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Revisiting Collectivism and Rural Governance in China

The Singularity of the Zhoujiazhuang People's Commune

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Zhoujiazhuang (周家庄) is singular, being the only de facto people's commune in China today. A township in Jinzhou city (晋州), located fifty kilometers from the capital of Hebei province (河北), Zhoujiazhuang has a population of 13,922 persons from 4,506 families, with 8,270 working people over a land area of 17,860 *mu* (12.03 square kilometers).[1] Today, Zhoujiazhuang maintains the political, economic, and social structure that has been essentially in place since 1956. For over sixty years—since ten years before the Cultural Revolution began and thirty-eight years after the dismantling of almost all people's communes in 1982—Zhoujiazhuang has survived as an organizational unit over the same territory comprising the same six natural villages. This may not seem significant unless one is familiar with the turbulent history of China since 1949.

Tracing the trajectory of Zhoujiazhuang, its individual and collective subjectivities and its temporal and spatial conjunctures, offers a glimpse into the multiple factors at play in the larger context of China's pursuit of modernization and globalization. The Zhoujiazhuang experience, historically embedded in the turbulences of internal and external forces, allows us to theorize alternative, collectivist practices operating in crevices under the hegemonic power of the state and the logic of the profit-driven market in today's China. While "collectivism" has been part of the state discourse, and the state's modernization drive has for several decades been implemented in the name of "collectivism," the Zhoujiazhuang experience is one where the institutional day-to-day operations of a local collective manifest subaltern thought about principles of organization and a mode of local governance oriented toward defending the common.

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1982: Retaining the People's Commune

What happened in Zhoujiazhuang in 1982 can be characterized as an *event*, partially in the sense that Alain Badiou presents the term. An event occurs, according to Badiou, when the excluded appear on the social scene, suddenly and drastically. It ruptures the appearance of normality and opens up a space to rethink reality from the standpoint of its real basis in inconsistent multiplicity. Events are ruptural in relation to the dominant order, giving agency to their subjects. In 1982, three thousand families in Zhoujiazhuang made the audacious choice to *not* follow the state-promulgated household responsibility system, a reform implemented in the early 1980s, the essence of which was individualization of production with peasant households operating as "free agents."

Badiou highlights the event in relation to the state: "the State organizes and maintains, often by force, the distinction between what is possible and what isn't. It follows clearly from this that an event is something that can occur only to the extent that it is subtracted from the power of the State."[2]

Zhoujiazhuang's 1982 event was low profile and almost invisible, unlike Badiou's examples of events, which include the Paris Commune, the Russian Revolution, the Cultural Revolution, and the 1968 French student revolt. But the Zhoujiazhuang experience, as a politically ruptural one—in that it went against the hegemonic process sweeping the rest of the country—was an event in its own right. While almost all people's communes in the country were dismantled like an avalanche, Zhoujiazhuang insisted on the continuation of the people's commune in its own preferred mode—not the state-imposed mode of the household responsibility system nor the people's commune mode of the Cultural Revolution period. Zhoujiazhuang's choice was an exception, a subtraction from the power of the state that sought to impose its policy and regulation across the board.

The state at this conjuncture was actively disengaging itself from the rural. Rather than extracting surplus value from the rural to support industrialization, as was the case of the first thirty years of the People's Republic of China, the state was shifting the burdens of employment, food, health, education, and housing onto individual peasant households, leading to the household responsibility system, and village-level elections in the 1990s after the eventual cancellation of exorbitant tariffs on the rural. However, the transition was from the state as the guiding principle of economic and social ordering to submission to the law of the market, reigning over individuals conceived as *homo economicus*. Still, even though society is left more and more to "private" initiatives, and capitalist forces are gaining impetus, the state keeps its ultimate regulatory and interventionist authority.

The withdrawal from the people's commune system from 1978 to 1982 was a process of hesitation and vacillation. At the end of 1978, when the people's commune policy prevailed, there were only a few exceptions, the most well-known being the case of Xiaogang village (小岗村) in Anhui province (安徽). It was explicitly stipulated in the Party Central's resolution of December 1978 that the household responsibility system was forbidden. Du Runsheng (杜润生), the Party leader who orchestrated the system, reminisced that, in 1979, Wang Renzhong (王任重), vice premier and minister of agriculture, was not opposed to the household responsibility system as a transitional form, but stressed that the future lay with persisting in collectivism. In mid–1979, only exceptional permissions were granted to poor and remote townships to break up the collective and return to household farming. In May 1980, Deng Xiaoping decisively recognized the household responsibility system, but insisted that China's "overall orientation [was] to develop the collective economy. In places where the household responsibility system is practiced, so long as productivity is raised, and social division of labor and the commodity economy in the rural are developed, low-level collectivism will develop into high-level collectivism." From January to December 1980, the percentage of production brigades implementing the household responsibility system rose from 1.1 percent to 14.9 percent. The decisive breakthrough was on January 1, 1982, when the policy to implement the reform based on the household responsibility system was promulgated in the Party Central's Number 1 Document, and a sweep across the country was enforced to dismantle the people's communes. By 1984, 99 percent of production brigades implemented the household responsibility system.

The official rhetoric to justify the sweeping reform was that the state was complying with the sentiments of peasants who defied the people's commune's collectivism imposed from above during the Cultural Revolution. The fingerprint oath taken by villagers of Xiaogang in December 1978 became a publicized, nationwide historical illustration of the determination of peasants, risking their lives to divide up collective assets for the so-called effective management of production by individual households. The number of peasants taking this oath was only eighteen, representing twenty households, but it served as a harbinger for a change in the mode of production for over eight hundred million peasants.

In Zhoujiazhuang, a fingerprint oath was taken in the opposite spirit by 3,055 household representatives in November 1982, calling for the retention of the people's commune. While the Xiaogang village oath is well-known throughout China, the Zhoujiazhuang oath has remained in the shadows for going against the grain. The reform was indeed partly forced onto the

state by a general boycott and the resentment of peasants against state-imposed collectivization in the form of people's communes, and the reform chose to allow peasants to claim their household's right of land usage. As a result, in nearly all the six hundred thousand villages throughout China, almost all the two hundred million peasant households were allocated a plot of land for right of usage for decades. Over 90 percent of rural assets that were collectively owned and managed by the village community were decollectivized, though fragments of collectivity have remained in diverse forms in different localities, with variations in ownership and management.

The reform chose to promote the atomization of the peasantry into individual households for production and livelihood, and, as had always been the case, imposed the same mode on the peasantry. Could the state have taken an alternative path—what Zhoujiazhuang insisted on—of collectivism by self-governance at the commune (township) level? The threat of "subtracting the power of the state" was too great to risk.

How Zhoujiazhuang secured its rupture from the state's policy is a story of audacity and defiance, of navigating uncertain waters. Lei Jinhe played a pivotal role. Born in 1921 into a poor peasant family, Lei Jinhe had struggled against Japanese invasion since his teenage years. He became a Communist Party member in 1944. In 1948, he won the battle against the local landlords and obtained land titles for 234 poor peasant households in his village.

In 1949, at the age of 28, Lei Jinhe could not have imagined that his efforts for the emancipation of peasants from Japanese imperialist aggression and local landlord exploitation were only the beginning of an arduous struggle to secure peasants their hard-won gains. In the ensuing fifty-two years, until his death at the age of 80 in 2001, Lei Jinhe and his fellow villagers were to undergo twists and turns on the road to emancipation.

In 1982, in Zhoujiazhuang, the collective economy was faring well. Lei Jinhe, disgraced during the Cultural Revolution but restored to his position as commune leader in December 1978, saw that cotton was in short supply. Members were persuaded by the strategy of growing more cotton and less grain. Cotton output increased by 4.8 times from 1978 to 1980. At the end of 1979, the commune earned so much income that it repaid the ¥180,000 debt owed to the state, compensated commune members with ¥163,000 for the properties taken from them in previous years, and still had ¥1.61 million of surplus.

With this economic performance that demonstrated the superiority of collectivism, Lei Jinhe advocated keeping the institutions of the collective as they were. Yet, this option was at odds with the state policy, and to resist this would be politically unacceptable. Li Erzhong, writer and former Governor of Hebei province, in his obituary of Lei Jinhe in 2002, remembered the 1982 event: "Comrade Lei Jinhe was concerned

that the household responsibility system could negatively impact Zhoujiazhuang's production system, and could destroy its integrated irrigation, mechanization, collective industries, and social welfare. They did not dare divide up into the household responsibility system, but were also apprehensive about resisting the Party Central's policies. They petitioned some leaders, but the leaders dared not take a stand."[3]

With unyielding stamina, Lei Jinhe looked for wording in the central government's documents and found phrases such as "the wish of the local people should be respected" and "policies should adapt to local circumstances," which would normally be empty signifiers, but which Lei quoted to justify local difference. He lobbied some central and provincial government leaders and made a pledge: if the commune could not outperform those that had shifted to the household responsibility system, it would give up its preferred mode of collectivism. Peng Zhen (彭真), a central government leader, agreed to give him a grace period of one year pending observation. After a year, the commune economically proved itself. It was allowed to retain its structure and operation, but had to change its name to Zhoujiazhuang Agricultural, Industrial and Commercial Corporation in March 1983. After some time, the name *Corporation* was changed to *Cooperative*. In substance, it has remained a people's commune until the present.

A weakening of state power, a move that constitutes an event in the assertion of the individual and collective will to self-organize and self-manage is by no means a writing off of the figure of the state; rather it is a taking up of a marginal position in the interpretation of the central significance of the state. Thus, the prioritization of the state above all else is recast in light of what the state relegates to the margins and yet cannot dismiss for its own fulfillment. Hence, the Zhoujiazhuang people's commune referred to state rhetoric—"the wish of the local people should be respected" and "policies should adapt to local circumstances," for example—to transform the figure of the state into legitimizing self-governance.

Lei Jinhe experienced the superiority of the collective and held onto his commitment to a form of rural organization that best defended peasant interests. Pursuing this brought him in confrontation with the state-building modernization project that extracted surplus value from peasants and agriculture by optimizing control over resources and human bodies. It was a case of a peasant leader rallying fellow villagers to negotiate with the state. His local authority could easily have been removed in the face of powerful authorities. With the balance of forces adversely against Lei Jinhe, the will of a strong majority, not just of an elite minority, was needed at the commune level. Thus, a high degree of internal democracy by the majority, both in articulating choices and deciding on a course of action, had to be in place.

Instead of "rights" asserted by individuals, the basis of political expression was trust and cooperation. In confrontational moments, such as the revolt against the state imposition of atomization, political expression is articulated directly, while in everyday life it takes the path of cohabitation and coproduction. The basis of rights is individual. The basis of trust and cooperation is interpersonal interdependence through a sustained period of living and working together, from which evolves a pattern of managing the common.

Three Decades of State Vacillations on Rural Organizational Form

The 1982 event occurred as a climactic moment in the history of negotiations and tensions between the Zhoujiazhuang collective and the state in the preceding three decades. The state's policies on the organizational form in the rural scene were fraught with contradictions and vacillations that placed Zhoujiazhuang's pursuit of self-governance in stormy waters.

In the early years of the People's Republic of China, peasants continued with their spontaneous mobilization. In February 1954, the Zhoujiazhuang Agricultural Production Cooperative was set up as a merger of 10 cooperatives and 13 mutual aid groups; the 425 households joining the cooperative constituted 87.8 percent of households in the village while other households did not join, as cooperatization was voluntary. In 1956, the fad was to set up inter-village cooperatives everywhere in China. In February 1956, the Zhoujiazhuang Advanced Agricultural Production Inter-Village Cooperative was set up, with 1,635 households and a population of 6,896 from six villages.

This organizational advance was useful for developing Zhoujiazhuang's agriculture. For three years, starting in the lunar new year of 1957, Zhoujiazhuang members turned one thousand *mu* sand dunes into arable land.[4] In the 1960s, until 1965, seventy-nine deep wells were drilled for irrigation. While only 7 percent of arable land was irrigated in 1949, by 1965, 100 percent of arable land was irrigated. This was the initiative of the peasants in a period when the state was also imposing certain organizational forms on the peasantry in order to advance various political agendas. Zhoujiazhuang already had a popular mobilization for cooperatization and responded differently than other townships. In June 1956, the state promulgated the policy of merging small cooperatives into big cooperatives. At the end of 1956, a move to withdraw from cooperatives occurred. Many involuntary cooperatives took natural disasters of frost and flood as opportunities to pressure the authorities to allow them to shrink their scale for easier management. It was a reaction against reduced income, undemocratic management, and inappropriate use of means of production. In the entire Jin County, only two inter-village cooperatives, Zhoujiazhuang and Donglizhuang (东里庄), remained. Heated debates were conducted within the six villages

in Zhoujiazhuang, involving all its members. From above, the county government pressured all cooperatives to divide into smaller units, but the Zhoujiazhuang Cooperative eventually decided not to split up. Lei Jinhe's rationale, as he put it to the authorities, was that one commune differs from another; you cannot count walnuts and chestnuts in the same tally.

Ironically, not long after, in August 1958, came the state directives to form people's communes. Zhoujiazhuang was ordered to merge with two other townships to form Dongfeng (东风, East Wind) people's commune, comprising over ten thousand households. This resulted in six mega people's communes in the entire Jin County. After the three-year famine of 1959–61, an order came from above to dismantle the mega people's communes and narrow production to units of twenty households. In 1961, Zhoujiazhuang split from the Dongfeng people's commune, but refused to divide into household clusters; instead, it reverted to the 1956 structure of 10 production brigades under 6 villages, with an average of 160 households per brigade.

The fate of Zhoujiazhuang from 1949 to 1961 was shared by many villages in China, when peasant enthusiasm in the early years of the People's Republic gradually dampened as the state attempted to control labor and production through administrative and organizational mechanisms. The policies vacillated violently. Whether it was a mega scale of ten thousand households or a scale of twenty households, imposition from above remained constant.

The vacillations in agricultural polices need to be understood in the context of China's pursuit of modernization. Wen Tiejun (温铁军), renowned agroeconomist from the Renmin University of China, points out that the state, in order to boost newly set up industries, compelled the rural to adapt to the creation of a market for agricultural machinery. Merging small cooperatives into large cooperatives, then advancing to people's communes, the scale would justify the use of large agricultural machinery. This was one way in which state policies privileged industry over agriculture. Industrialization of agriculture constitutes a vital move of capitalist globalization, along with supporting the growth of industries. A corresponding set of beliefs — in progress, development, modernization, science, growth, productivity, and efficiency in trade and market, all essential elements of the driving forces of capitalism — is also organized and propagated. Despite the critique of the evils of capitalism, China embraced the engines of capitalism early on.

Zhoujiazhuang's organizational structure of 1956 remained throughout the Cultural Revolution as a people's commune, a continuation of the short-lived official mode of people's commune imposed on peasants during the Great Leap Forward campaign of 1958. Even though Lei Jinhe was a dedicated Communist, he reacted against top-down state imposition. In 1958, when the coercive collectivization of people's communes

was imposed on peasants, Lei Jinhe made what was considered a heretical statement: "the ideal would be to serve the interests of all three—the state, the collective, and the individual—at the same time; however, if the three were in conflict with each other, the latter two should take precedence." Despite Lei's resistance, the commune was given ridiculous orders, such as to increase pig production from 1,985 in 1958 to 18,397 in 1959, or increasing per *mu* grain production within one year from 450 to 6,500–8,500 kilograms. By May 1960, a total of ¥192,302 worth of property was expropriated from Zhoujiazhuang by the authorities above the county level, and ¥18,866 worth of property was expropriated by the mega commune.

During the Cultural Revolution, the state imposed its comprehensive control over all labor output of workers and peasants. Lei Jinhe, together with over 90 percent of his team, were removed. He was jailed for the "crime" of taking a "capitalist road."

Lei Jinhe was a promoter of cooperatization, and in 1957 and 1961 had resisted the breakup of the cooperative. The antagonisms he encountered with the state arose from his on-the-ground considerations for raising productivity and enhancing collectivity, but not with the state's priorities of expropriating peasants' labor value for industrialization. If 1957 and 1961 were two tough instances of refusing to divide up into smaller units, Zhoujiazhuang's choice in 1982 can be said to be herculean—a moment in a long history of sustained endeavors to defend peasants' interests against extortions by the state. The 1982 event laid the basis on which Zhoujiazhuang charted its singular path in the following decades. In the post-1982 period, not only was it necessary to continue to deal with the state, but Zhoujiazhuang also had to confront the increasing influence of and determination by the market.

Managing the Common: The TROA Scheme

The fight for an organizational form is a fight to retain and govern local resources, economy, and cultural life based on a community's own rules, social and customary traditions, norms and practices—in other words, to govern its common. The common does not only refer to goods or property as such, but also to relationships: relationships of ownership, usage, management, right, and benefits.

Zhoujiazhuang, named a cooperative before 1958 and again after 1984, took on its own local and specific organizational mode of the people's commune. Singular to Zhoujiazhuang, the Three Responsibilities and One Award scheme (TROA), invented by the collective in 1953, banned *during* the Cultural Revolution years of 1966–78 and reinstated *after* the Cultural Revolution, shows both the innovativeness of self-governance within a collective, as well as the many forces that can constrain or contain self-governance.

As early as 1953, when the cooperative was set up, Lei Jinhe was probably unaware of the underlying tensions between the interests of the state and those of the peasants. As a Communist, he was keen to explore ways to raise production, in line with the state discourse of advancing toward socialism and communism through enhanced productivity. Together, Lei and his fellow villagers came up with a scheme of managing economic production that most people thought was fair, democratic, and effective. They tried to figure out how, without being trapped by dogmatic egalitarianism, one could recognize differences in ability, competence, and engagement, while attempting to reduce inequalities over time. Both utopian and pragmatic, TROA restructured labor, output, and costs under the umbrella of production, and gave a bonus for surpluses.

The system distinguished over 372 categories of agricultural work and meticulously recorded the daily labor contribution of each member of the collective. Work in the industries was accounted for by labor time and output. Over the years, there were amendments to the categorization methods. In brief, the leadership made overall strategic planning decisions and oversaw general accounting, and the local units were responsible for their designated production targets. If the targets were not met, all members of the local unit would share the responsibility and be penalized, whereas surpluses would be rewarded. The advantage was clear: it was more sophisticated than conventional schemes of payment by piecework or by work time. Having reached consensus among the collective's members on the details of the system in the first place, both the manner of work and the remuneration were accepted without contestation. Thus, standardization of remuneration was avoided and differences between types of work were recognized as well as monitored.

TROA worked well for ten years. The two-tier management scheme combining coordinated planning and localized implementation was positively appraised at the township, county, and even provincial levels. It was widely reported in *Hebei Daily* and other mass media between 1960 and 1962. But the setback came in 1963. The Party regional secretary of Hebei province reported the system to Chairman Mao Zedong (毛泽东) on a train ride. In response, Mao unexpectedly called the system a "philosophy of triviality, devised by impractical intellectuals."[5] Mao apparently equated "details" with "triviality," and dismissed Communist peasants as "impractical intellectual[s]." This negative comment sealed TROA's fate. The system was shelved during the twelve years of the Cultural Revolution, during which Zhoujiazhuang operated in the same mode as other state-controlled people's communes.

When he was reinstated in 1978 as leader of the commune, Lei Jinhe revived TROA as a necessary instrument of the people's commune's institutional setup. The mainstream capitalist mode was not embraced.

While authoritarianism of state policies continued in various forms in the early 1980s, the dictates of the market and especially the cultural mindset of individualism and monetarism in the reform era exerted immense pressure on the egalitarian spirit of TROA. As a lone island in the midst of a stormy sea, Zhoujiazhuang had to find a way to combine planning (with general strategic choices) and efficiency (through efforts by local teams), the success of which depended largely on minimal coercion from above and maximal voluntarism and consent from below. Though not without qualms or setbacks, TROA has operated to this day because it is considered both necessary and desirable. Political and cultural factors play a critical role. TROA, as a local initiative from the community itself, addresses the dynamics of the individual versus the collective, weaving an interplay between coercion and consent, and mediating between leadership struggles and grassroots efforts.

TROA's point system, operating by different measurements and categorizations of work assignments, was much more than an economic system based on the logic of efficiency or competition. The adjustment of responsibilities and tasks to ensure minimum income inequality was a political decision to close the widening gaps between who was perceived as "strong" and "weak" within the commune.

Land and Agricultural Production: Remaking of the Common

Zhoujiazhuang's governance over the common goes beyond the regulation of labor input and remuneration. It is a cultural, social, and economic project, with the community experimenting politically to give shape to its aspirations for communism.

One of the main areas in which the commune committed resources and demonstrated the success of collective governance was agriculture. From the 1980s until 1991, 180 electricity-powered deep wells were constructed. In 2003, ¥1.56 million were invested to install 100,000 meters of leak-proof pipes in the fields to improve the irrigation system, releasing 110 *mu* of arable land and saving 1 million cubic meters of water per year while doubling the efficiency of irrigation. Each production brigade had its own expert team of between thirty to forty people, including at least one technician, and responded to crises in a coordinated manner. In general, the commune's agricultural productivity was high—wheat production reached as high as 480 kilograms per *mu*. After the early 1990s, loans by the commune for agricultural development were interest free, unlike loans to the industrial sector.

The scale of Zhoujiazhuang, one of its great advantages, is significant. Over the last six decades, the Zhoujiazhuang township has roughly had a population of less than fourteen thousand people. While there were six villages, the largest one was divided into four production brigades, and

the smallest was not incorporated with members from another village. The local unit of governance was the production brigade composed of between 223 and 577 households, and a population of between 703 and 1,729.[6] This allowed for a concurrence in political administration and economic production, assuring a cultural identification at the level of the brigade. Checks and balances on governance and monitoring relied heavily on kinship-based community ties. The brigade units were therefore stable as a territorial, political, economic, and social entity. Each brigade had clear demarcations of leadership, population, geographic boundaries, production targets, arable land, agricultural means of production (each brigade had its own large harvesters and large, medium, and small tractors), and hence was a relatively self-sufficient unit of agricultural production.

In keeping the ten brigades semiautonomous in agricultural production, a scale small enough to facilitate effective participation in economic and social life was ensured. At the same time, at the commune level, the scale was big enough for planning and coordinating primary, secondary, and tertiary sectors, as well as operating local finances via the credit union formed in 2008.

Since the reform era, arable land all over China has shrunk significantly. One estimate calculates that five hundred million *mu* of arable land was too contaminated for farming, thirty million *mu* was left fallow, and several million *mu* of farmland grew only one crop instead of the two or three that could have been grown. In contrast, no farmland in Zhoujiazhuang was left fallow. Arable land increased from 16,000 *mu* in the 1950s to over 21,000 *mu* in 2008, though it steadily dropped to 16,441 *mu* in 2015.

Zhoujiazhuang's main production areas were grain and fruit – in 2016, it grew ten thousand *mu* of wheat, three thousand *mu* of grapes, two thousand *mu* of pears, two thousand *mu* of greenhouse vegetables, and one thousand *mu* of saplings. Its dairy farm, launched in 2004 with an investment of ¥14 million, had 1,200 cows annually producing 4,000 tons of fresh milk, and an annual income of ¥20 million.

The insistence on growing grain and food for self-consumption was a deliberate political choice. Agricultural returns in monetary terms are low and one can easily buy grain and food items in the market with cash. However, in Zhoujiazhuang, the sentiments for land and agriculture prevailed. "Losing our land would be losing our roots!" Zhoujiazhuang has persisted in its historic perspective on the importance of nurturing a relationship to land, agriculture, and nature.

Guaranteed Livelihood Provided by the Common

As soon as Zhoujiazhuang secured its continued mode as a commune in 1982, it embarked on a comprehensive project to improve the liveli-

hood of all members, indiscriminately, using its common resources. The commune ran three funds, whose total amounts increased yearly: the accumulation fund for infrastructure investments, to which 10 percent of net profits was allocated; the welfare fund for the twelve items provided to and enjoyed by all commune members, which took 5 percent of net profits; and the risk fund, which also received 5 percent of net profits, for natural disaster relief or any drastic drop in members' incomes. In 2018, the three funds amounted to ¥705.3 million. Compared to 1978, the funds increased by 140 times, commune members' livelihood levels by 189 times, and total industrial and agricultural income by 247 times.

The provision of welfare and security to all commune members covered essential livelihood items—housing, education, health, recreation, pension, and special care for the marginal sectors. Most spectacularly, the commune was able to embark on long-term planning and implementation.

From 1982 to 2002, in a coordinated twenty-year plan to improve housing, the commune provided building materials at factory prices to its households, and construction was done at no cost by the commune's construction teams. Each house stood on an equal area of 0.298 *mu*, with 250 square meters of space for any and all members. A total of 3,426 two-story houses were built, each with a small courtyard and main gate. The total residential area was 640,000 square meters and every family had a house. The commune made a total investment of ¥300 million into the housing project and recovered 842 *mu* residence plots for agriculture. In 2009, a new residential complex was built, with 41 blocks and a total residential area of 280,000 square meters, providing housing for 1,500 households. In 2015, per capita housing was 65.14 square meters.

In daily life, the commune had been providing all its members with free pipe water and subsidized electricity (¥100 per person per year). Each brigade had its own garbage collection, with central garbage treatment, and gardening team, which commune members enjoyed for free. With its orderly houses, trees lining wide cemented roads, well-lit streetlights, and clean environment, Zhoujiazhuang was a sharp contrast to most neighboring villages that had gone for the household responsibility system where public utilities management was in disarray. In terms of health and education, each brigade operated a clinic, each with one to two doctors, amounting to ten clinics and sixteen doctors for a population of under fourteen thousand people. This almost free medical system was in place long before the state promulgated the new rural cooperative medical insurance scheme in 2002 and confirmed its implementation in 2009.

Since 1982, Zhoujiazhuang provided nine years of free compulsory education to all its members. In contrast, the Chinese state promulgated a law to make nine years of education compulsory in 1986 and free only in 2005.

Zhoujiazhuang also attended to an acute problem in rural areas—guaranteed livelihood for the aging population. To cover the social security benefits for all commune members, the commune has committed ¥30 million per year since 2016. With the industrial income waning, in 2014 the commune invested ¥150 million to build a collective-owned commercial complex of fifty thousand square meters and receive a steady rental income.

Resisting Corrupting Forces

Compared to other townships, Zhoujiazhuang was above average in its fixed assets, collective funds, and per capita income. In 2018, its total industrial and agricultural income was ¥1,226.9 million and net income was ¥302.53 million, of which ¥244.01 million was distributed to commune members. Per capita net income was ¥21,730.

Notwithstanding such remarkable achievements, Zhoujiazhuang as a collective had to struggle to keep its legacy of communality amid the larger social milieu of reform that privileged individualism, social Darwinism, and monetarism. Zhoujiazhuang has institutional mechanisms to contain corruption at the leadership level. For example, all production brigades are forbidden to keep overnight cash income beyond ¥200, needing to hand over cash income every evening to the commune accounting office. The income of the brigade is kept by the commune until the end of the year, with 5 percent withdrawn by the commune for the retention fund and, after working out incomes and expenditures, the rest is returned to the brigade so they can calculate members' work points and distribute incomes accordingly.

The commune also has stipulations regulating members' extravagant expenditures, which prevailed in most villages in China. For instance, for weddings, eight tables of food was the maximum, as was ¥6,000 for the bride and ¥20 for cash gifts.

In the torrential currents of reform and individualization, Zhoujiazhuang had to confront not only the external forces of the state and the market, but, to borrow Felix Guattari's term, a *mental ecology*. Since the 1980s, Zhoujiazhuang adopted a relatively libertarian mode of allowing free labor mobility—villagers working outside the commune or starting their own private business could opt to retain their commune membership. The libertarian mode had its downside, however, giving rise to tensions and contradictions within the community. The basic principle of relative egalitarianism on which the commune had insisted was increasingly difficult to maintain. Allowing villagers to work outside or run their private businesses inevitably created palpable income discrepancies among commune members.

From the mid–2010s, pressure started to come from some members to divide up collective assets, the arable land in particular. To offset this pres-

sure, the commune has been giving an annual cash subsidy of ¥500 to each commune member since 2016. This amount roughly equals the net return of peasants cultivating staple crops on their share of arable land, about one *mu* per capita. While this measure helped assuage the discontent of some members, such a reluctant concession could not itself abate a subjectivity stressing individual gains, pitting the collective against individual interests. Controls and sanctions alone are not adequate for the defense of the commune and the common—subjectivity, or mental ecology, is of paramount importance. The community relations among commune members, their identification with and pride in the commune, are decisive factors.

Theorizing Community Experience

The Zhoujiazhuang experiment of governing the common, neither as public property operated by the state nor as private property, shows the possibilities of actually existing socialism to chart a path for self-governance. Its form of people's commune, while in name similar to people's communes of an officially discredited past, is a creative design by a subaltern peasant community to govern land use, labor processes, and welfare provisions in the current Chinese political and social context. It is first and foremost a relationship within a community, while the community navigates and negotiates with the state and market forces.

Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, in elaborating the idea of *common wealth*, propose that the common represents not just inclusion of knowledge, traditions, and culture in addition to natural resources, but a different mode of thinking, where knowledge is not just instrumental, but a relationship between humans and other humans, as well as humans and nature.[7] The stress on the common as a relationship echoes what Guattari proposes in *The Three Ecologies*: "the ethico-aesthetic aegis of an ecosophy: social ecology, mental ecology and environmental ecology."[8]

Gustavo Esteva draws on Indigenous thoughts and practices in the articulation of the common. Quoting Floriberto Diaz and Jaime Martinez Luna, two Indigenous thinkers from Oaxaca, Mexico, who coined the term *comunalidad* (commonality), he defines the common as "both a collection of practices formed as creative adaptations of old traditions to resist old and new colonialisms, and a mental space, a horizon of intelligibility: how you see and experience the world as a We." According to Esteva, the practice in most Indigenous communities is that "every I is still a We."[9]

The common represents our embeddedness in relations, in processes of becoming in the production of the common and subjectivities for our existence. The common is not to be taken as a preexisting or independent entity, but rather as constitutive of our world—the relation of open

accessibility; the potential of beings actualized in knowledge, technique, affects, desires, social relations, languages; shared ontological conditions of the production and reproduction of the community.

The Zhoujiazhuang experiment provides insights into these searches for a new mode of thinking and the articulation of possibilities and potentialities for rural self-activity and self-governance. Zhoujiazhuang has been in the shadows. On the one hand, Cold War discourses from the West tend to discredit experiences under "actually existing socialism" as state propaganda and state manipulation. On the other hand, yet in a similar vein, everything relating to the prereform era has been discredited since 1979. However, the Zhoujiazhuang experiment shows that there are rich legacies on the ground. Formal private property was suspended for decades in the Soviet Union and China, and different modes of collectivism had been practiced. Previously and even up until now, not all experiences are merely negative instances of state domination, maneuvering, and propaganda. The revolutions in which millions of people were engaged in varying ways kindled aspirations for both new social relationships and new individual and collective subjectivities. Raymond Williams, in pondering the parameters for a society beyond actually existing socialism, stated that the question is not "whether a new human order might, in struggle, come through, but whether, as a condition of that struggle, and as the entire condition of its success, enough of us can reasonably believe that a new human order is seriously possible."

The Zhoujiazhuang experiment is not to be romanticized, but it deserves to be looked at in the context of many constraints and tensions, as well as of changing social relations and cultural beliefs with the advent of individualism, selfishness, and greed in larger society. This reading of the Zhoujiazhuang commune is, hopefully, a modest contribution to the efforts to theorize and connect community experiences that have implications not only for China, but also as part of an international struggle for the common good of humanity.[10]

Notes

1. Data from 2018.

2. Alain Badiou, "The Idea of Communism," in *The Idea of Communism*, ed. Costas Douzinas and Slavoj Žižek (New York: Verso, 2010), 7.

3. Li Erzhong, "Old Peasant Lei Jinhe, Leader of Zhoujiazhuang People's Commune," *Contemporary Thought* 3 (2002), in Chinese.

4. One hectare is fifteen *mu*.

5. Zhang Qingtian, *The Spring and Autumn Annals of Zhoujiazhuang*, (Jinzhou: Zhoujiazhuang Press, 1986), 80, in Chinese.

6. Data from 2015.

7. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Commonwealth* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009).

8. Felix Guattari, *The Three Ecologies* (London: Athlone, 2000), 41.

9. Gustavo Esteva, "Hope from the Margins," in *The Wealth of the Commons: A World Beyond Market and State*, ed. David Bollier and Silke Helfrich (Amherst: Levellers, 2012), 193.

10. François Houtart, *From "Common Goods" to "the Common Good of Humanity"* (Brussels: Rosa Luxemburg Foundation, 2011).