REVIEW ARTICLE

Agrarian Classic
An Essay on *Revolution in a Chinese Village: Ten Mile Inn*

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This book shows how one backward village became a revolutionary bastion[1]

> In the middle of the civil war between the Chinese Communists and the Kuomintang, the writers floated on a barge down the Grand Canal, through no-man's land and into the Liberated Areas. At the end of November 1947, they finally reached the cluster of villages in the foothills of the Taihang Mountains, which formed the capital of the Shansi-Hopei-Shantung-Honan Border region. (*Ten Mile Inn*, p. vii)

They were by then about 400 kilometres south-west of Beijing.

"The writers" were Isabel and David Crook, she the daughter of Canadian missionaries, born in Chengdu in 1915, and he a British Communist, who had first arrived in China as a Comintern agent in 1938, after having fought with the International Brigades in the Spanish Civil War. They had met in China and then made separate, dangerous journeys to London in 1942, where they married. David joined the Royal Air Force, eventually to serve in South Asia, while Isabel served with the Canadian Women's Army Corps. She also took up graduate studies of anthropology (the subject of her undergraduate degree at the University of Toronto in the late 1930s), at the London School of Economics (LSE), before she and David decided to return to China in 1947. The two authors pay particular tribute to the help and encouragement that they had received in writing *Revolution in a Chinese Village: Ten Mile Inn* from Raymond Firth, long-time chair of the anthropology department at the LSE.[2] Dedicated

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[1] The epigraph is also that of the book: Isabel and David Crook (1959) (henceforth *Ten Mile Inn*). This essay, a tribute to two remarkable people, was written shortly after Isabel Crook's death in China on August 20, 2023.

[2] Isabel Crook explains the work she did with Firth in the Introduction to her later book, *Prosperity's Predicament* (2013).

Communists, though never uncritical of Chinese governments, the Crooks remained in China, teaching at the Beijing Foreign Studies University. David died in 2000, Isabel at the age of 107, in 2023. For her, the study that she and David did in Ten Mile Inn in the early months of 1948 was, she said, "the beginning of [her] role as a participant observer of the Chinese Communist Revolution."

The Crooks lived in Ten Mile Inn for eight months in 1948, as Isabel explains in her introduction to *Prosperity's Predicament*, which was based on her first research in China, conducted in the early 1940s (though the book was not published until 2013). *Revolution in a Chinese Village: Ten Mile Inn* offers an account of the history – rather than an ethnography – of Ten Mile Inn between 1937 and 1947, as the Crooks were able to reconstruct it. It is in their later book, *Ten Mile Inn: Mass Movement in a Chinese Village* (1979), that they report on the events of the Campaign for the Adjustment of Land Holdings and the Purification and Reorganisation of the Party, which they observed as it went on from February 26 to April 15, 1948. In between the publication of these two books came another, *The First Years of Yangyi Commune* (1966), about the founding of the commune in Ten Mile Inn in 1958-1960.

Contemporary reviewers for academic journals of all the three books based on the Crooks' studies in Ten Mile Inn, tended somewhat to damn with faint praise, acknowledging them as rich "eyewitness" sources, but finding them lacking in rigorous analysis ("no anthropology"), and criticising them for presenting a Panglossian view of the inexorable, positive progress of the revolution.[3] This is perhaps a defensible criticism of chapter X of *Ten Mile Inn,* entitled "Achievements of Eight Years of Democratic Reforms," which does read at times somewhat like a propaganda document, but it does an injustice to the preceding chapters. These provide a richly detailed account of the failures and the mistakes made in the context of what were turbulent and extremely uncertain, dangerous times. These problems of the revolution were summed up by Lai Jo-yu, then secretary of the Sub-Regional Communist Party Committee, in an interview with William Hinton – author of another classic, *Fanshen* (1967) – who was living, in 1948, in another village on the other side of the T'aihang Mountains:

> The mistake is basically a form of extreme equalitarianism. This is typical of the ideology of the peasantry and reflects the character of their production . . . Both the May Fourth Directive and the Draft Agrarian Law support the peasants' urgent demand for confiscating and dividing the land of the landlords and rich peasants. The critical point comes when the peasants go on to distribute the property of the middle peasants.[4] Equalitarianism then becomes reactionary. Many cadres of peasant origin did not clearly understand about the turning-point, so they made mistakes . . . (*Ten Mile Inn*, p. 135)

[3] For an example of these reviews, see Marsh (1961).

[4] See Appendix for a summary of the class categories that were in use at the time.

What Lai Jo-yu referred to as "mistakes" can be seen as the focus of the Crooks' book, and they point to the problems that followed from the way in which a section of the middle peasantry gained particular advantages in the early phases of the revolution. There is nothing Panglossian about the heart of the book.

The Crooks arrived in Ten Mile Inn – 30 kilometres or so west of the county town of Wu An (now on the tourist circuit in China) – because it was at the time treated as the Border Region Government "guest house." What this meant in practice was that they lived in homes that had formerly belonged to landlords and rich peasants who might still be living in a part of the house. This gave the authors the run of the village, and links with cadres, so that they and their assistants – four of them took part at one time or another – were able to build some knowledge of the village before the arrival of the team that was to guide the peasants during the Campaign for the Adjustment of Land Holdings.

In the 1930s, Ten Mile Inn had a population of about 1500 people, dependent on about 4000 *mu* (659 acres) of land. Wheat, maize, millet, and sesame were the main crops. Draught power was supplied mainly by mules and donkeys, of which there were two for every five families – had they been equally distributed. But most owned "not even one hair of a donkey." Two-thirds of the more than 400 families in the village were poor peasants, their families small, many of them with "home-raised daughters-in-law." These were girls who had often been bought outright, in a society in which there was a chronic shortage of women, and who then might be very badly treated. The poor were sometimes forced by poverty to give away or to sell their children, and some daughters were killed at birth – a practice that was "condemned [but] winked at in the case of the poorest" (*Ten Mile Inn,* p. 11). On the other hand, in the remaining third of the village, the twenty richest families owned two-and-a-half times as much as the middle peasants, and seven times the poor peasants. For these twenty families, "usury supported by police power yielded a far higher rate of profit than productive enterprise" (*Ten Mile Inn,* p. 5), with rates of interest ranging between a low of two per cent per month, and one hundred per cent for 20 days. The Crooks vividly portray the landlords of Ten Mile Inn, noting that three of the followers of one of them – though the landlord himself long remained respected – were the most hated men in the village, together with the second largest landlord, who was especially loathed as an exploiter of labour and a womaniser. Three of these four men were brutally killed during the revolution, in an action condemned by the Communist Party, which, though it sought the elimination of the landlord *class*, did not have a policy of eliminating individual landlords. The May Fourth Directive of the Party, 1946, of which the Crooks write, advocated "a magnanimous policy, not killing anyone."

In 1937, the Japanese invaded China, and the Crooks start their story at a moment when the 53rd Army of the Chinese nationalists, the Guomindang, occupied a small area (which included Wu An) between the Japanese on the plain to the east and the

Communist-led guerillas in the Taihang Mountains. From 1937 until 1940 Ten Mile Inn was subject to the brutal and extortionate control of Guomindang soldiers, and it was in this time that the four men who later met their deaths by stoning began to earn the hatred of others in the village, by serving as middlemen for the Guomindang officers – and, not least, by procuring women for them. In 1940 the Japanese advanced to within a very few miles of the village, and the Guomindang fled. At the same time the Communist Eighth Route Army advanced from the mountains, and, even though the Japanese were close by, Ten Mile Inn came under the authority of the Communist-led anti-Japanese county government that had first been set up late in 1939. To begin with the old village leaders from the landlord class remained in control of village government, and they were able to some extent to subvert the Communist tax policy, under which each village was assessed according to its total wealth, but with only the richest 30 per cent liable to pay. The policy strengthened the village peoples' determination to resist the Japanese, who taxed at a flat rate per *mu* of land, and it began slowly to lift the mass of the peasantry out of crippling debt. In 1941 the People's Militia of the village was first established, with six recruits from among the middle peasants. The training given them by the county administration helped to raise their political awareness, as well as their military skills. Village men provided "Rear Service," supplying frontline fighters, and women of the village were employed in making uniforms. A women's association was set up, partly with the objective of emancipating women from patriarchal control, though this was to remain for long an elusive goal. A village cooperative was established, too, though it suffered from dependence on literacy and business skills that could only be supplied by landlords. Forty of the poorest families organised a peasant union in 1942, though for some time it was to rely on a core of militants rather than becoming a mass movement. A Communist Party branch, with a small number of members, was formed. Among them, though, were two powerful old village leaders from the landlord class.

From these beginnings, over a few years, the balance of class forces in Ten Mile Inn changed. In the context of famine in 1942–43, the peasant union grew in strength, mobilising for the campaign for "Digging Out the Landlords' Hidden Grain," and the "Clearing-Up Debts" campaign. Mutual aid groups began to be formed. The "Movement to Reclaim Wasteland" brought more land into production. The staunchest supporters of the Communist-led reforms were also those who benefited most from these campaigns and initiatives, and they constituted a class of "new middle peasants," some of whom took over the village government. The new leaders had been courageous but began to acquire personal interests in the new regime, using their positions to acquire benefits, including securing wives, for themselves. The old leaders were not done yet, however, and in 1943 and 1944 the village saw a lot of intrigue, in circumstances in which, given uncertainty about the outcome of the fighting, many (and not only landlords) were hedging their bets. There were secret agents working for the Japanese among village people. There was the firing of what were called "black shots" at night. Some people of the village were

mysteriously killed. The Communist Party branch had to be cleaned up. It was after this that Ten Mile Inn had its first elected government, which set about implementing the Communist policy of reduction and payment of rent and interest (also known as the "Double Reduction" campaign), under which the highest rent that a landlord could legally demand was fixed at 37.5 per cent, and the highest rate of interest at 1.5 per cent per month. The movement further sharpened class lines and brought important changes, although those who took advantage of the changes and gained from them were often not the poorest of the village. The Crooks don't hide the tensions in the revolutionary struggle.

In 1945, following the Japanese surrender and the defeat of an attempt by the Guomindang to retake the area of Wu An, the revolution accelerated with the "Allied Struggle of the People of Town and Countryside" against landlords. The indiscriminate and wholesale appropriation of landlord property – such as happened in Wu An to the county's largest landlord, who controlled as many as 80 villages – was later strongly condemned, as damaging to industry and commerce. Mao Zedong argued:

> The target of agrarian reform is only and must be only the feudal system of exploitation on the part of the landlord and the old-type rich peasant classes, and neither the industry of the liberal bourgeoisie nor that of the landlords and old-type rich peasants can be infringed upon . . . In the market towns . . . attention must be paid to exerting every effort to preserve to the greatest possible extent all usable means of production or of livelihood. (*Ten Mile Inn*, p. 113)

After two waves of struggle in the countryside, however, by early 1946 hardly a plot of tenanted land remained in Wu An County. There followed the "Black Lands Campaign" of spring 1946, directed against the landlords and rich peasants who had hitherto successfully used many different dodges, including nominal gifts of land, to evade taxes. The result had been that the burden of taxation fell more heavily than it should have done on the middle peasants. The campaign had "struggle objects" – the exploiters – and "struggle fruits" – fines and property taken in lieu of fines – and though

> the overall effect was to take . . . means of production away from the landlords and rich peasants and to advance Ten Mile Inn further towards a community of independent middle peasants,

it also created serious problems. The property of the offending landlords was sold, much of it at low prices, rather than being given away, so that some middle peasants made windfall gains in buying land. The more militant among the peasantry received more, to the disadvantage of the poorest. The May Fourth Directive (1946), formulated by the Central Committee of the Communist Party, drew on reports of experience such as that of Wu An County, and among the principles it laid down was that distribution of the proceeds of sales of the "struggle

fruits" was not enough, and the "fruits themselves should have been 'justly and equitably distributed'" (*Ten Mile Inn*, p. 126).

Up to the summer of 1946 the main activity of the revolution had been carried on mainly by the relatively small numbers of the most militant peasants. Now,

> instead of a minority of courageous and forceful individuals having their own problems settled and receiving the fruits of struggle, the whole people were to be mobilised . . . and the fruits divided according to need. (*Ten Mile Inn*, p. 127)

All were to *fanshen* – which literally means "to turn over" or "to turn the body," and is glossed as meaning to stand up for one's rights, to emancipate oneself. [5] The "Fill the Holes and Level the Tops" movement of summer 1946, which was supposed to take from the rich and to give to the poor, met with little success, because by now "fruits" available for redistribution were scarce. The Communist Party line was that it was unacceptable for hard-working middle peasants to become "struggle objects." But then there came the "Feudal Tails" campaign in Ten Mile Inn, directed against middle peasants who did employ some labour, sub-let land or lend money at usurious rates, and against the descendants of landlords and rich peasants among the poor and middle peasants. These "feudal tails" were to supply "fruits" to the "fanshenised" poor peasants, and it was this struggle against middle peasants that came to be regarded as having been a serious mistake, as a form of the "extreme equalitarianism" of which Lai Jo-yu spoke to William Hinton.

The Crooks reported, nonetheless, that the back of feudal landlordism was broken through these campaigns of 1946. Members of the landlord class, however, still held positions from which they could carry on disruptive activities, including, in Ten Mile Inn, the management of the village cooperative, and roles as school teachers. In the summer of 1947 came another campaign, "Divide the Family," the purpose of which was to examine all those of landlord or rich peasant origin, to establish what positions they held, and whether they were abusing them. The campaign involved the most detailed attempt that had yet been made at undertaking systematic class analysis of the entire village population. Judgment was then passed on "struggle objects," among whom three grades were recognised, with different penalties attaching to them. The fifty or more middle peasants who had been classed as feudal tails were now placed more firmly than ever in the camp of the enemy. Passions ran high in the village. There was a lot of paying-off of old scores, and it was in this context that the four most hated struggle objects were taken to the river bed and stoned to death. But there was still more to come in 1947, in finding "fruits" for redistribution in another campaign, "Digging-out the Air-Raid Shelters," aimed at finding the secret caches of the class enemies. This campaign, like Feudal Tails, ended in failure. Both campaigns were, the Crooks argue, misguided attempts to set right the middle peasant line:

[5] Hinton (1967).

> The best of the fruits had already been acquired by the middle peasants [notably as a result of what had happened during the "Black Lands" campaign when "fruits" had been put on sale]. It was perhaps for this reason that the villagers, feeling frustrated and angry, resorted to violence. (*Ten Mile Inn*, p. 155)

As a member of the Central Committee of the Communist Party, Jen Pi-Shih, wrote in a report on "Some Problems Regarding Land Reform":

> hidden wealth alone cannot be relied on to overcome the peasants' difficulties. The government should issue agricultural loans to help the peasants solve their problems after the distribution of land. Eliminating the system of feudal exploitation is for the purpose of unshackling the rural productive forces, providing agricultural economy with the opportunity for great development. (cited in *Ten Mile Inn*, p. 155)

Resentment was now directed against the village cadres who had been elected in 1944. They had failed to arouse and organise the majority of their fellow villages. Had they done so, perhaps the mistake of selling off landlord properties would not have happened. For them it was difficult to see that they had done wrong. They could not be held responsible for the passivity of so many of their fellows. They had borne the brunt of the struggle and they felt that they deserved a reward. But the kinds of resentments that were felt in Ten Mile Inn were found very widely, and the sub-regional authorities decided on another campaign intended to change the working style of the village cadres, called "Washing Faces and Rubbing Off Smudges." It was soon realised, however, that the campaign involved serious dangers of creating damaging disorder and could lead to the loss of the most capable cadres. So it was called off, and the local authorities set about calming things down. This was the juncture at which the Crooks arrived in Ten Mile Inn. The Campaign for the Adjustment of Land Holdings and the Purification and Reorganisation of the Party that they were soon to observe, was aimed at addressing the problems that they identified in their history of the earlier phases of the revolution in the village.

William Hinton's sympathetic review of *Revolution in a Chinese Village*, casts an interesting perspective on the book.[6] Though very appreciative of it, he finds that the book shows a "left" bias and that the Crooks judge the village cadres too harshly and underestimate the achievements of the land reform. The period of their research, Hinton points out, was one "during which a left line dominated in Communist Party thinking over most of North China." Known as the "poor peasant line," it held that the aim of the revolution was to guarantee every poor peasant enough land and property to make him a "middle farmer," so that, when there still remained large numbers of poor peasants after the expropriation of the landlords, it was thought that something must have gone wrong with the reforms. This is, indeed, what the Crooks show to have happened in Ten Mile Inn in 1946-47, with the consequent chasing of the "feudal tails" and increasing agitation against the

[6] Hinton (1961)

middle peasants and the village cadres. Hinton reminds his readers that it was only in the spring of 1948, after the Crooks had left Ten Mile Inn, that Mao Zedong's report on land reform exposed the thinking of the left line, and clearly stated the position that searching for further adjustment of property to make everyone equal was destructive. This was because it meant attacking the middle peasants (as had started to happen in Ten Mile Inn) risking the alienation of millions of people, and so undoing the achievements of the revolution. Mao's argument was that only the productive forces released by the elimination of feudalism could solve the problem of poverty – precisely the view that I referred to earlier, following the Crooks in quoting from Jen Pi-shih's report.

The point that Hinton makes in his review about the problem of the "left/poor peasant line" is important, and I think that the Crooks can be read as having been sympathetic to it - in their remarks, for example, about the failings of the cadres from among the "new middle peasants." But the idea that the book is to be faulted because the authors fail to recognise "the basic bias of their own outlook," as Hinton suggests, is unconvincing. After all, they quote from Mao himself (see, for example, *Ten Mile Inn*, p. 113), as well as from other Communist Party leaders such as Lai Jo-yu, from whom I quoted in introducing this essay (cited in *Ten Mile Inn*, p. 135), and Liu Shao-chi (*Ten Mile Inn*, p. 180), who refers to "deviations in agrarian reform [when] the interests of part of the middle peasants were encroached on," to the same effect as Hinton. Hinton's idea that the Crooks offer "too disparaging an estimate of the accomplishments of the land reform," is also, frankly, strange. They consistently refer to the success of the reform movement in eliminating landlordism, and Chapter 10 celebrates the accomplishments of the period from 1940 to 1947. No, the Crooks reflect very clearly the tensions in the struggles for land reform, and, read so many years later, they bring alive the impact of those tensions in the experience of the people they came to know in Ten Mile Inn.

Reading *Revolution in a Chinese Village* in 2023, and from the perspective of India, one can only regret the failure fully to eliminate landlordism in India in the 1950s. This wouldn't have made every poor peasant a "middle farmer" any more than the land reform in China could achieve such an outcome. But it would have brought about the release of the productive forces in agriculture and in the economy as a whole, as was achieved in China.

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Appendix

Distinguishing Agrarian Classes

Isabel and David Crook refer, in their own Appendix, to "The Thought of Mao Tse-Tung" (using the former transliteration of his name into English), and to Mao Zedong's understanding of agrarian class structure, analysis of which he thought essential in addressing the problems of who will carry out the revolution and against whom it will be directed. As the two writers say:

> A detailed document on classification was issued by the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party in 1933. This was brought up to date at the end of 1947 to serve as guide in carrying out the Draft Agrarian Law which had been issued in October that year (*Ten Mile Inn*, p. 182)

They then go on to discuss Central Committee member Jen Pi-shih's report on "Some Problems Concerning Land Reform." This included comment on problems that had arisen in the classification of agrarian classes during the implementation of the Draft Agrarian Law. In this document the principal lines are defined "in general," as follows. It must be remembered, however, that the qualifying words "in general" were to be taken seriously. The definitions were intended as general guidelines and they were often modified in the light of local conditions. They were later given more formal (and legal) shape in the law of land reform of the People's Republic of China after Liberation:

1. Those who possess a large amount of land, who do not labour themselves but depend entirely upon exploiting the peasants through rent and usury, who maintain themselves without labouring – these are the *landlords.*
2. Those who own large amounts of land, draught animals and farm implements, who themselves take part in the main labour but at the same time exploit hired peasant labour – these are the *rich peasants.* China's old-type rich peasants are strongly feudal in nature . . .

3. Those who have land, draught animals and farm implements themselves, and who labour themselves but do not exploit others, or who do so only to a very slight extent – these are the *middle peasants.*
4. Those who have only a small amount of land, farm implements, etc., who labour themselves but at the same time sell part of their own labour power – these are the *poor peasants.*
5. Those who have no land, draught animals or farm implements and who sell their labour power – these are *hired labourers.*

This is the way the principal rural classes should in general be determined . . .

(*Ten Mile Inn*, pp. 183-84)