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MASS-LINE LEADERS AND LEADERSHIP IN RURAL CHINA

Chapter Eighteen
of

The First Years of Yangyi Commune
By Isabel and David Crook



"MASS-LINE LEADERS AND LEADERSHIP IN RURAL CHINA"

Introduction

FAR EAST REPORTER reproduces this chapter from Isabel and David Crook's "The First Years of the YANGYI COMMUNE". Written on the scene and by competent writers, long-time residents of China, and published in 1966, at a time when much "news" and speculation is being given the American reader about ideological developments in China, this book is a most timely and probably the most valuable reporting of the process by which the Chinese people are building their new society. As the flyleaf says -

A factual and detailed on-the-spot investigation of a people's commune in a mountainous area of China. The authors, who understand Chinese, lived in the commune for a year and made a thorough study of the work and life of its people.

The authors show how the commune came into being in 1958 and how it developed during the natural disasters of 1959-61. Drawing on case histories, specific examples and biographical sketches of people they know, the writers deal with the key questions of the commune: Has it failed or succeeded? How does it differ from the farming co-operative? How does it deal with the family and the individual? How has it affected agricultural output, industry and trade? How does it combine economic activity with local government, education and defence?

The book includes a section on the politics of the commune, showing how the Communist Party operates and describing individual communists, methods of leadership and organisation. This section also brings out the role of women and youth, the place of art, literature and philosophy in commune members' lives and the importance attached to the continuation of class struggle.

To give an idea of the richness and scope of
the book

"THE FIRST YEARS OF THE YANGYI COMMUNE"

there is herewith included
the table of

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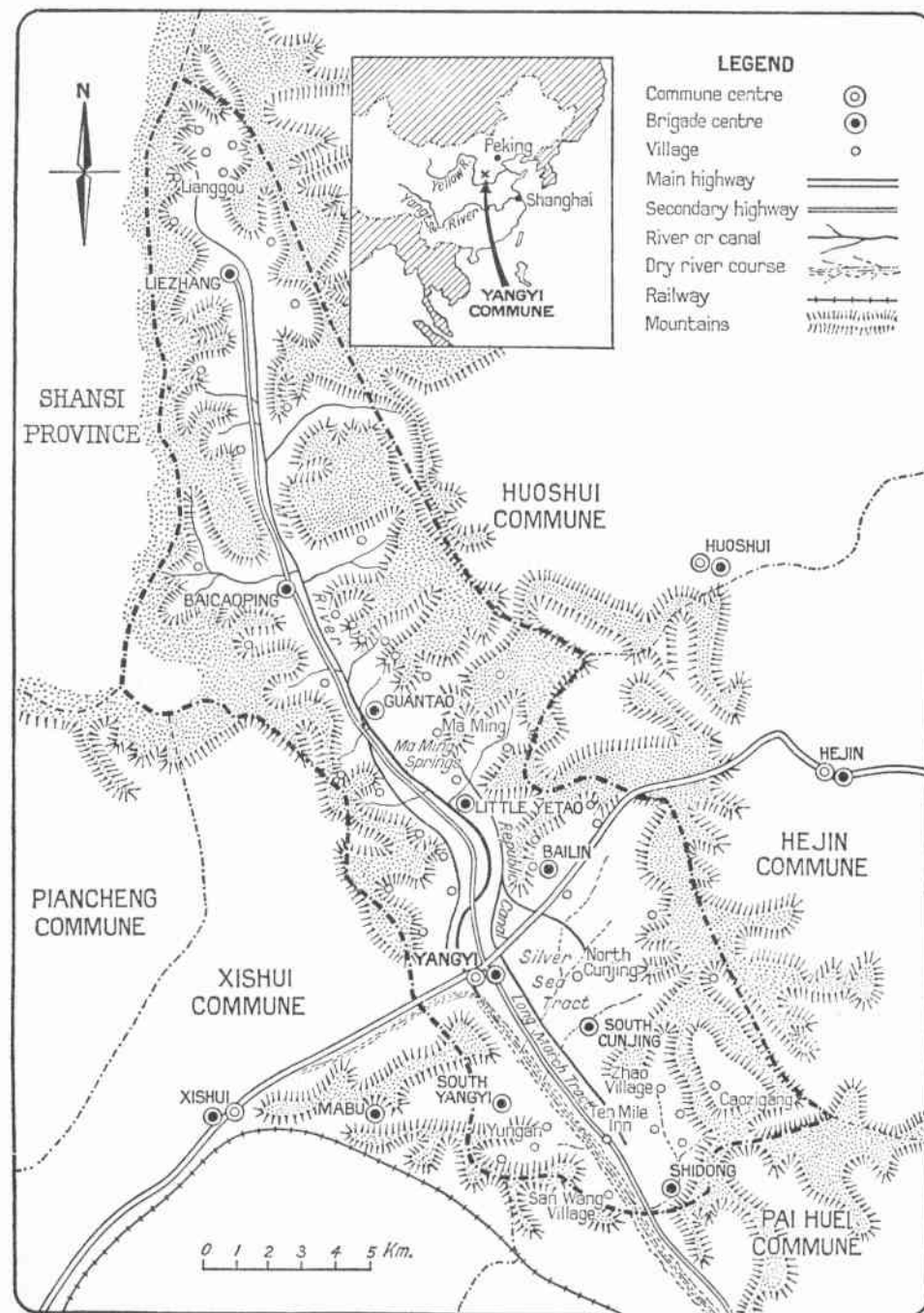
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Chapter XVIII

MASS-LINE LEADERS AND LEADERSHIP

'GOOD class origin' was required of cadres because poor and lower-middle peasants, having most to gain from the socialist transformation of agriculture could be counted on to support it most staunchly. But to get farming out of the rut where it had lain at the mercy of the weather and a prey to pest, scraping along with poor seed, narrow range of crops and puny draught animals, called for comprehensive long-term planning and effective short-term measures. This strategy and tactics was worked out by the Communist Party. Without the study of Party policy, therefore, even poor peasant cadres would be 'blind, half-baked, muddle-headed revolutionaries', as Mao Tse-tung described those who forgot the Party's General Line and specific policies.

Furthermore the various policies had to be interpreted in the light of local conditions and applied in a flexible fashion. But to know what was flexibility and what was departure from principle called for grasping overall strategy. Thus cadres could not be satisfied with studying particular directives; they had to study the General Line, politics as a whole and even dialectical materialism.

In the spring of 1960, for example, according to policy the running of canteens was to be taken as the focal point for improving commune members' living conditions and freeing women for work in the fields. But in some brigades the cadres favoured persuading everyone to eat in the community dining-room and to contribute their private allotments to it. This, however, deprived old people of employment. It was therefore not in keeping with the spirit of the General Line, which called for the 'mobilizing of every positive element' for the 'rapid building of socialism'.¹

Cadres found that without systematic study of both general and specific policies they could not reach sound decisions or put forward correct proposals. One brigade cadre remarked, 'I used to have the idea that I must be stupid, because I couldn't sort out which was the right thing to do and which the wrong. I couldn't reach prompt decisions and I was always making mistakes. Now I see it's not a question of being either stupid or clever, but of studying politics and grasping policy. Since I did that I seem to have grown a lot cleverer'.

¹ See Chapter XIII, 'Social Services'.

Mass-Line Leaders and Leadership

'PUTTING POLITICS IN COMMAND'

Even after a cadre did understand policy and support it, he still faced another and bigger task: getting the masses to do the same. This called for 'good work style'. Relying on administrative measures was seen as a hangover from an exploiting society, where those in authority were bureaucrats. Cadres in the commune were called on to 'follow the mass line' and 'put politics in command'.

Described as a fundamental political and organizational line of the Party, the mass line is based on the belief that 'the people are the real makers of history' and that they have 'boundless creative power'.² Therefore, while Communists should serve and keep close to the people, they cannot take the place of the people or take over from them. 'Merely through the efforts of the vanguard and without the genuine consciousness and mobilization of the people themselves,' says Liu Shao-chi, 'emancipation of the people is impossible, history will not move forward and nothing can be accomplished.' Thus the Communists cannot 'bestow emancipation' upon the people; they can only lead the people in struggle to emancipate themselves. And they can lead neither by ordering people about ('commandism') or by trailing behind them ('tailism'); but only by learning from them, systematizing and refining their knowledge and experience, returning it to them as their own policy and then leading them into action for it. The mass line thus 'comes from the masses' and 'goes back to the masses', though what comes from them is raw material, what goes back is processed. It arises from and expresses the unity between masses and leaders, just as its opposite, bureaucracy, arises from and expresses contradiction between them. To the extent that the mass line is practised, bureaucracy and the emergence of a privileged class of leaders is ruled out.

'Putting politics in command' meant explaining the long-term significance of an undertaking, showing its effect on the building of socialism, winning support for it by reason and persuasion, not by compulsion. It also meant urging people to put the interests of the group before those of the individual, those of the large collective such as the state or commune ahead of those of the small one such as the brigade or work team. It did not rule out material incentive, but it placed long-term before short-term and collective before individual material interests.

The Ten Mile Inn cadres, for instance, were anxious to afforest the hills beside their village, which meant covering them with thousands of fish-scale pits. While this was expected to bring ample reward in years to come, it could yield no immediate return. This meant that current income would have to be divided to cover not

² Liu Shao-chi, 'The Mass Line of the Party', *On the Party*, F.L.P., Peking, 1950.

only immediately profitable production but the long-term pit-digging project as well; in other words, more work but not more pay. At first there was opposition to the idea, so the cadres called a public discussion to win support for it. First they worked out how much could be gained from growing wild pepper, which produced a crop in three or four years and sold at a good price. Then they spoke of how afforestation would check erosion, reminding their listeners of the topsoil washed into the river and the stony soil washed down from the hillsides onto the fields during the heavy rains of past years, of the silting up of the river and the floods it had caused. Afforestation would help stop all this, they argued, and in the long run it would even change the weather. Despite some scepticism on this last point, villagers found the cadres' arguments convincing. They agreed to dig the pits. Politics had taken command.

It was the same when the Little Yetao brigade leadership set out to train some of its primary school graduates as technicians for the breeding station and poultry farm. The job called for living in. 'That old temple's only fit for monks and nuns,' the poultry girl's mother had at first protested. As to those working at the breeding station: 'No decent girl ought even to see such things,' was a common attitude in the community. But Ren Qing-mei called the Communist Youth League members together and explained the importance of the work to them. He contrasted their youth with his own and spoke of the Communist Youth League's special responsibility in building a socialist society. The whole nation set great store by them, he said; they should not be shy or timid or afraid of difficulties. Fortified in this way the young people went ahead. Politics took command.

When the commune leadership gave Little Yetao a small quantity of special seed for some extra large turnips, in recognition of the brigade's outstanding achievements, some brigade members took it for granted that they would be raising a crop for their own consumption. But after discussion initiated by the Party branch, the majority favoured letting the crop go to seed. The turnips grew 'two feet long and as big around as a rice-bowl'. When they did go to seed the members who had first favoured eating them suggested that the seeds should be sold, saying they would fetch a fine price. But once more after the matter had been discussed the majority favoured a different course. The interests of the larger collective should come first, the cadres and Party members pointed out. This view prevailed and the seeds were turned over to the commune, free, for distribution amongst the 24 brigades.

When workers on the newly set up Silver Sea Tract, despite hard work and cold, damp living quarters, put aside thoughts of going home; when Youth League members hankering for home cooking came to the conclusion that community dining-rooms accorded with their aim of fighting for communism and that the old way of eating

belonged to the past, it was all a result of subordinating short term to long term interests, of putting the interests of the collective before those of the individual, of judging all words and deeds by their effect upon the building of socialism and communism.

An essential part of the process of putting politics in command was for the cadres to make clear to the people the whys and wherefores of proposals put forward and what must be done to implement them; and for the cadres to know what ordinary members thought about current developments and about Party and Government measures for dealing with them. The former called for a 'mobilization' meeting; the latter for 'airing of views'.

'Mobilization' aimed at arousing mass enthusiasm for a new policy or undertaking, and determination to see it through. The usual pattern was for the matter first to be put to the Party members and cadres, who in turn would take it up with the 'activists'. All of these might informally sound out public opinion in personal chats, so that when the meeting was held not only were the audience mentally prepared but the leadership had some idea how they felt about the matter on hand. First a mobilization speech would be made. This would generally be followed by discussion, which would centre first on the policy or project itself, to bring out its significance, then on how to implement it. Finally pledges would be made to carry it out.

A new means of airing views came into being with the wiping out of illiteracy. This was the writing of *dazibao* or 'large character posters'. Introduced in the late fifties this had soon become nationwide practice and was widely used in the commune. Whenever some important task or controversy arose, commune members were called on to put their views in writing and display them. Writing *dazibao* had the advantage not only of providing a record which anyone could consult. It meant, too, that ideas were put pithily. This made it easier for the leadership to sort out and sum up the ideas of the rank-and-file. Writing *dazibao* was one of the methods used on the Silver Sea Tract when tract workers were called on to decide whether to push on with contouring or wait till the weather grew warmer. On that occasion 1,500 posters were put up, an average of almost seven for each of the 220 workers.

Putting politics in command called for long-term perspective, for seeing the future rising on the basis of present achievement and against the background of the past. It was a means of moving from the socialist distribution system of 'to each according to his work', to the communist one of 'to each according to his needs'. This perspective served as an incentive. But perspective alone was not enough for rank-and-file commune members in the early stages of the process. It had to be bolstered by immediate material incentives. Hence the communes' slogan: 'The more you work, the more you

Politics of Yangyi Commune

get.' Material incentive, however, might be either useful or dangerous; it might lead to either socialism or capitalism, depending on how it was guided and controlled. Its course was set by political education.

Broadly speaking material incentive grew less important as 'political consciousness'—public spirit and social conscience—rose. This needed to be accurately estimated at each stage of social development. Under-estimation of political consciousness and over reliance on material incentive was termed a 'rightist' mistake, leading to capitalism; over-estimation of it was a 'leftist' mistake in which the leaders struck out towards socialism but left the rank-and-file behind them. When the commune was taking shape, for instance, its cadres supported 'levelling and transferring' (equalizing the value of work points in the various brigades regardless of differences in output, and transferring means of production from brigade to commune or from one brigade to another). The result was what commune leaders first described as a contradiction between rich and poor brigades and a lowering of morale and production in both.³ The Commune Party Committee tried at the outset to deal with this by putting politics in command. They pointed out to the rich brigades that though they were contributing something to the poor ones, they themselves were getting richer each year, not solely through their own efforts but as a result of belonging to the commune. At the same time they urged the poorer brigades to cultivate a spirit of self-reliance and become more prosperous by exploiting the special resources of their hilly land. This, while helpful, did not solve the problem. It assumed a degree of 'political consciousness' which had been reached only by the most advanced, not by the vast majority of commune members. What was needed at this stage was a change in set-up which would give fuller play to material incentive. This was provided in the check-up of April 1959.⁴

'LEADING ON THE JOB'

Following the mass line and putting politics in command were not enough. A cadre needed another aspect of good work style: a practical approach to a host of technical problems such as growing grain, planting trees, raising livestock, building dams, terraces or houses, running canteens, setting up new industries and keeping accounts.

³ See Chapter IV, 'Tempering the Winds of Communism'.

⁴ The danger of over-estimating the people's development had long before been pointed out by Mao Tse-tung. 'When we lift a bucket of water, for instance,' he said, 'aren't we lifting up something that stands on the ground and doesn't float in mid-air?' (See 'Talks at the Yen-an Forum on Art and Literature', *Selected Works*, Vol. IV, Lawrence & Wishart, London, 1956, p. 75.) An accurate estimate of people's political and ideological level—of just where the bucket was to be lifted from—was the starting point for putting politics in command.

Mass-Line Leaders and Leadership

The Ten Mile Inn cadres, for example, by putting politics in command, succeeded in persuading the villagers to cover their hill-sides with fishscale pits. But the wild pepper they planted did not flourish; it died. Why? Were the pits not well dug? Was the upkeep not careful enough? Could wild pepper not flourish on a northern slope? Whatever the reason, the promising pepper project was abandoned. Politics in command without adequate technique to back it up proved fruitless.

The importance of technical competence to leadership was one reason why cadres were urged to cultivate experimental plots. In 1960 Yangyi Party Committee called on all Party secretaries in the commune to 'go in for experimental plots in a big way'. The 'plots' were not limited to agriculture; they might consist of pilot projects in social services, animal husbandry or forestry. Their purpose was to improve leadership and increase production, by finding out what could be done and how to do it.

In addition to technical problems there were complex questions of management to be solved.

Early in November 1959, for example, the team leaders of the Ten Mile Inn brigade reported that their teams had finished the sweet potato harvesting and were moving on to their next tasks. A little later complaints reached the Brigade Party Committee that time limits set for the harvesting had been too short, the job had been rushed and many tubers had been left in the ground. The Committee investigated and found that this was so. Then it called a meeting of the brigade members and put the facts before them. First the Party Secretary dwelt on the work put into growing the sweet potatoes (a crop requiring much care) and the waste that had been brought to light. Then he showed how the Party's policy of 'increasing production and avoiding waste' was vital for the building of socialism. Finally he called on the teams to go over the fields again, this time with a plough to save labour. This was agreed, and so many tubers were turned up in the first ploughing that some teams ran over their fields twice. The additional sweet potatoes thus harvested in all nine teams came to over eleven and a half tons though over a ton of them were spoilt.

This loss of both crop and time was due rather to management than technique, and indicated the need for improvement in methods of leadership. This need existed throughout the commune, in fact throughout the country as a whole.

Measures were taken to strengthen management following the rectification in the winter of 1959-60, in the form of a newly-introduced system which brought brigade leaders into closer and quicker contact with the teams. It was known as 'leading on the job'.

In some brigades the new system was not adopted without misgivings.

'We brigade leaders are now supposed to lead and to take part in production at the same time,' said Wang Mi-shan, Party Branch Secretary of Ten Mile Inn. 'At first I had my doubts about it. I just didn't see how I'd be able to keep it up and lead the brigade as well.'

All the same, when in the spring of 1960 the call for 'leading on the job' came through to Ten Mile Inn, the brigade leaders did not hold back. When the wheat was being harvested they were out in the fields from dawn till dusk. And when the work team leaders said, 'Well, that job's done,' the brigade leaders disagreed. They saw ears of wheat among the stubble. They took a sample *mu* of land already harvested and went over it with eagle eyes, gleaning as they went. They got 2.4 *jin* from that *mu*. Then they took an abacus. There were 1,800 *mu* sown to wheat in the brigade and on the basis of 2.4 *jin* to a *mu* they would be able to glean over 4,500 *jin* (two and a half tons). 'That could just about keep a hundred men going for forty days,' said Wang Mi-shan. A brigade meeting was called and the situation explained. A mass 'gleaning movement' was launched, and 4,550 *jin* was brought in.

After the wheat was reaped the maize was hoed. As they worked, the brigade cadres saw some sickly, yellowish sprouts. They got together, compared notes and estimated the total area of such sprouts throughout all the teams they were in. It came to 125 acres.

Again a mass meeting was called. The outcome this time was a brigade-wide movement to collect fertilizer.

Let's pile up muck both night and day,
To drive those yellow shoots away.

With this couplet as a slogan, barnyards were scraped; cess-pools were emptied; streets were swept, especially round the donkey-driven mill-wheels; chicken-coops and pig-sties were given a thorough cleaning. The occasion was seized, too, to knock down crumbling earthen walls. This helped make good compost. At the same time it helped to clean up the village, so that collecting fertilizer was combined with sanitation. Within less than the scheduled five days and nights over 400 tons of fertilizer was collected.

'After a few experiences like that,' concluded Wang Mi-shan, 'I realized that there was no contradiction between leading the brigade and working in the fields. As a matter of fact, the only way you can lead properly is to work in the fields. You can't do it from the brigade office. It's only if you're on the spot that you can find out right away if anything's wrong; or how to do things better and faster. If we'd been on the job with the sweet potatoes the way we were with the wheat, we'd never have lost that 2,000 *jin*.'

His conclusion was that 'leading on the job' not only speeded up the spotting of problems and shortcomings; it helped cement relations between the brigade and its teams and improved the general

quality of work. Previous experience had shown that when work team leaders saw the brigade leader and Party branch secretary leading from an office instead of from the fields, they tended to do the same. And since these lower level leaders were among the best field workers, their divorce from production had meant a loss to the teams. Leading through taking part had the opposite effect. 'The rank and file put their hearts into it more when they see us cadres working beside them in the fields and shouldering our other responsibilities as well,' said Wang Mi-shan.

Thus leading through taking part not only improved the quality of the work. It also increased its quantity. While in 1959 the average number of work days put in by brigade cadres throughout Yangyi Commune was 165, in 1960 the average was already 150 by the end of May.⁵ The cadres 'at the basic level' had become full-time members of their teams.

UPPER LEVELS OF LEADERSHIP AND THE TWO:FIVE SYSTEM

'Leading on the job' and running experimental plots were two of the chief systems devised for helping cadres at the basic level to keep in close touch with production and with the rank-and-file. The need and the difficulty of doing this was all the greater at the higher levels of leadership.

In 1960 there were five levels of administration from central government down to commune—the basic unit of the State. These were: central, provincial, regional, county and commune. Within the commune there were three levels of supervision or management: district, brigade and work team (the last two being considered basic levels of production).⁶ Thus there were cadres at eight levels altogether, those at each level being responsible for implementing policy laid down above, and for investigating and reporting on the situation below, on which policy was based. This called for upholding the spirit of a policy while adapting it to the particular conditions existing in a given area. It demanded understanding of policy on the one hand and of the local situation on the other.

In combining the general lines and policies with the situation in their own areas, cadres were called on to 'learn from Chairman Mao' whose thinking 'combines the general truths of Marxism-Leninism with the specific reality of the Chinese revolution'.

This integration of the general and the specific was the practice all along the line. For example the 'Resolution on Some Questions

⁵ 10 points counted as a work day. Experienced, able-bodied farmers could earn 12 work points in a day.

⁶ At this time the brigade was the basic level of ownership, management and accounting. In the winter of 1960-61, the basic level in some brigades went down to the work team. In such cases the brigade became a supervisory level.

Politics of Yangyi Commune

Concerning the People's Communes' was passed by the Central Committee of the Communist Party in December 1958 after a series of conferences reviewing the state of communes throughout the country. Soon after this the Hopei leadership convened a conference at which six points were selected as applying most directly to the communes of their province. This was followed by conferences called at county level but attended by cadres of the region, county, commune, district and brigade. It was by this detailed, step by step procedure that the Central Committee's resolution of December 1958 was implemented in Yangyi Commune through the check-up of April 1959.

In connection with leadership, Mao Tse-tung had warned: '... No leading worker can possibly give general guidance to all the units under his direction if he does not get actual experience in working on specific tasks with the individual workers in particular units. ...'⁷ Various measures were taken over the years to enable leading cadres to get such experience. Outstanding among them was the two : five system. This meant that out of every week, five days should be spent 'on the production front' helping the cadres 'at the basic levels' to become good leaders; the other two days were to be spent at headquarters at meetings, studying policy documents, consulting, summarizing and analysing the situation in the district, commune, county, region or province, as the case might be.⁸

The two : five system was first evolved in Hopei Province in 1959. It was tried out in various localities, including Shexian, and after initial successes was taken up throughout the province. In 1960 all cadres from the district and up were being urged to use it. Some cadres, however, had slipped into a routine of office work and meetings; others knew no other way of working. Many cadres really wished to get away from their offices; but they had so many meetings to attend, so many reports to write or to study and so many forms to fill in that they did not see how they could spare the time. A few felt they were not the type to function well in the field. To overcome doubts much publicity was done to show how the system worked.

One case publicized was that of a bank manager in a county town not far north of Shexian. Emerging from his piles of printed forms and stacks of ledgers, this banker went to work in a commune brigade. It was at the height of the battle against the 1960 drought and every available person was carrying water from reservoirs and rivers, ponds and tanks, in buckets on shoulder-poles and basins in hands. The bank manager joined this army of water-carriers. At the edge of a field he noticed two steam-powered pumps lying idle. Why were they not working? he asked. No funds to buy coal, came the

⁷ Mao Tse-tung, 'On Methods of Leadership', *Selected Works*, Vol. IV, Lawrence & Wishart, London, 1956.

⁸ Sunday was not normally a day of rest. See p. 96.

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answer. The banker put down his bucket, went to the brigade headquarters, phoned his office, authorized a loan, and soon the pumps were working. According to established office routine the granting of the loan should have gone through four steps: application, investigation, authorization and issuance. By being on the spot the manager had been able to telescope the first three steps into one. He at once gave instructions that the office should get in touch immediately with each commune in the county to find out how many pumps were idle through lack of fuel and to issue the necessary loans.

A cadre's duty during his five days in the field was more than taking part in production. He was to give three types of help: in making plans, in arranging work, in solving problems. His relations with those he led were to be governed by 'the five together': he was to work, consult, eat, live and study together with them. Besides this there were 'the six types of work' that he was required to be proficient at: the work of a commander, as well as of a rank-and-file labourer, of a technician and a herdsman, of a cook and a propagandist. He was to carry with him 'three notebooks and one tool'. The tool might be a hoe, sickle or trowel; the books were for recording work points, for study and for work matters.

Despite its advantages the system was not easy to establish. The main problem was the amount of time taken up by committee meetings. The solution put forward was: if in doubt about holding a meeting or not, don't hold it; if in doubt about holding a short meeting or a long one, hold a short one; if in doubt about having many attend or only a few, have only a few. The same line was laid down for reports and form filling. Upper levels were not to ask lower levels for reports or to fill in forms if they could get on without them. These measures were an acknowledgement that for the two : five system to work there must be not only the will but the way, in the form of appropriate arrangements.

On the other hand the two : five method of leadership itself made many meetings and much paperwork superfluous. A leader on the spot had little need for oral or written reports. He could learn how work was going on by using his eyes, having talks with those on the job, by his own participation.

Co-ordination of the different levels of administration, however, from central government to work team needed direct links not only with the basic level, but with the intervening ones. One way of achieving this was for upper level cadres to engage in projects at the basic level together with cadres of intervening units. In Guzhen Commune, for instance, adjoining Yangyi, Party secretaries of five levels had a joint project in the form of a high yield tract, made by damming a big gully at intervals so as to form a series of steps, each with a reservoir and terraced fields. This experiment in land reclamation and flood and drought control was of significance for a large

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area. The five levels of Party secretaries involved were Handan Region, Shexian County, Guzheng Commune, the local district and the brigade on whose land the gully was situated. Yangyi Commune itself contained no projects involving any level higher than the county; but it had cadres at three levels (county, commune and brigade) working together on experimental plots or projects. The Long Sea Dam had been one of these; the Silver Sea High Yield Tract was another.

With cadres of various levels working together in this way, discussing problems on the spot, all levels were kept in the picture while a mass of written reports, conferences and meetings were dispensed with. At the same time valuable experience could be rapidly passed on.

COUNTY CADRES

Shexian County had ten rural communes and one urban one (in the county town). Responsibility for the rural communes was shared by the First Party Secretary, Duan Peng-xiang, and the County Head, Wang De-hen, Duan taking those in the western half of the county and Wang those in the eastern half (where Yangyi was situated). Both were local men.

County First Party Secretary, Duan Peng-xiang, born in 1910 in what is now one of Yangyi's neighbouring communes, had long been a hired hand.

'When I recall those years,' he said, 'no tears come to my eyes, but my heart weeps.'

'We had little land of our own. Just on six *mu* for the six of us, my parents, my wife, myself and two children. Poor land it was, too, on a steep hillside. We cleared it and terraced it. But it wouldn't feed six mouths and my father and I both worked for landlords at the busy seasons. We tended our own land when things were slack.'

Duan's parents, worn out by toil and hunger, died in their forties. To provide them with a fitting funeral (by feudal standards of filial piety) Duan sold four of the six *mu* of land. He returned from the burial of his mother to a home bare of a single grain of sorghum (wheat was an undreamt of luxury) and to quiet the sobbing of his hungry children he went to borrow from the landlord who had bought his four *mu*. But no loan, not even a measure of grain, was forthcoming without security; so he mortgaged his last two *mu* of land. It was not long in following the first four. Thus Duan, in his early twenties, sank from the low level of a poor peasant and occasional farm hand to the lower one of a full-time labourer.

'We lived in a tiny broken-down rented room,' he said. 'And though the *kang* practically filled the place, it was too short for me and my feet dangled over the edge; so I had to prop them up on a pile of stones. When it rained outside it drizzled inside. One night

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during a storm my wife was afraid the whole place would collapse and said we'd better move to the temple with the beggars. But I wouldn't go. I thought, "Let it fall and bury us, kids and all. So much the better".'

This was his state of mind when, in 1939, an 8th Route Army unit came to organize his village to resist the Japanese. Before long he became head of the militia and later of the peasant union, which struggled successfully for the reduction of rent and interest. In 1942 he joined the Communist Party. 'I knew from my whole life,' he said, 'that they told the truth when they said that the landlords had everything without working and that we poor peasants had nothing though we worked ourselves to death.'

'Soon after I became a cadre there was a flood and some of the people were ready to give up. They didn't care whether they were saved or not. But I rounded up others to drag them from the flood waters and save them in spite of themselves. I knew what was going on in their minds. I remembered how I, too, once had no hope.'

When Duan was leading the rising struggle for reduction of rent and interest, the very landlord who had taken over his land came offering him a loan, hoping to blunt the point of the struggle. (This was before land reform and during the anti-Japanese united front.) 'How much were you thinking of lending?' asked Duan. The landlord hesitated. 'What about five bushels?' he said at last. 'That won't do,' said the peasant union chairman. 'You'll have to make it at least fifty. Mine's not the only poor family in the village. There are plenty of others.' He refused to let the issue become a private one between himself and the landlord who had foreclosed on his last two *mu*. He kept it a struggle of class against class.

Duan Peng-xiang was promoted step by step. By the early fifties he was in charge of trade for the region. Although now a middle-ranking cadre living in the city of Handan, his way of life remained frugal. In 1956 when experienced cadres were needed to strengthen the leadership in the countryside during the high-tide of the co-operative movement, Duan volunteered to go there.⁹ It was then that he became a county cadre. In 1960 he was appointed first secretary of the Shexian Party Committee.

The administrative head of the county, Wang De-hen, was born in a village in the Taihang foothills a few miles to the east of Yangyi. Both his father and mother had worked for landlords (the latter as a weaver) and he himself had started to do so, herding sheep, at the

⁹ With the setting up of the People's Republic in 1949 had come a trend towards centralization. This was largely a result of the shifting of the base of the revolution from the countryside to the cities. Strengthening centralized leadership speeded up unification of the country, stabilization of the currency, economic recovery in general. In 1956 it was found possible to simplify the central administration and there was a considerable reduction of personnel at higher levels.

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age of thirteen. By then both his parents were dead (poor peasants died young in those days) and young Wang went on working for little more than his keep for another eight or nine years. Then his sister married and with the wedding gift from her husband's family was able to buy a small plot of land. This she gave to her brother to work. Thus the hired hand Wang De-hen became a poor peasant.

This was in the early forties when the 8th Route Army were waging guerrilla warfare in the area. Even before the Communists could operate openly in the village young Wang had secretly contacted them and begun to do underground work. They were impressed by his spirit, energy and intelligence. 'If you work and study hard,' they told him 'some day you'll be a village leader.' Recalling this, the County Head commented, 'I wasn't interested in becoming a leader. All I wanted was my own bit of land'.

He had it, and held it, but only through constant struggle. When he first started working on his own he borrowed from his former landlord-employer enough to buy himself a home, offering land as security. He saved all he could to keep up the exorbitant interest payments, but it was a losing battle. At last he was resigned to surrendering his security. By this time, however, the Communists had gained ground and had instituted a steeply progressive tax on land. The landlord was already cursing this. To have acquired more land by foreclosure would have put him in a still higher tax bracket.¹⁰ He refused to take the land (the tax system had been specifically devised for just such an end) and demanded his money, threatening to have his toughs beat up young Wang if it were not paid. But the ex-hired hand now belonged to the communist-led village peasant union. The peasants rallied round him, no beating was even attempted and the debt was finally paid off—at the new, reduced rates with the usurious interest already paid being reckoned towards repayment of the loan itself.

This was one of many incidents which convinced Wang De-hen that the policy of the Communist Party was the policy for him and his whole class. In 1946 he joined the Party and in time became secretary of the village branch as well as head of the peasant union which had once saved him from a beating. From then on he won steady and rapid promotion, as well as a year and half of study at the Revolutionary University in Peking in 1949 and 1950. On completing the course there he was first given a regional post in Handan. Then with the decentralization which started in 1956, he became a county cadre, in 1960 becoming head of Shexian.

Shexian county leaders were among the first to take up the

¹⁰ The whole of a village's tax fell on the richest 30 per cent of the families; among these the bigger their holding the higher was the tax-rate. For fuller treatment of the Communists' use of taxation as a weapon against feudalism, see *Revolution in a Chinese Village*.

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two:five system. County Head Wang De-hen worked on experimental plots at several places in the five communes he led and whenever he could took part in the key task on hand, making the production of wheat and cotton his focal points. In 1959, he cultivated an experimental plot of cotton on the outskirts of Ten Mile Inn and attained a yield of 1,161 *jin* per *mu*. He drew into the experiment party secretaries from both Yangyi Commune and the Ten Mile Inn Brigade, the three working on the plot together, discussing problems and solving them as they went along. In 1960, when the breach in the Long Sea Dam was being filled, the County Head shovelled dirt and trundled a wheelbarrow, and from his vantage point on the job was able to streamline and speed-up the work. At crucial periods (during sowing, pest prevention and hoeing) he stayed at the Silver Sea Tract, where he had an experimental plot. When the Lunar New Year came round he went into the tract cook-house to make dumplings so that the cooks might have extra time off. Once while sowing cotton alongside tract members, he proposed that an ordinary seeder be used. This had never been done in this part of the country before and the suggestion provoked heated debate, some saying, 'You can't plant cotton with a seeder any more than a mother-in-law can give birth to her own daughter-in-law'. But the County Head offered to show that you could, and with one of the oldest farmers on the tract leading the donkeys he sowed cotton far faster than could be done with the old-style hand drill. His team-mate was impressed not merely by the efficiency of the seeder but also by the fact that the County Head was handling it. 'You never saw county heads like that, when I was a boy,' he said. 'They used to go lolling around in sedan chairs carried by eight men, while we were sweating in the fields.' He felt that the new experiment demonstrated new social relations quite as strikingly as it did new technique.

Many cadres no longer tied to the office and bogged down in paper-work spoke of themselves as 'liberated'. Yangyi commune members put it differently. They said, 'The 8th Route Army has come down from the mountains again'.

'GRASPING EACH END TO PULL FORWARD THE MIDDLE'

Spending time in the field was one thing; deciding which particular unit to spend it with was another. The county cadres did not pick at random. They went by the principle: 'Grasp each end to pull forward the middle.' This meant on the one hand spending time with units which had achieved conspicuous successes, mastering their methods and helping them advance still faster; and on the other hand working with units where failures had occurred, giving them guidance and help. After the experience of both the backward and advanced had been summed-up, lessons were drawn and publicized for the benefit

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of the mass of average units—'the middle'—so that similar mistakes might be avoided and successes achieved on the broadest possible front.

County Party Secretary Duan Peng-xiang, for instance, went to work in Mabu Brigade in Xishui Commune, which had the lowest production record in Shexian. After a preliminary sizing up of the situation he called a meeting of brigade members and had county and commune cadres attend. The farmers themselves made clear at the meeting that their main problem was the lack of water, both surface (rivers or ponds) and underground (wells or springs). They depended wholly on rain. Yet even after it did rain there was little water for their land; it drained so rapidly to the valley. How could this problem be solved? Duan asked. Some brigade members suggested that rain storage tanks might be the answer. After discussion this was agreed and taken as the focal point of the brigade's work, on which the maximum labour force should be concentrated.

The Mabu farmers knew every fold of their land, every path and outcropping where a rivulet formed after a downpour. At these points, carefully sited to trap the rain-water, they hollowed out and lined vat-shaped tanks ten to fifteen feet deep, leaving only a small opening so as to reduce evaporation. Six thousand of these tanks were dug in Mabu's rolling uplands. When the rain came it flowed into them and almost every field had its own supply of water close at hand. This made it possible to irrigate all the land once, some of it twice during the growing season. The next harvest showed that Mabu had moved up from being the most backward brigade in the county to one of the advanced. Following this it became the scene of county and even provincial 'on-the-spot conferences'¹¹ for the study of 'clusters of rain-storage tanks'. Soon brigades all around were following Mabu's example.

Secretary Duan achieved similar success with another backward unit—North Ridge Brigade in Henandian Commune just outside the county town. This time the problem was not lack of water but lack of drive. The brigade and team leaders worked hard but they could not get the rank-and-file to follow suit.

After working in the brigade some days Duan began to suspect that the leaders' weakness lay in welfare work. So he told them what he had learned in the Dragon and Tiger Brigade of neighbouring Xishui Commune, which was noted for its high morale. Just recently, he said, a number of the brigade members happened to fall ill. This made it hard to finish the field work on time and placed an extra heavy load on the brigade leader. Nevertheless he took the time to visit every one of the sick, discussed their needs with the doctor and helped in every way he could. This concern, especially at such a

¹¹ See below, this chapter.

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difficult time, was appreciated by the sick people's families and by the patients themselves, who tried to show their gratitude by getting up to work. The brigade leader restrained them until they were fit; but when they were well enough to work they went at it with a will—and the whole brigade followed suit.

The North Ridge cadres were impressed by the story.

'Yes, that's the way to lead,' said the brigade leader. 'We haven't paid enough attention to welfare work. We should take a leaf from their book.'

'What about the members of your brigade?' asked Secretary Duan. 'Are they all in good health?'

'Pretty good. Just two or three of them aren't too well at the moment.'

'Have you visited them?'

'Not yet.'

'Could you find time to go and see them?'

'Yes, we ought to be able to manage it as soon as we finish this weeding. It's a rush job, you know.'

'Couldn't you find time before then? Even while the weeding's going on?'

The visits were paid right away.

The first result was that the brigade members started to talk. They commented that their leaders seemed to have become more human. At the same time, complaints which had not been openly expressed before, came out: that the cadres had been concerned only about work, targets, plans—but not people. The second effect was a speeding up of the weeding. Within a week 500 acres were completed—a record for this brigade.

The lesson the brigade cadres drew from this experience was: 'The more attention the cadres pay to the welfare of the masses, the more enthusiastically they work.' Secretary Duan reminded them also that: 'The more enthusiastically the masses work, the more attention the Party should pay to their well-being.'¹²

STANDARDS AND STANDARD BEARERS

While 'grasping the backward' meant giving them help to catch up, 'grasping the advanced' meant having frequent checks and competitions to discover who was advanced in each aspect of work. It also meant cultivating model units or individuals and publicizing their experiences. In the summer of 1960, for instance, Shexian County organized a competition and election of 'standard-bearers'—those who had achieved outstanding results in increasing production. Six were finally chosen from the whole county. Each had contributed

¹² 'Resolution on Some Questions Concerning the People's Communes.'

something different. The head of the Dragon and Tiger Brigade of Xishui Commune was singled out for his 'strong mass line', shown in his concern for the sick, which had heightened his brigade members' enthusiasm. Ren Qing-mei was chosen for the measures he had taken to prevent loss in output despite the damage done by the hail. A third 'standard-bearer' had raised output by using every possible patch of land in the brigade, his method being termed 'the sow more line'. A fourth paid special attention to planting high yield crops such as sweet potatoes and maize. This was called 'the high yield crop line'. Another had gone in for high yield tracts wherever possible. This was the 'better field management line'. The sixth was the 'Five Plum Blossoms' cotton-growing team of the Silver Sea Tract, led by Zhu Xu-mei, who had achieved outstanding results by using advanced technique. The achievements of all these 'standard-bearers' were summarized by the county leadership and their six different measures were publicized throughout Shexian.

Checks and competitions were carried out not only on a county scale, but at each level and in every branch of work. During 1959, for instance, Yangyi Commune won one red flag for production and another for trade from the Handan Region administration. From Shexian County Government it received red flags for tax collection, finance, military affairs and transport as well as for farm work—primarily for excellent wheatfield management and manure collection. At the end of the year the county graded Yangyi as one of its three red flag communes. (The Commune Party Committee, too, received a red flag from the County Party Committee for its Party work.)

While the selection of 'standard-bearers' and awarding of red flags was for specific achievements and limited periods of time, a more general and permanent award was the title of Labour Hero or Heroine. During the anti-Japanese war, when Shexian was first liberated, there had been a constant need to promote personnel to the higher levels. This unavoidably meant a loss to the villages of some of their most experienced and able cadres. Labour heroes and heroines were a notable exception to this trend, for whether in the local, provincial or national category they stayed at their posts in the village. Guo Heng-de, a provincial labour heroine, from time to time attended conferences in the provincial capital, but most of her time was spent in Bailin; Ren Qing-mei, a national labour hero, attended conferences in Peking and elsewhere, but his regular post was Little Yetao. Thus the choosing of labour heroes and heroines was a form of recognition which did not divorce the producer from the primary level of production. It meant that each area was able to honour its best people without losing them.

Labour heroes and the units they led provided examples for the less experienced or less able. In fact it was a standing joke

that their thresholds were worn down by advice-seekers. It was not only local people who drew on their fund of practical experience. The People's Government and the Communist Party called labour heroes and heroines to conferences at county, regional, provincial or national level as a means of keeping in touch with the people, preventing bureaucracy and guaranteeing a down-to-earth approach to problems in the villages.

Many methods were used for publicizing and popularizing achievements of advanced units and individuals. Summaries were written, duplicated and circulated. Reports were given at conferences and over the radio. Rolls of honour and accounts of special deeds and experiences were posted on bulletin boards together with photographs and biographical notes on those concerned.

One method considered especially effective was the 'on-the-spot conference'. This meant inviting the cadres engaged in a particular type of work to a conference at the spot where some success had been achieved. In this way they could see it in operation and talk things over, not only with the cadres in charge, but also with the rank-and-file participants. In the first few months of its existence the Silver Sea Tract was the scene of ten on-the-spot conferences and fifteen checks arranged by cadres at three levels—Handan Region, Shexian County and Yangyi Commune. Over 1,000 visitors went to see for themselves what the tract had achieved and how it had done it.

Competition and emulation were another important method of leadership. Here the current slogan was 'Learn from, catch up with and overtake the advanced'. (This was subsequently broadened to: 'Compare yourself with and learn from others, catch up with those ahead and help forward those behind.') This was the opposite to merging backward units with advanced ones. The idea that differences between the advanced and the backward should be concealed rather than exposed had arisen perhaps from the feeling that emulation was socialist, competition capitalist. After discussion this view was rejected. As the Silver Sea philosophy tutors observed in their study of dialectical materialism, 'There are contradictions in everything under the sun. They exist between the advanced and the backward. These contradictions are the motive force of society. So we should not be afraid of them, but bring them to light and solve them.' Merging meant glossing over problems. Comparison and competition were a way of revealing contradictions between the advanced and the backward; emulation was a way of solving them. Competitions, checks and emulation drives were therefore popularized as a method of leadership.

The two:five system, leading on the job, competition and emulation, the election of labour heroes, on-the-spot conferences, 'grasping both ends', all created conditions for fostering unity between leaders and led, for combining centralized leadership with 'the

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boundless creative power of the masses'. They were specific measures for practising the mass line and avoiding bureaucracy.

Another important means for helping a cadre improve his work style were rectification movements. These started inside the Party with a study of current policy, which was followed by a check on its implementation by the branch leadership, by the branch as a whole and by individual members. After this a rectification movement might be taken to a new, public phase in which non-Party cadres and even rank-and-file commune members were drawn in on a voluntary basis. In the course of both inner-Party and public phases, the class stand of Party members, cadres and others was checked in the light of their actions during the period under consideration, especially during certain critical moments. Rectification for example, took place on the eve of the check-up on Yangyi Commune in April 1959, as preparation for the clearing up of mistakes of 'levelling' and 'transferring'.¹⁸ This gave people who had clearly strayed from the socialist road a chance to consider their conduct and if they chose—like Yuan Tian-fu of Liuqu to—return to it; or if they chose not—like Guo You-lin of Baicaoping—to be expelled from the Party. At the same time the work style of Party and non-Party cadres was examined in order to root out bureaucracy, subjectivism and departmentalism, or sectarianism.

¹⁸ See Chapter VI, 'Rectification'.

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