

## It Takes a Village: Land Reform in the Classroom

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In the summer of 1998 I found myself in Beijing, bored. Unlike later years when the city flooded with knockoff DVDs, there was little to do during the hours between Chinese classes. Luckily a fellow *liuxuesheng* had hauled a small library of Chinese history classics to Beijing, so I passed the hours reading. One book struck a deep nerve: *Fanshen*, William Hinton's "documentary" account of land reform in the village he called Long Bow. Sitting in an air-conditioned hotel room, I delved into this tale of an American radical personally witnessing the overthrow of feudal power in the Shanxi countryside. A few years later when I was in the first year of my PhD program I told my advisor I intended to investigate the changes the Communists brought to the rural cultural scene. Intrigued, he suggested I focus my dissertation on land reform. Memories of Hinton's stories of violent class struggle and peasant liberation instantly returned to my mind as if I had read *Fanshen* that very morning. I didn't hesitate, land reform it was.

*Fanshen* captured my imagination, and in this I am far from alone. Falling under the spell of Hinton's prose, which often reads as narrative fiction, is an affliction that spans generations. To say that the book has defined the academic understanding of land reform and rural revolution broadly is no overstatement. Because the massive scale of land reform eludes easy textualization, Hinton's gripping description of revolution in a single village has become entrenched as the go-to source for a global understanding of Maoist revolution. A few years after its publication, *Fanshen* was already declared a classic, listed as one of the essential books on China in *Harvard Magazine* for documenting rural revolution from an unforgettable eyewitness perspective and revealing how China's peasant masses "were ripe for mobilization by Communist activists and officials."<sup>1</sup> Over the years, textbooks have relied on Hinton's account to explain land reform to generation after generation of students.<sup>2</sup> One recent textbook, for example, praised *Fanshen* as a "detailed and memorable account" of rural revolution and summarized Hinton's description of land reform, including the violent struggling of collaborators and landlords.<sup>3</sup> The tendency to rely on Hinton's text as a shorthand description of land reform shows no sign of abating. During 2017 *Fanshen* was cited dozens of times, popping up in everything from studies on the Cultural Revolution, civil war, footbinding, social performance, and marriage reform.<sup>4</sup>

My dissertation research into land reform, conducted in Beijing, Hong Kong, and eventually Long Bow itself, revealed the inadequacy and errors in Hinton's account. Many of the problems with *Fanshen* stem from what made the book such a compelling read: Hinton's masterful use of narrative. Reading land reform novels written by Ding Ling and Zhou Libo, I recognized a close correlation between Communist narratives of the campaign and Hinton's "documentary" findings. I also came to realize why, over fifty years after land reform had come to a close, no English language book-length account of this critical moment in rural revolution existed.<sup>5</sup> The Chinese language studies of land reform were dry and dusty affairs,

notable for their massive length and unreadability. After completing my graduate studies I quickly turned my attention to drama troupes and quietly admitted to my colleagues that I hoped someone else would take up the task of writing a true study of land reform.

I took comfort in the belief that I could at least teach land reform to my students. Years of research had confirmed that this was indeed the critical moment in rural revolution, full of drama, violence, and the promise of liberation. And armed with an understanding of the party's experimental policies, ever shifting laws, as well as deviations left and right, I could avoid the simplified story Hinton had spun decades earlier. Teaching land reform, however, has proven a difficult process, starting with the simple fact that the majority of my students have no idea what the term "land reform" might even mean.<sup>6</sup> And so every year I walk my undergraduate charges many miles down the long and winding road of land reform, starting with the May 4<sup>th</sup> Directive of 1946 that signaled the official start of the campaigns. Early experiments with buying property from landlords for redistribution to poverty-stricken peasants gave way to violent struggle and the forcible seizure of wealth. Growing calls for equalization led to the *Outline Land Law* of 1947, which promised even distribution of land holdings in village China. As I explain to my students, the new law of the land mobilized poor villagers to support the party, but also encouraged a seemingly never-ending search for hidden wealth that produced widespread strife as the tide of the Civil War turned in favor of the Communists. As a result, the party called a halt to land reform until victory was assured.

This decision has fundamentally affected how we understand and teach land reform, and once again *Fanshen* plays a pivotal role. Because most history textbooks rely on *Fanshen* for their understanding of land reform, the Civil War era campaigns, and specifically Hinton's depiction of rural revolution in Long Bow, have become the defining moment for land reform. PRC-era land reform campaigns, much larger affairs affecting hundreds of millions of villagers, are typically lumped together with other early PRC mass campaigns as part of a larger "state-building" process.<sup>7</sup> One of the reasons I am interested in land reform is that the campaigns cross the 1949 divide, but in the context of a modern China history course that means that discussions of the final stages of land reform must occur in a separate lecture, which highlights continuities and disjunctions with the Civil War campaigns. This final stage of land reform promised a more lenient approach to the treatment of rural classes, as well as an orderly implementation of the new rural order. The *Land Reform Law of the People's Republic of China*, issued in the summer of 1950, protected the property of rich peasants in order to ensure the quick recovery of the war torn economy. This was especially important as Mao's rural revolution moved into the relatively wealthy environs of South and Southwest China.

Close attention to the winding course of land reform policy is essential, but what of the narratives of land reform found in

works by Hinton, Ding Ling, and Zhou Libo? As a student *Fanshen* drew me into the process of rural revolution in Long Bow, but as a historian I had become suspicious of Hinton's story, which faithfully follows the party's narrative of peasant liberation through fierce class struggle. Recent research has also revealed how Hinton crafted his narrative by removing significant information about his own role in Long Bow's revolution. He did so, I believe, to put a stronger focus on the Chinese people and their revolution. But by cutting from his book his significant difficulties working in Long Bow, including an ongoing quarrel with one of his translators that led to a near total estrangement with his work team, Hinton elided issues of language and what exactly he knew as an outsider relying on the party for his access to the countryside.

*Fanshen* can no longer be assigned or cited as a "documentary" of rural revolution.<sup>8</sup> But narratives are part of the craft of writing history, and so too do they have a place in the classroom. Students, as many teachers well understand, respond strongly to stories. In my survey on early Chinese history, for example, I always make sure to find the time to retell the story of King Goujian, who famously vowed to "lie on firewood and taste gall" until he found revenge on a neighboring kingdom. Grisly details and surprising plot-twists aside, there are compelling reasons to introduce my students to King Goujian: his tale has been used as a powerful metaphor throughout Chinese history, most recently to encourage students to study hard.<sup>9</sup> And because King Goujian's story has been accepted as factually correct in China, this narrative has become highly influential in its own right.

A similar process occurred with land reform, which generally followed the outline for rural revolution found in Mao Zedong's *Report on an Investigation into the Peasant Movement in Hunan*. Party artists serving on work teams put their experiences into narrative form by writing land reform novels, creating literary field guides for future work teams. Cities, meanwhile, hosted elaborate exhibits to visualize the land reform narrative. Because urban residents were explicitly instructed to read land reform novels and attend land reform

exhibits to help them prepare to carry out agrarian revolution, I have always believed that students could not understand land reform without a deep engagement with the narrative that informed the campaigns. This raises another problem. My students are curious about the lives of the historical actors we discuss in class, but the cast of characters needed for the drama of land reform, these landlords and peasants, who exactly were they? In order to help my students engage land reform and its inescapable narrative, I turn my classroom into village. I do this often when discussing rural issues; students have little hope of understanding the lives of farmers without using some imagination, and a bit of role play never fails in this regard.

First a handful of students are recruited into a work team, just as students and intellectuals were mobilized to transform the countryside during the actual campaigns. After arriving in our classroom village, the team seeks out the poor and bitter, which allows a discussion of the realities of economic differentiation in rural China. As I emphasize to my students, freshly labeled as peasants and landlords, these new class statuses were also novel in rural China. A good farmer blessed with multiple hard working sons was suddenly a rich peasant. Wealthier villagers who rented out their lands, perhaps formerly known as a "moneybags," were now labeled landlords. These class labels, while new, had extreme importance for rural life. Our classroom village continues the story of land reform as the work team organizes poor peasants to speak bitterness, preparing for the final struggle of our unlucky landlords.<sup>10</sup> I first walk my students through the story of land reform first during a discussion of the Civil War, repeating the process once again during my lecture on early PRC mass campaigns. By highlighting the shifting fortunes of various rural classes, my aim is to bring home to students how seemingly abstract Communist policies had profound implications in Chinese villages.

<sup>1</sup> Jerome Alan Cohen, "Just Fifteen Books on China?" *Harvard Magazine*, 1974, 64.

<sup>2</sup> For one particularly influential use of *Fanshen*, see Jonathan Spence, *The Search for Modern China* (Third Edition) (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2012), 440-441.

<sup>3</sup> Andrew G. Walder, *China under Mao: A Revolution Derailed* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015), 46-47.

<sup>4</sup> [https://scholar.google.com/scholar?cites=1163317906693260075&as\\_sdt=8000005&sciodt=0.19&hl=en](https://scholar.google.com/scholar?cites=1163317906693260075&as_sdt=8000005&sciodt=0.19&hl=en). Accessed January 4, 2018.

<sup>5</sup> Aspects of land reform and other rural campaigns, to be sure, appear in a number of important studies of the Chinese revolution. See, for example Suzanne Pepper, *Civil War in China: The Political Struggle 1945-1949* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1999) and Vivienne Shue, *Peasant China in Transition: The Dynamics of Development Toward Socialism, 1949-1956* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981).

<sup>6</sup> By and large my students, while bright and inquisitive, enroll in my courses to fulfill a "non-West" requirement. They know little of China, and nothing of rural revolution.

<sup>7</sup> In *The Search for Modern China*, for example, Spence quickly dispenses with PRC-era land reform in order to move on to much more in-depth discussions of state structures, the Korean War, and urban mass campaigns. For his coverage of post-1949 land reform, see Spence, 462-463.

<sup>8</sup> This is not to say, however, that it should be forgotten! *Fanshen* is still a tremendous read, and is essential for anyone interested in the global appeal of Maoism.

<sup>9</sup> Paul Cohen, *Speaking to History: The Story of King Goujian in Twentieth-Century China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010).

<sup>10</sup> Here I will add that I have never actually organized class struggle in my classroom. It would, I am sure, be an unforgettable experience for my students, but I have always been wary of a Tulane land reform experiment spiraling out of control. Perhaps now that I have tenure it is time to revisit the idea.