MAO'S WAR AGAINST NATURE? THE ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT OF THE GRAIN-FIRST CAMPAIGN IN CHINA*

Peter Ho

Abstract

It is generally assumed that agricultural policies in Maoist China – in particular through mass movements – have led to grave ecological destruction. The movement believed to have had the most catastrophic outcome is the "Grain-first campaign", which allegedly urged farmers to cultivate as much grain as possible. It is said that in the arid, pastoral areas indiscriminate reclamation led to desertification and a dramatic drop in livestock numbers. However, this article demonstrates that there is a fundamental lack of concordance between textual sources written during the collectivist period versus those of the post-collectivist period. A filtering process is apparent: misrepresentation of the Grain-first movement as lopsidedly geared to grain self-sufficiency instead of integrated development; denial of the concern for environmental protection of certain mass campaigns (e.g. Learn-from-Dazhai and Wushenzhao movements); and the juggling of statistics to support an inaccurate reading of the Maoist era. The article argues that the Grain-first movement has become a powerful tool in directing the "historical gaze" towards an overly negative appraisal of the Maoist period. In turn, this caused a misguided interpretation of the socio-political context in which mass campaigns evolved.

Introduction

The period from land reform in the early 1950s to the end of the Cultural Revolution decade in 1976 witnessed great socio-economic and political changes. The People's Republic was wracked by political upheavals and mass campaigns such as the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution. Mao Zedong believed that campaigns were the ultimate means to effect the "socialist transformation" of Chinese society and that such campaigns were instrumental in achieving a full-fledged Communist state. For this reason, campaigns were

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deployed for various purposes in different economic sectors: among them, campaigns that aimed to transform the natural environment to serve human needs. Not unlike Western politicians of his time[1] Mao, too, had an excessively optimistic belief in the power of science to master nature. In his words:

> If people living in nature want to be free, they will have to use natural sciences to understand, overcome and change nature; only then will they obtain freedom from nature.[2]

According to Judith Shapiro, this "polarizing, adversarial language … captures the core dynamic of environmental degradation of the era" in China.[3] She argued that Mao's conceptualization of the relation between humankind, science and nature led to grave ecological destruction. One of the campaigns commonly believed to have had the largest negative impact on the environment is the Grain-first campaign. This campaign allegedly sprang from one of Mao's collectivist blunders, the Great Leap Forward, which caused the world's largest famine. In reaction, it is argued, the central state became overly concerned with food security. In order to attain self-sufficiency in grain the rural populace was urged to cultivate as much grain as possible. Reportedly forestry, animal husbandry and rural sidelines all yielded to grain cultivation, and even land unsuited to agriculture was reclaimed to satisfy the country's need for grain. Warnings from the grassroots were disregarded because man and science dictated to nature and not *vice versa*. In the arid, pastoral areas of China's northwest, it is said, indiscriminate agricultural reclamation gave way to desertification.

There is no doubt that the era of collectivism caused great physical and psychological suffering for many herders and had a profound impact on pastoral society. But Chinese and Western authors have recorded the period of collectivism *solely* in negative terms, such as an alleged massive slaughtering of animals when pastoralists felt insecure about the direction of political winds; the neglect of livestock by herders dispirited by the unrewarding Dazhai work-point system; and the undermining of customary rights and emergence of the "Tragedy of the Commons"—uncontrolled overgrazing through free-riding.[4]

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1 One only needs to recall the enthusiasm with which the Green Revolution was propagated in the South to understand that Mao Zedong was certainly not an exception of his era.

2 *Nongken* (Agricultural Reclamation), No. 6, 1966, p. 44.

3 Judith Shapiro, *Mao's War Against Nature: Politics and the Environment in Revolutionary China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 4.

4 There are several studies that deal with the effects of collectivism on customary rights systems in pastoral areas; see Li Ou, Ma Rong and James R. Simpson. "Changes in the Nomadic Pattern and its Impact on the Inner Mongolian Steppe Grasslands Ecosystem",

The slogan that in the dominant discourse is thought to best capture the spirit of collective madness during the Grain-first movement is "take grain as the key link" (*yi liang wei gang*). According to recent claims, this slogan became the guiding principle for agricultural development, and urged farmers to engage in indiscriminate, large-scale agricultural reclamation that took a heavy toll on the environment. Among Western authors, Vaclav Smil writes that "the early 1960s were in fact the beginning of a sharply accelerated degradation of China's farm soils, grasslands, forests and wetlands, largely a result of the 'grain-first' policy". Smil termed it the "staggering land degradation of the 1960s and 1970s".[5] Hu, Hannaway and Youngberg remarked that "the agricultural policy of China was essentially focused on food crops: 'the food crop is the line of agriculture'. These policies pressured farmers to cultivate hill and mountain slopes, even those that were not suitable, and to break out large areas of grassland for cultivation. This resulted in long term problems, such as soil erosion of farmlands and the deterioration of grasslands".[6]

Some authors see a single chain of cataclysmic events linking the Grain-first campaign with the Great Leap Forward, the Cultural Revolution, the Learn-from-Dazhai movement and other campaigns used to indoctrinate the masses. The North American Committee on Scholarly Communication with China claimed that "during the periods of Mao Tse-tung's ascendance, the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution, tremendous pressure was brought on peasants and local officials to 'grow grain everywhere'. Later, when crops grown in marginal areas failed, land erosion followed, and viable rangeland was lost".[7] Shapiro states that "the slogans 'Take Grain as the Key Link' and 'In Agriculture, Learn from Dazhai' were key themes in the nationwide effort to stockpile grain. The 'Take Grain as the Key Link' policy was thus transformed from a post-famine

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Nomadic Peoples, Vol. 33 (1993), p. 66; and Peter Ho, "The Clash over State and Collective Property: The Making of the Rangeland Law", *The China Quarterly*, No. 161 (March 2000), pp. 227–50. Some authors have also observed a certain continuity in traditional land tenure during collectivist times. See Tony Banks, "State, Community and Common Property in Xinjiang: Synergy or Strife?", *Development Policy Review*, Vol. 17, No. 3 (1999), pp. 293–313. A similar phenomenon has been found in Mongolia; see Robin Mearns, "Community, Collective Action and Common Grazing: The Case of Post-Socialist Mongolia", *The Journal of Development Studies*, Vol. 32, No. 3 (1996), pp. 283–325. However, Mearns also claims there was a weakening of traditional conflict resolution mechanisms.

5 Vaclav Smil, "Land Degradation in China: An Ancient Problem getting Worse", in Piers Blaikie and Harold Brookfield (eds), *Land Degradation and Society* (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 216.

6 Shing Tsung P. Hu, David B. Hannaway and H.W. Youngberg, *Forage Resources of China* (Wageningen: Pudoc, 1992), p. 276.

7 Committee on Scholarly Communication with the PRC (ed.), *Grasslands and Grassland Sciences in Northern China* (Washington D.C.: National Academy Press, 1992), p. 32.

emphasis on staple crops into a Dazhai-related overemphasis on grain".[8] And experts on pastoralism maintain that "large amounts of poorer quality rangeland were destroyed during the Great Leap Forward (1958 to 1961) and the Cultural Revolution (1966 to 1976)".[9] A writer from the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences similarly claims: "Then came the so-called Great Leap Forward and Cultural Revolution periods. This led to a dramatic acceleration of the desertification process".[10]

To many, thus, the Grain-first campaign symbolizes the folly of collectivism. The belief is that China's leadership called for the large-scale destruction of pasture through agricultural reclamation, as a result of which livestock perished *en masse*.

However, as I will show below, the textual sources written during the Grain-first campaign should deter us from uncritically accepting the narrative described above. These primary sources reveal several things. First, the Grain-first campaign is wrongly blamed for a lopsided emphasis on grain production. In fact, it called for the *diversification* of agriculture through the integrated development of agriculture, forestry, animal husbandry and rural industries. Second, there is a tendency to put the Grain-first campaign on a par with other collectivist excesses, notably the Great Leap, whereas the grain campaign's notion of self-sufficiency had quite different premises. Related to this is the tendency of some historians to sweep the mass campaigns into one heap, conflating the Grain-first and Learn-from-Dazhai movements. Yet these campaigns were at the time of their political conception quite distinct from each other, with different purposes. Last but not least is the issue of the campaign's ecological and economic effects. The Grain-first campaign is believed to have caused a blind opening up of steppe and wasteland, leading to soil degradation, a drastic drop in livestock numbers through starvation, and eventually, in combination with the arid conditions of the northwest, desertification. The reality, as will be seen, is quite different.

Hearing the Voices of Dissent: Research Questions and Methodology

This article is the spin-off of a wider study on desertification in China. The purpose of the research project was to assess the extent and nature of environmental degradation in the pastoral areas during the collectivist period until today. I initially started from the premise that mass campaigns, particularly

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8 Judith Shapiro, *Mao's War against Nature*, p. 106.

9 John W. Longworth and Gregory J. Williamson, *China's Pastoral Region: Sheep and Wool, Minority Nationalities, Rangeland Degradation and Sustainable Development* (Wallingford: CAB International, 1993), p. 305.

10 Songqiao Zhao cited in Dee Mack Williams, "The Desert Discourse of Modern China", *Modern China*, Vol. 23 No. 3 (July 1997), p. 342. See also Vaclav Smil, *China's Environmental Crisis: An Enquiry into the Limits of National Development* (Armonk: M. E. Sharpe, 1993), pp. 65–6.

the Grain-first campaign, have led to increased desertification[11] in the pastoral areas.[12] During the course of archival research, however, I stumbled upon a number of inconsistencies that cannot be explained from this view of the period. Another question accordingly emerged that has become the leading question for this paper: Is the Grain-first campaign part of a wider discourse about the period of collectivism (1956–78)[13] that has directed the present "historical gaze" towards an overly negative interpretation of this era?

I will argue that the answer to this question is positive. The epoch of collectivism has become an officially recognized black page in history. As a result, a powerful discourse surrounds the topic that filters out contradictory or dissenting voices. This active selection of certain textual sources and the exclusion of others has wider implications for our understanding of the environmental impact of mass campaigns in particular, and the socio-political context of the collective period in general. Through an analysis of the current discourse, I will also demonstrate that the central leadership's stance towards the Grain-first campaign was far from unanimous, and the way in which the campaign was implemented varied widely between regions and over time.

The methodological approach of this article is to distinguish between primary source material written during the period 1956–78 when the mass campaigns were launched, as against secondary sources written about the collective period and mass campaigns in more recent times. It will be demonstrated that the differences between the primary and secondary sources are the result of recent active selection to construct a disparaging retrospective discourse.

This article draws on archival research carried out in the libraries and archives of Yinchuan, Hohhot, Beijing and Leiden.[14] In addition, fieldwork was

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11 Desertification is defined as one of the possible outcomes of land degradation whereby rangeland is turned into desert. Land degradation means a decline in total biomass production due to soil erosion induced by human or animal influence.

12 Peter Ho, "Ownership and Control in Chinese Rangeland Management: A Case Study of the Free-rider Problem in Pastoral Areas in Ningxia, China", in *Cooperative and Collective in China's Rural Development: Between State and Private Interests*, edited by Eduard B. Vermeer, Frank Pieke and Woei Lien Chong (Armonk: M. E. Sharpe, 1998), p. 211.

13 I take 1956, the year in which the first Higher Agricultural Production Cooperatives were established, as the beginning of the collective period. The end is marked by the start of the economic reforms in 1978.

14 The main Chinese sources are *Renmin ribao* (People's Daily) over the period 1956–78; *Hongqi* (Red Flag) over the period 1956–78; *Zhonggong dangshi jiaoxue cankao ziliao* (Reference and Teaching Material for the History of the Chinese Communist Party), Beijing: Guofang Daxue Chubanshe, 1986; *Zhonggong dangshi cankao ziliao* (Reference Material on the History of the Chinese Communist Party), Beijing: Renmin Chubanshe, 1979 (covering the period 1949–78); *Nongye xue Dazhai ziliao* (Material on the Agriculture-Learns-from-Dazhai Movement), Nonglinbu Zhengce Yanjiushi, over the

conducted in the summers of 1996 and 2000 in two agro-pastoral regions: Yanachi, Tongxin, Pengyang and Guyuan counties in the Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region, characterized by sedentary livestock farming, and Wuyuan County and Zongge'er Banner in the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region, where semi-nomadic pastoralism predominates.

The Regions under Analysis

China's northwest or "Great Northwest" (*da Xibei*), as it is often referred to by the Chinese, is regarded as the traditional pastoral region, accounting for over 50 per cent of China's rangelands, covering parts of Inner Mongolia, Tibet, Shaanxi, Gansu, Qinghai, Ningxia and Xinjiang. The northern rangelands are strategically important, as they are located near China's borders and inhabited by ethnic populations who historically sometimes rose up in opposition against Chinese rule. These frontier zones feature a harsh ecological environment with low rainfall, cold long winters, dust storms and other natural disasters. This environment supported only subsistence farming and extensive animal husbandry. At present, the rural net income per capita is still on the bottom rungs of the national ladder: Inner Mongolia ranked twentieth among provinces, while Gansu, Shaanxi and Ningxia occupied the last positions—twenty-eighth to thirtieth.[15]

The pacification and development of the northwestern frontier has for centuries been a source of state concern. During late imperial times and the Republican period, reclamation of the "wastelands" through colonization (*tunken*) was heavily promoted by the central authorities.[16] And since the establishment of the Shaan-Gan-Ning revolutionary base area by Mao in the 1930s, the taming of the northwest's adverse environment has become one of the political priorities of the Communist government.

Two provinces that can be termed typical for the northwest in terms of ecology, ethnic composition and socio-economic parameters are Ningxia and Inner Mongolia. The two provinces are characterized by a continental climate, with icy winters and blistering summers. Rangelands vary from productive meadow rangeland on both sides of the Daxing'an mountains in the east to desert

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period 1970–73. Consulted archives and libraries are the Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region Library and Archive, the Yinchuan Library, the Ningxia Agricultural College Library, the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region Library, the China Academy of Agricultural Sciences Library, the China National Library, and the Leiden Sinological Institute Library.

15 *Zhongguo nongcun tongji nianjian 1996* (Rural Statistical Yearbook of China 1996) (Beijing: Zhongguo Tongji Chubanshe, 1996), pp. 134 and 369.

16 Peter Ho, "The Myth of Desertification at China's Northwestern Frontier (1929–1960)", *Modern China*, Vol. 26, No. 3 (July 2000), pp. 348–95. See also Flemming Christiansen, *New Land in China, 1900-1937: State Intervention and Land Reclamation* (Leeds: Leeds East Asia Papers 10, 1992).

steppe on the Ordos plateau and at the periphery of the Tengger and Mu'us deserts. Nomadic pastoralism as practised by the Mongols in the Republican era has disappeared and has evolved into semi-nomadism and sedentary livestock farming.

Scrutinizing Reclamation: The Statistics

In order to assess the claim that the Grain-first movement caused large-scale degradation of rangeland through agricultural reclamation, which allegedly intensified during the Great Leap Forward (1958–61) and the Cultural Revolution decade (1966–76),[17] I will examine the figures for cultivated land both at the national level and in Ningxia and Inner Mongolia.

The official data released by the Ministry of Land Resources (see Figure 1) do not support the current discourse's claim that large-scale reclamation occurred during the Great Leap and the Cultural Revolution. The largest increase in cultivated land (14 per cent) actually occurred before the Great Leap (from 1.4 billion *mu* in 1949 to 1.6 billion *mu* in 1958). This can easily be explained. The early years of the People's Republic witnessed a great spurt in the opening up of wasteland due to the drive for reconstruction and development after the war years. The establishment of the first rural cooperatives in the early fifties also meant an intensification of agricultural reclamation, which could occur collectively from then on. However, a decrease in cultivated land of almost nine per cent (149.5 million ha) took place over 1958–61. The period of the Cultural Revolution similarly shows a gradual downward trend that persisted up to the 1980s.

Figure 1: Cultivated land in China (1949–1988)

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17 Anita Chan has argued that in political terms the Cultural Revolution should be defined as 1966–69 rather than 1966–76. See Anita Chan, "Dispelling Misconceptions about the Red Guard Movement: The Necessity to Re-examine Cultural Revolution Factionalism and Periodization", *The Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (September 1992), pp. 61–85. However, in this article I will adhere to the official Chinese periodization of 1966–1976.

Source: Zhang Xiaohua and Li Yu (eds.), *Zhongguo tudi guanli shiwu quanshu* (A Practical Encyclopaedia of Land Administration in China) (Beijing: Dadi Chubanshe, 1997), pp. 1414–5.

The trends for cultivated land in Ningxia and Inner Mongolia are not much different from the national aggregate. Figure 2 shows that the greatest enlargement of cultivated land in Ningxia took place over the period 1949–56. A substantial amount of arable land in Ningxia Province had been abandoned in the 1940s.[18] The Second World War and civil war had thrown Ningxia into an agricultural crisis and the total acreage of wheat and rice was only 488,000 *mu* in 1946 (almost 50 per cent below the level of 1949).[19] After a period of rapid expansion the area of cultivated land basically stabilized during the Great Leap Forward.[20] Similarly, from 1966 to 1976, when the Grain-first movement is supposed to have led to indiscriminate reclamation of rangeland, the total acreage of cultivated land was in fact relatively stable.

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18 Peter Ho, "The Myth of Desertification", p. 359.

19 See National Agricultural Research Bureau, "Acreage and Production of Rice and Wheat in China: 1931–1946", *Zhongnong yuekan*, Vol. 8, No. 5 (1947), pp. 87 and 89.

20 That is, there was a slight decrease in 1959 and a small peak the year after. This peak coincided with the government's order that each commune reclaim 9,000 *mu*, proclaimed in the spring of 1960 in response to the famine of the Great Leap. Under the slogan "communes should reclaim a large amount, brigades a medium-sized amount, teams a small amount, and team members a single plot", Specialized Reclamation Teams (*Kaihuang zhuanye dui*) were set up (1985, cited in *Ningxia nongye hezuo jingji shiliao* (Historical Material on the Collective Agricultural Economy of Ningxia) (Yinchuan: Ningxia Renmin Chubanshe, 1988) Vol. II, p. 1156). However, this movement cannot fully account for the 6 per cent increase in cultivated land (770,000 *mu*) in 1960. If we assume that in 1960 there were as many communes in Ningxia as in 1958, namely 59, we arrive at a total of only 531,000 *mu* of land reclaimed under the "9,000 *mu* Order".

Figure 2: Cultivated Land in Ningxia (1949–1995)

Source: Ningxia Statistical Bureau, *Ningxia Huizu Zizhiqu guomin jingji tongji ziliao: 1949–1965* (Statistics of the National Economy of the Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region: 1949–1965) (classified material) (Yinchuan: Ningxia Huizu Zizhiqu Tongjiju, 1966), p. 335; Ningxia Statistical Bureau, *Ningxia tongji nianjian 1995* (Ningxia Statistical Yearbook 1995) (Beijing: Zhongguo Tongji Chubanshe, 1995), p. 144.[21]

Data about reclaimed land are generally not included in statistical yearbooks. However, I was able to obtain statistics for Ningxia from the local Statistical Bureau after some financial compensation. Unfortunately, the data are fragmentary and the periods 1949–62 and 1965–71 are missing. If we review these figures, we can see that during the Cultural Revolution reclamation was far less than in the periods prior to 1966 and immediately after 1976 (see Figure 3).

Figure 3: Land Reclamation in Ningxia (1963–1995)

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[21] The figures for Ningxia exclude Alxa Banner, which was a part of Ningxia until 1976, after which it was returned to Inner Mongolia.

Source: Supplied to the author by the Ningxia Statistical Bureau.

The figures for cultivated land in Inner Mongolia roughly coincide with those of Ningxia. The period 1947–56 witnessed a relatively sharp increase, while the Great Leap is characterized by a downward trend. The years 1960–61 again show a small peak, whereas over 1966–76 the amount of cultivated land gradually decreased.

Figure 4: Cultivated Land in Inner Mongolia (1947–1996)

Source: Inner Mongolia Statistical Bureau (ed.), *Neimenggu tongji nianjian 1999* (Inner Mongolia Statistical Yearbook 1999) (Beijing: Zhongguo Tongji Chubanshe, 1999), p. 170.

Declining Livestock Production or Statistical Juggling?

The Grain-first campaign not only is blamed for the destruction of rangeland through reclamation, but also for having caused an overall decline in livestock production. For instance, the *Yanchi County Gazetteer* maintained that the number of sheep and goats totalled 80,000 ruminants fewer in 1976 compared with 1952,[22] while the *Ningxia Daily* asserted that sheep and goat numbers over the period 1970–76 barely reached the level of the early People's Republic, at approximately 300,000 animals.[23]

The statistics, however, present quite a different image (Figure 5). First, Yanchi County's sheep and goat figures over the entire period of the Cultural Revolution are not exceptionally low (hovering at a level higher than was later attained in the 1980s, after a steady increase during the Great Leap and its aftermath). Second, 1976 was an exceptionally bad year as a result of extreme drought. The alleged decrease of 80,000 animals in 1976 in comparison with 1952 turns into an *increase* of 118,000 animals if 1952 is compared with 1975, merely one year earlier. According to a study on natural disasters in Ningxia, the 1976 drought that scourged the whole of south Ningxia (in which Yanchi County is located) exacted a death toll of 381,000 sheep and goats and 13,000 cattle.[24] A short look at the provincial aggregate confirms the findings. The level of ruminants throughout the Cultural Revolution decade was not exceptionally low, with the exception of 1976.

Figure 5: Sheep and Goat Figures for Yanchi County and Ningxia (1949–1988)

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22 *Yanchi Xianzhi* (Yanchi County Gazetteer) (Yinchuan: Ningxia Renmin Chubanshe, 1986), p. 156.

23 "Editorial", *Ningxia ribao*, 16 July 1978, p. 1.

24 Zhang Lizhi, *Ningxia nongye ziran zaihai: 1949–1990* (Natural Disasters in Ningxia's Agriculture: 1949–1990), (Yinchuan: Ningxia Renmin Chubanshe, 1992), p. 89. In Yanchi county 150,000 sheep were reported to have died due to drought.

Source: Supplied to the author by the Ningxia Statistical Bureau.

Figure 6: Sheep and Goat Figures for Inner Mongolia (1949–1988)

Source: Inner Mongolia Statistical Bureau (ed.), *Neimenggu tongji nianjian 1997* (Inner Mongolia Statistical Yearbook 1997) (Beijing, Zhongguo Tongji Chubanshe, 1997), p. 177.

The effects of the "ten years of turmoil" on animal husbandry appear to have been similar in Inner Mongolia. The book *Contemporary Animal Husbandry in China* makes a comparison of total livestock numbers (cattle, sheep, goats and

hogs) in the province between 1965 and 1976 and concludes there was a decrease of 43.7 per cent.[25] However, these figures do not correspond to the official data of the State Statistical Bureau, which show a decrease of merely 8.5 per cent for sheep and goats (see Figure 6), while the number of cattle and hogs actually *increased*. As regards sheep and goats numbers, the use of 1976 as a reference year displays the same statistical juggling as found earlier. Over the entire period of the Cultural Revolution, sheep and goat numbers wavered around the level of 1963 and 1964, with a sustained increase over 1970–75 and a sudden modest drop in 1976.

The national livestock statistics—cattle, sheep and goats—also show a small but steady increase during 1966–76 (see Figure 7).[26] This is confirmed by the Directorate General for Animal Husbandry and Veterinary Science of the Ministry of Agriculture, although it, too, paradoxically stated rhetorically that "the Cultural Revolution had destroyed once more the animal husbandry economy that had just recovered".[27]

Figure 7: National Livestock Statistics (1949-1995)

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25 Deng Yinzhang (ed.), *Dangdai Zhongguo de xumuye* (Beijing: Dangdai Zhongguo Chubanshe, 1991), p. 52.

26 Cattle rose in numbers by 8.6 per cent, while sheep and goats increased by 14.5 per cent.

27 Nongyebu Xumu Shouyisi (ed.), *Xumuye jingji guanli shouce* (Handbook for Animal Husbandry Economy and Management) (Beijing: Nongye Chubanshe, 1993), p. 6. This work also contains an excellent chronology of all national laws and regulations on animal husbandry and veterinary science.

Source: State Statistical Bureau, *Quanguo gesheng, zizhiqu, zhixiashi, lishi tongji ziliao huibian—1949–1989* (A Compilation of Historical Statistics of all Provinces, Autonomous Regions and Municipalities—1949–1989) (Beijing: Zhongguo Tongji Chubanshe, 1990), p. 13; State Statistical Bureau (ed.), *Zhongguo tongji nianjian 1996* (China Statistical Yearbook 1996) (Beijing: Zhongguo Tongji Chubanshe, 1996), p. 378.

What, then, was the actual story underlying these statistics? Let us take a closer look, first, at the various claims of the prevailing discourse about the Grain-first movement.

Grain First and Grain Only?

Whereas the current discourse maintains that the Grain-first campaign initially had a lopsided focus on grain production, analysis of primary sources demonstrates that the Grain-first movement was not just a frenzied "plant grain wherever you can" program. From the very beginning the full slogan ran: "Take grain as the key link for overall development and diversification" (*yi liang wei gang, quanmian fazhan, duozhong jingying*).[28] This slogan was accompanied by another: "Agriculture, forestry, and animal husbandry are interdependent; not one can be omitted" (*nong, lin, mu san zhe huxiang yilai; que yi bu ke*).[29]

If we merely judge from the literal meaning of these slogans, the Grain-first movement called for integrated agricultural development with a mixed farming operation in which livestock raising, agroforestry and sidelines supplement each other. Such a policy line is a rational and environmentally friendly choice, particularly so in the arid areas of the northwest where rural poverty abounds, soils are of low productivity, and alternative income opportunities are few. But what we should ask ourselves is how the Grain-first policy, and the slogans, were interpreted. I will show that there were wide variations across different times and places. In the agro-pastoral areas, two opposing trends emerged that co-existed until the early 1970s. On the one hand, officials and scientists advocated that

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[28] The fact that the "take grain as the key link" expression is often truncated, while the entire slogan actually points to diversified agricultural development, was first noted by William Hinton. See William Hinton, *Fanshen: A Documentary of Revolution in a Chinese Village* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1966), p. 142.

[29] One such example is *Ningxia nongye hezuo jingji shiliao* (Historical Material on the Collective Agricultural Economy of Ningxia) (Yinchuan: Ningxia Renmin Chubanshe, 1988), Vol. II, p. 715.

agriculture should support the development of animal husbandry, which remained the prime target. As a result, strong attention was paid to rangeland management and protection. On the other hand, the slogan of taking grain as the key link for overall development was regarded as an official encouragement to reclaim even the most barren wasteland for grain cultivation. To complicate matters, the two programs at times blended into one whole, and rational rangeland management was practised in addition to impractical agricultural reclamation.

The first year of the Great Leap Forward held the promise of prosperity and abundance, a period in which everything seemed possible.[30] During this time, the local implementation of policies was driven by sanguine hopes of realizing a true socialist transformation of society and a desire to outdo others in claiming contributions to China's development. Expectedly, the Grain-first movement led in some localities to a blind reclamation of grazing lands. For instance, on the eve of the Great Leap, the Ministry of Agricultural Reclamation announced that the state livestock farms had opened up 112,000 *mu* of wasteland and thus had made a great contribution to self-sufficiency in grain. The exhortation to reclaim rangeland in areas where virtually no agriculture had been practised before was premised on the slogan: "agriculture, forestry, and animal husbandry are interdependent; not one can be omitted".[31] And in the *People's Daily* in November 1959, the Qinghai government proudly announced that the first mechanized reclamation brigade had started opening up grassland, while in the same year, the Qinghai Bureau of Agriculture declared:

> Under the leadership of the Party, we have finally subdued nature and turned the grasslands that have been desolate for a thousand years into fertile farmland.[32]

On the other hand, in some pastoral regions an attempt was made to assess the proper balance of agriculture within the overall development of the economy, without conceding the "moral duty" of grain self-sufficiency. For example, in a 1959 work on the Inner Mongolian livestock sector it was remarked that pastoral development should follow local conditions. "Pure" pastoral regions were urged to pursue integrated development with animal husbandry as the basis (*yi mu wei zhu*),

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30 It was also called the "Eat it Up" period in some regions. See Richard Madsen, "The Countryside under Communism", in *The Cambridge History of China, The People's Republic, Part 2: Revolutions within the Chinese Revolution 1966–1982*, edited by Roderick MacFarquhar and John K. Fairbank (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 642.

31 Nongkenbu, "Nongkenbu Muchang Guanliju Zhaokai Zhishu Muchang Shengchan Huiyi" (Conference on the Production of Subordinate Livestock Farms hosted by the Livestock Farm Management Bureau of the Ministry of Agricultural Reclamation), *Zhongguo Nongken* No. 6, 1957, p. 22.

32 "Qinghai diyige jixie kenhuangdui dao caoyuan kaihuang", *Renmin Ribao* 11 November 1959, p. 4; Qinghai Nongyeting, "Shengkai zai caoyuan de honghua" (Flourishing Red Flowers on the Grasslands), *Zhongguo nongken*, No. 1, 1959, pp. 20–1.

whereas semi-pastoral regions were to take the simultaneous development of animal husbandry and agriculture as the objective (*muye, nongye bingju*).[33] As early as the late 1950s, much was done to improve rangeland through anti-desertification measures, the planting of drought-resistent forage species, the introduction of rotational grazing based on traditional Mongol grazing practices, and even "taking land out of cultivation" (*tuigeng nongtian*).[34]

In a very different vein, the Ningxia Party Committee released an official report in February 1961 which stipulated that agriculture should be taken as the basis for development in the province, with the following elements: 1) simultaneous development of agriculture and animal husbandry—with an emphasis on the former—for the semi-pastoral regions; 2) development of animal husbandry for designated mountain areas; and 3) development of animal husbandry on the (impossible) condition that grain self-sufficiency has been met for regions where livestock production takes up more than 90 per cent of the economy.[35]

The central government provided no decisive answer on the topic. After the end of the Great Leap, the national Sixty Articles in 1962 stipulated that "it is allowed to reclaim single plots of wasteland after consultation with the team members' congress and the commune's or brigade's approval". Yet at the same time the Sixty Articles determined "it is strictly prohibited to reclaim land if it leads to the destruction of rangeland".[36] A few years later, the Directorate General for Animal Husbandry and Veterinary Science of the Ministry of Agriculture stated that "in determining whether a collective economic unit is prosperous, it does not suffice to consider merely the annual increase of grain production. One also has to consider the relatively quick development of animal husbandry, and

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33 Li Zonghai (ed.), *Dayuejin zhong de woguo muyequ* (The Pastoral Regions of My Country during the Great Leap) (Beijing: Minzu Chubanshe, 1959), p. 4.

34 Note that this was more than forty years before the current Western Development program reiterated this policy line. See Shaanxi Dingbian Zhongyangchang, "Nong lin mu jiehe, xiaomie wanmu huangsha" (Integrate Agriculture, Forestry and Animal Husbandry, Eliminate the Ten Thousand Mus of Yellow Sand), *Zhongguo nongken*, No. 10, 1959, p. 31.. See also Yuan Renyuan, "Nong mu jiehe, liang xu fengshou" (Integrate Agriculture and Animal Husbandry: A Bumper Harvest for Grain and Livestock), *Renmin ribao*, 20 April, 1959, p. 5.

35 Ningxia Zizhiqu Dangwei, "Ningxia Zizhiqu dangwei guanyu jingying xumuye bizhong jiaoda de nongcun renmin gongshe zhengfeng zhengshe wenti de baogao" (Report by the Ningxia Party Committee on the Rectification of Work Styles and Collectives of Rural People's Communes with a Large Proportion of Animal Husbandry), 15 February 1961, No. 1961/262. Reprinted in *Ningxia nongye hezuo jingji shiliao*, p. 545.

36 Article 24, "Nongcun renmin gongshe gongzuo tiaoli—cao'an" (Work Regulations for the Rural People's Communes—Draft Version) March 1961, in *Zhonggong dangshi jiaoxue cankao ziliao 23*, edited by Zhongguo Renmin Jiefangjun Guofang Daxue Dangshi Yanjiushi (Beijing: Guofang Daxue Chubanshe, 1986), p. 146.

animal husbandry has to promote agriculture".[37] Contrarily, other voices within the central government *solely* emphasized agriculture. For example, in its 1966 New Year's Day editorial the *People's Daily* commented on the Third Five Year Plan: "we shall put great effort into the development of agriculture. All Communist Party committees at provincial, regional, county and commune level should place agriculture first".[38]

The provinces and autonomous regions reacted to the confusion at the centre in contradictory ways. Into the early 1970s, reports and articles were released in which "bad elements" and "Liu Shaoqi and other impostors" (*Liu Shaoqi yi lei pianzi*) were accused of obstructing agricultural development under false pretexts, such as "it is detrimental to reclaim the desert, because in the grasslands no grain has grown since olden times", "cultivating the land is done in the regions of the Han Chinese, let us just pasture sheep!", or "reclaiming wasteland is destroying grassland". Instead, it was argued that herders must be induced to "change desert, wasteland and grassland into fertile farmland, gardens and orchards".[39]

Ironically, at the same time the *same* rhetoric was used for the opposite allegation: the destruction of pasture by reclamation. In *People's Daily* in 1972, the Party Committee of Hobot Xar Banner declared that due to the "revisionist interference of Liu Shaoqi and other impostors, some communes and brigades had excessively emphasized grain production and had blindly reclaimed the poor and arid grassland, thus seriously influencing animal husbandry production".[40] This article was not an isolated publication, but part of a contradictory interpretation of the Grain-first campaign that co-existed with the call for "grain

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37 Nongyebu Xumu Shouyisi (ed.), *Quanguo xumu gongzuo huiyi jingyan xuanbian 1965* (Selected Compilation of Experiences of the 1965 National Animal Husbandry Work Conference) (Beijing: Nongye Chubanshe, 1966), p. 1.

38 "Quarterly Chronicle and Documentation", *The China Quarterly*, No. 26 (April 1966), p. 206.

39 "Ji Bayinnuo'er Gongmuchang zili gengsheng shixian liang liao cao cai zigei de xianjin shiji" (A Record of the Advanced Achievement by the Bayan Nor Livestock Commune in Realizing Self-Sufficiency in Grain, Forage, Grass and Vegetables), *Ningxia ribao*, 15 June 1970, p. 1; and "Shamo shenchu dazhai hua: Alashan Zuoqi Tenggeli Gongshe Yongjiu Dadui" (Flowers of Dazhai in the Heart of the Desert: Yongjiu Brigade, Tengger Commune, Alxa Left Banner), in *Xumuye shengchan jingyan xuanbian*, edited by Geweihui Nonglinju (Yinchuan, 1972), p. 3. A good view from the grassroots of the attempts by urban youth to reclaim desert and steppe areas is offered through the interviews recorded in Shi Weimin and He Gang, *Zhiqing beiwanglu* (Memorandum of the School Graduates) (Beijing: Zhongguo Shehui Kexue Chubanshe, 1996), pp. 82-3.

40 "Luxian zhengque muye fazhan caoyuan xingwang: xianghuangqi fazhan xumuye de diaocha" (The Route is Right, the Development of Animal Husbandry is the Flourishing of Grassland: Research on the Development of Animal Husbandry of Xianghuang Banner), *Renmin ribao*, 12 July 1972.

only" during the Cultural Revolution decade. Throughout the early 1970s, an entire set of articles was published in which the reclamation of grasslands was branded as a mistake, and the one-sided focus on the quantity of production criticized. Livestock production had to pay attention to quality in addition to quantity.[41] These two opposing trends co-existed until the latter half of the 1970s. Shortly before the start of the economic reforms in 1978, the reclamation of grasslands for grain cultivation had become regularly criticized in print.[42]

Lumping Together the Follies of Collectivism

The second claim of the current discourse postulates a chain of catastrophic events, linking the Grain-first campaign with the Great Leap Forward, the Cultural Revolution, the Learn-from-Dazhai campaign and other mass movements. This dominant discourse, however, overlooks that these movements sprang from different and sometimes opposing concerns.

Let us first examine the idea that the Grain-first policy was the central government's overreaction to one of its earlier blunders: the Great Leap Forward and ensuing famine. In 1959 the central government indeed reacted to the disastrous results of the Great Leap by calling for an increase of grain production, and the following year Liao Luyan, the Minister of Agriculture, officially launched the slogan "take grain as the key link" for the first time (not in 1965 as is sometimes maintained).[43] But the treatment of grain as a special commodity

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41 See, for example, two articles on Tibet: "Shengxu chun zeng yidian, liubei de chengji shi zenyang qudede?" (If Livestock has a Small Net Increase, How is an Achievement of Six Fold Reached?), in *Nongye xue Dazhai ziliao* 19-26, edited by Nonglinbu Zhengce Yanjiushi (Beijing: Nonglinbu Zhengce Yanjiushi, 1973), p. 44; "Xizang Zizhiqu 'yuan xue Dazhai, jin gan lie mai' de qunzhong yundong pengbo fazhan" (The Vigorous Development of the Mass Movement "Learning from Dazhai from Afar, Overtaking the Arrangement of Wheat"), in *Nongye xue Dazhai ziliao* 19–26, pp. 34–5.

42 See, e.g., Renmin guangbo diantai jizhe, "Yi mu wei zhu, nong lin mu jiehe, huaguan caoyuan, jianshe cao kulun" (With Animal Husbandry as the Basis, and the Integration of Agriculture, Forestry and Animal Husbandry, We Delineate and Manage Grassland, and Construct Forage Storage), *Ningxia ribao*, 22 December 1977, p. 2; "Yanchixian nong muye shengchan pengbo fazhan" (The Vigorous Development of Agriculture and Animal Husbandry in Yanchi County), *Ningxia ribao*, 16 June 1978, p. 1. In addition, important publications on agriculture compiled by state institutions in the mid 1970s confirmed the new views. See, for example, Ningxia Nongye Dili Bianxiezu, *Ningxia nongye dili* (An Agricultural Geography of Ningxia) (Neibu Ziliao. Yinchuan: Kexue Chubanshe, 1976), pp. 40–1 and 52.

43 Liao Luyan, "Quandang Quanmin Dongshou, Daban Nongye" (Let's Get to Work and Go in for Agriculture in a Big Way with the Whole People and the Party), *Hongqi* (Red Flag), Vol. 17, No. 9 (1960), pp. 1–7. On the basis of an article in *People's Daily* of 8 March 1965, p. 5, Doolin and Ridley wrongly date the beginning of the Grain-first policy as 1965.

within agricultural production and the emphasis on increasing grain production was nothing new in the early 1960s. In fact, the roots of the Grain-first movement date back to the Republican era, when the needs of a war-economy forced the Kuomintang and Communist camps to stress self-sufficiency in agricultural production, a portion of which was meant to supply the army. During the War of Resistance against Japan, a Chinese author wrote that "China is a country that lacks grain, while sufficiency in grain is advocated by most people. We therefore must discuss this problem in particular".[44]

After the Kuomintang had been defeated, the newly established Communist government continued the program of agricultural production pursued earlier in their safe haven against the Kuomintang—the Shaan-Gan-Ning Border Region.[45] In December 1953, Beijing centralized the grain supply and marketing structure by establishing a compulsory grain procurement system. This was tightened over the years with a series of measures.[46] The emphasis on grain cultivation existed for many years before the Grain-first movement came into being.

What about the assertion of the dominant discourse that the Grain-first movement is linked to the Learn-from-Dazhai campaign? There is an element of truth in this claim—during the Cultural Revolution decade, slogans and mass campaigns tended to blend, making analytical distinctions between them increasingly difficult. But one can also discern here the workings of the dominant discourse, actively filtering out important elements of the pre-existing situation.

For a start, it is seldom pointed out that the Learn-from-Dazhai campaign sprang from environmental concerns, notably soil and water conservation through terracing and afforestation. Like the Grain-first campaign, the Dazhai campaign has roots dating back to a period before the Cultural Revolution. The Communist efforts against soil erosion in mountainous areas ranging from Jiangxi province to

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See Dennis J. Doolin and Charles P. Ridly, *A Chinese-English Dictionary of Communist Chinese Terminology* (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1973), p. 223.

44 Dong Shijin, *Guofang yu nongye* (National Defence and Agriculture) (Chongqing: Shangwu Yinshuguan, 1942), pp. 6 and 32.

45 According to Eduard Vermeer, one could even state that the roots of Grain-first can be traced to imperial times, when taxes were paid in grain. Vermeer, oral communication, 1998. For more information on the Shaan-Gan-Ning border region, see for example, Mark Selden, *China in Revolution: The Yenan Way Revisited* (Armonk: M. E. Sharpe, 1995), pp. 196–9.

46 These included the "Resolution Concerning the Implementation of the Planned Procurement and Supply of Grain" (16 October 1953); the "Notice on Intensifying the Work on the Consolidation of Unified Grain Marketing" (28 April 1955); and the "Temporary Measure on Rural Grain Procurement and Marketing" (25 August 1955); the "Twelve Articles for Agriculture" and the "1956–1967 National Program for Agricultural Development". (The "Twelve Articles" were sent to the provincial governments for suggestions on 21 December 1955, but strangely not proclaimed until 1960).

the loess plateau started at least as early as the 1950s.[47] These soil and water conservation efforts developed into a nationwide model through Dazhai. According to local Party history, Dazhai Brigade in Xiyang County, Shanxi Province, was hit by a severe storm in August 1963, which devastated the village's hillsides. But the village rose like a "phoenix from its ashes due to the relentless efforts of the villagers at reafforestation and terracing of hills and slopes". Dazhai rose in importance in 1964 through a series of articles in the *People's Daily* and radio programs and was adopted as Mao's envisioned model for rural development through mass collective action. It also became the subject of differences between Mao and the Party's moderate faction under Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping during the Socialist Education Movement (1963–65). In order to increase the pressure on his political adversaries and to reinforce the momentum of the campaign, Mao ensured that Dazhai's leader was elected as a member of the National People's Congress and was invited to Mao's home.[48]

A major shift in the movement occurred after the Agricultural Conference of the Northern Regions in the summer of 1970, where it was decided that in addition to soil and water conservation, class struggle should form an integral component of the Dazhai campaign. Dazhai would henceforth become the undisputed moral standard for every aspect of rural life.[49] During this period, a merging of the Dazhai campaign with the Grain-first movement occurred, as slogans of both mass movements were increasingly used as each other's equivalent.[50] The end to the Dazhai campaign came with the Sixth Plenum of the Eleventh Central Committee of the Communist Party in 1978, when the rural reforms were set in motion.

But throughout, the relevance of the Dazhai campaign for livestock production was rather limited and lay mainly in its attempts to improve hilly pasture through soil and water conservation. According to the Deputy Director of

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47 In Ningxia province, afforestation and terracing in the loess areas started in the 1950s. See "Yinian de jubian: guyuan xian Jiaoyao Renmin Gongshe diaocha baogao" (A Great Change within One Year: Research Report of Jiaoyao People's Commune, Guyuan County), *Xinghuo* 12, 1959, pp. 30–2.

48 Chen Jiyuan, Chen Jiaji and Yang Xun (eds.), *Zhongguo nongcun shehui jingji bianqian: 1949–1989* (Socio-economic Change in China's Countryside: 1949–1989) (Taiyuan: Shanxi Jingji Chubanshe, 1993), p. 367 and 378–85; and Jack Gray, *Rebellions and Revolutions: China from the 1800s to the 1980s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), pp. 331–2.

49 On 11 September 1977, Ye Jianying, the Vice-Premier, publicly announced that "Dazhai is the direction for the Chinese people". See Chen et al., *Socio-economic Change in China's Countryside*, pp. 451–6; Jack Gray, *Rebellions and Revolutions*, p. 374.

50 "Luxian Zhengque Muye", 1972, p. 50; and "Shengxu chun zeng yidian, liubei de chengji shi zenyang qudede?" (If Livestock has a little Net Increase, How is an Achievement of Six Times more Reached?), in *Nongye xue Dazhai ziliao* 19-26, edited by Nonglinbu Zhengce Yanjiushi (Beijing: Nonglinbu Zhengce Yanjiushi, 1973), p. 40.

the Ningxia Bureau of Animal Husbandry, the reforestation was an entirely futile activity from the start due to the area's low and erratic rainfall.[51] An elderly Ningxia farmer related that "at the time of collectivization we had to plant trees every year, but with no result whatsoever. We planted virtually every kind of tree: almond, poplar, willow, elm".[52] It should not be forgotten that the Dazhai campaign was geared to the ecology from which it sprang: the loess plateau. The environmental measures of the Dazhai campaign, the terracing of hills and afforestation, would have little effect in the traditional pastoral areas in the northwest.

For this reason, an alternative development model was launched that catered for the pastoral sector in the arid steppe and desert areas. What Dazhai meant for agriculture is what Wushenzhao (Uxin Banner) represented for animal husbandry.[53] The slogan exhorting pastoralists to subdue the "yellow danger" of the desert ran, "agriculture must learn from Dazhai, animal husbandry from Wushenzhao". Since 1947, Wushenzhao village had devoted its efforts to desert control and the development of ecologically sustainable grazing practices.[54] Under the condition of grain self-sufficiency, the aim of the Learn-from-Wushenzhao campaign was to increase livestock production by rangeland protection and improvement. Grain self-sufficiency was important, but it was stressed that "animal husbandry is the main industry of the pastoral region, and the development of agriculture and forestry should cater for animal husbandry". In addition, "rangeland must be well managed and protected, [land] use must be

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51 Oral communication, 1996.

52 Oral communication, 1996. In recent years, the impracticability of planting trees in the harsh environment of the loess plateau was once more confirmed during the implementation of the Four Wastelands Auction Policy in the early 1990s. See Peter Ho, "The Wastelands Auction Policy in Northwest China: Solving Rural Poverty and Environmental Degradation?" in Peter Ho, Jacob Eyferth and Eduard B. Vermeer (eds.), *Rural Development in Transitional China: The New Agriculture* (London: Frank Cass, 2003).

53 Zhonggong Neimenggu Zizhiqu Weiyuanhui Diaochazu, (ed.), "Yingxiong suo 'huanglong', shamo bian lüzhou" (Heroes Lock up the "Yellow Dragon": Changing the Desert into an Oasis), in *Nongcun Renmin Gongshe diaocha huibian* (A Research Compilation of Rural People's Communes) edited by Xinhua Tongxunshe, Vol. I, Neibu Ziliao, 10/5, 1960, pp. 203–7; and Yang Xin, "Zhengzhi guashuai, weili wu qiong" (Politics Takes Command, its Might is Boundless), in ibid, pp. 215–21. A detailed description of rangeland protection measures of the 1950s is given in Peter Ho, "The Myth of Desertification", pp. 373–75.

54 The campaign was heavily promoted by the village leader of Wushenzhao, a Mongolian woman named Boroldai, who rose to deputy director of the Inner Mongolia Revolutionary Committee in the early 1970s. Uradyn E. Bulag, oral communication, 2003.

rational, and degradation must be prevented".[55] What is odd is that, in deference to the current discourse, the anti-desertification measures propagated by the Learn-from-Wushenzhao campaign never made it into the historical records. Nevertheless, many of the rangeland protection and management measures that were pursued in Wushenzhao are still common in present-day China, with varying success. These measures included: desert control through tree shelter belts; balancing out grazing pressure by rotational grazing and fencing of pasture; the construction of "basic grassland" (*jiben caodi*); and the revegetation of rangeland by sowing grass seeds.[56]

Conclusion: The Memory that Sinks in

The Grain-first-movement is one of the most heavily criticized of the campaigns associated with collective agriculture. At the height of the waves of mass campaigns that destabilized the nation, Mao is said to have launched a "war against nature", and mad, indiscriminate reclamation of marginal lands is alleged to have led to disaster, as fragile soils eroded and eventually gave way to desert.

In this paper I have demonstrated there is a fundamental lack of concordance between textual sources about the Grain-first campaign written during the collectivist period (1956–78) versus those of the post-collectivist period. A filtering process after Mao's death is apparent in several respects: the misrepresentation of the Grain-first movement as lopsidedly geared to grain self-sufficiency through land reclamation instead of integrated agricultural development; the denial of the different origins and sometimes opposing aims of mass campaigns, notably the concern for environmental protection; and the exclusion or juggling of statistical data so as to support a new inaccurate reading of the Maoist era.

Shortly before the end of the collectivist period at the end of the 1970s**,** this discourse gained ascendancy and evolved into the dominant narrative that exists today. The era of collectivism has been officially branded as a historical mistake, and the imagery of herders and farmers forced into planting grain in all corners of the nation, thereby causing massive land degradation, is particularly memorably graphic. In this sense, the Grain-first movement has become a powerful tool in directing the "historical gaze" towards an overly negative appraisal of the Maoist period.

This in turn has led to a misguided interpretation of the socio-political context in which mass campaigns evolved. In the dominant discourse, the Chinese state is presented as uniform in its endeavours to concentrate on grain production. The primary textual sources tell a different story and show that the

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[55] Long Taizhong, "Shenru kaizhan nongye xue Dazhai yundong" (Thoroughly Launch the Agriculture-Learns-from-Dazhai Movement), in *Nongye xue Dazhai ziliao*, No. 13–18, 1972, pp. 23–4.

[56] *Ibid*., pp. 12–27.

central state was far from monolithic. The interpretation of the role and relative weight of agriculture within overall rural development varied over time and from region to region.

The reach of the Maoist state is strongly exaggerated. During the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution there was no single reaction in implementing the directives from above. One reason, to be sure, was the confusion at the political centre over the Grain-first campaign. But it was also because of the wide regional differences in ecological and socio-economic parameters. The latter factor explains why the Learn-from-Dazhai campaign was translated into a movement that specifically catered for extensive livestock farming in the steppe and desert regions: the Learn-from-Wushenzhao campaign. Regional differences also led to two opposing interpretations of the Grain-first campaign. One was geared to an indiscriminate and rapid expansion of agricultural acreage to meet grain self-sufficiency; the other was geared to overall rural development in which animal husbandry, forestry and agriculture were balanced out according to local conditions. This also entailed conservation of the natural environment. These contradictory efforts co-existed until the end of the Maoist era.

Taking the above into consideration, we can ask ourselves whether the filtering and selection mechanisms that surround the Grain-first campaign also extend beyond it. And if so, what does this mean for our understanding of the Maoist era? Naturally these questions cannot be answered within the limited framework of this article. But they merit future research. It is crucial to remain critical, as rewritten history, stripped of its contradictions and inconsistencies, easily sinks into the mind.