

Chapter One

The Last Thousand Years of Chinese History: Changing Patterns in Land Tenure*

IT is immediately apparent to anyone who juxtaposes those two massive works of scholarship and patient investigation, Sudō Yoshiyuki's *History of Land Tenure Systems in China*,¹ which is mostly concerned with the Song dynasty, and John Lossing Buck's *Land Utilization in China*,² which describes the early 1930s, that in the intervening thousand years the character of Chinese rural society changed, and changed radically.

Sudō's book shows us a world of manors whose fields were either worked by serfs, by tenant-serfs or by tenants who were very similar to serfs, being bound to the soil and subjected to numerous and irksome restrictions.

Buck's shows us, in contrast, a world of free small-holders, owning fragmented plots, fiercely competitive, untrammelled by status barriers, and whose individual fortunes clearly rose and fell with some rapidity. In the North China plain at this time over four-fifths of the cultivated area was farmed by those who owned it. In the Yangzi valley the corresponding proportion was about three-fifths and in Guangdong and Sichuan slightly over half. The quantities of land held by landowners who did not themselves farm can easily be seen from his figures to have been too small to have served as an adequate basis for a distinct and socially dominant landlord class. Other data confirm

* This article is based on a lecture delivered at Stanford University on 8 January 1969.

¹ Sudō Yoshiyuki, *Chūgoku tochiseido shi kenkyū* (Studies on the history of land tenure systems in China; Tōkyō daigaku shuppankai, 1954).

² John Lossing Buck, *Land Utilization in China*, 3 vols (University of Chicago Press, 1937).

this latter point. Thus William Hinton's admirable recent work on a North Chinese village shows that landlords owned about three acres each, rich peasants two acres each, middle peasants one acre each and poor peasants about half an acre.³

These thumbnail sketches of rural society in Song times and in the early part of the present century are both, needless to say, much too simple. But they serve a useful purpose in highlighting an important fact. To move from the first to the second there must have been a series of far-reaching changes, both touching and touched by almost every other aspect of Chinese society; but no-one, with the possible exception of the late Henri Maspero in his brief but brilliant essay "Land Tenure Systems in China from Their Origins Down to the Present Day"⁴ has tried to describe or analyse them. To raise but one of the problems, when and how did serfdom disappear?

There is a gap at the centre of the social and economic history of China over the last thousand years. Until it is filled it will remain impossible to attain much understanding of such matters as, for example, the lowest levels of the political structure or patterns of overall social mobility. It also seems reasonable to assume that changes in the nature of rural society will turn out to be related in a variety of ways to the more or less well-known patterns of demographic expansion, commercialization, urbanization, and even, possibly, of intellectual and technological advance and stagnation.

There is thus considerable justification at the present time for trying to advance some testable hypothesis, however speculative. The stakes, in terms of the possibility of advancing our understanding of pre-modern Chinese history, are too high for prudence to appear an attractive proposition.

I propose to sketch here what seems to me to be one defensible solution of the problem, and then to consider some of its implications in more detail. However, three observations of a general nature need to be made at the outset.

First, the high degree of regional variation between the different parts of China is a major complicating factor. In surveying these thousand years we must be careful not to interpret regional differences as evidence for, or against, changes over time. As Sudō Yoshiyuki has

³ William Hinton, *Fanshen: A Documentary of Revolution in a Chinese Village* (Vintage, New York, 1967), pp. 209, 592.

⁴ Henri Maspero, "Les régimes fonciers en Chine, des origines aux temps modernes", *Mélanges posthumes sur les religions et l'histoire de la Chine*, 3 vols (Publication du Musée Guimet, Paris, 1950), III, pp. 147-92.