

Research Report

The Political Economy of Land Reform in China's "Newly Liberated Areas": Evidence from Wuxi County*

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ABSTRACT A farm survey conducted in Wuxi county in the 1950s found that the Chinese Communist Party had successfully “preserved the rich peasant economy” in the “newly liberated areas”: the landlords were indeed the only social class whose properties had been redistributed, yet without compromising on the magnitude of benefits received by the poor peasants. A higher land inequality in that region, coupled with an inter-village transfer of land, allowed these dual goals to be achieved. Our study further reveals that class status was determined both by the amount of land a household owned and whether it had committed certain “exploitative acts,” which explains why some landlords did not own a vast amount of land. Conversely, it was the amount of land owned, not class status, that determined redistributive entitlements, which was why 15 per cent of the poor peasants and half of the middle peasants were not redistributed any land.

China's land reform was beset with contradictions and difficulties from the outset, not surprisingly because, constrained by limited (land) resources and the zero-sum nature of redistribution, it was by no means an easy task to juggle between the social and political desirability of allocating a greater amount of land to the poorest peasants, on the one hand, and the economic benefits of preserving the production incentives of the rich peasants, on the other. The “errors and excesses” of land reform as they had reportedly occurred in the “old liberated areas” (OLA) of rural north China¹ had, at least in part, motivated the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to soften its stance on the rich peasants in the “newly liberated areas” (NLA), specifically by protecting the land owned and cultivated by the rich peasants and their hired labour.²

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1 See, for example, the classic work of William Hinton, *Fanshen: A Documentary of Revolution in a Chinese Village* (New York: Vintage Books, 1966); Isabel and David Crook, *Revolution in a Chinese Village: Ten Mile Inn* (London: Routledge and Keegan Paul, 1959).

2 Article 6, Agrarian Reform Law, reprinted in Mao Zedong, *Selected Writings of Mao Zedong, Vol. 4* (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 1960); See also Robert Ash, “Economic aspects of land reform in

The first set of empirical questions that we wish to address with new data in this context is thus the extent to which the stated goal of “preserving the rich peasant economy” (*baohu funong jingji* 保护富农经济) had been achieved, and whether it was achieved at the expense of the poor peasants especially in areas of high man-to-land ratios such as south Jiangsu.³ To the extent that the CCP did intend to protect the rich peasants, the criteria used in differentiating them from the landlords assumed critical importance. Our second goal, therefore, is to examine the role played by land inequality, among other factors, in determining class status and accordingly entitlement to redistributive benefits in the reform process.

Using a retrospective farm survey conducted in Wuxi county in 1958, we confirm that the rich peasants were indeed being protected in land reform without correspondingly reducing the benefits received by the poor peasants, contrary to the findings of an earlier study.⁴ Our evidence clearly shows that the poor peasants were undoubtedly the biggest beneficiary both in terms of the amount of land and the range and quantity of other items redistributed to them.

Our second important but unexpected finding is that class status per se did not determine benefits entitlement; up to 15 per cent of the poor peasants and nearly one-half of the middle peasants had failed to receive land in the process, seemingly because they had distinctly more land than their peers. In other words, the amount of land owned by a farm household crucially determined who would be entitled to “redistributive benefits” but not class status in land reform. Allegations of “exploitation” (*boxue* 剥削), which apparently involves subjective interpretations, appeared to have played an equally important role in this important process. There is plenty of archival evidence to confirm that many “landlords” did not necessarily own vast amounts of land, and econometric analysis suggests that both charges of “exploitation” and land wealth were significant in determining class status. Our fresh findings concerning how land reform might have been carried out in the NLA must be viewed with caution, however, in light of the fact that they are predicated upon evidence of only one county.

The Data

The data used in this study are based upon a retrospective survey conducted in 1958 by the famous Chinese economist Xue Muqiao (薛暮桥), in eleven villages

footnote continued

Kiangsu, 1949–52 (part 1),” *The China Quarterly*, No. 66 (1976), pp. 261–92; Li Haiwen, “Tudi geming shiqi zhongguo gongchandang dui funong zhengce de zhuanbian” (“The change in the Communist Party’s policy toward the rich peasants during the land revolution period”), *Zhonggong dangshi yanjiu* (*Research on Communist Party History*), No. 5 (1987), pp. 71–73; Edwin E. Moise, *Land Reform in China and North Vietnam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1983), among others.

3 Due to extraordinarily high land pressure, there were indeed tensions between the parent Agrarian Reform Law, which was unambiguous in its regard of affording protection to the rich peasants, and local modifications that tended to resort to a less lenient practice. See Ash, “Economic aspects (part 1),” pp. 289–90.

4 Robert Ash, “Economic aspects of land reform in Kiangsu, 1949–52 (part 2),” *The China Quarterly*, No. 67 (1976), pp. 519–45.

in Wuxi county (*Wuxi xian* 无锡县), south Jiangsu province.⁵ The survey consisted of two parts. As a sequel to a 1929 study organized by Chen Hansheng (陈翰笙),⁶ then deputy director of China's Social Science Research Institute (SSRI), the first part was intended to reveal the nature of the social economy of Wuxi before it was "liberated" by the CCP. The specific theoretical question was whether, being an "advanced" region at the time, the Lower Yangzi could be characterized by "feudalism" (*fengjian zhuyi* 封建主义) as specifically marked by a pervasive landlord–tenant relationship, on the one hand, while exacerbated by forces of "imperialism" (*diguo zhuyi* 帝国主义), on the other.⁷ With these hypotheses in mind, the survey enumerated information not merely on the demographic and socioeconomic profiles of the farm households, but also on the incidence and magnitude of what modern economics regards as factor – specifically land rental and labour – market transactions.

In light of the historic importance of land reform, the second part of this retrospective survey was designed to ascertain the redistributive consequences of land reform conducted in 1952. Xue appeared to be especially concerned with the issues of who had benefited from the reform and the magnitude of these benefits for both land and a gamut of other assets such as houses, draught animals, farm implements, and other items like stored grain and rescinded loans and rents. Although the survey did not include questions on whether, and if so how much, a household had suffered in the reform, the fact that it supplies data on land ownership for the two time-points, coupled with the assignment of class label for each household, allow us to assess the identity of not just the beneficiaries but also the likely victims. Altogether a total of 800 farm households in Wuxi were interviewed, but the number made available for our analysis are 352 for 1952 and 304 for 1948, respectively, obtained from four villages.⁸

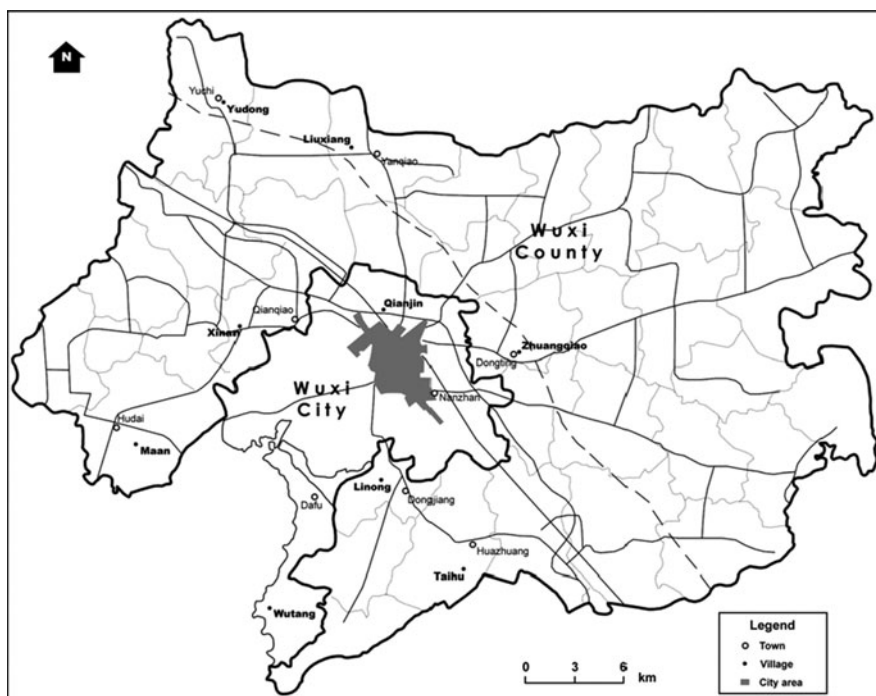
Moreover, notwithstanding the limitations that the survey was conducted in only one county, this dataset is valuable because it shows the enormous variations in size, resource endowment and even (pre-reform) distributive consequences that existed among villages (see Table 1). As shown below, these differences affected not just how redistribution within a single village was played

5 Although the survey in question was conducted in the same year as the Great Leap Forward was launched, we are still confident that the answers obtained were reasonably reliable, primarily because the questions asked were basically factual in nature. For instance, instead of asking the respondents about their attitudes or perceptions of land reform – questions that tend to invite "politically correct" answers – they were simply required to provide factual information pertaining to household demographic structure, the type and quantity of assets they owned, and, for 1952, the amount of land and other items they received in land reform.

6 At least two historians have made use of part if not all of this dataset. See Lynda S. Bell, *One Industry, Two Chinas: Silk Filatures and Peasant-Family Production in Wuxi County, 1865–1937* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999); Li Zhang, "Peasant household economy under the influence of international trade, industrialization, and urbanization: a case study of Wuxi peasants' response to economic opportunities, 1860s–1940s" (Ph.D dissertation, University of California, Los Angeles, 2002). None, as far as we know, has used the data on land reform.

7 Chen Han-seng, *Landlord and Peasant in China: A Study of the Agrarian Crisis in South China* (Connecticut: Hyperion Press, 1936). See also the debates of pertinent issues in Philip C. C. Huang (ed.), *The Development of Underdevelopment in China: A Symposium* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1980).

8 These four villages were located in the townships or *xiang* of Dongting in the centre (Zhuangqiao village or village 1), Yanqiao in the north (Liuxiang village or village 2), Yuchi in the far north-west (Yudong village or village 3) and Hudi in the south-west (Maan village or village 4). See Figure 1.

Figure 1: **Wuxi Villages Surveyed by SSRI**Table 1: **Land and its Distribution in Pre-Land Reform Wuxi (1948), by Village**

Village	No. of households	Land (per household, in mu)	Land (per capita)	Gini coefficient
1	56	3.23	0.85	0.393
2	44	2.09	0.41	0.448
3	92	4.01	0.93	0.665
4	112	11.22	2.64	0.528
Total	304	6.24	1.46	0.588

Note:

One mu equals 0.0667 hectare or 1/6 acre.

out, but also the transfer of resources between villages of varying endowments and distributive characteristics before land reform.

Was the Rich Peasant Economy Preserved, and Who Benefited the Most?

So was the policy of “preserving the rich peasant economy” really being observed in these Wuxi villages, and was it more difficult for such a policy to be implemented in areas where land pressure – and hence the demand for land from the poor and landless – was greater? Alternatively, might such a goal be achieved at the expense of preserving inequality – a point that Robert Roll⁹ observes to be

⁹ Robert Roll Jr., “The distribution of rural incomes in China: a comparison of the 1930s and the 1950s” (PhD dissertation, Department of Economics, Harvard University, 1974).

generally the case for the OLA? The evidence upon which Ash¹⁰ draws suggests that the rich peasants in the counties of Wuxi and Wu were indeed able to retain the land that they and their hired labourers cultivated, but not the portion that they had rented out for an income – evidence that appears to match the stated goal of preserving the rich peasant economy in the NLA.

Our village evidence supports this benchmark finding. By comparing changes in the size distribution of landholdings of various social classes before and after land reform, the data in Table 2 clearly show that although both landlords and rich peasants had experienced a decline in per capita land endowment, change for the rich peasants – a mere 0.17 mu per person – was basically negligible, whereas that for the landlords – from over 9 mu per capita in 1948 to only a little over 2 mu in 1952 – was far more substantial. As a result, the rich peasants emerged from land reform with landholdings amounting to approximately 45 per cent more than that of the landlords’ (Figure 2; see also Figure 3, which

Table 2: Per Capita Land Endowment before and after Land Reform in Four Wuxi Villages, by Class Status (in mu)

	Households	Before	After	Difference
Farmhand	2	0.22	1.23	1.01
Tenant	1	0.05	0.8	0.75
Poor peasant	195	0.72	1.53	0.81
Middle peasant	68	1.69	1.93	0.24
Rich peasant	14	3.3	3.13	-0.17
Landlord	15	9.06	2.16	-6.9
Others	9	0.84	1.01	0.17
Total	304	1.46	1.7	0.24

Figure 2: Per Capita Land Endowment of Various Social Classes in Wuxi Before and After Land Reform

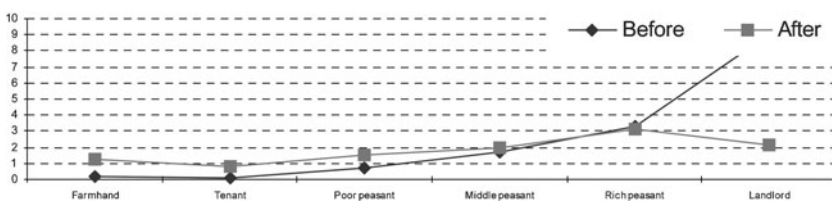
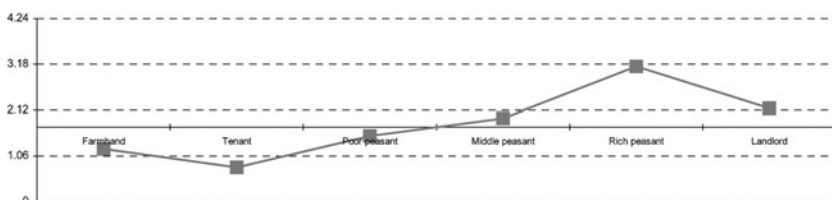


Figure 3: Per Capita Land Endowment of Various Social Classes in Wuxi after Land Reform



10 Ash, “Economic aspects (part 2),” p. 532, especially n. 26.

highlights the contrast between various social classes in land endowment after land reform). While we are unable to gauge specifically whether the rented portion of the rich peasants' holdings had been confiscated and redistributed, it is sufficiently clear that the rich peasants were by and large well protected.

Did the moderate policy of “preserving the rich peasant economy” entail sacrificing the interest of the poor peasants, since land that could otherwise be confiscated and redistributed from rich peasants became unavailable? Based on the “average” area allocated to the middle peasants (1.1 mu, range 0.5–1.9) and the poor peasants (1.2 mu, range 0.6–1.2) in the south Jiangsu counties of Wuxi and Yang-chung, Ash concludes that “it was the middle peasants who ultimately stood to gain the most from land reform ... [principally] because their holdings were larger to start with, [which thus enabled them to] continue to enjoy a substantial advantage in terms of farm size even after redistribution was completed.”¹¹

Does our village evidence corroborate such a finding? If comparison is confined to the poor and middle peasants, the difference in per capita landholdings was fairly substantial before land reform – 1.34 times (Table 2, column 2), but was substantially narrowed – to a mere 26 per cent difference – thereafter (column 3). While it was the farmhands who received more land than the poor peasants – one mu as opposed to 0.81 mu per capita (column 4), the amount received by the poor peasants was substantially higher than the 0.24 mu per capita received by the middle peasants. Thus, according to our evidence at least, the Wuxi village reformers did not seem to have compromised by redistributing less land to the poor peasants in their pursuit of protecting the rich peasants.

This conclusion finds further support if we consider also the other items redistributed alongside land. For instance, Table 3 shows that only the poor peasants were exclusively redistributed houses, draught animals, cash and rescinded loans in the reform. Moreover, even for items that the middle peasants also received, such as stored grain, farm implements and furniture, the poor peasants were awarded a larger share.¹² Together, these data show that it was the poor peasants, not their middle peasant counterparts, who benefited the most from land reform.¹³

However, not every poor and middle peasant household benefited in the reform: up to 50 per cent of the middle peasants and as many as 15 per cent of the poor peasants had, curiously, not received any land (Table 4). Why did households of basically the same class status differ in benefits entitlement? To unlock this conundrum, we relate a household's pre-reform land endowment, on

11 *Ibid.* p. 525.

12 The only exception was rescinded loan.

13 Concern for egalitarianism was obviously a primary cause of why local officials in Wuxi redistributed more land to poor peasants. But there may also be an “efficiency” explanation, namely that village officials want to prevent a large number of undersized farms that could result from redistributing smaller amounts of land to the poor. See *ibid.* pp. 525 and 528–31.

Table 3: Magnitude of Various Items Redistributed in Wuxi's Land Reform (by whether a household had been redistributed land)

	N	Whether obtain land	Land (mu)	Houses (rooms)	Stored grain (in husked rice) (jin)	Draught animals (no.)	Farm tools (no.)	Furniture (no.)	Cash (yuan)	Rescinded loan (yuan)	Returned loan (yuan)	Rescinded rent (in husked rice) (jin)	Other (yuan)
Farmhand	2	Yes	1.7	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Tenant	1	Yes	1.8	0	0	0	3	1	0	0	0	192	0
Poor peasant	227	Yes	3.42	0.39	52.76	0.04	0.38	0.91	0.13	4.89	0.07	6.94	0.16
		No	0	0.12	4.97	0	0.12	0.12	0	0	0	0	0
Middle peasant	74	Yes	2.66	0	11.03	0	0.08	0.14	0	6.38	0	0	0
		No	0	0	5.47	0	0.08	0.03	0	0	0	0	0
Rich peasant	19	Yes	0.7	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
		No											
Landlord	18	No											
Others	11	Yes	2.73	0.3	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total	352												

Table 4: **Whether Obtained Land in 1952 Land Reform, by Class Status**

	No	Yes (%)	Total
Farmhand	0	2 (100)	2
Poor peasant	33	194 (85.5)	227
Middle peasant	36	37 (50.7)	73
Rich peasant	18	1 (5.3)	19
Landlord	18	0 (0)	18
Tenant	0	1 (100)	1
Others	6	5 (45.5)	11
Total	111	240 (68.4)	351

the one hand, to whether or not it had been redistributed land and the amount of land it received, on the other (Table 5). Take the poor peasants as an example. It is clear that only those with substantially less land than their peers in the same class category in 1948 (0.59 mu versus 1.38 mu) had received land. In other words, class status was a necessary but not sufficient condition for redistributive entitlement; differences in pre-reform land endowment importantly determined who at the lower tiers of China's rural class structure were entitled to benefit from redistribution. The ironical fact that even one rich peasant household qualified for land redistribution strongly substantiates this conjecture.

This paradoxical feature begs the intriguing questions of why households of varying land endowment were grouped into the same social class and how wide this intra-class dispersion was. While answer to the first question will have to await future research, our data do reveal that land endowment did vary widely even within the same social class in the same village. Table 6 shows, for instance, that mean per capita land endowment among the poor peasants, 0.64 mu, in village 3 conceals the vast extremes of landless households at one end and those

Table 5: **Pre- Reform Land Endowment and Redistribution in Four Wuxi Villages**

	Whether obtained land	N	Per capita land in 1948	Per capita land obtained	Per capita land in 1952
Farmhand	No	0			
	Yes	3	0.02	0.75	0.89
Poor peasant	No	24	1.38	0	1.71
	Yes	154	0.59	0.94	1.49
Middle peasant	No	36	2.22	0	2.22
	Yes	37	1.34	0.62	1.86
Rich peasant	No	11	3.37	0	2.98
	Yes	1	1.57	0.08	1.65
Landlord	No	15	9.06	0	2.16
	Yes	0			
Others	No	8	1.12	0	1.18
	Yes	15	0.48	0.89	1.36
Average	No	111	3.14	0	2.09
	Yes	240	0.71	0.94	1.56

Table 6: Per Capita Land Distribution in Pre-Reform Wuxi (1948), by Class Status and Village

Village		1	2	3	4
Poor peasant	N=	42	30	62	62
	Mean	0.79	0.16	0.64	1
	Min	0.03	0	0	0
	Max	5.05	1.26	2.63	3.88
	Std Dev.	0.81	0.26	0.55	0.95
Middle peasant	N=	15	7	21	25
	Mean	1.01	1.07	1.72	2.24
	Min	0.2	0.13	0.98	0.8
	Max	1.7	2.25	3.06	4.44
	Std Dev.	0.46	0.75	0.59	0.83
Rich peasant	N=		3	2	9
	Mean		1.55	2.38	4.09
	Min		0.26	1.38	1.8
	Max		2.81	3.38	7.34
	Std Dev.		1.28	1.42	1.62
Landlord	N=			1	14
	Mean			3.31	9.47
	Min			3.31	3.72
	Max			3.31	15.55
	Std Dev.				4.17

with land that exceeded the average of the middle peasants in all the four villages combined at the other. This anomaly aside, the earlier verdict that it was the poor peasants who benefited from a redistributive policy aimed primarily at protecting the rich peasants still holds. The remaining question is what enabled an area of exceedingly high man-to-land ratios such as south Jiangsu to adopt such a land reform policy. Specifically, where did it get the land required to achieve these dual goals?

Prior Inequality and Inter-village Redistribution of Land Resources

We begin with the hypothesis that land inequality in the NLA was higher, which was a condition more conducive to accomplishing the goal of simultaneously protecting the rich peasants while satisfying the demand of the poor for land redistribution. Was this the case in our Wuxi villages? Going back to Table 1, which lists the distribution of land in each village in 1948 measured by Gini coefficient, provides a useful clue. Standing at 0.558 on average,¹⁴ overall land inequality was distinctly higher than the 0.22 found in rural north China,¹⁵ a

14 The Gini coefficients for Wuxi county as found by other scholars, which ranged from .438 to .667, were thus strikingly similar to what we find here. See Chao Kang, *Zhongguo chuantong nongcun de diquan fenbu* (*The Distribution of Land Rights in China's Traditional Villages*) (Taipei: Lianjing chubanshe, 2005), p. 73. Note also that the Ginis varied even within the same county.

15 Joseph Esherick, "Numbers games: a note on land distribution in prerevolutionary China," *Modern China*, Vol. 7, No. 4 (1981), pp. 387–412.

region predominated by owner-cultivators.¹⁶ The size distribution of landholdings by class status similarly shows that land inequality was high in the NLA: whereas per capita land was 9 mu for landlords, it was little more than 3 mu for rich peasants (Table 7, column 6). And while the landlords and rich peasants together accounted for a mere 12 per cent of the village population (column 3), they owned up to 43.2 per cent of the land (column 4),¹⁷ with the remaining social classes, which accounted for 82.5 per cent of the population, owning only slightly more than half of it (54.4 per cent).

On the other hand, there were no large landed estates of hundreds or thousands of mu in these Wuxi villages.¹⁸ For instance, the “representative” landlord owned roughly 38 mu of land, although in relative terms this was already 15 times the amount owned by a poor peasant household (Table 7, column 5).¹⁹ A more revealing finding, according to our own evidence, is that there were altogether only 15 landlords among the 352 households in these Wuxi villages in 1948, amounting to a mere 4 per cent, and they were distributed rather unevenly among the villages. For instance, there were no landlords in two of the four villages (villages 1 and 2), and in one only one landlord (village 3); in fact, virtually all the landlords were found in village 4 (Table 6).²⁰ This begs the puzzling question of how these Wuxi villages managed to protect the rich peasants while simultaneously redistributing land to the poor.

One way of getting around this problem, as appears to be the case in the OLA, was to classify those who should presumably be rich peasants as landlords. This apparently happened in Wugong in north China, for instance, when the land reform team had difficulty identifying anyone to “fit squarely into the landlord category, even taking pre-reform 1936 as the benchmark.”²¹ Similar practices allegedly occurred in Shaanxi province, where the administrators assigned landlord status to households that had either hired labour in peak agricultural seasons or engaged in (usurious) lending, after failing to identify households with abundant land.²² While such misclassifications may similarly exist in the NLA, it appears that land reform administrators in Wuxi redistributed land from villages with relatively generous land endowments to those where no

16 The Gini for Shandong was .154, Henan .222 (Chao Kang, *The Distribution of Land Rights*, p. 73), and Shaanxi below .23 (Qin Hui, “Fengjian jingji de guanzhong moshi – tugaiguan guanzhong nongcun jingji fenxi zhiyi” (“The ‘Guanzhong model’ in feudalistic society: an analysis of the rural economy before the land reform, Part 1”), *Zhongguo jingjishi yanjiu* (*Research on the Economic History of China*), No. 1 (1993), pp. 73–84.

17 Our figure is close to those employed by Ash, “Economic aspects (part 2),” p. 520, who finds that the proportion of land owned by landlords in south Jiangsu ranged between 36.8% and 40%.

18 Robert Ash, *Land Tenure in Pre-Revolutionary China: Kiangsu Province in the 1920s and 1930s* (London: SOAS Research Notes and Studies No. 1, University of London, 1976), p. 3.

19 It appears that the peasant economy of south Jiangsu around the 1930s was predominated by those with holdings in the smallest size categories – of not exceeding 10 mu (*ibid.* p. 5). For the self-sufficient middle peasants in our Wuxi villages, for instance, average farm size was less than 10 mu (8.22 mu for these four villages, Table 4, column 6).

20 In village 1 there were not even rich peasants.

21 Edward Friedman, Paul G. Pickowicz and Mark Selden, *Chinese Village, Socialist State* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), p. 82.

22 Qin Hui, “The ‘Guanzhong model,’” p. 76.

Table 7: Land and its Distribution in Pre- Reform Wuxi (1948), by Class Status

	No. of household	Household size	% of total population	% of total land	Land (per household)	Land (per capita)
Farmhand	3	2.00	0.5	0.0	0.06	0.02
Poor peasant	178	4.01	54.8	22.8	2.44	0.69
Middle peasant	73	4.95	27.7	31.6	8.22	1.79
Rich peasant	12	6.92	6.4	13.0	20.60	3.22
Landlord	15	4.80	5.5	30.2	38.28	9.06
Others	23	2.91	5.1	2.3	1.93	0.69
Total/average	304	4.28	100.0	100.0	6.25	1.46

landlords could be readily identified and there was not enough land available for redistribution. Table 8 shows, for instance, that while land had been redistributed from the landlords and (to a lesser extent) the rich peasants in villages 3 and 4 to the other social classes (columns 2 and 3), the amount of land received by the beneficiaries exceeded that redistributed from the benefactors, as indicated by the negative signs in column 4. The exception is village 4 (with the highest percentage of landlord households), where the reverse – an outflow of land away from the village – had apparently occurred. These numbers demonstrate that land was redistributed not merely within a single village but across villages, a practice that effectively rendered the landlords and rich peasants in villages with above-average land endowment especially vulnerable.

The foregoing evidence helps explain why land reform in China was conducted at the township (*xiang* 乡) level – presumably because doing so better allowed villages of varying population-to-land ratios and degrees of inequality to equalize their land endowment. This implies that sheer inequality in land was not a sufficient condition for either safeguarding the rich or benefiting the poor. For instance, at 0.665 the Gini coefficient in village 3 was very high (Table 1), and yet because there was only one landlord in that village, an additional 98.97 mu of land had to be “imported” from outside for redistribution to the poor (Table 8, column 4). It was this kind of inter-village redistribution of land that enabled an average of one-third of the land in these four Wuxi villages available for redistribution (column 5), a figure substantially higher than the 7.7 per cent observed by Friedman and his collaborators in the 764 villages in Raoyang and nearby counties.²³

The Intriguing Determinants of Class Status

The fact that the rich peasants were safely protected from expropriation during land reform in the NLA suggests that the determination of class status – in particular the distinction between landlords and rich peasants – in these regions took on great importance. Specifically, what distinguished a landlord from a rich peasant? According to the guidelines laid down by the CCP, a landlord family

23 Friedman *et al.*, *Chinese Village, Socialist State*, p. 104.

Table 8: **Inter-Village Land Redistribution among Social Classes in Wuxi, 1952**

Village	(1)	(2)		(3)	(4)	(5)
	Landlord as % of households	Redistributed land from: (in mu)		Redistributed land to: all other classes except those in (1) (intra-village redistribution) (mu)	Net difference: (2) – (3) (inter-village redistribution) (mu)	Land redistributed as % of total
		Rich peasants	Landlords			
1	0.00			126.02	–126.02	41.2
2	0.00	–7		140.20	–147.20	59.5
3	1.09	11.3	24.39	134.66	–98.97	30.1
4	12.50	55.87	410.42	277.47	188.82	27.5
Total/average	4.93	60.17	434.81	678.35	–183.37	33.8

was one who, after “essential labour,”²⁴ rented out more than three times the amount of land it cultivated.²⁵ In short, pre-reform land inequality should in principle be the single-most important factor in determining class status. That was only half true, however.

Indeed, evidence suggests that three criteria had been employed in the determination of class status, all of which, while related to the amount of land owned, were quite independent of it.²⁶ These important parameters were, respectively, “not performing essential labour” (*bu laodong* 不劳动), “relying on land rents for income” (*yikao boxue shouru* 依靠剥削收入) and “having practised exploitation for three consecutive years” (*boxue chaoguo sannian* 剥削超过三年). The detailed records showed that 81 households were classified as landlords, amongst whom a substantial proportion, 92.6 per cent, earned their classification for not performing “essential labour” rather than having too much land. In fact, 58 of these landlords (71.6 per cent) had per capita land even below the mean of 9.42 mu. This raises the issue of the extent to which subjective factors played a part in determining the fate of a household, particularly for those on the borderline between the classification of landlord and rich peasant.

A few case studies in the aforementioned Rural Works Committee are helpful in furthering our understanding of this intriguing phenomenon. As with many other “landlords” in Wuxi, Ni Deyu (倪德裕) of Yunlin town (*yunlin xiang* 云林乡), Dongting district (*dongting qu* 东亭区) owned only a meagre 19 mu of land. With a family of eight, per capita land was a mere 2.38 mu per person – lower than the mean. That Ni was classified as a landlord was premised on the allegation that he failed to perform “essential labour” himself but relied on hired hands for three consecutive years – an allegation similar to that which Qin Hui (秦晖) has found in north China.²⁷ In addition, Ni was also charged for usurious lending, and that he obtained his income mainly from land rentals.²⁸ What might have fuelled the verdict of classifying Ni as a landlord was the prestigious and well-paid job that his eldest son held – as director of the Central Biological Research laboratory in Shanghai – and the fact that half his family members no longer resided in the village; this exacerbated his vulnerability to the stigma of being an “absentee landlord” (*bu zaicun dizhu* 不在村地主).

Qin Qiaoquan (钦巧泉) of Sanhe village (*sanhe cun* 三合村) provided another example involving an even more subjective interpretation of the elusive concept of class. The entire Qin family owned a meagre 3.93 mu of land, and even had to

24 Essential labour referred to “ploughing, planting, reaping and the other major farming tasks” (Vivienne Shue, *Peasant China in Transition: The Dynamics of Development toward Socialism, 1949–1956* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), p. 48).

25 *Ibid.* p. 43.

26 This analysis is based on the minutes of a meeting organized by the Rural Works Committee of South Jiangsu (Sunan nongcun gongzuo weiyuanhui) (n.d.) on class classification. The document is entitled *Wuxi xian nongcun jieji qingkuang cailiao* (*A Compendium of Materials on Rural Social Classes in Wuxi County*), archival classification B1-2-17.

27 Qin Hui, “The ‘Guanzhong model’,” pp. 80–82.

28 By farming 6.34 mu himself and renting out 12.75 mu, clearly Ni was well within the stipulated limits of renting out not more than three times the amount of land he cultivated.

rent in 5.45 mu so as to utilize his family labour more fully. As with the case of Ni and many others, Qin was charged for hiring others to do the farm work for him. But that was not the only charge. What eventually nailed his fate as landlord, according to the jury, was that he frequently brought together interested parties to engage in land rental transactions, and collected rents on behalf of the landlords (*dai dizhu shouzu* 代地主收租) – an act that allegedly “facilitated exploitation.”²⁹ However, Qin might have simply earned the classification by allegedly “feasting and drinking at tenants’ expense” (*chi renjia, yong renjia* 吃人家,用人家), prerogatives that typically only landlords enjoyed and which were resented by the tenant farm households. In any case, these examples plainly illustrate that, in determining social classes the subjective criterion of “exploitation” afforded the reformers much greater flexibility than the objective measure based upon the amount of land owned by a household.

We now test, using the Wuxi farm survey data, the determinants of class classification. The dependent variable to be explained here is class status, which is ranked in descending order starting with landlord at one end to farmhand at the other. The explanatory variables include both a set of objective, quantifiable factors and more subjective factors. In operational terms, the objective explanatory variables include pre-reform (1948) per capita owned land, the number of rooms in a house, draught animals and household income. The “subjective” variables include two “dummy variables” (with either a “yes” or “no” answer): whether a household had “hired labour” and whether it received “exploitative income” (from land rental, for example), which are reasonably close proxies for measuring the effect if any of subjective interpretations in determining class status. For model analysis choice we employ the ordinal logistic model, as it allows the dependent variable of class status to be “ranked” in an ordinal fashion according to the clearly defined class classifications as laid down by the CCP. The results of this exercise are shown in Table 9, in five specifications. Column (5) represents the full model with the inclusion of all the explanatory variables, plus the village dummies, which are added to control for the possible effect on the dependent variable of inherent differences between the villages.

The analytical results show that the objective factors are all statistically significant at the 1 per cent level of significance, suggesting that differences in class assignment were indeed premised upon differences in measurable wealth – productive (such as land and draught animals) and otherwise (houses, for instance). While the two factor market variables, namely labour hiring (in) and land renting (out), are significant in the earlier estimations (for example, 3 and 4), they are only marginally significant, at the 10 per cent level, once differences in these markets between the villages are controlled for. The dummy variable of “exploitative income” is, like household income and land, also highly

29 This suggests that the incidence of “absentee landlords” in south Jiangsu or *Jiangnan* was probably high.

Table 9: The Determinants of Class Status in Wuxi (Ordinal Logit Model)

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
PC_land 1948	1.689*** [0.185]	1.519*** [0.208]	1.347*** [0.212]	1.296*** [0.226]	1.012*** [0.224]
Housing property		0.427*** [0.102]	0.358*** [0.104]	0.359*** [0.107]	0.308*** [0.114]
Draught animals		2.883*** [0.785]	1.940** [0.828]	2.334*** [0.876]	2.663*** [0.973]
Hire in (labour)			0.002*** [0.000]	0.001*** [0.001]	0.001* [0.001]
Hire out (labour)			-0.004 [0.003]	-0.004 [0.003]	-0.005 [0.003]
Rent in (land)				0.027 [0.072]	-0.040 [0.077]
Rent out (land)				0.358*** [0.126]	0.285* [0.155]
“Exploitation”					0.002*** [0.001]
Household income					0.000*** [0.000]
Village 2	0.726 [0.517]	0.796 [0.535]	0.688 [0.568]	0.614 [0.574]	0.576 [0.631]
Village 3	-0.238 [0.425]	-0.205 [0.436]	0.022 [0.446]	-0.021 [0.448]	-0.078 [0.480]
Village 4	-0.876* [0.458]	-2.076*** [0.548]	-1.268** [0.574]	-1.433** [0.587]	-0.928 [0.610]
Observations	293	293	293	293	293

Notes:

Standard error in brackets.

* Significant at 10%; ** significant at 5%; *** significant at 1%

significant. Since the answer to “whether a household had received an income premised upon exploitation” was determined by the village reform committee, it was thus a less objective measure as compared to, for instance, either land or housing property. As the foregoing case studies have shown, a landlord could be one who did not own a disproportionately large amount of land. Consistent with the case studies analysed earlier, the statistical results confirm that both subjective as well as objective factors played a crucial role in class determination. Thus, notwithstanding the greater emphasis placed upon economic considerations in the NLA, human factors continued to play a crucial part in a social process that easily lent itself to political manipulation.

Summary and Conclusion

Regardless of whether it was motivated to rectify past excesses and errors or more decisively to restore agricultural productivity, a salient feature of land reform as it was carried out in the NLA was the supposed greater tolerance the communists had for rich peasants. The research questions that arise in this context are thus whether this declared modest policy was actually being achieved

and, in the light of (land) resource constraint, whether it was achieved at the expense of poor peasants. The distinctly stated goal of protecting the rich peasants also rendered the determinants of class status, in particular the delineation between landlord and rich peasant, an intriguing question. Based upon a farm survey conducted among a few hundred households in Wuxi county, south Jiangsu province, this study confirms that the “rich peasant economy” had indeed been well preserved, in that only the landlords’ property was confiscated and redistributed. More important perhaps is that this modified goal was achieved without sacrificing the interest of the poor peasants, who in fact were the biggest beneficiaries.

Two factors are considered important for the achievement of these dual goals. Whereas a higher degree of pre-reform land inequality in this region constituted the necessary condition, the reform’s success required also the equalization of land resources across villages. In addition to egalitarian considerations, disproportionately benefiting the poor might reflect also the village officials’ concern, for reasons of efficiency, to prevent the emergence of a large number of undersized farms.

Our last but clearly not least important finding pertains to the paradoxical role played by household differences in land endowment in decisively determining the beneficiaries of land reform, on the one hand, while serving as only one of the criteria in determining class status, on the other. Indeed, some households were classified as landlords not because they owned an outrageously large amount of land, but rather because they had allegedly committed certain “acts of exploitation,” which suggests that class determination was much less objective a social process than the determination of redistributive entitlement.