

# Primitive Accumulation in China: A Continuing Process

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## ABSTRACT

This paper utilizes Marx's concept of primitive accumulation as a major process influencing China's historic, social and economic development. Coupling this is the idea that migration is as an integral part of this process (Standing, 1981:192). Migration from the rural to the urban is essentially validating the changes done by primitive accumulation in the countryside and inadvertently transforms the urban and rural landscape that has created poles of development in the eastern region of China. Historicizing the processes as well as looking into the factors that accelerate, decelerate, and hinder primitive accumulation and migration would better our understanding of Chinese development and its trajectories. These processes are then contextualized in the historic changes initiated in China in the late 1980's that gradually affected their forces and relations of production and are situating a continuing process in the current times such as the Western Development Program enacted at the turn of the twentieth century that is still revolutionizing social relations in other regions of China. Generating from these points are observations for discussion and conclusions.

Keywords: primitive accumulation; migration, China studies, capitalism, Marxism

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## INTRODUCTION

China has experienced unremarkable growth rates in the past decades since they embraced the policies of 'Reform' and 'Opening Up' in the 1980's. This growth is hailed as a miracle (Zhao, 2013). This statement is unquestionable and in recent years the world has seen China expanding its investments abroad as well as displaying its newly found wealth in the extravagant showcase of the 2008 Beijing Olympics. In recent times, China has even surpassed the United States as the largest economy in relation to trade and investments (Willige, 2016). This pronouncement might be premature as contested by authors but there also exist numerous literatures predicting China's inevitable overtake as the largest economy.

Imperative for any scholar dealing with Chinese development is the demystifying of this so called 'miracle'. Many Chinese scholars insist on the

'uniqueness' of China with regards to its policy adoption and development strategy (Zeng, 2014:617). The prevalent 'consensus' for China's growth was credited to the death of free markets and shift to state capitalism or as being termed as the 'Beijing Consensus' (Kennedy, 2010:473). Contrary to this widely circulated and propagated 'consensus', Huang (2011) urges scholars that China depended on the free market in development rather than challenging the dominant 'Washington Consensus' as early as the reform period when he rethinks and resounds the 'myth of the Beijing consensus'. There is now a call to 'rethink' as well as describe the 'myth' as a myth to better understand Chinese development. The figure of speech "call a spade a spade" comes to mind and, in this context, "call a myth a myth" is necessary in understanding Chinese development. There may be relative degrees as to how China adheres to the dominant 'Washington Consensus', but that would not be the focus of this study. This 'rethinking' would imply that China was all along following what would be a "normal" capitalist economy that would undergo, as it had started in the 1980's, the nature of primitive accumulation (Nolan, 2011:25). Nolan would add the relative comfort that China had been experiencing from lessons of other countries when they were taking off into capitalist industrialization.

This paper would utilize Marx's concept of primitive accumulation as a major process influencing China's historic, social and economic development. Coupling this is the idea that migration is as an integral part of this process (Standing, 1981:192). Migration from the rural to the urban is essentially validating the changes done by primitive accumulation in the countryside and inadvertently transforms the urban and rural landscape that has created poles of development in the eastern region of China. Historicizing the processes as well as looking into the factors that accelerate, decelerate, and hinder primitive accumulation and migration would better our understanding of Chinese development and its trajectories.

The discussion of this paper would initially define terms such as primitive accumulation capitalist production, and migration. Then contextualizing these processes in the historic changes initiated in China in the late 1980's that gradually affected the forces and relations of production as well as situating a continuing process in the current times such as the Western Development Program enacted at the turn of the twentieth century

that is still revolutionizing social relations in other regions of China. Observations gained would be briefly discussed and concluded.

## SOME DEFINITIONS

The concept of primitive accumulation has declined in its use in recent scholarly writing. This may be seen as a result of ideological discourse in the last century or a propagation of writings such as that of Bose (1988), where he discredits the idea and posit other factors that would bring about a capitalist mode of production. Yet authors such as Nolan (2011) passively talks about it with when he deals with the 'crossroads' in contemporary China and the need to look at the phases of accumulation in the process of in search of revolutionizing factors that determine and influence China's economic development.

Taken from Bose's excerpt of Marx (1909[1867]) which describes the process of primitive accumulation that states:

Accumulation of capital presupposes surplus value, surplus value presupposes capitalistic production; capitalistic production presupposes the pre-existence of considerable masses of capital and of labor power in the hands of producers of commodities. The whole movement, therefore, seems to turn in a vicious circle out of which we can only get by supposing a primitive accumulation preceding capitalist accumulation, an accumulation not the result of the capitalist mode of production but its starting point...It appears as primitive, because it forms the pre-historic stage of capital and of the mode of production corresponding with it.

In this except from Marx, we would see the idea that primitive accumulation is defined as where capitalist production emerges from preexisting conditions of work (Webber, 2008b:396). From this process, Webber (2008a:301-302) said that capitalists and workers also emerge, where the former in the hopes of profit advance capital to purchase means of production and the latter sell their labor power as they are separated from the means of production. It is in essence a change in the forces and relations work due to the dispossession of the peasant (Bose, 1988:2981) and consequentially having the peasants 'free' from agricultural means of production, and having the capacity to 'freely' hire themselves out was

wage workers (Standing 1981:192). This idea of a double meaning of the word 'free(ly)' would be grounded by He and Xue (2013:127) when they state that it is where the imperative of capitalist accumulation overwhelms the individual's rights to live well and to achieve self worth in the context of the displaced thus clarifying the 'free' term loosely utilized in this discussion. And true to its character, this is as what Nolan (2011:26-27) would describe as having a brutal nature to the accumulation process supported by an authoritarian political structure that concentrates power to a minority ruling class rendering 'free' not part of this discussion. This would better situate our argument in the context of China's one party rule that penetrates and influences every aspect of Chinese life.

This nature is better encapsulated in another excerpt from Marx's *Capital*:

...the fraudulent alienation of State domains, the robbery of the common lands, the usurpation of feudal and clan property, and its transformation into modern private property under circumstances of reckless terrorism, were just idyllic methods of primitive accumulation. [Chapter 27: Expropriation of the Agricultural Population from the Land]

In Standing's (1981:192-193) discussion, he gives prime importance to the role of migration in creating industrial capital. He meant that there should be workers that are mobile and willing to migrate and constitute an unlimited supply of labor. The process of primitive accumulation does not stop at the displacement of the peasant workers but in collaboration with migration that would be integral in creating an industrial capitalist society that would utilize these reserve army of labor 'free' to sell their labor power. Hence, the need to marriage the two concepts in this paper. Webber (2008b:398-399) would also provide a working definition of a capitalist type of production that it is a form of production that coexists with various forms of production and it does not necessarily eliminate altogether other forms such as subsistence farming, independent commodity production, and of state enterprises. He would further describe the type of capitalist production as the environment where the displaced peasants are to sell their labor power and the capitalists are to buy their labor power amidst the constant contradiction of the relations and forces of production. This is essential in our discussion for we are to tackle Chinese economy where

various types of production are still in co-existence and are constantly being transformed as the state still exerts some significant amount of influence of internal migration in China with various controls and preferential development policies that it administers (Liu et al., 2014:48) influencing development that initially concentrated growth to the east and in recent decades stimulating these revolutionizing forces to the western regions.

## PRIMITIVE ACCUMULATION IN CHINA

China's economic performance in the past three decades has seen unprecedented economic performance with double digit growth rates. This success is attributed to a change in policy during the early 80's from public ownership and closed door policy to reform and opening up. Central to this feat is privatization and Foreign Direct Investment inflow than the public sector and domestic investment in promoting sustained economic growth both in the national and provincial level (Zhao, 2013:2130-2134). These two elements played vital roles in the transformation of the countryside and the emergence of an eastern growth area in China.

Zhao (2013:2131) posits that Reform and Opening Up had a bottom up characteristic where the enterprise of privatization and FDI attraction were initiated from local governments. This would counter the general belief that the national government was the primary 'hands' who acted in the development process. This bottom up characteristic is seen in such form as that of the establishment of Town and Village Enterprises (TVEs) that were formerly communal enterprises mostly owned by township or village governments but some was in fact a disguise for private enterprising of local cadres claiming to be protectors of communal proprietorship being slowly transformed into private enterprises (Webber, 2008a:303).

Deng Xiaoping promoted in his often quoted sayings and speeches the dismantling of the ideological blocks for promotion of private enterprises such as 'grasping the large and letting go of the small' which refers to privatization, 'letting some get rich first' were also popularized and was embodied by the creation of the Special Economic Zones (SEZs) of Guangdong and Fujian province and other coastal cities (Zhao, 2013). In these areas, labor intensive industries were established. These policy changes were imperative in dismantling the social relations fostered by

the collectives and communes instigated during the Mao period and incentivizing the population to migrate east in the newly created SEZs. These changes provided the 'liberalization' from agricultural ties as well as the ideological support in a socialist society in transition. Liu et al., (2014:48) would add that migration in socialist transition economies are products of a combination of market forces and government intervention as how national policies effected local 'enclosures' in creation of this willing unlimited supply of labor incentivized by prospects of greater income in new industries in the east. This section would discuss various policies implemented in three phases that He and Xe (2014:126) mentions as the 'three Chinese enclosure movements', these are the periods around the years in the 1980's, 1992 and 2003.

A further narration would be of the consequences on the local population in contributing to creation of a disciplined reserve army of labor that is steadily fueling the internal migration crucial in the transition to capitalism (Standing, 1981:192). In each phase it would be evident that there would be an initial 'enclosure of the commons' that resounded of privatization in the rural area and would inevitably affect the local population with the removal of traditional rights to communal resources, and inevitably removing alternatives to wage labor such as vagrancy and welfare (Webber, 2008a:309). This pattern can be seen in the three phases but differs to certain degree as well as in application in various parts of China and not a single monumental process. The first two phases are coupled together as they are intertwined as the second phase is the intensification of the initial phase as the reforms were implemented in a gradual and pragmatic manner (Zhao, 2013:2132). The Third phase would situate the current development policies being implemented such as the "Western Development Program" that is aimed at revolutionizing the forces of production in the left behind regions of in the west as well as the central region.

### *The First and Second Phase: 'Reform' and 'Opening Up' Enclosing the Communes*

Ching (2012:137) would conveniently summarize the goals of the Deng Xiaoping's reforms as aiming to systematically change fundamental relations of production by dissolving the communes, dismantling the state ownership and collective ownership of the means of production in the

end goal of privatizing them, and labor reform that would turn labor into a commodity. These are in effect dismantling the socialist transition that Mao had embarked since 1949.

Deng's initial reforms were in part seen in the restructuring of the farm collectives and small industrial communes in the rural regions. This de-collectivization was promoted with the idea of eventual dramatic fall in absolute poverty and rapid agricultural growth (Webber 2008a:303). This was supported with the rhetoric such as that of '*A good cat is judged by whether it can catch mouse, not by the color of its hair*' being part of the sayings Deng Xiaoping was propagating to ideologically legitimize the reforms. In 1983, the Household Contract Responsibility System was enacted (Li et al., 2013:592). Land and other productive facilities were distributed among individual peasant households which completed de-collectivization. This marks the start of privatization in agriculture which coupled with introduction of modern implements such as fertilizers, high yielding rice, and pesticides increased production (Li et al., 2013:593) inevitably dismantling the old social relations of collective ownership and promoting individual growth with 'incentive' as the impetus under private ownership in a market oriented economy. As the state abolished the State Unified Purchase and Unified Sale System in 1985 which controlled agricultural prices and promoted the free market for agricultural products, this in effect gave the individual farmers difficulty finding buyers for their crops (Ching, 2012:30). Eventually higher yield of agricultural crops did not mean higher income leading farmers opting to search for off farm work in enterprises (Li et al. 2013:593). These changes created a huge population in the countryside that were not tied to their agricultural lands but are liberated to sell their labor power in the growing industries of China.

Individuals were allowed to open some businesses in the late 1980's as former communes and brigade enterprises were contracted to individuals (Li et al., 2013:593) and these were the beginnings of TVEs beings set up as private enterprises disguised as collectively operated town enterprises (Webber, 2008a:303). State Operated Enterprises, as a result of fierce competition were privatized by local governments (Zhao, 2013:2130). The Contract Labor Law was passed in 1986 which gave the employers the ability to renew or terminate an employee after a year's work coupled with the Wage Reforms which provided incentives to the

wage system of state workers. (Ching, 2012:30). This was to eliminate the permanent employment status of state employees and furthered private takeover of SOEs and provide 'welfare' remedies to ease the transition from permanent employment to the contractualization of labor. To further discipline the work force, worker's rights and the basic rights of the people were rescinded (Ching, 2012:137) and would be forever epitomized in the incident at Tiananmen Square in 1989.

At the same time, SEZs were set up in the eastern region to situate FDI inflow. These special zones experienced an influx of migrants coming from the rural regions due to the relaxing of institutional barriers, such as the *hukou* in 1984, which previously hindered off farm work to agricultural *hukou* (Liu et al., 2014:48) as well as decrease in productivity in agriculture (Li et al, 2013:593) gave the incentive to the rural population for higher income. The *hukou* in the context of migration became the controlling mechanism to migrants that emphasized the rural and urban divide and was a barrier for migrants to settle down permanently in destinations, at the same time excluded them from government provided welfare and services.

During the times of the communes and collectives, rural labor forces were not allowed to work off-farm activities or out of the collective farms (Li et al. 2013) as they were designated production specific *hukou*. The *hukou* system is where every citizen was required to register and is classified as agricultural *hukou* or non-agricultural *hukou* (Shen, 2013). This envisioned collective ownership of the land by the agricultural *hukou* residents and as well as collective management of agriculture in producing the needs of the population at the urban *hukou*. Yeh et al., (2013:916) would note that the *hukou* system, particularly that implementation in the urban setting, denies 'peasant workers' state services, such as access to education, health care and housing, which are reserved for urban citizens. In addition, they are seen by urban residents as criminals and are sometimes their salaries are paid late by their employers as well as experience other forms of discrimination. This is showing the form of disciplining for migrant peasant workers to enter into the wage labor system.

These policy changes that reversed the self reliance in agricultural production that incentivized peasant workers to migrate and would



be disciplined by various legislation and discriminatory practices are reminiscent of the experience of Great Britain's peasantry as how Marx stated as:

...the agricultural people, first forcibly expropriated from the soil, driven from their homes, turned into vagabonds, and then whipped, branded, tortured by laws grotesquely terrible, into the discipline necessary for the wage system. [*Capital*, Ch 27: Expropriation of the Agricultural Population from the Land]

China's internal migration has been a result of a growth imbalance and relaxation of migration controls (Liu et al., 2014: 48) prompted by the reforms during the 80's. These reforms have changed the rural landscape of China. This created wealth in eastern regions and further widened inequality between regions (Li et al., 2013:558) and in the early 2000's the general call to privatize SOE's and TVE's that were soon overtaken by urban and industrial expansion (Webber 2008a:304). As growth is being polarized to the east, this necessitated the Chinese government to enact programs to address inequity between regions.

### *The Third Phase: The Western Development Program*

Going 'west' is not new for the government of China (Maimaitiming et al., 2013:79). The government had in fact prioritized the western and central region before the reform period which produced rapid urbanization to the region yet its primary goal was of national security and egalitarianism (Liu et al., 2014:49). Projects such as the 'Third Front Project' and "Up the Mountains and Down to the Countryside" were planned avenues for state investment and revenue transfer to these hinterlands (Liu et al., 2014:49). In the reform period, the initial efforts were reversed, with prioritizing the eastern region with newly established SEZs. This region has experienced rapid growth while the western region has been experiencing the opposite (Liu et al., 2014:51).

The Chinese state has expressed to its people that the development of the western region as a national priority (Maimaitiming et al., 2013:85). Programs such as the 'Western Development Program' (WDP), 'Grain for Green Project', 'Northeast China Revitalization', and "Rise of Central China"

(Liu et al., 2104:51), and 'building a new countryside project' (BNCP) (Li et al., 2013:589) to name a few were enacted. Deng et al., (2013:240) describes these preferential policies implemented as improving the region with construction projects, tax breaks, loosening in land policies, open more channels for foreign investors, and loosen restrictions for foreign investors. To further this goal, local government officials are up for promotion if they able to attract firms, especially foreign firms, to their locality (Li et al., 2013:604) and has resulted in land grabs, collusion with private firms, and issues of corruption in the local setting to the detriment of the local population (He and Xue, 2014:127-132).

Li et al., (2013:604) stated that the 'WDP' was positively welcomed and implemented in parts of Sichuan Province, the 'tax for fee reform' and abolition of agricultural taxes reduced the autonomy of township governments as well as local services such as medical and educational services. Lands were acquisitioned to enlarge industrial parks in the hopes of attracting investments in exchange for compensation. The authors would narrate the village head and villagers complaints as:

...Land acquisition is inevitable, but the standard of compensation was too low and the way of compensation was also questionable...Land served us with basic food, but now we lost it forever. With this amount of money, we could do few things, because the commodity price is rising heavily. We need unemployment insurance and social security rather than cash...

In addressing the ecological conditions of the countryside, the 'Grain for Green' project was implemented. Its objectives was to improve ecological conditions by converting cultivated land with a slope above 25 degrees to forest or grassland in the upper Yangtze and middle and upper Yellow River basins (Li et al., 2013:597-598). The lands converted had the farmers subsidized and as these subsidies were lowered, these peasants were inclined to search for off farm work in nearby industries.

Wilmsen et al.,(2011:38-40) talks about the conditions of the communities that were resettled due to the construction of the Three Gorges Dam. There were arrangements of 'benefits-shared investment' and that majority of resettled are generally poorer than they were prior

to resettlement. Some of the 'investment' that they were to enter were construction work and an issue was that once work has been completed, then the resettled communities would look elsewhere for work as they are laid off. This 'development' induced displacement and resettlement has subsidies as well as 'benefit sharing investments' but were deemed insufficient to sustain the communities. The author would note the children's academic performance under the new circumstance as having lower average. This would further their poverty state induced by development as they would be at a disadvantage at the *caocao*, or the state examinations for entry to the various State Universities.

The elimination of agricultural taxes in 2006 rendered townships fiscally powerless and intensified local cadres in expropriating land as what has been done early in the 1990's (Yeh, 2013:918). He and Xue (2014:127-129) points out that land of the locals are being privatized to favor investment initiatives of local cadre officials. And the villages had been 'emptied out' due to the land grabs urging the youth to migrate to the eastern region. Yeh et al., (2013:917) stated that as the countryside has been 'emptied out' of working men and women, the national ideology valorizes the urban and denigrated the rural which reshapes cities as the primary site of political, cultural, and economic worth. This mind set would rationalize the continuing dispossession and the breaking down and fuel the trickling down effects of urbanization and in effect dampen resistance.

Other projects such as the 'BNCP' were inclined to invest in one or two already developed towns and villages and registered that some villages were incapable of attracting investors due to heir inherent characteristics (Li et al., 2013:604-605). Investing in already developed localities, for local officials to report progress and await their promotion, just maintained the inequity between towns in the region. Issues of corruption loomed over failed road construction projects and is prevalent in other projects (He and Xue, 2014:130). Deng et al., (2013:239-240) would cite factors such as the eco-fragile environment, water shortage and uneven distribution, inferior geographic location for investors, weak socioeconomic capacity for industries, relatively poor quality of population that complicated investors to penetrate the western region. These would prove troublesome when developing the west hinges on private investment, particularly FDI that necessitates infrastructure development and human capital. These regions

have suffered losses of highly educated and less educated labor from the brain drain in the past decades (Liu et al., 2014:67) and is now a factor that impedes its growth. As pointed out by Zhao (2014: 2132), FDI would not come to a region that does not have a certain level of technical ability, especially human capital accumulation.

A decade has passed since the implementation of various projects to address the inequity between regions and it is worth noting that migration patterns still show an outward trend towards the eastern region even at the onset of development projects. Taken from the data of Liu et al., (2014:57-58), there had been eight provinces in the western and central regions that registered rates over 3% in the period of 1995-2000. They would highlight that these eight provinces continued their high out-migration rates even in the period of 2005-2010. At the same time period we would see a surge of FDI inflow to the eastern region (Zhao, 2014:2133) that would explain the increased amount of migration towards these industries. In correlation to the increase of migration from the western region, Yeh et al. (2014:917) would state that data from the year 2011 shows more than 180,000 incidents of peasant resentment and contention. In effect the prioritization of development in the west is continuing the enclosure movement that was started during the reform period and is still revolutionizing relations of production in China. The Western Development Project is carrying out China's transition towards a capitalist society as shown in the discussion above.

## **CONCLUDING REMARKS**

Perspectives coming from the displaced, the peasant workers were not fully discussed in this paper and would pose to other scholars for further study into that topic. The above discussion focuses on historicizing state policies that legitimize the actions of local government cadre officials in utilizing privatization as well as FDI inflow in transforming the factors as well as relations of production in China. It would show the non-statist approach of Chinese development as how it has been perceived in recent decades that are also dominant in scholarly publications. The state in turn would only legitimize the actions emanating from the effects of entrenching privatization, marketization and further deregulation that would displace

and alienate the peasants and the state would also provide ideological support to this type of ‘Socialism with Chinese characteristics’.

In various phases of Chinese development, it would be evident that the ‘enclosure’ or the privatization aspect is prevalent and would point us to clarify statements asserting China’s ‘uniqueness’ in terms of their so called ‘Socialism with Chinese characteristics’.

Utilizing primitive accumulation in China’s transition towards a modern capitalist society, it would show the continuing phase of China’s development. Significant is the concept of the reserve labor army of workers, that they are still partially tied to their *hukou*. Most of the migrants would have left their elders and children to find off farm work and would eventually return to their rural residences as they are not permitted to reside in the urban cities where they labor. There are some provisions that permit the change of *hukou* yet only a few would follow the tedious process. A number of authors signify the *hukou* as a stumbling block for China’s development and would center the argument at the character of the reserve army of labor not being ‘liberated’ from the agricultural ties.

In the current rhetoric for development, large populations are continuously being displaced with various forms and under different circumstances. And these populations are migrating towards off farm work to augment their situation of being displaced or their capacities limited by the adoption of market forces in state policy. These migrants are also conditioned to sell their labor power through policies, ideological reconditioning and even through discrimination.

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