**CASES STUDIES OF RURAL RECONSTRUCTION IN CHINA**

**CCRD-CS Team**

The following offers a brief examination of the changes in some rural communities in the last 40 years since the Reform policy began implementation in 1979. The experiences offer a contrast of the way rural communities in different locations in China responded to and negotiated with the rapid changes. Though these localities are characterized by the specificities of histories and subjectivities produced in their respective histories, they are subjected to more or less similar confines defined by general over-determining forces hanging over the trajectories of China’s pursuit of modernization with the aim of realizing a “strong China” as a key powerful player in the international political and economic game. It seems to have become a common sense worldwide that in order to be successful, sacrifices have to be made, sacrifices borne by the majority of the people excluded from mechanisms of decision making – the common people defined mainly by the urban poor and the rural. There is no doubt that the common people, that is, the powerless, suffer as the ruling elites are getting more powerful and prosperous. However, the experiences here represent the resisting and resilient spirits of how the marginalized have negotiated with poverty and adversities; they demonstrate hopes from their practices constituting, and constituted by, the production of the common, which is the key to socialist transformation.

**CASE 1: ZHOUJIAZHUANG COMMUNE**

Zhoujiazhuang is singular, being the only de facto People’s Commune in China today. A township in Jinzhou City, located 50 km from the provincial capital of Hebei Province, Zhoujiazhuang has a population of 13,922 persons from 4,506 families, with 8,270 labor, over a land area of 17,860 mu (12.03 km2) (2018). Today, it still keeps a political, economic, and social structure which has been essentially in place since 1956. This means, for over 65 years, that is, 10 years before the Cultural Revolution began, and 39 years after the dismantling of almost all People’s Communes in 1982, Zhoujiazhuang has survived as one organizational unit over the same territory comprising of the same six natural villages.

In 1982, the 3,000 families in Zhoujiazhuang made an audacious choice after a general assembly – *not* to follow the State-promulgated conventional Reform of Household Responsibility System, but to remain as a commune. In 1953, the Three Responsibilities and One Award Scheme of managing the common was designed for production teams to manage the three responsibilities over labor, output, and costs, and receive a bonus award for surpluses, while the overall production strategy was discussed and coordinated by the commune leadership. The scheme 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. This scheme was interrupted during the Cultural Revolution years but resumed after 1979.

Zhoujiazhuang’s governance over the common goes beyond the regulation of labor input and remuneration. It is a cultural, social, and economic entity, with the community making political experimentation to give shape to its aspirations for communism. The commune committed resources and demonstrated the superiority of collective governance over the common.

One of the foremost collective governance over the common is land and agriculture. From the 1980s till 1991, 180 deep wells were constructed powered by electricity. In 2003, 1.56 million yuan was invested to install 100,000 m of leakproof pipes in the fields to improve the irrigation system, releasing 110 mu of arable land and saving 1 million m3 of water per year while doubling the efficiency of irrigation. Each production brigade had its own expertise team of 30–40 persons and one technician and responded to crises in a coordinated manner. In general,

its agricultural productivity was high – wheat production could reach as high as 480 kg per *mu*. After the early 1990s, loans by the commune for agricultural development were interest-free, unlike loans to the industrial sector.

Zhoujiazhuang’s main production areas were grains and fruits – in 2016, it grew 10,000 mu of wheat for seed, 3,000 mu of grapes, 2,000 mu of pears, 2,000 mu of greenhouse vegetables, and 1,000 mu of saplings; its dairy farm launched in 2004 with an investment of 14 million yuan had 1,200 cows annually producing 4,000 tons of fresh milk with an annual income of RMB 20 million.

The insistence on growing grain and food for self-consumption was a 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 kept its persistence on a “traditional” rural perspective in relation to land, agriculture, and the beings living off the land and nature. As soon as Zhoujiazhuang secured continued mode as a commune in 1982, it

embarked on a comprehensive project to improve the livelihood of all members, indiscriminately, using its common resources. The commune ran three Funds. Each year, 10 percent net profits was put into the Accumulation Fund (for infrastructure investments, etc.), 5 percent into the Welfare Fund (for the 12 welfare items enjoyed by all Commune members), and 5 percent into the Risk Fund (for relief during natural disasters or drastic decline in members’ income). These three funds had been increasing by the year. In 2018, they amounted to 705.3 million yuan. Compared to 1978, the three Funds had increased by 140 times, commune members’ livelihood level 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 spectacular was that it could embark on long term planning and implementation. From 1982 to 2002, in a coordinated 20-year plan to improve housing, the Commune provided building materials at factory price to the households, and the 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 m2 of space, for cadres and members alike. A total of 3,426 two-storey houses were built, each with a small courtyard and main gate, hence each household unit was self-contained. The total residential area was 640,000 m2. Every family had a house. The commune made a total investment of RMB 300 million into this 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 m2, providing housing for 1,500 households. In 2015, per capita housing was 65.14 m2. In daily life, the commune had been providing all its members with free pipe water and subsidized electricity (RMB 100 per person per year). Each brigade had its garbage collection and gardening team, with central treatment of garbage. Commune members enjoyed these for free. Zhoujiazhuang with its orderly houses, trees lining wide, cemented roads, well-lit streetlights and clean environment was a sharp contrast to most neighbouring villages that had gone for the Household Responsibility System where management of public utilities was in disarray. In terms of health and education, each brigade operated a clinic, each

with 1–2 doctors, hence there were 10 clinics and 16 doctors for a population under 14,000 (2015). This almost free medical service 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 had provided nine years of free compulsory education to all its members, much ahead of the State’s policy: The State promulgated a law to make nine-year education compulsory in 1986, and to make it free in 2005. Zhoujiazhuang also attended to a most acute problem in rural areas – guaranteed livelihood for the aging population. While the needs of the marginal sectors were taken care of, the logic being oriented toward egalitarianism, there would not be people with excess wealth if they worked in the commune. Since 2016, to cover the social security benefits for all Commune members, the Commune has committed RMB 30 million per year. With the industrial income waning, the Commune, in 2014, invested 150 million yuan to build a collective owned commercial complex of 50,000 m2, and received a steady rental income.

The Zhoujiazhuang experimentation of governing the common, neither as public property operated by the State nor as private property, shows possibilities in contexts of “actually existing socialism” (or its after-phase) 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, situated in the current political and social context of China, a creative design by a subaltern peasant community to govern land use, labour processes, and welfare provisions. It is first and foremost a relationship within the community, while the community negotiates with the State and the Market.