

The Industrialization of Rural China. *By Chris Bramall.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2007. xii + 424 pp. Maps, tables, bibliography, notes, index. Cloth, \$99.00. ISBN: 0-199-27593-9.

Reviewed by Yixin Chen

Drawing from an impressive collection of county-level data, Chris Bramall examines the growth of China's rural industry, from 1949, when Mao first became the country's chairman, to the present. Unlike most scholars, who regard 1978, the year when China's reform movement began, as the onset of the phenomenal growth of the country's rural industry over the past three decades, Bramall attributes China's rural success story to Mao's industrial policies. Bramall bases his position on two theories. First, he reconceptualizes "rural industry," appropriating into the category all the county-level, state-owned enterprises that served the agricultural sector and the defense-oriented enterprises in the inland provinces. Collectively, they formed the Third Front industrial program. The inclusion of these enterprises enhances our sense of Mao's achievement in opening up the rural areas to industrialization. Second, Bramall stresses the importance of the protracted process of "learning-by-doing" that took place in Mao's era, especially during the 1960s and 1970s, and enabled rural workers to acquire industrial skills. Without this groundwork, Bramall contends, the surge in rural industry that occurred in the 1980s would not have been possible.

However, his two-part theory is not without problems. Bramall's bold reconceptualization of rural industry is derived from an incorrect methodology. Most scholars view the "rural industry" that existed during Mao's time as having been composed of various types of enterprises initiated by the peasants living in the collectively owned rural areas; during the reform years, these enterprises were owned either collectively by town and village governments or privately by individuals. Thus, it is important to discover what these enterprises achieved: did they create alternative employment opportunities for the crowded population of farmers? increase the income and living standards of peasant households? bring significant change to the countryside? By fusing both the three distinct sets of economies that existed in

rural areas, county seats, and defense-industry zones and the dissimilar government administrations, state investments, managerial styles, and wage systems, Bramall blurs the border between state and nonstate sectors and erases the divide between what is urban and what is rural. We are left to wonder where the location of “rural” is, whether the large agricultural-machinery and chemical-fertilizer factories in urban centers belong in the picture, or even why “rural industry” needs to be singled out at all. Bramall is aware of the methodological difficulty of “document[ing] this [broader] rural industrialization with any degree of precision” (p. 47). As a result, while his book demonstrates the growth of state-owned enterprises at county seats in the late Maoist period, it does not provide any new information about the reality of China’s impoverished rural society.

Nor does his theory of the learning-by-doing process convincingly establish a meaningful link between the Maoist and post-Maoist eras. Bramall is interested both in how long it took for Mao’s workers to acquire the skills that were necessary for industry and the degree to which the Maoist legacy of learning contributed to the process of rural industrialization that followed. Rural industry in the late Maoist era and the early reform years centered on food processing, construction materials, textiles and apparel, and metal products and machinery, and it took anywhere from a few weeks to a few months to acquire the skills that were needed to work in these types of enterprises. Thus, it is not logical to conclude that the skills acquired by the peasants during the 1960s and 1970s were indispensable for the rural industrial recovery that occurred in the mid 1980s. To be sure, as Bramall demonstrates, between 1965 and 1977 rural enterprises trained over twenty million unskilled peasants, transforming them into a cadre of skilled workers, but there is no solid evidence that this cadre laid “the foundations for the expansion of industrial production in the decades ahead” and paved the way “for long run rural prosperity” (p. 165). During the early years of the People’s Republic, the cadre was not even capable of transforming the rural operations into efficient enterprises (p. 4). This does not negate the fact that the cadre was critical to the buildup of rural industry during the reform era.

While Bramall’s concern is to evaluate the role of Maoist industrial legacies in a positive light, his ideological approach to the issue undermines his case. The inefficiency of the rural enterprises created by Mao has led to the general view that his legacy is insignificant; we are more likely to credit the reform policies of the past thirty years for the success of China’s rural industrialization. By introducing incentives and removing the restrictions on private ownership,

the reform policies unleashed an explosion of individual entrepreneurial activities. Bramall believes that Mao's strategy of industrialization, which started with the Great Leap Forward in 1958 and then relied on the state's promotional efforts and a command economy, was a crucial factor in the eventual success of rural industrialization. Although the Leap failed, in his view the Maoist legacy was nevertheless a prime mover of China's industrial growth. "With better planning and less haste in the development of rural industry," argues Bramall, "there was every reason to expect the [Maoist] underlying strategy to lead to success" (p. 9). Thus, Bramall holds that reform policy was not pivotal, although he does give it some credit for the later achievements.

History does not support his position. Under Mao's reign, traditional rural industry was dissolved in the 1950s during collectivization. The rural industrialization inaugurated by the Great Leap came to a standstill by 1965, and it received still another blow when the Cultural Revolution erupted in the late 1960s. The expansion of rural enterprises that began in 1970 was often interrupted by state campaigns to suppress peripheral industries. During the first twenty-seven years of the People's Republic, rural industry did not achieve steady growth because it was continually being disrupted by ideological and political campaigns and by misguided economic planning. A closer examination of history would have revealed that the Maoist rural strategy had little to no chance of success.

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