life experience and professional background. They conducted door-to-door investigations of 1,207 peasant families, having a detailed understanding of the real situation of local peasants and agricultural production, such as land tenancy, rents, rural loans, various taxations, commercial trades, and peasants' daily life.

Through the Wuxi survey, researchers found that peasants had less arable land. More than half of the peasants who grew rice cultivated less than five *Mu*¹. Because of thousands of years of traditional family separation, tenancy, mortgage, and rural trading, cultivated lands were scattered in those rural regions. Furthermore, China's industrial capital was not developed yet; therefore, weights and measures were not unified at that moment. Under this circumstance, Wuxi's *Mu* system was very chaotic and complicated. For example, there were 5 to 12 types of "Mu" in a single village. There were at least 173 types of "Mu" with different sizes in the 22 villages surveyed. Chen pointed out that the accuracy of other rural economic statistics related with land could be ensured only by accurately counting all land-owned and land-cultivated areas. Therefore, the team conducted follow-up research after converting various-size lands into uniformed "Are." Finally, they perceived as many as 12 types of land ownership and land use right. By observing the relationship among complicated land rights, land rents, and agricultural costs, the research team found high land rents and heavy taxes were prevailing in Wuxi's rural areas. Peasants were plagued by usury, and their economic and living environment was challenging.

2.2 Baoding Survey, 1930

May to August 1930, the Sociology Group of the Social Research Institute of the Academia Sinica and Peking Social Research Institute co-organized a team of 68 people to survey Baoding, Hebei. The team located their office in Qingyuan, a county in Baoding, and recruited many local investigators working in different groups. They divided Qingyuan county into four zones according to the characteristics of local agricultural production, then selected six markets, 78 villages, and 1,773 households from 11 villages as investigation objects. Compared with the materials used in the Wuxi survey, the questionnaires used in Baoding were further improved, and the formats and contents were carefully optimized. The investigators launched a detailed investigation by classifying investigation objects into three levels: 1) markets; 2) villages and towns; 3) peasant households. In addition, questionnaire mail investigations were conducted in adjacent towns, and many first-hand data were collected.

¹"Mu" is a Chinese unit of land area, equal to 1/15 a hectare or 1/6 an acre

Baoding survey focused on different economic sections such as production, distribution, exchange, and consumption, mainly paying attention to eight categories of projects: rural farming, animal husbandry, sideline production, agricultural products trading, taxes, land rent, loans, and consumption (Hangshen,2002).

The findings showed that most of the land was still concentratedly occupied by landlords and rich peasants in Baoding. Peasants only could get access to farming land by leasing. There were three types of rent paid by peasants: sub-rent, grain rent, and money rent (as a major way). Exploitation in employment and usurious exploitation were prevailing in rural areas in Baoding.

2.3 Lingnan Survey, from 1933 to 1934

From November 1933 to May 1934, Chen was invited to work at the Sun Yat-sen Institute for the Advancement of Culture and Education. With the help of Song Qingling and Tang Shaoyi, who was served as the magistrate of Zhongshan county, Chen got the opportunity to cooperate with Lingnan University to organize an economic survey of rural regions in Lingnan Guangdong. Before Chen's survey, the School of Agricultural Sciences of Guangdong University had conducted a study of the local agricultural situation. Still, it placed too much emphasis on agricultural technology but ignored the observation of rural production relations. Chen's investigation team had made complete preparations to recruit personnel, select and contact investigation regions, and design investigation forms. Afterward, they took more than three months to conduct surveys about the brief of the rural economy in 16 counties². Door-to-door investigations of 1,209 peasant families were conducted in 10 representative villages in Fanyu, and questionnaire mail investigations were conducted in 335 villages of 50 adjacent counties.

After collecting detailed information, they found that agriculture was still the core industry of Guangdong's product development, while the utilization rate of cultivated land in Guangdong was meager. The possession of the land was still highly concentrated by landlords and rich peasants. A small number of individual landlords also owned a few lands, but they were far less powerful than collective landlords. However, landlords who had possessed most of the land ownership rarely engaged in farming, while poor peasants who needed land for farming could only rent out scattered ones or even had no land for farming at all. The conflict between land ownership and actual use was severe. An analysis of the ten representative villages in Fanyu showed that 52% of the population of the ten villages was hired peasants and landless peasants. In addition to the uneven distribution of land, the heavy land rent, excessive taxes, rampant exploitation of commercial capital, and usury capital, coupled with meager wages of the rural laborers, had led to extremely difficult life-living for local peasants. Many young male laborers left the villages to make a living, and women had no choice but to participate in laboring and farming. In his *Landlord and Peasant in China: A Study of the Agrarian Crisis in South China*, published in English in 1936, Chen presented the situation in which Guangdong's rural production stagnated, and peasants' lives fell into extreme poverty at that time. He believed that the separation of land ownership and right of use was the fundamental cause of the tension between productivity and production relations (Hansheng, 1936). The contradiction between productivity and the burden of land rent, taxes, and interest, and rural laborers losing their livelihood or becoming homeless fully demonstrated the tension's severity.

2.4 Other Surveys

Except for these three well-known surveys above, Chen organized surveys in other rural regions in the areas ruled by Kuomintang and completed many valuable investigation reports and academic works. In *Refugees exiling in Northeast China, Peasants and Landlords of the Heilongjiang River*, Chen described the difficult situation of refugees in Northeast China and the decline of the northeast agricultural society due to land rent, exorbitant taxes, and usury. From 1933 to 1935, with the Institute of Pacific Relations funding, Chen surveyed rural areas where became British and American tobacco-producing regions. The survey was conducted in 127 villages in Xuchang, Weifang, and Fengyang. It observed the connection and impact of China's rural areas with the external economy through the field investigations in 6 typical villages and 429 peasant households. Based on the survey, Chen and his collaborators completed the *Industrial Capital and Chinese Farmers—A Study of the Livelihood of Chinese Tobacco Cultivators*, revealing how Western capital penetrated Chinese rural areas and colluded with local warlords and landlords to exploit Chinese peasants together.

²They were Mei county, Chaoan, Huiyang, Zhongshan, Shunde, Taishan, Gaoyao, Guangning, Yingde, Wengyuan, Qujiang, Lechang, Maoming, Lianjiang, Hepu, and Lingshan.

2.5 Summary

Chen Hansheng's teams collected many first-hand data about rural economic production and economic relations from those surveys. They collated and analyzed the data with scientific analysis methods. Combining Marxist theories with the early materials related to the Chinese rural economy,

Chen proposed that Chinese society had entered the transition period of "pure feudal past, pure capitalism has not yet formed," which was described as a state of "pre-capitalist society." (Chen, 2002) At the same time, according to the survey materials, he attributed the crux of Chinese social problems, especially rural issues, to the dual oppression of imperialism and feudalism. These conclusions provided strong support for the CPC's declaration that the nature of Chinese society was semi-colonial and semi-feudal and strengthened the CPC's determination to insist on the Agrarian Revolution Route.

However, Chen's conclusions were not approved by the Academia Sinica. The KMT authorities and the CPC had different opinions on the issue of land reform. Although both parties were following Sun Yat-sen's idea of the equalization of land ownership and the land-to-the-tiller principle, the KMT did not realize the fundamental problem of the rural land issue, preferring a peaceful transference of rights from landlords to peasants. The CPC insisted on solving the contradiction between rural productivity and production relations revolutionary. Under the political situation, some of Chen's reports like the Wuxi survey report, which supported the CPC's political standpoints, were ultimately not published publicly, and some original manuscripts were even missed. The complete original materials of Chen's surveys are currently kept in the Institute of Economics of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences.

3. The Characteristics of Chen Hansheng's Rural Surveys

3.1 Problem-Oriented

Problem-oriented is a distinctive feature of these rural surveys organized by Chen. Through social investigation methods, Chen and his teams explained the fundamental problems behind social phenomena. They demonstrated the correctness and necessity of the Agrarian Revolutionary War led by the CPC. This political purpose was also a significant difference between Chen's and other academic surveys. In practice, each survey had specific research goals. Chen chose rural areas in Wuxi, Baoding, Guangdong as the most critical research objects, based on social facts and scientific logic. The rural regions of Jiangnan area, Hebei, and Guangdong were where industry and commerce were relatively developed, and the social-economic relations changed fastest in China in the early 20th century. A thorough analysis of how production relations of these three representative economic regions had evolved, and an accurate understanding of the nature of the social structure in these regions, would help to infer the status and evolution of national social and economic development. Chen's first-hand data and research findings from these rural areas controlled by the KMT authorities reinforced confidence in the CPS's further consolidation of land policy. Chen's researches on rural land distribution, tenancy, taxations, and rural production relations have played a key role in adequately understanding China's socio-economic and political relations dominated by land issues.

3.2 Focusing on Production Relations

When Chen conducted rural surveys, production relations were the basis for his studies of all other structures. In *Research on Rural Areas in China*, he wrote, "What is the core of the problems in the countryside? They are concentrated on the possession and use of land, and other means of agricultural production: from these problems, various rural production relations have been produced, and thus various social organizations and social consciousnesses have been produced (Hansheng, 2002)." Chen believed that it was necessary to clarify the dominant production relation in society to analyze and identify its nature accurately." Only by comprehending the rural issues through the production relations, which "constitute all the social infrastructure," can the core problems in the rural areas be discovered. Only through the observation and analysis of various social relations in agricultural production could researchers explain what caused the decline of agricultural production and the recession of rural society. Just as the machine's ownership and use right of the machine in industrial society occupied the core position in production relations, the land ownership and land use right in agricultural society occupied the dominant position in production relations. A large number of rural surveys conducted by Chen focused on land issues, observing the social relationship structure of rural society. These surveys revealed that some people who possessed land ownership also had the power to dominate other people who had no land but needed to rely on the land for survival, namely landlords and peasants. Landlord interest groups used this power advantage to squeeze and seize peasants' production income through land rent, tax, usury, and other ways. With the increasing concentration of land ownership in landlord interest groups, the strengthening of this power and thus expanded the differentiation of social relations, the economic living conditions of peasants were continuously deteriorating. Rural social relations evolved into a confrontation between landlords and peasants.

The contradiction between land ownership and land use right was the source of all unreasonable rural production relations. After the capitalist forces penetrated those rural regions, the original fragile agricultural production system could not resist the influence, and the oppression and exploitation of peasants became more and more serious. Therefore, only the Agrarian Revolution and a sweeping change in production relations could liberate rural productivity and overthrow the exploitation and oppression from foreign capital, bureaucratic capital, and landlords on Chinese peasants.

3.3 Class Analysis Method

Class analysis is a significant Marxist feature through Chen's researches. In the same period, rural surveys conducted by other scholars, such as John L. Buck, mostly classified peasant households according to the mode of management, usually dividing peasant households into different categories such as self-cultivated peasants, semi-self-cultivated peasants, and tenants. This classification covered up the contradictions among different social classes, and as a result, it could not explore the actual causes of rural social contradictions. Drawing ideas from Lenin's class analysis method, Chen divided peasant households into landlords, rich peasants, middle peasants, poor peasants, and employed peasants by economic status (i.e., the degree of exploitation and exploitation). By studying the role of peasants in different economic situations in rural social and economic activities, he had a more profound analysis of the social structure in rural areas of China. This classification method is an important symbol of the practice of the Marxist class analysis method.

At the same time, Mao Zedong also carried out many investigations in rural areas of liberated areas in Hunan and Jiangxi to demonstrate the nature of Chinese society to support the revolution. Class analysis was also an important research method used in Mao's surveys. Comparing their researches, the political purpose of Mao's survey was more prominent, while Chen was a social scientist with professional training in social science research (Zhangpeng, 2006). Chen's surveys showed more rigorous and comprehensive academic characteristics in method design, sampling, implementation process, and data statistics. The results of Chen's rural surveys in the Kuomintang-authorized areas and Mao's surveys in the liberated regions provided convincing empirical data and theoretical explanations for the CPC to persevere in the Agrarian Revolutionary War.

4. Conclusions

4.1 Integrating Marxist Analysis Method with Western Empirical Research

Chen's rural surveys have significant academic value in modern Chinese social investigation history. There is a milestone for the development of the localization of Marxist Sociology in China and the empirical research on Chinese Sociology (Xiaosi & Hangsheng, 2007). Those well-organized surveys were the first large-scale rural surveys guided by academic principles in modern Chinese history. Those surveys in Wuxi, Baoding, and Lingnan are undoubtedly classical models of social surveys. During the implementation process, the selection of investigation areas, the grouping, stratification, and sampling design benefited from Chen Hansheng's professional academic literacy.

Furthermore, he criticized the superficial judgments of China's rural problems relying on Western economic theories. In contrast, his analysis of China's agrarian distress focused on the contradiction between productivity and production relations. He deeply integrated Marxist theories with the facts of Chinese society and found the right way to analyze China's social problems. Many of Chen's publications were based on his rural surveys, such as *The Beginning of Rural Economic Research in China*, *Land Problems in Modern China*, *Guangdong Rural Production Relations and Productivity*. In addition, some of his books, like *Landlords and peasants in China*, *Industrial Capital and Chinese Farmers*, were published in English, helping the international academic community better understand China at the time.

4.2 Promoting the Development of Marxist Agricultural Economics in China

Chen Hansheng contributed theoretical innovation and distinguished researchers for China's Agricultural Economics. Based on those rural surveys in the 1920s and 1930s, Chen wrote a large number of rural economic research reports and papers, summarized systematic methods and concepts for China's rural study, and put forward many constructive suggestions which provided massive support for the research of Marxist agricultural economics. Those outstanding young scholars, such as Xue Muqiao, Qian Junrui, Sun Yefang, established the China Rural Economic Research Association under Chen's guidance, founded the *Journal of Rural China*, and participated in the debate on the nature of Chinese society and the national liberation movement. Chen, and these scholars who followed him in those rural surveys, grew up as the first Marxist scholars after the founding of the PRC and have made an irreplaceable contribution to the development of China's economy in the process of socialist modernization (Xueying, 2008).

4.3 Spreading Marxism in China

To ensure that Marxism theories and methods could always be the research principle during the surveys, Chen required all investigators to study "Das Kapital" before their investigations. He provided classic Marxist works, such as *Communist Manifesto*, *State and Revolution*, *Two Strategies*, *Theory of Imperialism*, *Socialism from Utopia to Science*, to the investigators and his students to enhance their study of Marxism (Xiaosi, 2007). During those rural surveys, some young scholars, like Qian Junrui, Zhang Xichang, and Qin Liufang, gradually accepted Marxism theory by directly in touch with the social realities and changing their political attitude to support the CPC's revolution fully. Through the three debates about the nature of China's rural society in the 20th century, those young scholars had introduced their investigation findings of Chinese rural social problems in the process of participating in the debates, to explain why Marxism could solve China's social crisis, thus further expanded the influence of Marxism in China, especially to the progressive youth and intellectual groups.

For a long time, compared to Mao Zedong's rural surveys, there has been a lack of attention on Chen Hansheng's rural surveys in China. Undoubtedly, Chen's surveys provided valuable support for the Chinese revolution and significantly promoted Marxism's spread in China. Those surveys are essential parts of the vivid practice of Sinonization of Marxism in the early 20th century. The enlightenment that Chen Hansheng left on the ideas and methods of social science research still has tremendous significance today.

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