

# **Gauging the Chinese Reality: 40 Years of Research in Rural**

## **China**

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### **Abstract**

This paper examines my research involvements in rural China through the last four decades, and the checkered twist and turns of my intellectual commitments through this career path. The first part of the paper reviews how I framed my research interests and orientations in light of China's modern history characterized by its struggle to achieve modernization when confronting Western colonialism and imperialism. Debates over the legitimacy of Confucian orthodoxy and the viability of traditional Chinese culture occupied much of the intellectual concerns throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Growing up under the authoritarian Chinese Nationalist regime in Taiwan, however, dampened my interests in the seemingly hypocritical Confucian tradition. Reaction against the lived experiences of a stifled intellectual environment led me to pursue post-graduate education in the U.S., and developed unrealistic expectations about the socialist China and what it could have offered or might have accomplished to salvage the miseries of the peasant underclass. Subsequent fieldworks in rural China served as an awakening call to the crude social reality that seemed to be insurmountable. These experiences also allowed me to construct a more distant and neutral view about the nature of Chinese peasant society and the difficulties involved in its transformation. The conclusion tries to explain what contributed to the successful transition of the current market reform.

**Key Words: Rural Poverty, Dynastic Cycles, Collectivization, Market Reform, Post-Peasants**

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## 1. Intellectual Burdens among Social Elites in China's Modernity Quest

The opening phrase of the ancient Chinese epic *The Three Kingdoms* notes, “As far as the affair of the universe goes, it will be united after division, and divided after unification.” For orthodox Confucian scholars, this unique rhythmic historiography merely indicates the inevitability of a predestined statecraft or governance called “Mandate of Heaven”—a linear progression of power from one sage king to the next, depending on the ebb and flow of his (rarely her) moral authority as the “Son of Heaven.”

In spite of the belief among Confucian scholars that entrusts the responsibility of the state's wellbeing in the hands of the mythical heavenly mandate, pragmatic sage kings knew better by honing their statecraft and governance through practical policies: the promotion of higher yield crops to replace the old ones to alleviate hunger, the promotion of agricultural technology through the publication of technical farming manuals, the allocation of relief assistance to populace affected by natural catastrophes, and the construction of proper defense systems to ward off the invading nomads (Bray 1986).

In this teleological Confucian model of power succession, it is generally believed that in the beginning of the dynasty the founding rulers tended to be more diligent, hardworking, and caring, and hence capable to sustain the mandate of heaven. But as the time went by, the succeeding generations of the ruling house began to indulge in decadent practices and hence the precipitated decline of its moral authority. The telltale signs of sporadic draught, flood, famine, and pestilence, or social disturbances caused by the spread of secret religious sects, the untimely demise of a ruler before a proper successor was named, the invasion of the nomadic barbarians, and so on and so forth, indicated the waning of the heavenly mandate of the current ruling house and the entering of a new dynastic cycle. To claim the new mandate, the rising party must demonstrate its legitimacy by displaying the leader's sagacious deeds and moral commitment to Confucian ethics, as well the ability to alleviate poverty, resolve internal conflicts, and reestablish the normalcy of life.

This Confucian worldview about a predestined and static heavenly mandate that exhibited rhythmic circulation of power to govern among the sage kings had sustained Chinese intellectuals for more than two thousand years. Statecraft and governance was safeguarded and championed by the Confucian intelligentsia who successfully preached for the moral leadership of the Son of Heaven through personally exemplary

acts and deeds. To cover up the misconducts of certain incompetent rulers or their amoral aptitudes, the Confucian scholars often cooked up myths or fantasies to glorify the inept or corrupted. A certain level of hypocrisy was imbued throughout the system, but, on the surface at least, a superficial valence of social harmony was accomplished to sustain the orthodox myth in the sinocentric world.

Started from the infamous “Opium War” in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century and to be followed by repeated and humiliating military defeats at the hands of Western (and later Japanese) colonial powers all the way down to mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, however, Chinese intellectuals and social elites had been engaged in long and painful soul searching that tried to answer the utmost unpleasant but inevitable question: Was the Confucian orthodoxy a fundamentally false, if not merely superficially flawed, philosophy?

Opinions seemed to split right in the middle. One school, which can probably be labeled as the traditionalists, argued that the traditional orthodoxy was essentially sound and right. The recent glitch since the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century was merely an unexpected twist in the dynastic cycle when additional players from afar suddenly entered the sinocentric cultural arena at an inopportune moment when the dynastic cycle was in decline. The Confucian moral high ground would eventually prove its invincibility by converting the “barbarians” to its civilizational spheres. For the traditionalists, their most urgent task was to find out or explain what accounted for China’s repeated failures in the face of rising colonial powers. Once the diagnoses were made, then the next step would be to find out the necessary strategies and social practices—either developed indigenously or imported from the West—to be incorporated into the existing mode for the revival or restoration of the Confucian moral supremacy. “The Chinese in essence (or substance) and the West in practice,” so claimed the traditionalists from the Tongzhi Revival (circa 1868 CE) to the Nationalists’ New Life Movements in 1930s.

The direct opposite and perhaps more radical viewpoint belonged to the revolutionists who argued against the validity of the traditional orthodoxy and called for its complete eradication. After the rejection of the tradition, the revolutionists would insist on the total transplantation of whatever was in the West as the cure for the ill of China, especially the issue of rural poverty. The radical revolutionists, however, inevitably faced their own dilemmas. The West as we know it in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century was not a homogenous and uniformed body. Its ideological spectrum expands from the American style of popular democracy to Kropotkinian

anarchism to Marxian dictatorship of the proletariats.

Thus, it was amid the fusion and confusion of competing ideas and political ideologies that formed the intellectual milieu of the late imperial and early republican China, characterized by incessant academic debates among different intellectual camps, the pendulum swings of policy decision-makings along with the rise and fall of certain power blocks, the grass root social movements advocating one school of thought over another, the political parties formed to implement specific modernity projects, and so on and so forth. Ideological debates and conflicts degenerated into open confrontations and eventually military campaigns, with diverse international bodies clandestinely propping up their proxies or clients as surrogates to protect their imperialist interests in China. The contestation ended in 1949 when the traditionalist oriented government in the guise of the Chinese Nationalist Party (or *Kuomintang*, abbreviated KMT in historical texts) was defeated by the revolutionists under the Chinese Communist Party and retreated to Taiwan.

## **2. Exploring Fieldwork Opportunities in Rural China**

It was at this oblique moment in history that I began my academic quest to study the ill of the Chinese society, especially the perennial “peasant problems.” In early 1960s when I began my research on rural China, I found the challenge daunting. The KMT in Taiwan had just entered a hysteric period of anti-communism. Any scholars who did not retreat to Taiwan with the Nationalists in 1949 were labeled as traitors and whose works banned. Political dissentions against the KMT autocratic rule were branded as communist sympathizers. Freedom of the press and freedom of the expression of political beliefs were suspended under the Martial Law that began in 1949 and would run until 1987. To offer a counter movement against the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution in China (circa 1966-76 CE), the Nationalists in this juncture launched its own social movement in the name of the Restoration of Chinese Culture Movement (中華文化復興運動), with the single purpose of sanctifying Confucianism as the sole and legitimate political ideology.

Disgusted with this type of stifling intellectual environment in Taiwan, I happily embraced the opportunity to pursue my post-graduate studies with a scholarship from Michigan State University in 1970. It was an opportune moment for me because, at that point, the study of global peasantry was at the fermentation stage and Michigan State University was one of the breeding grounds of this new approach. Furthermore, there had been several dramatic social movements in the West since the early 1960s:

the civil rights movement in the U.S., the feminist movements in Europe and America, the Liberation Theology of the Vatican, the anti-Vietnam War movements throughout the West, and so on, not to mention the nihilist hippy and gay rights movements. It was the confluence of these liberating environments and the self emancipating ideas at that moment which made academic life so enriching in the U.S. I participated in lectures and seminars to explore new social issues and solutions. Through classmates I also took part in sat-ins and rallies organized by various groups, such as Students for Democratic Society—which I later found out was on the watch-list of the FBI. Social activism also led me to participate in anti-KMT rallies over the disputed islands of Diaoyutai (or Senkaku Islands in Japan), a small chain of uninhabited islands between Taiwan and Okinawa.

It was under this type of agitating moment that China exited from its self-imposed seclusion and reentered the international community that was ready to lay the red carpet to welcome back the once ostracized wayward vagabond. American President Richard Nixon's rapprochement with China through ping-pong diplomacy in 1972 brought about a frenetic craze over whatever news reports came out of the hermitic kingdom. Celebrities from the West trod through the gates of the "Bamboo Curtain" and brought back eye-witnessed testimonies vouching for the realization of the socialist utopia: All people lived in collective entities without the burden of personal property that might have interfered with their dedication to improving the greater wellbeing of the society; Human will and determination overcame seemingly insurmountable physical difficulties to create a better living environment for all; Selfless individuals ready to sacrifice personal gains or gratification to help those in need; All former forms of social inequality and exploitation, such as class division, gender oppression, patriarchal authority, bureaucratic hierarchy, income discrepancy and so on and so forth, had been effectively eliminated in the new socialist China.

In sum, within a short span of two and half decades, the socialist experimentation in China seemed to have effectively resolved its perennial rural poverty problems, eliminated all social ills that beleaguered the "feudalistic" Confucian orthodoxy, and created a new spiritual essence that entails selflessness, equality, endurance, caring, and hardworking. Thus, for the ensuing period of about one year, I feasted on the avalanche of books, films, lectures, news reports, and personal revelations that came out of China and dreamt about the possibility of studying the realization of the earthly utopia through China's rural collectives, the People's Communes.

In early 1973 when I completed all my course requirements at Michigan State

University and needed to carry out the dissertation research for my doctorate in anthropology, I suddenly faced a difficult choice. For my research interests on China's rural poverty issues and peasant transformation, I should go to China and conduct fieldwork in a rural collective. A close, microscopic study of a lived community might provide the hindsight to understand what made the greatest socialist experiment the world ever witnessed ticked. But in reality this option was completely out of the question because China at that point still maintained a close door policy, except for a small, selected group of celebrity who could provide maximum amount of publicity for China in the West.

Barring from the opportunity of conducting actual fieldwork in rural China, my next option was to return to Taiwan and study how industrialization had impacted on its rural livelihood. This option, however, carried its hidden risks. Taiwan was still under the KMT's autocratic rule, and my vocal critic of the regime certainly earned me an unfavorable position on the government's "Black List." My major professor at MSU, Dr. Bernard Gallin, however, encouraged me to go to Taiwan. He managed to get a fellowship from Harvard-Yenching Institute for my 15 months of fieldwork in Taiwan—a sort of international connections to provide some kind of implicit political protection.

My fieldwork in Taiwan went on smoothly. From May 1973 to August 1974, I conducted fieldwork in Sanlin Village in Central Taiwan, a farming community of slightly over 1,000 residents. At that point Taiwan had just entered the rapid stage of industrialization that siphoned off almost all the young and able bodies, both males and females, from the rural scene. The findings of my dissertation research, which was later published in book-length manuscript titled *Agricultural Degradation: Changing Community Systems in Rural Taiwan* (University Press of America, 1981), could be summarized below. Continuous urbanization and industrialization had rendered the agrarian way of life unsustainable in rural Taiwan. Infusion of the market economy had turned the previous kinship based relationships and activities into commercially calculated trades or wage labor. Exodus of the young and the better educated had turned agricultural productivity into a degeneration process of feminization and gerontolization. With average land holdings of less than one hectare per farm family, agricultural mechanization would not have been possible. At the same time, the existing Land Reform laws prohibited the combination of existing small farms with the limit of three hectares maximum per farm family. This restriction made the economy of scale through farmland combination impossible. In the same vein, the anti-communist rhetoric upheld by the KMT would prevent the consideration

of promoting agricultural cooperatives as the viable alternative to solve the agrarian problems of labor shortage and small-scale farm sizes. In the end, my pessimistic prediction was that there would be little hope for Taiwan's agricultural sector except for turning it into some kind of specialists' hobbies, or the existing farmers into weekend farmers who could no longer rely on farming as the mainstay for livelihood.

This unflattering portrayal of Taiwan's rural sector obviously did not earn any good credit for me in the eyes of the KMT. For the ensuing 15 years, i.e., from 1974 through 1989, I was not allowed to enter Taiwan without first applying for "special considerations." To carry out my extant research interests in the study of Chinese peasant society, I first went to Hong Kong's New Territories in 1980, and then succeeded in actual fieldwork in the Mainland in 1984. This process, alas, is not a smooth and straightforward one. The key questions I asked about China's peasant problems also changed as we began to learn more about the "real" China.

China's carefully cultivated image since the early 1970s as the new earthly paradise with uncorrupted socialist citizens began to wane as its domestic power struggles and intra-party purges surfaced. The launch of the Four Modernization Projects in 1976 certainly revealed that the ruling oligarchy was dissatisfied with its tempo of development. The promotion of the household responsibility system in 1978 signaled that the communal way of life was not making the ends meet to feed China's burgeoning one billion people—the population growth of two and half times in three decades. As China's closed door gradually cracked open, we began to see not an idyllic and smooth transformation toward the socialist utopia, but rather a coercive process that combined mass persecution, forced confession, false imprisonment, military confrontation, and inevitable bloodsheds. The carnage of the Cultural Revolution (circa 1966-76 CE) was only gradually beginning to be known to the outside world, the only uncertainty was its degree of ruthlessness and brutality.

I first entered China in 1981 when I attended the first anniversary conference of the Taiwan Research Institute at Xiamen University, established the year before. As the sole outsider in a meeting with over 100 leading Chinese scholars in Taiwan studies, I was taken aback by most meeting attendants who would argue about the political correctness of a paper presenter before they discussed the validity of the paper's contents. There was no objective truth other than the reiteration of Marxist slogans or quotations from Chairman Mao's little red book. Good scholarship was openly ridiculed as the vestige of feudalistic bourgeois elitism. Intellectual integrity and academic honesty had been replaced by shameless display of loyalty to the party

lines. That was the type of hypocrisy I encountered in the university circle which made me realized that perhaps there were shared commonalities between the revolutionists and the traditionalists on both sides of the Taiwan Strait.

Even with the pace of dismantling of the communal system accelerating in early 1980s, my idea of conducting long-term fieldwork in a rural community in China had actually become even more determined than before. My disappointment with China's urban intellectuals could probably found redemption through working and living in rural China. The rustic and down-to-earth rural folks would certainly not be behaving in the same hypocritical manner as the urban bourgeois. The rapid transition of Chinese peasants from a collective mode of living to an individualistic existence will certainly reveal another set of issues that external scholars might have overlooked before. If collectivization could not resolve China's peasant problems, what will? With this set of inquiries in mind, I explored the possibility of doing fieldwork in a village through Xiamen University that I established preliminary contacts.

Through persistence and patient negotiations, I ultimately gained permission to conduct fieldwork in Lin Village outside of Xiamen City in 1984. I believe it was the first time that China granted permission to a foreign researcher to conduct village studies in Han Chinese area since the Steven Moser debacle in 1979. My yearlong stay in Xiamen and seven months fieldwork in Lin Village produced the manuscript, *The Spiral Road: Change and Development of a Chinese Village through the Eyes of a Village Leader* (Westview Press, 1989, 1998).

The bottom line of that study is: Despite official rhetoric, the Chinese Communist Party, or any other communist regime for that matter, had never resolved the fundamental flaws in human nature—the individualistic selfishness at the expense of the others or the public. When the Marxian rhetoric: “From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs,” was rephrased to “From each according to his ability, to each according to his work” by the Chinese communists, it had accurately signaled the realization about the limitation of the utopian dream. The People's Commune imposed a shared equality through work and distribution, but never resolved the problem of boondoggism: having some smart individuals living off the back or at the expediency of the others. Sooner or later, even the not so smart ones realized that they had been taken advantage of, and ceased to put in real efforts in collective work. The stagnation of the rural economy during the collective era (circa 1958-78) became the reality, and shared equality in the People's Communes became shared poverty. My later research in rural Shandong, from 1987 through 1991, also



documented the gradual transition from the collective past to the market oriented future.

### **3. Explaining the Peasant to Post-Peasant Transition**

How can we explain the sudden surge of agricultural productivity in China since the early 1980s with the dismantling of the People's Communes? What have been the human factors contributing to the almost double-digit economic growth rates in the ensuing next three decades when China successfully transformed from an agrarian, rural society to become an industrial powerhouse? I try to unravel this question by providing a hindsight analysis to explain the transition.

China, the same as almost all East Asian rice terracing regimes, share essentially similar characteristics that are typical of most preindustrial, Eurasian agrarian societies: small scale but highly intensive farming systems that depends primarily on human and animal labor, combined with household-based supplementary handicraft or sideline industries. This agrarian regime had developed high degrees of elasticity and sustainability to endure the whims of catastrophic climate change, the invasion of the enemy, the collapse of the ruling houses, and so on and so forth. Such a pervasive and highly durable farming system—invariably called “the Asiatic mode of production” (Marx 1970); “Oriental Despotism” (Wittfogel 1957), “the high energy equilibrium trap” (Elvin 1973), or “agricultural involution” (Geertz 1963; P. Huang 1990)—clearly connotes the basic limitations set by nature that intermittently overwhelms the agronomic system and renders it partially paralyzed or completely overturned.

This was exactly what happened in 1949 when the triumphant People's Liberation Army march into Beijing and declared the establishment of a new orthodoxy based on Marxist utopianism (Wright 1951). The new regime knew perfectly well that agrarian upheavals have been one of the most serious root causes that aggravated internal social conflicts, and it set out to change the course of event through various programs aimed at eliminating rural poverty through redistribution of the most precious resources—farmland. Under the rubric of “Land Reform,” the Communists adapted social policies that contained a high level of coercion, if not brute violence, in its campaigns to implement the social engineering programs.

Critiques and cynics were quick to point out that under the smoking guns of Land Reform, the Chinese Communists were engaging in a grass-root campaign to

eradicate political opposition through the elimination the only tangible resistance—the landed gentry class. In the name of social justice and the alleviation of rural poverty, a pressing issue in the war-torn Mainland, the new regime launched the reform programs by rubbing the rich to feed the poor.

The early success of the Land Reform very quickly entered the stagnant stage typically embedded in any agrarian system. Thus, a long-term historical perspective is needed to put the Chinese peasantry in world historical context to understand its nature. Thomas Malthus (1766-1834 CE) would argue that in the pre-modern mode of production typical of any agrarian economy, the incremental progresses in farming technology, which follows an arithmetic growth curve, will soon be outstripped and overwhelmed by the increases of humans whose reproductive growth follows a geometric growth curve. When the population size exceeds the “carrying capacity” of the established agro-ecological system, the existing homeostasis begins to deteriorate with increased internal conflicts and “miseries.” The ultimate implosion leads to the total collapse of the established social order, with the ultimate replacement of the old ruling regime with a new one. In the meantime, during the extended period of turmoil, large segments of the population would be wiped out due to high levels of causality caused by displacement, murders, rebellion, pestilence, and warfare. The reduction of the population base below the technological ceiling allows the temporal respite needed for the restoration of social order and normalcy of life. Thus the perpetual cyclical movement with rhythmic rise and fall of social order was perceived by Confucian scholars as demonstrating the passing of heavenly mandate, but could equally be explained by the Malthusian evolving population dynamics.

Such a historical demographic interpretation of development pattern seems to have borne out in pre-modern Chinese history. Dwight Perkins’ study indicates that prior to 1400 CE, the Chinese empire witnessed a population that vacillates between 10 to 60 million (Perkins 1969). It was not until the 1600 CE, with the introduction of New World crops (e.g., corns, sweet potatoes, potatoes, peanuts, and tomato)—which not only replaced old crops such as maize and millet with higher yield corns but also allowed the expansion of agriculture to marginal lands—that the national population base exceeded 100 million. Once the demographic ceiling was broken, we began to see the dramatic population increase in the next three centuries: declining mortality rate due to improved public health and nutrition, the territorial expansion of the empire to the southwest at first and then to Manchuria in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, plus a highly efficient civil administration that maintained proper social order with minimum amount of crime or disturbances. The same as other developing economies, we began

to see the “doubling time” accelerated: from one hundred million in 1700 CE to two hundred million in 1800 CE to four hundred million in 1900 CE. The quadrupling of the population in 200 years certainly exert enormous amount of pressures on existing social infrastructures, which became the last straw that broke the camel.

Such a demographic interpretation of the Chinese agrarian crisis certainly entails a very different prescription than the one based solely on allegiance to ideological orthodoxy, either Confucian or Marxian. Richard Tawney (1966), for instance, explicitly argued that landlord-tenant relationships in pre-modern China were based on mutually agreed upon contracts, and either party could back out from a bad deal if deemed inappropriate. He further points out that there was no permanent social cleavage between the two in the same manner as that of the feudalistic lords and serfs in medieval Europe, and the application of a European model of feudalism to this system was a misnomer. The urgent need was to enhance technology and productivity, not social revolution to achieve land redistribution. The same line of argument has been repeated by subsequent historical economists or historians: high population density combined with a preindustrial farming technology on limited land based had produced a delicate ecological equilibrium characterized by high unit productivity resulting from high capital and labor intensity (Elvin 1973; P. Huang 1990; Weins 1987). Land reform or collectivization could not change the cyclical agrarian involutions of boom and bust, following Malthus’ prediction. The emancipation of the primordial peasants in China has to await additional external forces that completely change the *modus operandi* for the rise of the “post-peasants.” In other words, the eventual forces that ultimately emancipated the primordial “peasants” and turned them into “post-peasants” have been their participation in the global expansion of industrial production.

#### **4. Globalization and the Rise of the Chinese Post-Peasants**

Peasants in pre-modern China had always been free agents in a market economy who were familiar with basic principles of monetary use, including input-output analysis, savings and loans, capital accumulation, and investment interests, plus extensive knowledge about private land holdings and transactions (Gates 1996; Perkins 1969). They are anything but the illiterate country bumpkins of Marx’s feudal Europe. It was the preindustrial mode of agrarian production that had curtailed their ingenuity and capacity to undertake the necessary transformation to become post-peasants. Thus, two, three decades after the establishment of the People’s Republic, peasants in China had reached their maximum ceilings in terms of

productivity and growth. In the meantime the population based has more than doubled. The glooming Malthusian prophecy was averted when China abandoned the primordial locked-door policy of the agrarian state and joined the ever-expanding global economy. China's "Reform and Open" policy since late 1970s signaled the change of course in statecraft and ideology and became the manufacturers of world factories.

Several factors contributed to China's successful transition from a primordial peasant society to that of a post-peasant one since the 1980s. The first one had to do with the presence of an authoritarian political system which could effectively implemented goal-oriented social engineering programs, including the land reform, the Great Leap Forward, the collectivization, the de-collectivization, the Four Modernization, and so on. Certainly some of these experimental programs had brought about disastrous results, such as the Great Leap Forward or the Peoples Communes.

It was under such ironclad and undemocratic political regimes, however, we also witnessed the spread of successful social engineering programs such as the universal compulsory education, general healthcare programs, population controls, enhanced agricultural technology, and so on and so forth. The uniformed education system had implanted modern citizens' concept in China. Newly constructed universal citizens' identity promoted memberships in the new shared national community that transcended traditional cleavages based on traditional peasants' narrowly defined cellular units of family, region, language, religion, or ethnicity. Liberated from such cultural constraints, the post-peasants in today's China boldly trod from one locality to another in search of work and betterment in life (Solinger 2005; Xiang 2005). The scale and distance involved are historically unprecedented.

The second factor which made China's post-peasant transition possible was the persistent promotion of science and technology in rural area. Even with the disastrous failure of the Great Leap Forward (circa 1958-61), the communist regime never wavered in its determination to promote science and technology as the basic means to solve rural poverty problems. The training of large number of agronomists, veterinarians, health workers, had successfully transmitted basic scientific knowledge throughout China. The acquisition of science and technology in rural China not only provided the initial impetus in the reform era to enhance agricultural productivity in 1980s, it had also unbridled the peasants from their traditional "limited goods" mentality (Foster 1962).

A well-disciplined, well-educated, and well-informed labor force was the ticket with which China took the great leap into the global whirlpool of industrial production. Whether the primordial peasants in China have gained newly found happiness when they acquired the new status of “post-peasants” or “proletarians” is an issue that we must defer to social psychologists or moral philosophers, who must acquired empirically based data to base their judgment. One issue we can be assured of is, the primordial peasants had finally extracted themselves from the staled Malthusian predicament and enjoyed a new mode of living.

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