



CLIMATE VANGUARD

The Chinese

**RECLAIMING
COMMUNES PT. 3/6**

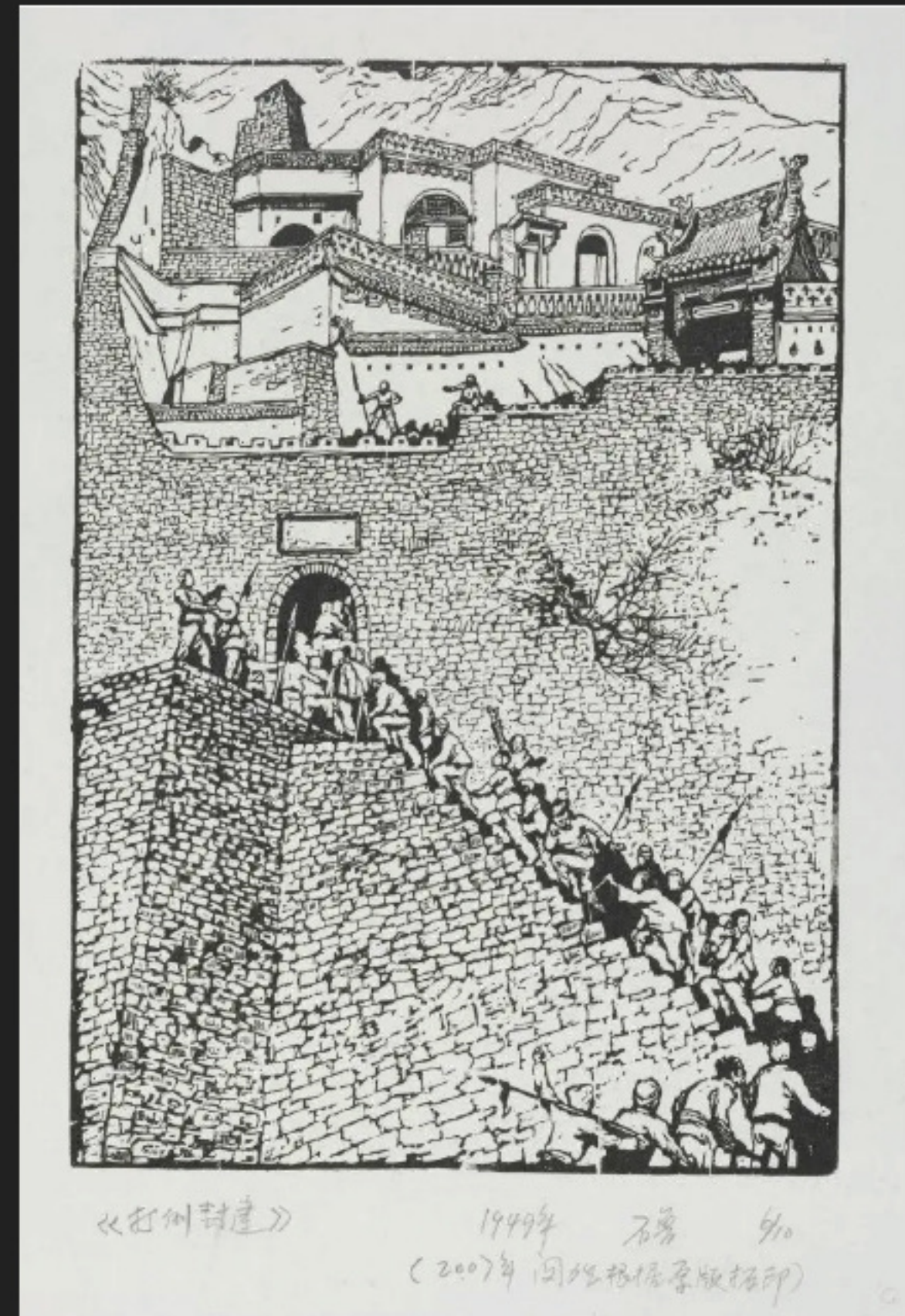
People's Communes

In the wake of the 1949 revolution, rural life in the People's Republic of China (PRC) was rapidly transformed. A cornerstone of this reorganisation was the **establishment of the People's Communes** – an organisational form combining communal production and local democratic governance – which were embedded **within a national process of socialist construction.**

Emergence of People's Communes

People's Communes emerged from a longer process of collectivisation. **Before the revolution, China was a semi-feudal society.*** The majority of the population were peasants who depended on landlords for access to land.

From 1949 to 1953, the new revolutionary government launched **nationwide agrarian reform under the banner of "land to the tiller."** The landlord class was expropriated and land redistributed to the peasants, resulting in hundreds of millions of new land owners.



***Note:** In a semi-feudal society, capitalist social relations exist, but they have not yet displaced deeply entrenched agrarian and pre-capitalist relations.

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However, the fragmentation of land and productive resources across individual peasant households limited their ability to increase agricultural production. Beginning in 1952, they increasingly self-organised into agricultural cooperatives, pooling land, livestock, labour, and machinery.



In 1958, many cooperatives began merging into larger organisations known as People's Communes, a development formally encouraged by the Communist Party of China (CPC).* Over 740,000 cooperatives across the country were reorganised into more than 26,000 People's Communes, comprising 120 million households (i.e. over 99 % of the PRC's total rural population).

***Note:** The rapid expansion of the People's Commune system occurred during the Great Leap Forward (1958–1962), a period of accelerated industrialisation and collectivisation in the PRC, which, compounded by poor harvests caused by adverse weather conditions, contributed to the famine of 1959–1961 that took an estimated 10–12 million lives.

Structure of the Communes

The People's Communes had a three-tiered ownership and administration system:

1. **Production teams** typically comprised around 30 households, which collectively managed land, livestock, and some equipment like threshers. Income was distributed among members according to the work-points they earned, reflecting the principle, *"from each according to their ability, to each according to their work."*
2. **Production brigades** were made up of multiple production teams, which communally owned larger means of production, such as tractors and irrigation equipment. Generally, each brigade corresponded to a village.
3. **People's Communes** coordinated across brigades, running industrial production, facilitating infrastructure construction, and taking on various administrative functions. Income from commune-level enterprises was reinvested across all three levels.



The Communes' Achievements

By collectivising labour and resources, communes contributed to numerous developmental achievements in the PRC, including

***Note:** Between 1957 and 1978, grain production increased by roughly 50% and Chinese agriculture produced enough to feed and clothe an additional 300 million people.

- **Increased agricultural productivity** and food security*
- Accumulation of **resources for industrialisation** and agricultural modernisation
- **Construction of civil infrastructure** like bridges
- **Expansion of social services**, including education and healthcare
- **Greater economic equality** through collective distribution and redistribution
- Greater **peasant participation in economic and political decision-making**
- **Integration of women** into productive labour and political life



Decollectivisation

Commune institutions were gradually dismantled from 1978 onward as part of the Reform and Opening Up process. By 1985, the commune system had effectively ceased to exist as a political institution.

However, the communes left a lasting legacy in Chinese society. For example, higher literacy and educational levels in rural areas as well as infrastructure built through the collective labour of commune members have contributed to the PRC's continued development.



Movement toward Recollectivisation

Socialist construction is a protracted process that develops as old contradictions are resolved and new ones emerge.

Contemporary policy in the PRC is once again placing an emphasis on collective production. The CPC's 2021 Rural Revitalisation Law calls for the development and expansion of the rural collective economy.

While we won't see the rebirth of the People's Communes in the exact form in which they once existed, new forms of socialised production that empower the masses may be on the horizon.