"SOFT" RESISTANCE IN RURAL CHINA: THE SILENT VOICE OF THE POWERLESS

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In 1953, the Chinese government introduced a monopoly on trade in grain, known as the "unified system of purchase and sale." Although often underestimated by the academic world, the effects of this policy on the countryside were nothing less than devastating. Challenging conventional wisdom which deems the Chinese peasants completely powerless and subservient, this paper seeks to show that in fact they unswervingly resisted it. However, as my comparative analysis of primary sources dating from 1953 to 1955 and relating to villages in Shanxi province (northern China) has shown, the peasants rarely resorted to violent, large-scale rebellions to express their discontent. They were more inclined to employ invisible and unorganized resistance strategies, which were very similar to those identified by the American scholar James Scott in his study of a Malaysian village and defined as "everyday forms of peasant resistance."

Keywords: Chinese peasants, resistance, Maoist era, unified system of purchase and sale

1. Introduction

In the summer of 1953, a radical shift occurred in Chinese politics as Mao Zedong decided to promote the process of socialist transformation of agriculture (Liu and Wang 2006, 724–725). Such a decision led a few months later to the establishment of a state monopoly on the purchase and sale of grain, known as the "unified system of purchase and sale" (*tonggou tongxiao zhidu*).[1] This was a policy whereby local governments were supposed to purchase the surplus grain from peasants in

[1] This measure remained in force for about forty years. It was gradually abolished during the phase of "reform and opening up" (*gaige kaifang*) introduced by Deng Xiaoping (Luo 2008, 28–30).

amounts, varieties, and at prices set by the State, and to resell it to households in need. Furthermore, this measure would have also guaranteed the supply of food to the urban residents (Li 2006, 145; Luo 2008, 28–34).

Defined as "one of the greatest enigmas" in Chinese contemporary history (Gao 2016, 1), the unified system constitutes a topic that has so far been treated only marginally in both Chinese and Western historiography. The socio-economic effects of this measure on the countryside have often been neglected by historians and consequently the extent of the peasant reaction to it has also been erroneously minimized (Tian 2006, 4–10; Huang 2013, 13). Scholars who deal with China's agrarian policies in the early 1950s have generally assumed that the unified system received a positive response from the rural masses and that the resistance, if any, involved mainly "class enemies" (*jieji diren*) in the countryside, namely rich peasants (*funong*), former landlords (*dizhu*), and other so-called "counter-revolutionaries"[2] (*fangeming fenzi*) (Bernstein 1967, 38–40; Perry 1985, 416; Lin 1990, 1228; Li 2009, 76–77). As Chinese scholar Yu Liu asserts, the ordinary villagers, including poor (*pinnong*) and middle peasants (*zhongnong*), would have never opposed a directive issued by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). For them, the Party was a "savior," who had redistributed a larger share of land to them, and even more importantly, had empowered them politically (Yu 2006, 734–735). In addition to this, Professor Vivienne Shue confirms that the unified system brought many benefits to the rural populace, thus gaining its immediate support (Shue 1980, 218–222).

The purpose of this paper is instead to show that the unified system encountered a wide and unswerving opposition, which involved the entire rural society, and even included the CCP's most reliable allies, the poor (*pinnong*) and middle peasants (*zhongnong*).[3] The supposed voiceless in the Chinese countryside, indeed, were not as vulnerable and submissive as conventionally held. Even under the authoritarian socialist regime, they proved capable of devising their own ways to react.

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[2] In addition to rich peasant and former landlords, bandit chiefs, professional brigands, Guomindang secret agents, local tyrants and sectarian leaders were also labelled as "counter-revolutionaries" (Yang 2008, 106).

[3] As is already known, Mao Zedong was among the first Chinese Communists to perceive the revolutionary potential of poor peasants and his preoccupation with safeguarding the interests of middle peasants, who held considerable economic power, is a continuous theme in his leadership and writings from the early 1930s until 1955. He considered this strategy as the key both to securing broad-based support and ensuring the vitality of the rural economy. Theoretically, even the measures of socialist development were designed to elicit broad support from such social groups. As Mao declared in *On the present situation and our tasks* (*Muqian xingshi he women de renwu*): "Our policy is to rely on the poor peasants and unite solidly with the middle peasants to abolish the feudal and semifeudal system of exploitation" (Selden 1982, 42–43; Selden and Lippit 1982, 6–7).

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To prove this thesis, I carried out a comparative analysis of local archive documents, statistics, newspaper articles, and inner-Party investigative reports (*Neibu cankao*)[4] dating from 1953 to 1955 relating to the northern province of Shanxi.[5] Although the unified system was implemented nationally, I chose this area as the object of study for the uniqueness of its historical background. Shanxi, indeed, played a fundamental strategic role in the process that led to the establishment of New China and later to the building of a socialist society. This province was on the front-line of conflict with Japan during the 1937–1945 War of Resistance[6] and in 1951 it hosted the first ten experimental agricultural cooperatives in the entire country.[7] The discovery that the peasants opposed a measure introduced by the Communist leadership even in a province with such a glorious revolutionary past is significant in order to understand how serious its consequences had been on their lives.

This paper is organized as follows. Chapters 2 and 3 illustrate the reasons behind the peasants' discontent. In particular, Chapter 2 shows how the flaws in the mechanism of grain procurement, which were conspicuous during the purchase campaign of 1954, caused many peasants to suffer starvation. Chapter 3 focuses

4 The archival documents analyzed are almost two hundred and mostly include reports from local Party committees to higher Party bodies. They are kept in the archives of some Shanxi townships and villages, where I conducted research between the summer of 2005 and the spring of 2016. The newspapers of the time consulted are mainly local, such as the *Shanxi Daily* (*Shanxi Ribao*), the *Shanxi Peasants' Daily* (*Shanxi Nongmin Bao*) and the *Pingshun* Gazette (*Pingshun Xiaobao*). They were all run by provincial and local Party organs. The so-called *Neibu cankao* consist of a series of confidential, inner-Party investigative reports written by Xinhua News Agency's journalists and submitted to the various levels of the Party leadership.

5 Shanxi province is located between North latitude 34°36'–40°44' and East latitude 110°15'–114°32' and it extends over an area of 156,000 square kilometers, occupying approximately 1.64% of the Chinese territory. Indicated also with the abbreviation of *Jin*, from the name of the state founded in that area during the Spring and Autumn period (771 B.C.–476 B.C.), it borders Hebei to the East, Henan to the South, Shaanxi to the West and Inner Mongolia to the North. Currently its territory includes eleven prefectures: Taiyuan, where the homonymous capital is located, Changzhi, Datong, Jincheng, Jinzhong, Linfen, Lüliang, Shuozhou, Xinzhou, Yangquan, Yuncheng (Shanxi sheng Difangzhi 1994, 2).

6 During the War of Resistance against Japan the Communists established in Shanxi province some of the revolutionary base areas (*geming genjudi*) which proved to be decisive in the fight against the invaders. One of the most important was the Taihang base area, from which the Jin-Ji-Lu-Yu (Shanxi-Hebei-Shandong-Henan-Jiangsu-Anhui) border region grew (Goodman 2000, IX).

7 The ten experimental agricultural cooperatives were established in Changzhi prefecture, in southeast Shanxi, on the initiative of the local authorities. However, this decision triggered a heated debate, which even involved the highest ranks of the Party and the government. In fact, many leaders were convinced that anticipating the stages of the process of transition to socialism would have been harmful for the development of the rural economy (Gao 1999, 35–61; Ma 2012, 10–12).

on the restrictions the unified system imposed on trade and other activities which were vital to the economy of the countryside and the peasants' livelihood. The various strategies used by the villagers to resist this policy are examined in Chapter 4.

2. The grain purchase campaign of 1954 and the causes of peasants' starvation

The unified system of purchase and sale of grain was officially established in Shanxi province in autumn 1953, soon after the approval by the central authorities of the *Resolutions on implementing planned purchases and planned supply of grain* (*Guanyu shixing liangshi de jihua shougou yu jihua gongying de jueyi*) and the *Orders on implementing planned purchases and planned supply of grain* (*Guanyu shixing liangshi de jihua shougou he jihua gongying de mingling*) (Shanxi sheng Difangzhi 1996, 110–111). The regime propaganda presented it as an indispensable measure for the following reasons. First and foremost, it would have guaranteed the availability of grain needed for both consumption and national construction, and secondly it would have stabilized the price of grain across the country and also eliminated speculation in grain. But, more importantly, this radical new policy was aimed at leading the peasantry on the road to socialism, the only path that would guarantee them prosperity and well-being.[8]

Despite these promises, right from the start Shanxi peasants showed a certain reluctance to hand over their grain quotas to the State. Back then, grain constituted their main source of nourishment (Walker 1984, 1–2) and, consequently, they feared that once it sold they would not have enough stocks to satisfy their needs, especially in the event of unforeseen incidents such as natural disasters (WX1 1953; Chen 1953; Shanxi Ribao 1953).

These fears materialized between the end of 1954 and the spring of 1955, when a grain crisis (*liangshi weiji*) erupted throughout the country (Tian 2006, 27). In 1954, the "unprecedented" floods of the Yangzi and Huai rivers ruined the harvests of about sixty million peasants (Trevor and Luard 1962, 196; Luo 2008, 187). In order to meet the demands of State supply, while at the same time not cutting down resources for the industrialization program, the State decided "to buy a little more" grain surplus from areas that had not been affected by calamities, or that had suffered only minimally (Bernstein 1969, 374). Since Shanxi province had been classified as a "minor disaster area" (*qing zaiqu*), it was forced to give its contribution, providing a large quantity of grain to the State (CZ10 1954). According

[8] These statements were contained in the *Outline of propaganda work on the unified purchase of grain* (*Guanyu tonggou liangshi de xuanchuan yaodian*), issued on October 31, 1953 by the Central Committee of the CCP (Shue, 1980, 217; Luo 2008, 89–90).

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to a survey of twenty Shanxi townships,[9] despite the fact that in 1954 the grain production dropped by 12.26% compared to the previous year, the State purchased 35.18% more of their grain surplus, namely 3,183,177 *jin*,[10] equal to 21.1% of production (Zhonggong zhongyang 1954, 13).

Such outstanding results were obtained above all at the expense of the ordinary villagers, 92.73%[11] of whom were grain-surplus holders (*yulianghu*). The rich peasants and the landlords, having lost a great part of their privileges during land reform, owned on average a quantity of land which was lower or slightly higher than that of the poor and middle peasants.[12] In addition, the survey shows that only 6.98%[13] of them held grain surplus. Therefore, the burden of grain procurement they shouldered could not be more than that of the ordinary villagers.

From the documents examined, it is possible to deduce that during the purchase campaign of 1954, the latter were even forced to sell a quantity of grain which was far beyond their surplus (Zhonggong zhongyang 1954, 13). The excesses in grain procurement (*guotou liang*) as a result deprived them of a conspicuous amount of provisions for personal consumption (*kouliang*). According to the above-mentioned survey results, in the twenty Shanxi townships the quantity of *kouliang* left in the peasants' hands corresponded on average to only 300 *jin* per person,[14] namely 115 *jin* less than in 1952, when the unified system had not yet been established. Considering that in Northern China the minimum quota

9 The twenty townships were selected by the Rural Work Department of the Shanxi Provincial Party Committee to represent the various geographical areas that characterized Shanxi province, including flat areas, semi-mountainous and mountainous areas. They were: Beiganquan, Yanggao, Guandongshui (Pingshun county); Wangjiazhuang, Caijiaya, Fengle (Xing county); Wangcun, Zhongwa, Xiaozhangwu (Jieyu county); Futang, Chenkan, Yanwucun (Yuci county); Xiashengjin, Xingjiabu, Youzai (Yanggao county); Lujiazhuang (Lu'an county); Pengmen (Xi county); Shangnaihe (Hepinglu, Shuozhou counties); Wangjiata (Lishan county); Weimozhuang (Wutai county) (Zhonggong Shanxi shengwei 1956, vol. 2, 1).

10 Unit of weight equal to 500 grams.

11 This is the percentage of grain kept by poor and middle peasants' households in the 20 townships, after the State's taxation of 1954 (Zhonggong Shanxi shengwei 1956, vol. 1, 19).

12 According to the survey of twenty townships, in 1954 the poor peasants had 7.05 *mu* of land per person, the old middle peasants owned 6.85 *mu* per person, the new middle peasants had 6.21 *mu* per person, the rich peasants had 7.08 *mu* per person and the landlords 5.55 *mu* per person (Zhonggong Shanxi shengwei 1956, vol. 1, 28–29).

13 This is the percentage of grain kept by rich peasants' and landlords' households in the 20 townships, after the State's taxation of 1954 (Zhonggong Shanxi shengwei 1956, vol. 1, 19).

14 This average was calculated by adding the maximum quantity of *kouliang* (379 *jin*) recorded in Wangcun township (Jieyu county, Yuncheng prefecture) to the minimum quantity (202 *jin*) recorded in Fengle township (Xing county, Lüliang prefecture) (Zhonggong zhongyang 1954, 13).

excluded from sale, though judged small,[15] was normally 360 *jin* (Gao 2016, 186), this data is quite alarming.[16]

The reasons behind the *guotou liang* phenomenon are various and attributable above all to the ambiguity of the rules governing the unified purchase policy. Indeed, neither the *Resolutions* nor the *Orders* reported concrete criteria to determine the quantity of grain each peasant household would have to sell to the State. The procurement quotas were generally defined on the basis of the general principle for which "if the surplus is a lot, a lot will be purchased; if it is little, a little will be purchased; if there isn't any surplus, it won't be bought" (CZ10 1954). Following this vague criterion, the local authorities were required to extract a percentage of grain corresponding to 75%–90% of the household's grain surplus.[17] Such a percentage was determined through the method known as "self-declaration and public discussion" (*zibao gongyi*). Once the peasants had calculated their grain surplus, subtracting from the estimated production the amount of grain each household would need for family consumption, for fodder, for seed, and for the payment of the agricultural tax, they communicated it to work teams. Subsequently, the work teams carried out checks and discussed the results with the villagers during public meetings. If the quantity of surplus declared by the peasants was less than that estimated by the work teams, the peasants were invited to repeat the count, until a match was reached (Luo 2008, 102).

As can easily be inferred, this method unleashed arbitrariness on the part of the work teams, who often failed to understand the grain situation of the villagers, thereby making mistakes in determining the procurement quotas. Contravening the principle of "leaving [the peasants] some [surplus]" (*liu yidian*) (CZ10 1954), they often deprived the peasant households of their entire surplus and, in the most serious cases, left them only the *kouliang* or a part of it. Therefore, the peasants worried that the State had set no limits in grain procurement. Interpreting their mood, the Chinese historian Gao Wangling asserts that the unified purchase seemed to have abolished the norm for which "the more you work, the more you get" (*duo lao, duo de*) (Gao 2016, 186). Even if grain output had increased, the peasants would not have reaped any benefit. With the exception of the quotas

[15] According to some peasants in Wangzhuang village (Pingshun county) at least 600–700 *jin* would have been needed to feed themselves enough (Guo 1954).

[16] There were, however, even more dramatic situations, such as that of Xinzhuang (Changzhi county, Changzhi prefecture), where some peasant households were left an amount of kouliang corresponding to only 100–140 *jin* per person (CZ3 1954).

[17] Specifically, in Shanxi province if the households' grain surplus was less than 100 *jin*, 75% was extracted; if the grain surplus was between 100 and 300 *jin*, 75–80% was extracted; if it was between 300 and 600 *jin*, 80–85% was extracted; if it was between 600 and 1.000 *jin*, 85–90% was extracted; if it was more than 1.000 *jin*, 90% was extracted (Shanxi sheng Difangzhi 1996, 111; CZ10 1954).

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for personal consumption, for fodder, and for the other needs, the entire amount of their provisions would have been purchased by the State. For this reason, Du Runsheng, a former secretary of the Rural Work Department, compares this system to that of the rationing for soldiers (Gao 2016, 186). Other authors, including Yang Jisheng, even state that it was the origin of the Great Famine (*Dajihuang*) which afflicted the country in the late 1950s (Yang 2012, 320–325).

Furthermore, the grassroots cadres were sometimes forced to overestimate or even falsely report crop yields, because they were put under pressure by higher authorities, and they did not want to fail to meet their expectations. According to an investigation into Qin county,[18] for example, during the purchasing campaign of 1954, the local Party Committee decided that the estimated production – on average 195 *jin* per *mu*[19] of land – was low and increased it by 17 *jin*. As a result, in some villages, the grassroots cadres had no choice but to revise and lower the criteria for calculating the grain rations for personal consumption, forcing peasants to sell part of it (NC3 1954).

To achieve the objectives set, the cadres did not hesitate to resort to coercion (*qiangpo mingling*). As a result, the peasants who did not want to sell their grain were subjected to "abominable" tortures (WX2 1955), such as being tied up, hung up, beaten, forced to fast, or kept outdoors in the cold for a whole night (WX2 1955). Such coercive methods led many peasants to commit suicide. According to the statistics of the Grain Department, 566 cases of suicide and 74 cases of attempted suicide occurred throughout China during the purchase campaign of 1954 (Yang 2008, 51).

The villagers were thus quite concerned about the unified purchase policy. According to a report dated November 24, 1954, a peasant resident in Huo village[20] admitted: "The transition period is really terrible, once the grain is sold, there are not even the shells left" (CZ9 1954). While another from Machang township[21] declared: "Once the grain is levied, people starve [...]. The Communist Party doesn't like the peasants [...]. Only 12 *liang*[22] of grain per person are left, the rest is all purchased by the State" (PS2 1954). The same rancor emerges from the words of Wu Qiqun, resident in Changjing village,[23] who declared: "In Shanxi province the planned purchasing task is heavy; this is the damage we receive

18 Qin county belongs to Changzhi prefecture.

19 Unit of area equal to one fifteenth of a hectare.

20 Huo village is located in Xiangyuan county, Changzhi prefecure.

21 Machang township was located in Lu'an county, Changzhi prefecture.

22 Unit of weight equal to 50 grams.

23 Changjing village was located in Lu'an county, Changzhi prefecture.

for having followed Li Shunda[24] [...] the grain has all been taken to the Soviet Union" (CZ5 1954).

Not even the guarantees offered by the unified sale program to the grain-short households (*queliang hu*) helped to reassure the mood of the rural masses. Indeed, many mistakes were also made during the redistribution of the State grain supplies in the countryside. According to a survey, in 1954 in eight Shanxi townships, 305 households who were not really in need of grain were excessively supplied; 156 should not have been supplied, but were nevertheless; 212 should have been given a supply of grain, but were not supplied at all (Zhonggong zhongyang 1954, 13). Furthermore, the price of the grain resold by the State was not only sometimes higher than the one established in the unified purchase, but it could also be affected by other factors such as transport, thus further aggravating the purchasing conditions of the peasants who lived in the mountainous areas, which were difficult to reach. Further inconveniences were due to the malfunctioning of transport systems, which sometimes caused delays in grain supply, thereby adding to the peasants' concerns (Zhonggong zhongyang 1954, 13).

Another factor that aroused peasant discontent concerns the purchase price of grain. Chen Yun, the president of the Finance and Economics Committee, declared that the purchase price would have been fair, reasonable, and above all stable (Pang 2003, 291–292). Despite such reassurances, there is little doubt that the peasants would have obtained a greater profit by selling their products on the free market rather than to the government organs. Furthermore, before the system was introduced, the villagers could take advantage of seasonal fluctuations of prices or wait to sell their products in the spring when their value would have increased. Later on, all these possible sources of profit were eliminated (Bernstein 1969, 366).

However, the excessive grain extraction in 1954 and the other problems which emerged during the implementation of the unified system in Shanxi villages were not the only reasons for the discontent of poor and middle peasants. As illustrated below, there were other factors which negatively affected their lives.

[24] Li Shunda (1115–1983) was born in Dongshandi village (Henan province) from a poor peasant household and later moved to Xigou village (Pingshun county, Changzhi prefecture). In July 1938 he secretly joined the CCP and on February 6, 1943 he founded, together with five other peasant families, a mutual aid team: it was the first organization of its kind created in China during the War of Resistance against Japan. For this reason, he was later awarded with various honors, including that of "hero of work." In subsequent years Li held various institutional positions at the local level, until April 1983, when he was elected vice-president of the Standing Committee of the Shanxi provincial People's Congress (Zhonggong Pingshun xianwei 2015, 5–8).

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3. From individual entrepreneurs to "agricultural workers:" How the unified system changed peasants' lives

The unified system of purchase and sale inaugurated the process of the socialist transformation of agriculture, allowing the State to strengthen its control over many aspects of the peasants' economic life. This process entailed, first and foremost, the loss of a series of fundamental freedoms for the villagers, starting with the freedom to trade (*maoyi ziyou*) their own products. This and other freedoms, such as buying and renting land (*tudi maimai he zudian ziyou*), hiring labor (*gugong ziyou*), borrowing or lending money (*jiedai ziyou*), had been legally allowed by the central government since the founding of the PRC in 1949 to facilitate economic recovery after a century of political disintegration, protracted foreign invasion, and civil war (Zhao 1992, 57; Gao 1992).

With the introduction of a state monopoly on trade in grain, however, this activity was subjected to many restrictions. As a result, the peasants were no longer allowed to operate as individual entrepreneurs, seeking the most economically advantageous opportunity to sell their products; they were now dependent upon a new and complex state mechanism (Bernstein 1967, 365). This radical change naturally caused great resentment among the rural masses. Chen Yun himself was aware of this and acknowledged it in one of his speeches: "The peasants are individual small producers and for thousands of years they have cultivated the habit of only paying rent and taxes and of at least formally disposing of their surplus grain freely," consequently "[they] are not accustomed yet to the monopoly on the purchase and sale of grain" (Zhang 2006, 96).

The state monopoly on the purchase and sale of grain had an adverse effect also on sideline rural occupations,[25] which had always been a sort of "safety valve" in case of bad harvests and an indispensable source of income. They were therefore fundamental for both the livelihood of peasants and the development of rural economy (Gao 1992). According to some estimates, in the early 1950s, subsidiary occupations accounted for almost a third of the total value of national rural production and about a fifth of the families relied on them for a primary means of making a living (Gao 1992).

After the planned purchase was established, however, the exercise of subsidiary activities was severely limited. In order to guarantee the production of grain and the purchase program, the central authorities found it necessary to impose control over the peasant workforce and the cultivated area (Du 2005, 42). For the same purpose, they assigned the grain a value which was much higher than that of any

[25] Some of the most popular sideline activities were raising livestock, poultry, bees, silkworms, planting fruit trees, fishing, weaving, working leather and wood, transporting goods, cultivating soy, cane sugar, peanuts, tobacco (Perkins 1966, 69).

other commodity and, sometimes, well above its official price (Perkins 1966, 52). Discouraged by these measures, Chinese peasants were thus forced to close their family-run workshops and to interrupt the production of many sideline goods, such as tofu, noodles, alcoholic beverages, soybeans, and other traditional foodstuffs. According to a survey on six townships of Shanxi located in semi-mountainous areas,[26] in 1954 the poor peasants' and middle peasants' sideline rural production respectively fell by 18.42% and 9.91% compared to the previous year (Zhonggong Shanxi shengwei 1956, vol. 2, 19–20).

The sideline rural occupation that suffered serious repercussions more than any other due to these restrictions was livestock farming. Raising livestock was not only a profitable activity, but it was also an essential source of fertilizer and workforce for the peasants. Hence, the popular saying "rich people do not part with books, poor people do not part with pigs," which was widespread in Chinese villages (Du 2005, 41).

However, since autumn 1954, livestock production decreased significantly. The main reason for this phenomenon was the lack of fodder due to the high compulsory quotas procured that year (Zhonggong zhongyang 1954, 13). As we have already established, the grain provisions kept by peasants after the purchasing campaign of 1954 were sometimes so scarce that they had no choice but to eat the animals' forage. For this reason, in Lujiazhuang township,[27] for example, the donkeys and the oxen were respectively left 360 *jin* and 240 *jin* of fodder, when they would have needed at least 500 *jin* and 300 *jin* to provide enough food (Zhonggong zhongyang 1954, 13).

The malnutrition of draft animals also had negative repercussions on agricultural production. In the Xinghuo cooperative, located in central-eastern Shanxi,[28] the amount of land that an animal was able to plow had dropped from 5 *mu* to 3.8 *mu*. Furthermore, some of the available animals had even become too weak to be employed in the fields (Zhonggong zhongyang 1954, 13).

Given the fact that the peasants had to raise livestock in increasingly difficult conditions, they preferred to give them away or to slaughter them. The villagers were convinced that they would have drawn a much greater profit from their carcass. Some of them, indeed, admitted: "When [the livestock] are alive we cannot sell them; once dead we can at least sell their skin and their meat, it is much more profitable" (HG1 1955). Thus, according to a survey, in eighty-five townships located

[26] The six townships were Beiganquan, Yanggao (Pingshun county); Futang (Yuci county); Weimozhuang (Wutai county); Wangjiata (Lishan county); Pengmen (Xi county) (Zhonggong Shanxi shengwei 1956, vol. 2, 1).

[27] Lujiazhuang township was located in Lu'an county, Changzhi prefecture.

[28] The Xinghuo cooperative was located in Fudang village, Yuci county, Jinzhong prefecture.

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in Huguan county, Southeast Shanxi,[29] 53% of cattle, pigs, and goats died only in the last four months of 1954 (HG1 1955). While in Xiashengjin township, Northern Shanxi,[30] the number of pigs had decreased from 140 to 20 heads (Zhonggong zhongyang 1954, 13).

The decrease of livestock production, however, did not concern only Shanxi province, but the whole country and it finally became serious enough to require an intervention by the central authorities. In order to safeguard livestock, on January 15, 1955, the Central Committee of the CCP issued the *Urgent directive to vigorously protect the working animals* (*Guanyu dali baohu gengchu de jinji zhishi*), establishing that farm animals could be slaughtered only after receiving the authorization of the local government (Gao 1999, 161). Although in some Shanxi counties urgent measures aimed at the protection of farm animals had already been taken in the winter of 1954, by the end of the following year little progress had been made in "safeguarding small livestock" (HG1 1955).

As Gao Wangling asserts, the limits imposed on trade and sideline activities transformed peasants from independent laborers into "agricultural workers" (*nongye gongren*), devoted almost exclusively to agriculture or, better, to the production of grain (Gao 1992). This change also interrupted their hopes of enriching themselves and improving their living conditions, taking advantage of the benefits obtained from land reform (Zhang 2013, 155). As an inner-Party document dated April 20, 1955 reports: "In the mountainous area of Pingshun county, Shanxi, the activities which were relied upon in the past, such as transporting cereals, [raising] cattle, [cooking] food and [running] inns, etc. [...] have already been abolished, [...] peasants' life now is very tough" (Gao 2016, 155).

Starting with the introduction of the unified system, however, the government did not only impose its own control over the economic life of the countryside, but also on the social. In order to ensure the efficacy of the grain rationing process in the urban areas, the State established the household registration system (*hukou*), which allowed it to exercise its own control over the population's geographical mobility.[31] Since then, the peasants, being in possession of a rural residence per-

29 Huguan county belongs to Changzhi prefecture.

30 Xiashengjin township is located in Yanggao county, Datong prefecture.

31 Although it was not until January 1958 that the *Regulations on household registration in the People's Republic of China* (*Zhonghua renmin Gongheguo hukou dengji tiaoli*) passed as a law, its establishment and execution was much earlier. In 1951, the Ministry of Public Security issued *Provisional regulations on urban hukou management* (*Chengshi hukou guanli zanxing tiaolie*). From then on, Chinese residents were required to have official permission to migrate. After the introduction of the unified system and the agricultural cooperative movement, expecting a possible large-scale exodus of rural residents, control of spatial mobility was deliberately strengthened. In March 1954 a *Joint directive to control blind influx of peasants into cities* (*Quanzhi nongmin mangmu liuru chengshi de zhishi*) was promulgated and in June

mit (*nongmin hukou* or *nongye hukou*), were prohibited from leaving their native village and migrating to the urban areas in search of work and better living conditions. Peasants who illegally entered the cities would have even risked starvation, as they were not provided with the coupons needed to obtain the food. The coupons, indeed, were distributed only to the urban residents, based on criteria such as age and profession (Cheng and Selden 1994, 657–658; Lei 2000, 121).

The *hukou* and the coupon system (*piaozheng zhidu*), therefore, bound the peasants to their land and facilitated the formation of a dualistic, city-countryside structure (*chengxiang eryuan tizhi*), which further increased the disparity between urban and rural residents. While the urban residents' livelihood was guaranteed by the State, the rural residents were responsible not only for feeding themselves, but also for providing enough grain surplus to meet the State needs (Cheng and Selden 1994, 650–651; Wang 2008, 12).

The process of centralization and control undertaken in the countryside by the central government intensified with the establishment of the agricultural production cooperatives (*nongye shengchan hezuoshe*) in late 1953.[32] Some historians, including Lin Yunhui and Xu Yong, have underlined the profound relationship between them and the unified system. The latter promoted the process of transition to socialism in the countryside, leading the peasants on the road to agricultural collectivization, whereas the agricultural cooperative greatly simplified and quickened the task of collecting grain performed by the cadres, who therefore no longer had to singularly deal with the numerous peasant households (Xu 2008, 54). This kind of organization, however, was never particularly attractive to most of the rural masses. Surprisingly, even in Shanxi province, where forms of mutual aid in agriculture had a long tradition, most of the peasants, taking advantage of the benefits obtained from the economic recovery, wanted to deal freely with production by working individually (*dangan*) (Zhao 2014, 101–102). As Professors Xin Yi and Gao Jie state, the peasants' lack of enthusiasm for the agricultural cooperatives proves such organizations did not arise as a response to villagers' desire, but by the exclusive will of the Party, contrary to what is generally claimed. In short, cooperatives, not unlike the unified system, represented a typical example of "top-down socialism" (*zi shang er xia de shehuizhuyi*) (Xin and Gao 2010, 84–85).

1955 the State Council passed a *Directive concerning establishment of a permanent system of household registration* (*Guanyu jianli jingchang de hukou dengji zhidu de zhishi*). These decisions were endorsed despite the fact that Article 90 of the 1954 Constitution, in force until 1975, guaranteed people "freedom of residence and freedom to change their residence" (Cheng and Selden 1994, 646; Yu 2006, 737–738).

32 The agricultural cooperatives spread nationwide from December 1953 onwards, after the promulgation of the *Resolution on the development of agricultural production cooperatives* (*Guanyu fazhan nongye shengchan hezuoshe de jueyi*) (Gao 1999, 137).

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4. The "soft" strategies of peasants' resistance in Shanxi villages

As previously discussed, the unified system of purchase and sale of grain brought many disadvantages to the Chinese peasants. Not only did it put their livelihood at risk, but it also radically changed their way of life and their long-established habits. Paradoxically, moreover, it transpired that these consequences were more deleterious for those who were considered the Party's allies, the poor and middle peasants, than for the dispossessed "class enemies."

Contrary to any expectations, however, the peasants were not helpless vis-à-vis such adversity. Instead of hindering their attempts at resistance, their condition of subordination and the ideological pressure exerted by the Party led them to devise alternative and more adequate methods to express their discontent. Surprisingly, indeed, the historical sources analyzed reveal that the villagers rarely resorted to violent or large-scale rebellions to oppose the unified system. They were rather more inclined to turn to individual, unorganized, and hidden protest strategies, described in the documents as "soft methods" (*ruan banfa*) (CZ2 1954; CZ8 1954; Picchiarelli 2021, 164–165). Such specific manifestations of rural discontent are very similar to those identified in the 1980s by the American political scientist James Scott in his study of a Malaysian village and defined as "everyday forms of peasant resistance" (Scott 1985, XV–XVI). Given the low level of tolerance of the Chinese Communist regime, the villagers preferred to opt for these kinds of actions, as they would allow them to keep a low profile and to avoid uselessly provoking the authorities (Scott 1989, 44).

The documents examined reveal, for example, that Shanxi peasants, reluctant to sell their harvest to the State, found all sorts of pretexts to evade or reduce their duties in grain procurement. They pretended to be ignorant, deaf, or sick regarding the requests of the grassroots cadres. Sometimes, they even bribed, cursed, threatened, or begged them by bursting into tears and swearing that they did not have enough grain to sell (CZ8 1954).

Some peasants thought it was better to self-consume the harvest rather than hand it over to the State (CZ8 1954), while others resorted to strategies such as the one known as "four for sale, four not for sale" (*si mai, si bu mai*), through which they "sold [only the grain of] bad quality and not [that one of] good quality; [they] sold [only] the unhusked grain and not the processed one; [they] sold [it] late and not soon; [they] sold [only] small amounts and not big amounts" (CZ2 1954). Following this logic, a middle peasant named Jia Cunxiao, who lived in the Chengcun township,[33] decided to sell only 300 of the 1,000 *jin* of grain he was supposed to hand over to the State. Disappointed with compulsory sales policy, he declared:

[33] Chengcun township is located in Huguan county, Changzhi prefecture.

"The State needs to purchase the grain surplus, but we [the peasants] don't need to sell it" (CZ7 1954).

An article from November 10, 1954, published in the *Gazette of Pingshun* (*Pingshun Xiaobao*), instead reveals that in the Nanjiao cooperative[34] the peasants used "the old type of scales (*lao cheng*) to [weigh the quantity of] grain to be distributed [among the peasants] and the new type of scales (*xin cheng*) to weigh [the quantity to be reported to the authorities]."[35] Using the *lao cheng*, the peasants could make a coarser measurement of their grain and thus keep a bigger portion thereof for their own needs (Pei and Han 1954). The same source also exposes the use of another popular method, which consisted in "sharing a lot [of grain], and reporting little [to the authorities]" (*duo fen shao bao*), through which the peasants of a cooperative in Huangya township[36] succeeded in subtracting from the unified purchase 1,956 *jin* of millet and over 16,360 *jin* of potatoes (Pei and Han 1954). A similar practice consisted in using a concave container (*jian dou*), slightly larger, to measure the grain to be distributed among the peasants and a flat-bottomed container (*ping dou*) to measure the quantities that the local cadres should have registered (NC1 1954).

In addition, always aiming to keep more grain, villagers used to exaggerate the damage caused by natural disasters to the harvest or to falsify the real quantity of the grain production. In some cases, they did not declare part of the crop coming from private fields, small plots, as well as that of the lands along the rivers or on the slopes of the hills (NC1 1954; CZ4 1954). Some villagers from Yuci, Yanbei, and Xinxian prefectures[37] had even intentionally left a large part of the land uncultivated, according to the motto: "Grow a little less, cultivate a little better, leave a little more, sell a little less."[38]

Not completely trusting the unified sale program and the reassurances of the government, many peasants claimed that they had no grain, even though in reality they had enough provisions. In Renjiazhuang village,[39] for example, out of 186 families, as many as 120 (64.5%) had lied about the quantity of grain at their dis-

34 Nanjiao cooperative was located in Pingshun county, Changzhi prefecture.

35 With "old type of scales" the report could refer both to the one employed starting from 1928 with the Nanjing government (1928–1937), and the one which persisted from the Qing era (1644–1911). The "new type of scales" was instead introduced on June 25, 1959, after the approval of the *State Council ordinance on the unification of China's system of measurement* (*Guowuyuan guanyu tongyi woguo jiliang zhidu de mingling*) (Sun 2006, 46–48).

36 Huangya township is located in Pingshun county, Changzhi prefecture.

37 The territories of Yuci, Yanbei and Xinxian no longer have the status of prefecture (Shanxi sheng Difangzhi 1994, 47–51).

38 The news is taken from an inner-Party investigative report dated April 20, 1955 (Gao 2016, 194).

39 Renjiazhuang village is located in Pingshun county, Changzhi prefecture.

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posal. Therefore, at the time of implementing the procurement policy, it turned out that more than double of the expected quantity of grain was missing (PS1 1954). A similar situation also occurred in other Shanxi villages, as the numerous articles published in the *Shanxi Daily* (*Shanxi Ribao*) report (Shanxi Ribao 1955).

Besides the above-mentioned methods, the peasants also resorted to other and more explicit forms of daily resistance. Defined in the archival documents as "hard methods" (*ying banfa*) (CZ2 1954; CZ8 1954), they consisted, for example, in avoiding public meetings or refusing to collect the certificate with the quantity of grain to be handed over to the State. It also happened that the head of the household sent their wives and children to face the local cadres, then pretend not to know or understand the information provided by them (CZ2 1954). Others barricaded themselves at home to avoid the local authorities or they left their house with the excuse of visiting relatives (CZ8 1954).

The archival documents also report acts of vandalism, such as thefts of grain and fires to the detriment of the harvest. Particularly serious, moreover, were the episodes that occurred in Lu'an county in the winter of 1954. There was a case of poisoning, which occurred in Guzhang, and an attempted attack by means of grenades organized in the village of Hetou. The details of these incidents are not revealed. The historical sources only report that they seriously affected the implementation of the unified system (CZ6 1954).

Finally, as a last resort, some Shanxi peasants did not hesitate to abandon their native villages to go in search of better job opportunities in the cities, despite the fact that the government had tried to limit this phenomenon through the establishment of the *hukou* system. According to an inner-Party report, more than four hundred people, most of whom came from Yanggao, Tianzhen, and Huanyuan counties,[40] migrated to Inner Mongolia between March 27 and April 20, 1954 to seek their fortune (NC2 1954). Although not properly defined in these terms in the documents from that period, the migration can be interpreted as a further example of resistance, and specifically of daily resistance. To paraphrase the German economist Albert Hirschman, subordinates preferred abandoning their own village rather than manifesting dissatisfaction with higher authorities (Hirschman 1982, 13, 31; Lichback 1994, 394; Eckstein 2013, 83).

Regardless of whether they were explicitly undertaken or not, these forms of daily resistance sometimes were not enough to express the peasants' resentment towards the unified system. When the frustration reached its peak, the peasants did not hesitate to act violently. Although no evidence has been found of rebellions against the unified system occurring in the Shanxi countryside, it is certain that

[40] Yanggao, Tianzhen and Huanyuan counties belong to Datong prefecture.

riots (*liangshi saoluan shijian*) and mass incidents (*qunzhong nao shi* or *jiti nao shi*) broke out in other areas.[41]

Having described the various strategies of daily resistance used by Shanxi peasants to boycott the unified system, it is worth wondering if such illegal acts, despite being hidden and extemporaneous, were really effective in achieving their purpose. Scholars who have dealt with this issue have conflicting opinions regarding these events. Professor Zhang Xiaoling, for example, argues that any act of protest would have been, in fact, ineffective. Typically, being too vulnerable, the Chinese peasants could not win the fight for their rights, nor influence the choices of the central government in any way, so they had no choice but to submit to its will (Zhang 2013, 153–154). Similarly, Lucien Bianco states with a clever wordplay that, with few exceptions, the "weapons of the weak" – as the strategies of daily resistance are often defined – turn out to be "weak weapons." From the point of view of the French sinologist, such actions did not bring any long-term results; on the contrary, they were sometimes even counterproductive (Bianco 2001, 263).

According to Li Huaiyin, instead, it would be wrong to consider the peasants powerless and subservient under the socialist State and the latter as an entity capable of imposing itself by any means. Li believes that the protests which occurred in rural China in the early 1950s played a key role in shaping the State's agrarian policies. It was under the pressure of the villagers' persistent and widespread resistance that the State finally adjusted its unrealistic plans in order to make them workable in the rural areas (Li 2009, 334).

Regardless of what the results of the daily resistance had been, it is certain that resorting to more open and violent strategies of dissent would have constituted, in any case, the least desirable alternative.

5. Conclusion

This paper has tried to re-evaluate the phenomenon of the peasant resistance to the unified system of purchase and sale of grain, showing that it was more serious and widespread than generally believed.

[41] In Guangodong, for example, starting from December 18, 1954 the so-called "*Xijie* events" (*Xijie shijian*) took place. The riots involved about 40,000 people and lasted for more than two weeks. During that time, the headquarters of thirteen local governments and six grain purchasing stations were besieged; more than 100,000 *jin* of rice was looted. The cadres sent to the village to collect the grain were kidnapped and beaten, while the militia were robbed of their weapons. A similar episode occurred in Fujian province, where on April 23, 1955 a violent riot broke out involving more than 10,000 people, including about thirty local cadres, thirteen of whom were arrested and eight accused of stealing 860 *jin* of millet and 437 *jin* of rice (Jiang and Liu 2012, 89).

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To demonstrate this thesis, I decided to carry out a case study of Shanxi, a province where the Communists had settled in the countryside since the 1930s. The discovery that even in this area the peasants opposed the unified system highlights two aspects hitherto underestimated by Chinese and Western historiography. Firstly, the effects of this policy on villages were more damaging than many historians demonstrated. As stated before, the unified system radically changed peasants' habits and negatively influenced the economic development of the countryside. Secondly, the existence of forms of resistance, albeit "soft," indicates that the peasants were not as submissive and well-disposed under the socialist State, as is generally believed. When their livelihoods were compromised, they did not hesitate to express their dissent, even if this meant questioning the decisions of the Party.

However, to interpret peasant behavior in light of their relationship with the CCP could be misleading. As opposed to what was initially hypothesized, it is likely that the bond they had created since the anti-Japanese war had not consolidated over time (Bernstein 1967, 389). Some scholars even doubt that the Party leadership ever managed to establish a connection with the rural population. David Goodman, for example, demonstrates that the Communist penetration into the Shanxi countryside was sometimes received with coldness and hostility by residents. Where the presence of landowners was greater, such as in Licheng county,[42] the local CCP organizations even encountered stubborn opposition, which effectively thwarted their reform plans (Goodman 2000, 144–145, 258).

Moreover, it seems that even the ordinary peasants, at least in an initial phase, were not very sensitive to the revolutionary ideals propagated by the communist leaders. According to Lucien Bianco, their manifestations of discontent were generally due to factors related to the defense of their immediate and personal interests[43] and the maintenance of the status quo, rather than the development of a mature class consciousness and the consequent awareness of their condition of misery and exploitation. Similarly, in a volume destined to raise a lot of controversy (Johnson 1962), Chalmers Johnson argues that, despite having carried out economic and social reform programs in Soviet areas, the Communist leaders had failed in trying to gain popular support. In his opinion, the peasant participation in the Anti-Japanese war was less due to the call for mobilization launched by

[42] Licheng, located in Changzhi prefecture, was included within the Taihang base area (Goodman 2000, 2).

[43] Peasants generally rebelled when events occurred that compromised their already precarious living conditions, such as abuses by the authorities, tax increase, military raids, to name but a few (Bianco 2001, 40–41).

the Communists, than to the emergence of a strong nationalist sentiment and the desire to protect the homeland from the invaders.[44]

Based on these assumptions, resistance in the Shanxi countryside should be considered anything but an unexpected occurrence. The connection between the CCP and the rural masses, indeed, was not strong enough to constitute a deterrent to action for the latter. Further investigations into the nature of the CCP-peasants relationship would therefore be useful to delineate this phenomenon more clearly.

Towards this end, it would also be interesting to extend this kind of analysis to other areas of the country. Shanxi, indeed, represents only a small reality compared to the enormous plurality of contexts that characterized, and still characterize today, the Chinese territory. Considering the influence exercised by this policy on peasants' lives, it is almost certain that such phenomenon did not concern only this province, but also throughout the mainland.

[44] Johnson claims that the war presented the peasants with a challenge to their security of such immediacy that they could not ignore it. Prewar pressures on them–such as economic exploitation, warlord wars, and natural disasters–had never been sufficiently widespread or intense to give rise to a peasant-based mass movement (Johnson 1962, 2).

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[45] Documents beginning with CZ and HG are respectively from Changzhi county archives (*Changzhi xian dang'an guan*) and Huguan county archives (*Huguan xian dang'an guan*). Documents beginning with PS and WX are from Pingshun county archives (*Pingshun xian dang'an guan*) and Wuxiang county archives (*Wuxiang xian dang'an guan*). The inner-Party investigative reports (*Neibu cankao*) are indicated with letters NC.

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