

The People's Republic of China

Who Should Own the Land? A Unit of Study for Grades 7-10

By Susan Meisler and David Wakefield

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This curriculum guide, produced by the National Center for History in the Schools, is intended as a set of lessons to teach middle school students about the problems associated with land ownership, land redistribution, and agricultural organization by using China as a case study. As such, the guide serves as a valuable “real-life” episode, which has tremendous potential for informing students of one of the most crucial issues affecting governments worldwide, especially in the developing world. The curriculum is evidently to be introduced to students by way of a “dramatic moment,” which provides a clear visual and mental focus on the problems of land ownership in early twentieth-century China.

The curriculum guide is divided into four distinct lessons. Lesson One, entitled “Whoever Owns the Land, Eats,” focuses on the tremendous disparity in land ownership in China during the Qing Dynasty. Lesson Two, “Eating Bitterness, Speaking Bitterness,” focuses on the campaign by the Chinese Communist Party

(CCP) to mobilize the peasantry to overthrow the feudal system. The third lesson presents two perspectives, one positive, one negative, regarding the move into the communes in the late 1950s. Finally, the last lesson examines the dismantling of the communal system after the reform program. Each lesson contains clear learning objectives, activities, and evaluation and assessment procedures.

The overall objective of the guide is to present to students the necessity of fair land distribution, and thus introduce students to important economic and political issues, and provide some criterion for making these sorts of decisions. Some minor objectives that are introduced through the lessons include understanding the use of primary and secondary sources and detecting bias in written sources. The guide largely achieves its primary objectives through interesting and informed activities and readings. There are three areas of critique, however, that ought to be noted by those attempting to use the materials in a classroom setting.

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U.S.-China Teachers Exchange Program

The American Council of Learned Societies is now seeking applications for the third year of a three-year exchange program for teachers in American and Chinese secondary schools. This is an unusual opportunity for schools and districts wishing to begin or to strengthen Chinese language and culture programs and for teachers wishing to live and teach in China.

During the first two years of the project, we have had American teachers from across the country in “key” secondary schools throughout China—in Beijing, Dalian (Liaoning), Hohhot (Inner Mongolia), Suzhou, Changzhou, and Yangzhou (Jiangsu), and Chengdu (Sichuan). We anticipate that many of the same schools on the Chinese side will participate in the third year of the program.

The American teachers in China teach English as a second language. The Chinese teachers, all of whom teach English as a foreign language in China, will be prepared to teach Chinese history, language, and culture and/or English as a second language at participating American schools. ACLS sponsors orientation programs for participating teachers in the U.S. and China during the summer before the exchange year.

ACLS pays the salary of visiting Chinese teachers and the transportation of American teachers. Participating American schools continue the salary and benefits of American teachers during their exchange year.

For more information and an application package, please send a letter to the Education Office—China Program, American Council of Learned Societies, 228 East 45th St., New York, NY 10017.

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CURRICULUM MATERIALS REVIEWS

The first issue is that the guide suffers from a lack of careful editing. Many of the misspellings are inconsequential (i.e., “diphthong” becomes “dipthing”), but at times, this lack of editing has more serious ramifications, particularly for teachers who might not know Chinese history well. For example, in a teacher background essay, the guide states that in the “iron rice bowl,” a worker could be fired. This is obviously a case of a missing “not,” but for a teacher who doesn’t know the difference, there will be certain confusion. In addition, the table of contents specifically states that chapter four will detail the return of capitalism, but a box in chapter four makes an emphatic point that the household responsibility system is not capitalism. This contradicts elements within the chapter itself that specifically refer to the rise of rural capitalism and enterprise. This lack of close editing diminishes the effectiveness of the guide, and forces teachers to rely on other materials in order to understand the issues.

A second, and more damaging, weakness is that the guide does not fulfill its goal of presenting balance in the materials. The authors do assemble a nice collection of essays, reminiscences, and narratives that portray both the negative as well as the positive side of China’s radical transformation, but the material presented errs in leaving out too much of the damning evidence against the forced collectivism. The Great Leap Forward, for example, is mentioned but never explained, along with the estimated thirty million deaths and the almost total disintegration of the rural economy that accompanied it. The policies of retrenchment, and the politics which necessitated it, are given little treatment that might make a teacher’s job much easier.

Further, the terminology of the curriculum guide undermines any real balance or critical distinction. The problem is that the authors wanted to demonstrate the necessity of the land reforms, and thus present a false dilemma between the inequities of Qing and KMT China and the utopian paradise of Mao. The real land reform policies of the KMT are ignored, and no other alternatives to the CCP’s program are presented for students, although they are given creative freedom to design their own program. This would be more effective, however, if they were given various models. This would also more effectively achieve the unit’s goal of understanding how land reform might work in other developing nations.

Another significant issue associated with the guide is that the material is somewhat dated. With a publication date of 1991, the guide was written before the very radical nature of the economic reforms became glaringly evident. In the past decade, China has retained little of its commitment to the old-style socialism, and yet the impression one gets from the curriculum guide is that minor modifications to the socialist system are the essence of the reform program. The importance of this is that the early collectivization program of the CCP has been almost completely undone by the economic reforms. Since the guide, of necessity, does not include a more extended discussion of “China’s Second Revolution,” it does not portray an accurate picture of China’s economic and land distribution, and the real economic lessons learned from this period.

An important issue for many teachers is the quality of the curricu-

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lum guide in terms of instruction and evaluation. The guide indeed uses an admirable collection of primary sources, from narratives concerning the revolution, to quotes from Mao Zedong and Zhu De, to the text of the 1947 Agrarian Law. This reliance on primary sources is to be commended, and allows the students to interact with real historical data. The narratives are focused, interesting, and attract student attention. The curriculum is also full of interesting learning activities, including drawing editorial cartoons and comic books, debating various perspectives, and further research projects. The extended activities also utilize a variety of methodologies, including writing, drawing charts, and class debate.

However, little direction is given to teachers who might find it difficult to facilitate a discussion in this unfamiliar terrain. More focused discussion questions might prove beneficial to teachers without extensive background in modern China or economic organization. Discussion itself is also insufficient as a method of evaluation in that many students do not participate; generally, only the more vocal few are assessed. Several lessons have other types of evaluation, but these could use some improvement. Many of the evaluative mechanisms only ask for a peasant’s perspective, and provide little opportunity for critical evaluation of the land reform movement itself.

In summary, the curriculum guide uses a compelling case study to introduce students to the problems of land distribution. The guide’s weaknesses reflect the difficulty of this project, in that all of the necessary background material to truly understand both the land reform and the more recent reform program requires quite a bit of explanation. In an attempt to achieve brevity, the authors have sacrificed a significant amount of important material. Teachers who use the guide will find themselves well served to supplement the background material with more extensive analyses of the economic and political issues associated with the Chinese economy, and perhaps even narrative treatments of this significant period of world history. ■

Randy and Pam Kluver

RANDY KLUVER is Director of the interdisciplinary Asian Studies Program and Associate Professor of Speech and Rhetoric at Oklahoma City University. He has recently published *Legitimizing the Chinese Economic Reforms: A Rhetoric of Myth and Orthodoxy* (SUNY Press, 1986).

PAM KLUVER is a doctoral student in the department of Instructional Leadership and Academic Curriculum at the University of Oklahoma.

Editor’s Note:

If you are interested in obtaining either *Early Chinese History* or *The People’s Republic of China*, please call the National Center for History in the Schools at 310-825-4702.