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The Rise of the People's Communes

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published by

New England Free Press
791 Tremont St.
Boston, Mass. 02118

How the People's Communes Arose

The common idea of the West that people's communes came in China by orders from Peking is of course sheer myth. No government ever existed that could force such an organization on six hundred and fifty million people. The description given by the December resolution of the Chinese Communist Party — "a new social organization appeared" — is accurate but inadequate. What natural and human forces produced it? In studying this, one also studies the role of communist leadership in China and the nature of the "mass line," which may be briefly defined as "from the people through the leadership to the people."

When 1958 began, most of the five hundred million peasants of China were organized in 740,000 agricultural co-operatives, with an average membership of 160 families. When the year ended, these had merged into 26,000 people's communes, with average size of a township or more, and with functions that included not only farming but industry, commerce, education and home defense. We must trace the causes of such change.

The farming co-operatives were themselves the result of eight or nine years' growth, which began with the land revolution and the policy of "land to the tiller": this was part of the "liberation" itself, or followed it almost at once. Mutual-aid teams came quickly, for without aid the poorer peasants, lacking draft-animals and implements, could not have worked their new land. These "teams" were small groups of neighbors who helped each other in farmwork, while keeping private property in land, animals and tools.

The mutual-aid teams grew, with encouragement by Communists and aid of state loans, into farming co-operatives, buying animals and better implements for joint use. For a time, in what was known as the "lower stage," the private ownership of land and many draft-animals was recognized by extra payments at harvest. In a few years, however, the co-ops grew into the "higher" or "socialist" form, holding land, animals and larger implements as joint property, and dividing the harvest in proportion to labor performed. This change was made not by confiscation but by the increasing part played by labor in the joint crop, and by buying the members' livestock for the co-op at market prices on the instalment plan, a process made possible by state loans.

In winter of 1955-56, a nation-wide "socialist upsurge" swept most remaining mutual-aid teams into co-operatives, and raised most of the lower type of co-ops to the socialist type. By winter of 1957-58, a large proportion of these co-operatives had paid much of the debts incurred in the purchase of their joint property and had even begun to save "accumulation funds." They were ready to think of wider advance.

The first joint aim deeply felt by China's peasants is control of the water supply. For centuries they have lived at the mercy of rains and rivers, with floods and droughts decreed by the climate and the long-eroded soils. In the eight years after liberation, the national government accomplished many remarkable feats of water conservation, increasing the irrigated area by some forty million acres, doubling the total irrigated land which the past centuries had achieved. This achievement was still far below the peasants' needs.

"To conquer floods and drought forever," as a popular peasant slogan has it, would clearly take generations if done by the national government, and would cost an unbearable amount in taxes. Moreover the great state projects had limits: many reservoirs and canals of past dynasties had been silted up by soil draining steadily from eroded hills. The problem began not with great floods but with millions of small streams washing down ravines. If the local peasants could retain these, their own farms would profit at once by the locally-retained soil and water, and at the same time this would materially help control the greater floods. By winter of 1957-58 this was widely understood, not only by experts but by the peasants. For China's peasants today are literate and avidly study any information that they find of use.

Great drives began in many parts of China in winter of 1957-58 which dwarfed all irrigation work previously done in world history. Of these drives I mention only two.

Honan Province was notoriously poor and subject to famine. It suffered for centuries the floods of the Yellow River and these were often followed by drought when the waters fell. "Ten seasons, nine calamities," said the local proverb. When I visited Honan in October 1958, they gave me figures. The province had inherited from past centuries some 1,266,670 irrigated acres. In seven years the national government, aided by local people, built projects that irrigated 4,500,000 acres more. Then, in winter of 1957-58, the local farmers organized "to banish flood and drought forever." Millions turned out and built reservoirs, dams, wells, cisterns, ponds of every kind, and stored enough water for 13,750,000 acres, three times what the national government achieved in seven years!

The projects were not all well done by the local farmers. Some dams and reservoirs were washed away. Only a small part of the stored water was in completed irrigation systems: it was in ponds and wells from which human labor must still carry it by pails to the fields. This did not worry Honan farmers; they had the water where they could get it and within another year or two they could add the electric pumps to lift it into channels for the fields. With water already stored on their land, they felt secure.

Even more spectacular was the achievement in Anhwei Province, at the joining of the Yangtze and Hwai rivers and the Grand Canal. In the years after liberation, the national government built here the great Hwai River project, a gigantic flood-control job which became famous around the world. This relieved the great floods, but left the local problems of lesser floods, drought and water-logging, which Anhwei shares with much of the North China Plain. The daring peasants proposed to handle this problem by criss-crossing the province with wide canals, which should then be connected with the Yangtze, the Hwai and Yellow rivers and the Grand Canal, and furnish irrigation, drainage, water-power and water transport to every township. It was an idea which, starting in Anhwei, was within a year to be discussed as a serious plan for the whole North China Plain.

In spring of 1958 the Anhwei peasants announced that in the irrigation and water-control jobs north of the Hwai, they had done a total of 3,900,000,000 cubic meters of earth removal during the previous winter, and that this was "seven times what the government did in the same area in the preceding eight years," which included the Hwai River project. The statisticians then added an even more astounding detail of a type dear to the hearts of the thrifty Chinese. When the national government removed the earth, it cost 364 yuan[1] per thousand cubic meters, but when the local people did it, it cost the state just 2.30 yuan, only 1/158th as much. The cost per thousand cubic meters of water stored was 290 yuan when the state did it, but only 1.80 yuan when the peasants did it, just 1/160th as much. The state had paid for some bridges, tunnels, arches, tools and wages of technicians. The local farmers did the rest.

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[1] 1 yuan=42 cents or 2.8 shillings. Other Chinese units used in this book: 1 catty=1.1 pounds or 0.5 kilo. 1 *mou*=0.16 acre or 0.06 hectare.

Who paid for this incredible achievement? This of course is where Mr. Dulles says "forced labor," and where the Chinese Communists say "the peasants' political consciousness." The peasants tell you it was "improving our own land." In point of fact, the individuals doing the work were paid, but not by the state and not, in most cases, in cash. They were paid by local co-operative farms, which credited their work on irrigation as work done for the farm, and hence payable by an increased share in the joint harvest. A tax economist would therefore find that the work was actually paid by a local taxation, assumed by the co-operative farms because they saw its immediate benefits, because they could easily spare the labor in winter, and because everybody hailed it as the surest way to guarantee the coming harvest.

In many other parts of China great water-control projects were begun or completed that winter of 1957-58. In Kansu they were bringing the waters of the Tao River over the mountains to irrigate two and a half million acres of hitherto arid soil. In Kwangsi they were controlling the Lunkiang, in Hopei the Haiho. In Sinkiang deserts they were renovating ancient irrigation systems after centuries of disuse. In Inner Mongolia and other parts of the arid northwest, they declared war against the moving sand dunes of the Gobi which in slow centuries have been swallowing the settlements of men. In Shansi, one of the worst eroded areas, where soft loess soil ran down treeless slopes with a total loss of three hundred million tons of soil a year, work began which within a year announced the terracing of four million acres of sloping land, and the consequent cutting of erosion by one third, saving to the province a hundred million tons of soil per year.

No Westerner will find it easy to accept such figures, but it is not wise to discount them, for every Chinese child eagerly counts the achievements of his village and every province checks on other provinces. The Westerner can at least note, what may be more important, that everywhere in China appears a great poster whose design has been copied by hundreds of thousands of local amateur artists on frescoed local walls — as common as Coca-Cola in the U.S.A. It depicts a giant peasant splitting a great cliff and ushering a swift river through, and it bears the words: "Let the mountain lower its head; let the river course be moved." This is the theme of China today.

From such actions grew "the military form," not by orders from Peking but by the fact that when men went out "to conquer a mountain" it was cheerful and effective to go with drums and banners, and to plant flags on hills showing the extent of their work. Later Mr. Dulles spoke of it as "the enslavement of the Chinese peasant," an epithet at which all Chinese angrily laughed.

None of these great actions were begun by the people's communes. But out of them the people's communes were born.

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A fascinating motion picture by one of China's many film-producing companies tells a typical story of the birth of a commune. It is called "County Secretary" and portrays with drama and humor the struggle of twenty small co-operatives in the office of a Party secretary, for the one modern irrigation pump the county had so far obtained. The chairman of Co-op No. Three, a doughty one-legged veteran of the liberation war, wins the pump on merit but loses it through the weakness of the county office to the greedy Co-op No. Eighteen. Unwilling to start a feud, he suggests that if the other co-ops will help him with labor to dig a ditch from Blue Dragon Fall for irrigation, this will be "better than the pump." The county secretary, inspecting the fall with a technician, finds that the best proposal is a big reservoir, useful on county scale, but inundating half the land of Co-op No. Three. . . . Out of this and other dramatic conflicts between local interests and county-wide development, the result is clear. All the co-ops form a federation, which builds the dam and uses it for everyone's interest. This is a simple, dramatic statement of the actual type of situation from which communes arose.

Spontaneous merger of farming co-ops into larger units began in many parts of China in spring of 1958. They took various names, such as "federation of co-operatives," or "enlarged co-operative." Most of them, but not all, came as a result of needs discovered in the irrigation drive of the previous winter. Thus forty-eight small co-ops on the Tanshui River in Honan built eighty small water-control projects during the winter, but because of small scale, poor quality and inability to select the best site, which might be on another farm's land, many of these projects were damaged in the summer flood. When the small co-ops merged, they were able to plan thirteen larger reservoirs, which eliminated the menace of flood and drought.

All these new mergers, whether they grew from the irrigation drive or from other causes, came because the farming co-ops felt a shortage of labor. This is another fact which will seem incredible to the West. Has not China had peasant labor in great excess? But it was a fact that the small co-ops could not deploy labor on the scale needed for all the new activities they wanted. This lack expressed itself in many ways. The Kuochuang Co-op had iron-ore on its land but lacked coal; the nearby Tienchuang Co-op had coal but no iron. Neither co-operative had funds or labor enough to buy from the other and start the making of iron. When the two merged, it was simple to begin the making of iron and steel by native methods for farm implements. . . .

The Sputnik Co-op in Suiping County of Honan, formed in April 1958 by merger of twenty-seven smaller co-ops, and which called itself at first an "enlarged co-operative," later claimed to have been the first people's commune. There are reasons for this claim, for the Sputnik's new constitution was published and widely copied, and Honan was indeed a main basis for the first great expansion of communes. But enlarged co-ops appeared also in many other provinces at about the same time as Sputnik. Liaoning, Szechwan, Kwangtung provinces all have claims. It may be of interest to note here two other widely differing communes, which began in different manners, and which show how varied the new tendency was.

A small island off the Chekiang coast, known as May the First Island, had actually a people's commune, though without the name, as early as 1954. Its total population is 2,700 souls, all fisherfolk. In 1953 they organized four fishing co-operatives. In 1954 these merged into one, thus ending quarrels over the rich but limited fishing grounds. The merger gave funds and manpower enough to launch into deep-sea fishing. The co-op took over the functions of the township government, which later was the typical mark of a people's commune. It absorbed small handicraft co-ops, a credit and marketing co-op and a small farming co-op which grew the locally-consumed vegetables.

When the movement for communes began, this little island not only took the new name at once but was ready for a big drive. It set up a fish-processing industry, established trade with the mainland, and sent a number of young men to Shanghai to learn to operate motor junks. By December they had built eighteen motor junks and ordered two trawlers: some of the young men already commanded motor vessels at sea. They had also a dozen small factories for motor repair, iron smelting, making fish-nets. They had a broadcasting station, a library, a "palace of culture," a school for fishery, a maternity home, electric lights and telephones. The 1958 gross income was five times that of 1957, a total of three million yuan, 1,100 yuan per capita, which is $450 U.S.A. Much of this would at once be reinvested, but all the fisher families now had bank accounts, while fifty of the poorest had moved into new homes during the year. This amazing advance showed what an already-organized community could do on the basis of the new form.

The Changshih Commune in Kwangtung, which also can claim to be one of the earliest, as it started in April 1958, is interesting for another reason. It grew out of the failure of the co-ops in 1957, and it illustrates the part played by Communist leadership in arresting and reversing a failure. This township had some 20,000 people, and there were eight farming co-operatives, none of which was doing very well. The area was mountainous with thick forests and rich ore deposits which the peasants exploited spasmodically. The small co-operatives proved unable to handle two kinds of work at once. In 1956 they got a good rice crop but neglected the side-occupations; in 1957 they developed the side-occupations and the grain fell to 219 catties per *mou* for the late rice crop. This was partly because the better-off middle peasants, dissatisfied with the income from the co-operative, had taken to private jobs such as peddling ore in Canton, so that entire field gangs were absent from the fields as long as two months. Members in one co-operative drowned sixty pigs in order to eat them. One township official went in for peddling watches without a license, thus evading the tax laws. In short, the drift towards capitalism, which always exists in a peasant economy, was breaking up the Changshih co-operatives.

The contrast of nearby successes with their own failure aroused the local Communists in late 1957. They reacted by holding a "rectification campaign" followed by a "great debate," a process then common in China. A mass meeting of the eight hundred local Communists was first held to criticize and analyze their own errors: this lasted several days. Then a "great debate" began for all the peasants on the subject: "Which road is best for China, for Changshih, for YOU personally, capitalism or socialism?" Since the Communists in their own discussion had already confessed their shortcomings and developed some useful ideas, they were able to show the peasants that the road of individual enterprise, however attractive at first, led to the splitting of the community, the exploitation of some by others, the return of the "old society." The way to cure the lacks of the co-operatives was to combine them, thus gaining enough labor power to organize division of labor. Permanent groups should specialize for each occupation. One eighth of the total labor force should be permanently assigned to the timber and mines, and keep this work going with a skeleton force even during the height of field work: then, when field work lessened, large numbers of workers could be thrown into the side-occupations under leadership of the permanent staff. Thus Changshih moved towards modern division of labor.

The eight co-operatives merged in April 1958, took over also the local handicraft co-operative, tailors' co-operative and some transport workers, and were soon given the state-owned marketing establishment. With these changes, and working with the new, united conviction that socialism was the best road for everyone and that they must make it work, the new combination, later renamed a people's commune, secured a total income of 13,000,000 yuan in 1958, five times the income of 1957. Of this somewhat more than half came from timber, ore, and newly-organized small industries, but the most spectacular progress was in the late rice crop, which had a yield of 1,717 catties per *mou*, eight times the yield of 1957. The income per capita is still extremely low by western standards: it was reckoned at 650 yuan gross income, or 400 yuan net income per capita, counting children and dependants: but the commune put so much back into new investment that its workers will draw only 10 yuan per month, about $4.00 U.S.A. . . . However, in the past most of the peasants never drew any wages, and Changshih today offers its members not only wages, but three good meals daily for everyone, children and aged included, for which they have not only more rice than they can eat, but also pork, fish, chicken, vegetables, fruits, mushrooms, peanut oil, tea and honey, all produced by themselves. "Salt is the only thing we have to buy," they boast.

One learns from the Changshih Commune that, because the leadership of the Communist Party penetrates and connects all areas, no local failure is final, but is discovered, analyzed, and made a starting-point for a wider success. This was even more strikingly illustrated by Honan Province, which, partly because of mistakes made in 1957, became in 1958 the leader in the organization of communes. In 1957 there was controversy in Honan as to whether small co-operatives or larger ones were best. Conservatives in the provincial Party committee supported the richer peasants' demand for small co-operatives, and induced a fairly large proportion of Honan's co-operatives to split into smaller groups. All those which did so found themselves at harvest of 1957 far behind the record of the co-operatives which had persisted in keeping a larger size. The lesson was learned. Honan peasants at once reversed the trend and promoted wider and wider amalgamation with confidence born of harsh experience. The winter irrigation drive strengthened this tendency. By April 1958, Honan, somewhat ahead of other provinces, brought forth the enlarged co-operatives that became people's communes.

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It is therefore convenient to start the history of the communes with the Sputnik Commune in Honan, even though it began at about the same time as several others. For the Sputnik was the first in Honan and Honan established the trend. It was a trend not only towards larger size but wider function. The agricultural co-operatives, in merging, took over also local handicraft, marketing and credit co-operatives, practically all of which served the farms. With the greatly increased labor force, a greater discipline was needed. Permanent labor groups were formed, assigned to special tasks or special fields. Having few clocks, they were often called to work by bells or bugles. They set out "to attack a mountain" with drums and banners, and proudly called this "the military form," not knowing — and probably not caring — how Mr. Dulles would later abuse this term. The tendency to set up nurseries for the convenience of mothers engaged in field work, which had begun in the smaller co-operatives, now widened; these services, which the smaller co-operatives usually charged for, began to be offered free. Public canteens, to save the women from the heavy drudgery of peasant households, and to carry food to the field gangs during harvest, appeared and grew.

All these changes began in the small co-operatives and increased in the larger ones. They marked the beginning of a new form. But the peasants were not yet aware of this, nor had the new form yet a name.

The new name and the precise definition of function, came from Mao Tse-tung's research and especially from his trips that summer to these new enlarged co-operatives. The Central Committee was of course carefully watching these developments: Mao himself, as well as the other Party leaders, spent much time in summer of 1958 travelling to the farms and talking with the peasants and the local leaders. In early August, about the time when Sputnik adopted its constitution as a people's commune, some Shantung peasants, seeking wider organization, proposed that they become a state farm. Mao told them that a state farm was confined to agriculture and this was not what they wanted. They wanted to absorb not only farming, but local industry and trade. This, he said, was a "people's commune" and they should add education and home defense as well.

This remark was published in the press: it crystallized action across the country. Dozens of peasants have told me this. All rural China at the time was discussing the enlarged co-operatives and asking in what manner they themselves might gain new strength. Evergreen Commune near Peking told me they sent a delegation to study the new form in Honan. Kansu farm women said they did not travel so far and why should they?

"When Chairman Mao said: 'People's communes are good,' and that they should include all those things we wanted, we said at once: 'Then why wait?' "

A leading Communist thus put it to me later: "The peasants already knew that they wanted to handle as a unit everything in their locality. They did not have the science to formulate this. The Central Committee had already discussed the future form of expansion but had reached no decision. Chairman Mao supplied the science and analysis. From his discussions with Shantung and Honan peasants that summer, the people's communes in their present form were born."

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The first publicly-announced people's commune was the Sputnik Commune of Honan, which adopted its new constitution on August 7, 1958. It comprised at the time four townships with 9,300 households and 43,000 people. The constitution was published and the fame of the Sputnik so spread that it recorded 85,000 visitors from all over China in six months. This constitution is therefore historic.

The people's commune, in this constitution, was declared to be "a basic unit of society" whose task is "to manage all industrial and agricultural production, trade, cultural and educational work and political affairs within its own sphere." "Military affairs" were not listed among essential functions but Article 10 provided for "a system of citizen soldiery."

The commune took over all members of the merging co-operatives who had reached the age of sixteen. Members had the right to elect the management, to be elected, to vote on all the commune's affairs. Individual peasants might also join by turning over to common ownership their means of production, except for small domestic animals and small farm tools which were privately retained. Property turned over to the commune was partly taken as "share capital" as in the former co-operative, but any excess over a modest "share capital" was listed as "investment" to be repaid. All past investments by members of co-operatives, such as livestock and tools turned over at various periods, were also assumed by the commune as debts. The commune took over all collectively-owned property and reserve funds of the constituent co-operatives and also all debts, except for the current funds and debts of the operating year, which the co-operative must complete.

The commune's tasks were to develop "an expanding agricultural output," to build "industry as rapidly as possible," to build roads, dredge waterways, build modern communications. One item provided "one or two postmen" for each "production contingent," a quick way of getting rural free delivery without cost to the state. The commune took over the local branch of the state bank and state trading organs, ran them under regulations fixed by the higher organs, and divided the profits. It absorbed local government, taking over one or more townships: this meant in practise especially the running of local primary and middle schools. The commune thus also became the registrar of marriages.

All local resources of nature and man were thus unified, and under democratic control. For the highest organization was the "congress of the commune," made up of elected representatives from all production brigades and all sections of the people, such as women's organizations, youth, old people, educational workers, personnel of industrial enterprises. This congress, elected on a functional basis, then elected a "management committee" and a "supervisory committee" for checking and inspection. The management committee set up departments for different tasks: agriculture, forestry, water control, livestock, fishery, industry, finance, trade, culture and education, armed defense and the like. All these had force of government at township level.

Members were to be paid "according to work." A "wage system" would be set up when the commune "acquires stability of income." This would replace the system common under the co-operatives of paying by workdays, reckoned at harvest. The wage system made local industry possible, and began the transition from peasant life to the life of industrial workers. Far down in Article 15, the constitution mentioned the possibility of free grain to members "when the grain supply reaches a higher level and all members of the commune agree. . . ." This free supply to everyone, including children and aged unable to work, was to be introduced only when the harvest was enough to do it, "while increasing and not decreasing the income of members supplying the labor power. . . ." The commune did not intend that any ultra-left voting by large, hungry families should introduce any free distribution that might discourage the actual laboring force.

The commune was to organize the labor force in "production brigades," or working units usually ranging from one hundred to a hundred and fifty able-bodied adults, and these were to be combined in what we may translate as "production contingents," usually over five hundred workers. Community canteens were to be organized and also nurseries, kindergartens and sewing teams "to free the women from household labor." These services were to be run at cost, "without losses or profits." In practise, with the bumper harvest that soon came, they were usually run without any charge at all. An important provision noted: "Members need not use the canteen or nursery service if they do not want to."

Other articles provided for "universal, compulsory education," for "health and medical service on a co-operative basis," not necessarily free, for "Happy Courts" for the aged and disabled "who have nobody to depend on" — which implied a system of old-age relief, and certainly not "splitting of the home." Other provisions were for financing and planning, reserves and expansion.

The full daring and originality of this new organization becomes clear from careful study of the constitution. The citizens of the local area, usually of township size, assumed ownership and management of all local natural resources, land, minerals, livestock, industries, subject only to normal taxes to the state. They were to manage these properties democratically, and expand them, and take responsibility for caring for all children and disabled, for paying steadily-increasing wages to all workers, for developing education and health services, roads, communications, irrigation works from their own resources and suitable to their needs.

Any student of government or of economic forms can at once think of many problems which this type of organization will face. But the comment quickly made abroad — that the communes were "militarization by Peking" seems singularly untrue. For no such decentralization of government, of economic assets and management had ever been seen before. It was now being proposed in the most populous nation on earth, with 650,000,000 people, who had been mostly illiterate ten years earlier, and who were now being offered, in local organizations, the ownership and management of the local resources, with the responsibility of using these to develop not only food production, but industry, trade, education, government, and all they desired of a good life.

The peasants of China saw this new form as unprecedented opportunity for rapid progress. The Communists of China saw it as the basic cell in what would become the future communist society. But in the rest of the world, which, far more than China, is today disturbed by the threat of annihilating, thermonuclear war, there must have been those who saw at once that the communes made China invulnerable far beyond other nations. Short of a war destroying the human race on the planet — a possibility in which the Chinese do not believe — what major harm can be done to a nation whose great central irrigation dams are supplemented by millions of small reservoirs in every township, whose central steel plants are reinforced by local iron and steel works in every county, whose citizens are organized to the ends of the land as mobile warriors, with every small unit able to raise food, make clothing and steel, and govern itself on a township basis? The strategic invulnerability which the people's commune gives to China, as well as the great economic potential, possibly accounts for the virulence of the foreign attack.

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The constitution of Sputnik Commune, adopted on August 7, was widely published "as reference material." This gave prestige but no authority over any people except its own members. The Communist Party of China had not yet spoken any authoritative word as to the commune's detailed form. During August, the provincial Party committees everywhere promoted experimental communes, encouraging sample "enlarged co-operatives" to develop their own ideas. By the end of August it was reported that all the peasants in Honan and Liaoning provinces had joined the communes, and that on a national scale thirty per cent of all China's peasants had joined.

Then, and then only, did the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party issue its first official resolution on the communes, on August 29, 1958.

This resolution, the first official statement of nationwide policy, was a modest document of six pages, somewhat more conservative than the Sputnik constitution. It stated that "people's communes . . . have made their appearance," that "it is highly probable that there will soon be an upsurge," and that, because of the "unprecedented advance . . . in farming . . . and the demands of rural industry for manpower . . . this new form has become the proper form to accelerate socialist construction . . . and carry out the gradual transition to communism." The township is recommended as the normal size, but larger or smaller communes may appear through local conditions. Mergers of local co-operatives should depend on local decision and this "should not be hastened." No changes of ownership should be pushed "beyond the desires of the owners."

All large, merged co-operatives should now be called "people's communes." They should embrace not only farming but also industry, trade, education and military affairs at the lowest level. They should seek to introduce a wage system instead of the earlier indefinite payment by shares of harvest. Payments were still "on the basis of work done" and not "according to needs." But in future the communes are the best form "for transition to communism" and will develop into "basic units" of the future communist society.

No mention was made in this short restrained resolution of anything like "free food." The Sputnik constitution had mentioned "grain supply" as a future possibility: the Communist Party's resolution did not go so far. But within a month the communes, organizing across all China, were to raise the banner of "free food" in a happy assertion that, to China's peasants, even wages were less important than the great dream that nobody in the area should be hungry, that famine of centuries was conquered at last.

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As one traces the history of the rise of the people's communes, one is struck by the constant presence of communist leadership and yet by how little it takes the form of "orders from Peking." Communist leadership exists from the township to the nation's center. The local Communists seek to organize the local people for the satisfaction of their demands for a better life. When they lead badly, as they did in 1957 in Changshih through apathy and in Honan Province through choice of a mistaken line, they are brought up short by actual failure, shown by small harvests and a poorer life. Mistakes of this kind provoke their own correction and may even introduce a new advance.

Meantime the Central Committee publicizes the successes in the press, studies the failures, and analyzes in what ways and forms the people's demands may best be achieved. A popular drive is encouraged; this goes as far and as fast as the people will take it, and gives birth to hundreds of new ideas and forms that at first are not restrained by criticism from above. "The first requisite of a people's movement is that it shall move," said a Peking Communist to me, "and premature comment might halt it." After a few weeks it is clear that the people have chosen a direction but that many details are disputed or tend to excess. Now is the time for analysis, criticism, the crystallizing of a form. Then the Central Committee speaks, fixing the new line in a formal resolution. It is significant that the line thus fixed does not go as far as the most advanced examples; it goes as far as the Central Committee judges the great mass of the people are ready to go. But it also indicates a future trend further than the most advanced have gone.

This technique of leadership, deriving policy from the demands and actions of the people, analyzing them and giving a clear form and returning this to the people to encourage a greater drive, is what is called the "mass line." The Party Resolution on Communes of August 29, was passed after thirty per cent of the peasants had joined communes. It predicted "an upsurge" and the upsurge quickly came. By September's end ninety per cent of the peasants were in communes and many of them, excited by their bumper crop, were going far beyond the Party resolution and declaring "free food." Many of them were competing somewhat to excess in the number of free items they offered.

Through October and November they advanced in a dozen directions with a force of explosion, creating new industries, mines, forestry, fisheries, dining-rooms, schools, housing, according to local demand. Not until 99% of the peasants were in communes, and two months' experience again began to show what methods were succeeding and which bore seeds of failure, would the Central Committee intervene again.

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SLEEPING ON THE HILL

With iron pick for pillow
And feet against a rock,
With earth beneath for mattress
And sky my bedding quilt,
The north wind woke me,
But I turned over and said:
"Blow there!
Blow the moon down!
You won't blow me off the hill
Till our dam is done."

(Shantung)