CHAPTER 5

Historical Observations Regarding the Large-scale Establishment of Rural Public Canteens in Hebei Province

Li Chunfeng

Abstract

Between the first half of 1958 and June 1961, rural public canteens in Hebei Province first exploded in number, then became difficult to sustain, then were forcibly reinstated, and finally were completely abolished. The fate of rural canteens in Hebei was closely related to the rise and fall of the “Great Leap Forward” and the people’s commune movement. Rural public canteens in Hebei grew prodigiously as the “Great Leap Forward” and people’s commune movement were in the ascendant, but the rural canteen movement ended in failure just as the “Great Leap Forward” came to its close.

Keywords

Hebei Province – rural public canteens – the “Great Leap Forward” movement – the people’s commune movement

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1 Li Chunfeng (李春峰) is a master of laws in the Hebei Provincial Academy of Social Sciences History Center.
I  Headlong Rush to Action

The genesis of the rural public canteen movement in Hebei Province lay in the rural cooperative movement. During this time, farmers voluntarily and spontaneously established simple or mobile canteens on a temporary or seasonal basis amid the fields to increase the work efficiency of farming. As the busy seasons wound down, these simple canteens were temporarily closed. These temporary canteens were similar in style and substance to the public canteens that followed. One might say they were the embryonic form of the public canteens; they laid the foundation for the widespread establishment of public canteens during the Great Leap Forward.

On September 24, 1957, the CCP Central Committee and the State Council jointly issued the “Resolutions Regarding the Large-scale Launch of the Farm-land Irrigation and Manure Collection Movement in Winter of this Year and Spring of Next Year” 关于今冬明春大规模地开展兴修农田水利和积肥运动的决定, which called for governments around the country to launch a “leaping” upsurge in output centered on construction of irrigation works in rural areas. In order to thoroughly implement the spirit of the Central Committee directives and comprehensively promote the construction of rural irrigation works, the Hebei Provincial Party Committee and Provincial People’s Committee between October 14 and 20 of that year jointly convened a congress of irrigation and manure collection activists, at which it was demanded that the entire rural population of the province initiate an upsurge in the movement for irrigation works construction and manure collection and promote the Great Leap Forward in agricultural production. The Xushui County 徐水县 government implemented a large-scale collective irrigation works labor strategy of “militarized organization, battle-style action, and collectivized living,” which brought about unified control of labor over a wide area. In response, all manner of busy season canteens and “on-work-premise canteens” were established to increase labor productivity and to integrate modes of living and modes of production. By July 1958, every commune and production brigade of Xushui County had established public canteens, which made Xushui the first county in Hebei to bring about county-wide “canteen-ization.” It was reported that “all the 247 agricultural cooperatives of Xushui County have established a total of 1771 rural canteens, serving a total of 275,000 people, more than 80 percent of the total population of the county.”

2 “Laoli da jiefang, shengchan da yuejin, Xushui xian sheshe ban qi gonggong shitang 劳力大解放,生产大跃进,徐水县社社办起公共食堂” Great Liberation of Labor, Great Leap