CHAPTER 7

Restitution Paid by Rural People’s Cooperatives in the 1960s—An Inquiry Focused on Jiangsu Province

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Abstract

Just as in the rest of China, the effects of the “five things in vogue”—most notably the “vogue of communism”—were extremely severe in rural Suzhou during the “Great Leap Forward” and people’s commune movements. As the entire Party was committed to redressing “leftist” errors in the early 1960s, the local governments of rural Suzhou began the task of cataloguing funds and materials that had been appropriated from production brigades, communes and individuals during the Great Leap Forward movement, with the aim of making restitution or reparation. Reviewing the experience and lessons of this work in rural Suzhou is of particular significance to our further understanding and evaluations of the people's commune movement as well as furthering research in the history of people's communes.

Keywords

people’s communes – reparation and restitution work – rural Suzhou

In the 1960s, the entire Party and governments across the country began to redress egregious errors made during the Great Leap Forward movement. At the same time, the national government began making comprehensive

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adjustments to the economy, and severe hardship was soon mitigated. One
important measure taken to redress previous “leftist” mistakes and correct the
economic was to settle accounts and make restitution for errors stemming from
poor leadership, the negative effects of the vogue of communism, and “mis-
appropriation of resources and personnel” which had taken place during the
people’s commune movement. Until now no academic research has been pub-
lished on this topic. Having made a deep reading of a large volume of materials
to serve as the basis of this essay, which focuses specifically on Jiangsu Province,
I hope to make a contribution in the further study of the issue of restitution.

I

Amid the Great Leap Forward and the people’s commune movements launched
in 1958, poor leadership led to many egregious errors, including “running into
communism,” the large-scale establishment of public canteens. The enthusi-
asm of the time led to the widespread emergence of the “five things in vogue,”
most particularly the “vogue of communism” (a trend by which egalitarian-
ism was held supreme, and labor and material resources were transferred ar-
bitrarily regardless of which commune they belonged to). In November 1958,
Mao Zedong 毛泽东 commenced an initiative to redress some of these errors,
demanding that “old accounts must be settled” and held that “settling accounts
is the only way to realize the objective value of things.” Thereafter, govern-
ments across the country began making initial settlements and restitution and
reparation for “misappropriations of funds and materials.” The Suzhou govern-
ment in April 1959 began launching pilots in settlement and restitution work
in some communes and production teams in Changshu County 常熟县, Wu
County 吴县, and other areas; officials also made reparation to people in some
areas for what had been appropriated from them during the “Great Forging of
Steel and Iron” movement. However, this work came to a grinding halt when,

2 Translator’s note: In addition to the “vogue of communism,” the “five things in vogue” also
included boastful aggrandizement, arbitrary commands, cadre exceptionalism, and counter-
productive direction of production.
3 People’s Republic of China State Agriculture Commission General Office 中华人民共和国
国家农业委员会办公厅, Nongye jitihua zhongyao wenjian huibian (1958–1981), xia 《农
业集体化重要文件汇编（1958~1981）下》 [Selected Important Documents on Agricultural
Collectivization (1958~1981), Vol. 2], (Beijing: Zhonggong zhongyang dangxiao chubanshe,
4 “Changshu xian diyi, er pi gongshe suanzhang dahui de zongjie (chugao) 常熟县第一、
二批公社算账大会的总结(初稿) [Summary of the Changshu County Conference