

# **Moral Mobilization: Morality and Mass Violence in China's Post-Revolutionary Land Reform Campaign**

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Abstract: How do political actors mobilize civilians to participate in collective violence? Despite abundant research in social psychology demonstrating the importance of morality in conditioning violent behavior, social scientists have yet to explore the processes by which political actors mobilize citizens to overcome significant moral-emotional proscriptions against using violence. I argue that political actors can leverage popular morality to alter social boundaries and elicit powerful emotional responses that can justify and mobilize collective violence, a process I term moral mobilization. I illustrate this process by examining the Chinese Communist Party's mobilization of collective violence in the land reform campaign (1950-1952). I argue that the Party, despite the absence of salient class cleavages, mobilized collective violence against "class enemies" by emphasizing and sensationalizing the alleged moral transgressions of a subset of the landed elite and other members of the community, while simultaneously emphasizing the virtue and victimhood of the masses. I combine evidence from archives, internal Party documents, oral histories, memoirs, and local county histories to demonstrate this process using within-case analyses of two "most different" cases in eastern China.

*“The hearts of the masses are easily moved. Someone raises an arm or calls out and the crowd jumps up with him. As long as the speaker’s words sound reasonable, they’ll be accepted. As for whether the speaker has other motives, this is not something that can be carefully discerned in the midst of the chaos. Once the people act, it is easy for them to overdo it; one could go so far as to say that they often overdo it.”*

—Huang Yanpei, “Report Inquiring into Southern Jiangsu’s Land Reform”<sup>1</sup>

How do political actors mobilize civilians to participate in collective violence? Although social psychologists have identified significant moral and emotional constraints on people’s willingness to engage in violence,<sup>2</sup> morality is often missing from or underexplored in accounts of violent mobilization. On a fundamental level, morality conditions and constrains how humans perceive and use violence; people are far more likely to use violence when they feel that they are in the right.<sup>3</sup> Instead, the mobilization of collective violence is usually construed as a “collective action”—or “free rider”—problem, which posits that collective action is unlikely in the absence of selective, usually material, incentives for participants.<sup>4</sup> Yet participation frequently occurs where material benefits are weak or nonexistent. Social norms, network ties, and “peer pressure” can motivate and sustain participation by raising the cost of non-participation,<sup>5</sup> but there are other, nonmaterial individual benefits that encourage participation. Most notably, individuals who feel a strong commitment or obligation are far more likely to engage in collective action.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Huang Yanpei, “Report Inquiring into Southern Jiangsu’s Land Reform (Excerpt),” [访察苏南土地改革报告（节录）] February 13, 1951, *JSTGYD*, 151-52.

<sup>2</sup> Albert Bandura, Bill Underwood, and Michael E. Fromson, “Disinhibition of Aggression through Diffusion of Responsibility and Dehumanization of Victims,” *Journal of Research in Personality* 9, no. 4 (1975): 253-69; Roy F. Baumeister, *Evil: Inside Human Violence and Cruelty* (New York: Henry Holt, 1999); Aaron T. Beck, *Prisoners of Hate: The Cognitive Basis of Anger, Hostility, and Violence* (New York: Perennial, 1999); Randall Collins, *Violence: A Micro-sociological Theory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008); Fiery Cushman, Kurt Gray, Allison Gaffey, Wendy Berry Mendes, and David Desteno, “Simulating Murder: The Aversion to Harmful Action,” *Emotion* 12, no. 1 (2012): 2-7; Alan P. Fiske and Taze S. Rai, *Virtuous Violence: Hurting and Killing to Create, Sustain, End, and Honor Social Relationships* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

<sup>3</sup> Beck, *Prisoners of Hate*; Fiske and Rai, *Virtuous Violence*.

<sup>4</sup> Mancur Olson, *The Logic of Collective Action: Public Goods and the Theory of Groups* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1965); for an articulation of the collective action problem in the context of peasant rebellion, see Samuel L. Popkin, *The Rational Peasant* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979).

<sup>5</sup> Elinor Ostrom, “Collective Action and the Evolution of Social Norms,” *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 14, no.3 (2000): 137-158. For paradigmatic examples of the importance of social ties and peer pressure on collective action and violence, see Christopher R. Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992); Lee Ann Fujii, *Killing Neighbors: Webs of Violence in Rwanda* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009); Doug McAdam, “Recruitment to High-Risk Activism: The Case of Freedom Summer,” *American Journal of Sociology* 92, no. 1 (1986): 64-90.

<sup>6</sup> John H. Aldrich, “Rational Choice and Turnout,” *American Journal of Political Science* 37, no. 1 (1993): 246-278; Kay Lehman Schlozman, Sidney Verba, and Henry E. Brady, “Participation’s Not a Paradox: The View from American Activists,” *British Journal of Political Science* 25, no. 1 (1995): 1-36.

These committed participants are not just altruistic “conscience constituents,”<sup>7</sup> who sympathize with a movement’s cause but do not benefit from its goals, but rather those who derive real emotional benefits from their participation. Collective violence and the mobilization process itself can bring self-actualizing and expressive benefits to participants—e.g. “pleasure of agency,” honor, etc.—and build common identities among participants where they act on moral commitments.<sup>8</sup> Individuals may also participate in collective violence to defend against emotional harm through the loss of respect or honor.<sup>9</sup> The large literature on emotions in social mobilization demonstrates that emotions can have various effects on mobilization, including bolstering collective solidarity,<sup>10</sup> mobilizing participation,<sup>11</sup> sustaining participation,<sup>12</sup> shaping participation identities,<sup>13</sup> and structuring the trajectory of movements.<sup>14</sup> These accounts that stress the importance of moral commitments and emotions in participation, however, tend to focus on non-violent mobilization and do not elucidate the “meso-level” processes by which political actors create or shape these commitments in the hearts and minds of potential participants.<sup>15</sup>

When looking at collective violence, it is imperative to examine the *process* by which political groups translate their abstract ideological message into a comprehensible popular idiom that can mobilize participation and generate a belief in the legitimacy of their cause and the

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<sup>7</sup> John D. McCarthy and Mayer N. Zald, “Resource Mobilization and Social Movements: A Partial Theory,” *American Journal of Sociology* 82, no. 6 (1977): 1212-1241.

<sup>8</sup> Rachel Einwohner, “Opportunity, Honor, and Action in the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising of 1943” *American Journal of Sociology* 109, no. 3 (November 2003): 650-675; Mark I. Lichbach, *The Rebel’s Dilemma* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995); Elisabeth Wood, *Insurgent Collective Action in El Salvador* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

<sup>9</sup> Elijah Anderson, *Code of the Street: Decency, Violence, And the Moral Life of the Inner City* (New York: W.W Norton, 1999); Richard E. Nisbett and Dov Cohen, *Culture of Honor: The Psychology of Violence in the South* (New Directions in Social Psychology. Boulder: Westview Press, 1996).

<sup>10</sup> Jeff Goodwin, “The Libidinal Constitution of a High-Risk Social Movement: Affectual Ties and Solidarity in the Huk Rebellion, 1946 to 1954,” *American Sociological Review* 62, no. 1 (1997): 53-69

<sup>11</sup> Elizabeth J. Perry, “Moving the Masses: Emotion Work in the Chinese Revolution,” *Mobilization: An International Journal* 7, no. 2 (2002): 111-128; Valentino et al., “Election Night.”

<sup>12</sup> Theodore Kemper, “A Structural Approach to Social Movement Emotions,” in Jeff Goodwin, James M. Jasper, and Francesca Polletta, ed., *Passionate Politics: Emotions and Social Movements* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001);

<sup>13</sup> Jocelyn Viterna, *Women in War: The Micro-processes of Mobilization in El Salvador* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

<sup>14</sup> Deborah B. Gould, *Moving Politics: Emotion and Act Up’s Fight Against AIDS* (University of Chicago Press, 2009).

<sup>15</sup> For a discussion of the importance of meso-level processes in understanding political violence, see Evgeny Finkel and Scott Straus, “Macro, Meso, and Micro Research on Genocide: Gains, Shortcomings, and Future Areas of Inquiry,” *Genocide Studies and Prevention* 7, no. 1 (2012): 56–67.

violent means they employ. As Fujii puts it, we must account for the “skill and ingenuity on the part of the norm entrepreneur [required] to establish a new norm, particularly one that conflicts with a longstanding proscription against killing others.”<sup>16</sup> That is, how do political actors, in the course of mobilization, exploit or create new moral convictions, present their cause as righteous, and elicit emotional responses that can rouse people to violence?

I argue that mobilizing support for and participation in a violent movement requires the elimination of moral-emotional barriers through the skillful articulation and performance of a moral narrative that justifies the righteousness of a movement’s mission and its means, a process I term *moral mobilization*.<sup>17</sup> This process combines boundary work and social performance strategies to reframe and sensationalize violations of culturally-specific norms of appropriate and just behavior to legitimize and motivate collective action against alleged transgressors.<sup>18</sup> Through *moral boundary work*, political actors impose a symbolic boundary between “transgressors” and “victims” by locating and emphasizing the violations of moral norms by members of a targeted group, while acknowledging the victimhood and valor of the audience-community. Through *moral theatrics*, political actors present and perform sensationalized accounts of norm violation to generate outrage against transgressors and sympathy for the transgressed.

This theory emerges from a significant yet understudied historical period of state formation: China’s post-revolutionary land reform campaign (1950-1952). The Chinese Communist Party, in the absence of clear and salient class cleavages, mobilized collective violence against their rivals by emphasizing and sensationalizing the moral transgressions—violations of culturally-contingent norms of appropriate or good behavior—of a subset of the

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<sup>16</sup> Lee Ann Fujii, “Transforming the Moral Landscape: The Diffusion of a Genocidal Norm in Rwanda,” *Journal of Genocide Research* 6, no. 1 (2004): 100.

<sup>17</sup> I define morality as shared understandings of what constitutes proper behavior and good character, and vice-versa. These shared understandings vary by culture and time, and they do not in any way represent an absolute or universal good. Those who invoke morality may represent or view themselves as righteous, but acting on their moral beliefs does not make their actions *good*; that is a normative judgment for outsiders to make.

<sup>18</sup> On boundary work, see Michèle Lamont, *The Dignity of Working Men: Morality and the Boundaries of Race, Class, and Immigration* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000); Michèle Lamont, *Money, Morals, and Manners: The Culture of the French and American Upper-middle Class* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992); Michèle Lamont and Virág Molnár, “The Study of Boundaries in the Social Sciences,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 28, no. 1 (2002): 167–195; Charles Tilly, *The Politics of Collective Violence* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003); and Andreas Wimmer, *Ethnic Boundary Making: Institutions, Power, Networks* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013). On social performance, see Jeffrey C. Alexander, *The Drama of Social Life* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2017).

landed elite and other members of the community, while simultaneously emphasizing the virtue and victimhood of the masses. I demonstrate that the CCP mobilized ordinary villagers to attend public rituals of violence and to denounce, beat, torture, and kill alleged “class enemies” where it engaged in *moral mobilization*. Through moral mobilization, Party and state cadres leveraged shared norms of right and wrong behavior to demarcate a virtuous ingroup and a villainous outgroup, eliciting sympathy for the former and outrage against the latter. In this “war for sympathy” against local elites, cadres elicited villagers’ sympathy for the suffering of their fellow villagers to generate ingroup solidarity, while rousing outrage against a select number of alleged transgressors among the local elite to push them, as a group, outside of the community’s “span of sympathy.”<sup>19</sup> Through this process of moral mobilization, the CCP delineated a new symbolic boundary between the “oppressed masses” and the “oppressive landlord class,” and used the public performance of certain individuals’ supposed moral turpitude to elicit outrage and sympathy, with the ultimate goal of mobilizing collective violence and consolidating state authority.<sup>20</sup>

I explore the process of moral mobilization through a “most different” design that delineates parallel processes in two radically different socioeconomic contexts:<sup>21</sup> the impoverished northern region of Huaibei and the prosperous southern region of Jiangnan in central-eastern China. A campaign of mass violence rooted in the ideology of class struggle should, one would expect, generate more enthusiasm in wealthy, unequal parts of a country; conversely, it should falter where objective socioeconomic differences are few. This analysis reveals that the CCP succeeded in mobilizing violent “class struggle” in wildly different socioeconomic contexts because of its use of moral emotions, particularly outrage and sympathy, to foment violence. By leveraging outrage and sympathy to construct ingroup-outgroup identities that separated oppressors from the oppressed, the Party turned class into a proxy for moral turpitude, which allowed it far greater freedom to mobilize in areas where objective socioeconomic conditions were less conducive to class-based violence.

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<sup>19</sup> Coser 1969.

<sup>20</sup> That is not to say that the CCP did not use any symbolic resources. In fact, the CCP did creatively use symbolic resources in their mobilization work (Perry 2012); however, the local elite were not the repository of those resources as they were, say, in the confessional movements of early modern Europe (Gorski 2003).

<sup>21</sup> On “most different” designs, see Henry Teune and Adam Przeworski, *The Logic of Comparative Social Inquiry* (New York: Wiley-Interscience, 1970).

The structure of the rest of this paper is as follows. First, I provide an overview of the process of moral mobilization. Next, I review the methodological approach used and the two case studies. I then present the within-case analyses of mass mobilization in the regions of Jiangnan and Huaibei and an analysis of cases of failed mobilization. I conclude with a discussion of the implications of this analysis for the study of mobilization.

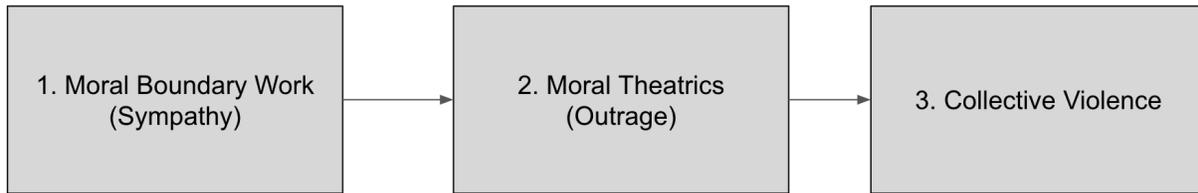
## **The Dynamics of Moral Mobilization**

Moral mobilization is a process that defines a righteous ingroup against a reprobate outgroup and dramatizes alleged specific transgressive acts by members of the latter to reduce sympathy for and provoke outrage against them and their affiliated outgroup. This mobilization process includes discourse but focuses on a set of practices that create and activate boundaries through communal discussion and the staging of public events. Moral boundary work defines an outgroup and casts its members outside of society's "span of sympathy" by alleging them to be morally bankrupt and builds solidarity within the ingroup by cultivating sympathy for the plight of fellow members. Once this boundary has been imposed, political actors activate it through moral theatrics, which dramatizes specific alleged transgressive acts to provoke outrage from the ingroup against members of the outgroup. This outrage diminishes sympathy for alleged transgressors and motivates support for or participation in violence against them. Significantly, it universalizes victimhood and transgression: specific instances of transgression and victimization become universalized to typecast the entire ingroup as victims and the outgroup as victimizers. In essence, it is the process by which "potential victims are collectively categorized into a monolithic group by perpetrators."<sup>22</sup> Sympathy and outrage operate during both moral boundary work and moral theatrics, but sympathy predominates in the former and outrage predominates in the latter (see Figure 1).

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<sup>22</sup> Peter Owens, Yang Su, and David Snow, "Social Scientific Inquiry Into Genocide and Mass Killing: From Unitary Outcome to Complex Processes," *Annual Review of Sociology* 39 (2013): 78.

**Figure 1. The Process of Moral Mobilization and its Predominant Emotions**



### *Moral Boundary Work*

Political actors introduce and transform their ideological scripts into participation identities for mobilization through moral boundary work, which leverages existing culturally-specific norms regarding good and bad behavior to delineate between “us” and “them.”<sup>23</sup> Moral boundaries, a subset of symbolic boundaries, are forged “on the basis of moral character...qualities such as honesty, work ethic, personal integrity and consideration for others,”<sup>24</sup> though the specifics of these qualities will necessarily vary by social context. In the context of moral mobilization, moral boundary work is an active political process whereby external political actors impose new categorical boundaries and imbue them with moral content using familiar normative appeals. That is, moral boundary work does not merely draw a line between an ingroup and an outgroup: it simultaneously constructs feelings of belonging within an ingroup and prescribes hostility towards a defined outgroup.<sup>25</sup> To use Wimmer’s language, this involves the imposition of categorical and socio-behavioral boundaries—i.e. boundaries that define membership in a category but they also those that determine how individuals relate to or treat members who belong to that category.<sup>26</sup> It is this process of moral boundary work that not only imposes new boundaries between targeted groups and the public, but also changes their socio-behavioral valence by using moral norms to exclude from the public’s “span of sympathy”—that is, to frame them as an evil, degenerate minority who, by virtue of their allegedly nefarious behavior, are deserving of punishment. So while political actors often impose

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<sup>23</sup> On the concept of boundary work, see Lamont, *Dignity*; Lamont and Molnár, “Boundaries”; Charles Tilly, *Identities, Boundaries, and Social Ties* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2005); Tilly, *Collective Violence*; Wimmer, *Boundary Making*.

<sup>24</sup> Lamont, *Morals*, 4.

<sup>25</sup> As Brewer (1999) argues, traditional social identity theory tends to assume that ingroup identities necessitate hostility towards an outgroup. For the classic articulation of social identity theory, see Tajfel et al. (1971) and Tajfel and Turner (1979).

<sup>26</sup> Wimmer, *Boundary Making*, 9.

new categorical boundaries rooted in their ideological scripts—e.g. landlords versus the masses; heretics versus the devout; Communist sympathizers versus patriots—these boundaries acquire moral meaning through elite appeals to the audience’s sense of right and wrong behavior.

Unlike resource competition theories of intergroup conflict,<sup>27</sup> moral boundary work does not require salient pre-existing resource competition between groups to delineate group boundaries. Of course, political actors cannot draw boundaries pell-mell: boundary work draws on pre-existing moral norms—shared understandings of good, correct, and appropriate behavior—and traditional patterns of exclusion and resource distribution within local communities; therefore, social relations limit the norms and symbols political actors can successfully invoke to define new symbolic boundaries or to elicit moral-emotional reactions.<sup>28</sup> Even when groups engage in boundary work themselves, these boundaries are “determined by available cultural resources and by spatial, geographic, and social-structural constraints, i.e., by the particular set of people with whom we are likely to come in contact.”<sup>29</sup> Mobilizers face a similar concern: a movement’s appeals must somehow resonate with the audience’s social reality.<sup>30</sup>

### *Moral Theatrics*

Drawing new moral boundaries is necessary but not sufficient for mobilization: political actors crystallize boundaries and catalyze participation by dramatizing “scripts” of moral transgression by members of the targeted outgroup to audiences, who are usually members of the ingroup, and by structuring ingroup-outgroup dynamics in a clear narrative of perpetrator and victim. The existence of a perpetrator and victim imbues this mobilization strategy with its emotional power. While attributing blame to a perpetrator may provoke outrage, sympathy requires designating a victim. Through the public display and performance of transgressions, political actors “overcome the distance between actor and script”<sup>31</sup> to create empathy for the “victim” and outrage against the “perpetrator” or “oppressor.”

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<sup>27</sup> The classic articulation of this argument in the ethnic conflict literature is Donald L. Horowitz, *Ethnic Groups in Conflict* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985). In social psychology, see Sherif’s famous “robbers cave” field experiment. Muzafer Sherif and Carolyn W. Sherif, *Groups in Harmony and Tension* (New York: Octagon Books, [1953] 1966).

<sup>28</sup> Lamont and Molnár, “Boundaries.”

<sup>29</sup> Lamont, *Morals*, 11.

<sup>30</sup> Gould 1995.

<sup>31</sup> Alexander, *Drama*.

Performance operates through the elicitation of moral-emotional responses: “feelings that stem from violating evaluative cultural codes, that is, codes that indicate what is good or bad or right or wrong in a society,”<sup>32</sup> chief among them being outrage and empathy. Outrage is an emotion that “motivates people to shame and punish wrongdoers” in response to perceived violations of moral norms.<sup>33</sup> Unlike fear, which tends to demobilize, social psychologists have found that anger and outrage have mobilizing effects,<sup>34</sup> reduce an individual’s risk threshold,<sup>35</sup> and heighten desire for punitive action.<sup>36</sup> It appears, however, that when anger is situated within a moral framework, thus becoming outrage, it has a stronger and more sustained mobilizing effect.<sup>37</sup> Through sympathy, moral theatrics builds political solidarity between civilian perpetrators on the same side of a symbolic boundary.<sup>38</sup> Empathizing with another’s pain triggers the same affective responses in an individual as if he or she were the recipient of pain.<sup>39</sup> In *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Adam Smith’s defines “sympathy” as a “fellow-feeling” that “does not arise so much from the view of the passion, as from that of the situation which excites it...when we put ourselves in his case, that passion arises in our breast from the imagination.”<sup>40</sup> Sympathy for those allegedly harmed by transgressors strengthens cohesion within the pool of potential participants through the cultivation of a sense of shared fate.<sup>41</sup> It also increases the willingness of citizens to accept violence in the name of “righteous” causes, movements where “interested publics believe that the enactors of political violence are defending society’s most

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<sup>32</sup> Jan E. Stets, “Current Emotion Research in Sociology: Advances in the Discipline,” *Emotion Review* 4, no. 3 (2012): 330.

<sup>33</sup> M. J. Crockett, “Moral outrage in the digital age,” *Nature Human Behaviour* 1, no. 11 (2017): 769-771.

<sup>34</sup> Valentino et al., “Election Night.”

<sup>35</sup> Jennifer S. Lerner and Dacher Keltner, “Fear, Anger, and Risk,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 81, no. 1 (2001): 146-159.

<sup>36</sup> Roger D. Petersen, *Western Intervention in the Balkans: The Strategic Use of Emotion in Conflict* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 35-37. Also see Donald L. Horowitz, *The Deadly Ethnic Riot* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

<sup>37</sup> See Julie H. Goldberg, Jennifer S. Lerner, and Phillip E. Tetlock, “Rage and Reason: The Psychology of the Intuitive Prosecutor,” *European Journal of Social Psychology* 29 (1999): 781-95.

<sup>38</sup> Following Davenport, I treat the state’s belief in the efficacy of moral mobilization and the actual efficacy of this strategy to build popular solidarity as separate hypotheses to be tested in my analysis of the Maoist state. See Christian Davenport, “State Repression and Political Order,” *Annual Review of Political Science* 10 (2007): 1-23.

<sup>39</sup> Tania Singer, Ben Seymour, John O’Doherty, Holger Kaube, Raymond J. Dolan, and Chris D. Frith, “Empathy for Pain Involves the Affective but Not Sensory Components of Pain,” *Science* 303, no. 5661 (2004): 1157-62. See also Adam Smith’s definition of “sympathy” as “fellow-feeling”: Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (Los Angeles: Enhanced Media, 2016 [1759]), 13-16.

<sup>40</sup> Smith, *Moral Sentiments*, 15.

<sup>41</sup> Conversely, outrage *attenuates* empathy across boundaries to justify violence.

vulnerable and protecting a morally legitimate social order.”<sup>42</sup> To be sure, sympathy and outrage often intertwine: sympathy for a suffering individual involves outrage toward the cause of suffering.

Moral theatrics does not refer to the mere conveyance of information; political actors do not present transgressive acts to persuade audiences to accept evidence of their transgressiveness but rather to provoke a visceral emotional reaction. In contrast to “moral shocks,” which are exogenous events that provoke outrage, political actors actively deploy moral theatrics by presenting transgressive acts to an audience with the intent to elicit an emotional response.<sup>43</sup> Past normative breaches between individuals or between an individual and the community-at-large are usually the base material for the dramatization of moral transgression, which draw their potency precisely from the centrality of these norms to a community’s social life. Stalin’s mass mobilization of factory workers during The Great Terror to “unmask” so-called “Trotskyist-Zinovievites” drew on Soviet norms of benevolence toward labor—i.e. that good Soviet officials should protect their workers from harm—to conflate the idea of anti-Stalinism with negligent factory management. The virulent campaign of denunciation against industrial “wreckers” was fueled by the idea that political enemies were those who caused or allowed industrial accidents to maim or kill innocent workers, an issue that was a major point of contention between factory management and workers on the shop floor.<sup>44</sup> Senator Joseph McCarthy’s crusade against Communists within the ranks of the State Department exploited the American public’s moral aversion to homosexuality to galvanize public support by emphasizing that homosexuality was a hallmark, if not the cause, of Communist leanings.<sup>45</sup>

## **The Puzzle of Land Reform after the Chinese Communist Revolution**

Launched merely one year after the Party assumed power, China’s land reform campaign was the world’s largest and most violent land reform, wherein millions of so-called “landlords” (地主) perished or endured extreme psychological and physical violence at the hands of local

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<sup>42</sup> Viterna, “Radical or Righteous,” 191.

<sup>43</sup> For Jasper’s definition of “moral shock,” see James Jasper, “The Emotions of Protest: Affective and Reactive Emotions in and around Social Movements,” *Sociological Forum* 13, no. 3 (Sept. 1998): 409.

<sup>44</sup> Wendy Z. Goldman, *Terror and Democracy in the Age of Stalin: The Social Dynamics of Repression* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

<sup>45</sup> David K. Johnson, *The Lavender Scare: The Cold War Persecution of Gays and Lesbians in the Federal Government* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

villagers in the name of “class struggle” (阶级斗争). Because of Mao’s ardent commitment to popular participation in revolutionary violence, the nascent regime insisted on the widespread involvement of ordinary villagers in highly ritualized public acts of collective violence. At various mass rallies—e.g. “struggle sessions” (斗争大会), “public sentencings” (公审大会), and “People’s Courts” (人民法庭)—armed guards escorted victims to a stage or clearing where, in front of a crowd of their fellow villagers, locals would openly denounce them. The spectating crowd meanwhile would act as a communal judge, listening to these melodramatic testimonies, shouting slogans in sympathy with the denouncers and against the accused, and eventually recommending a suitable punishment.

While the violence of this period involved a considerable amount of mobilization work, we know surprisingly little about how the Party mobilized collective violence after the establishment of the People’s Republic.<sup>46</sup> Most Western and Chinese scholarship has downplayed the land reform campaign’s mobilization of violence and fixated instead on its economic impact or its historical evolution as a policy.<sup>47</sup> Scholars have argued that the peasantry was responding more to the economic benefits of land reform, which included rent reduction and tax reform, than its political or ideological message.<sup>48</sup> Vivienne Shue, while acknowledging the “explicitly conflictual” nature of the land reform campaign, describes the overall socialist transition in the countryside as having been “accomplished with minimal violence and disorder.”<sup>49</sup> Even where scholars have alluded to the extreme violence of the campaign, they

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<sup>46</sup> Research that has addressed the mass mobilization of violence in land reform has focused primarily on the pre-revolutionary land reform campaign carried out in the northern Communist base areas between 1946 and 1948 during the Chinese Civil War. See Suzanne Pepper, *Civil War in China: The Political Struggle, 1945-1949* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1999); and Yang, “Peaceful Land Reform.”

<sup>47</sup> For economic accounts of land reform, see Robert Ash, “Economic Aspects of Land Reform in Kiangsu, 1949–52: Part 1.” *The China Quarterly* 66 (1976): 261–292; Victor D. Lippit, *Land Reform and Economic Development in China: A Study of Institutional Change and Development Finance* (White Plains, NY: International Arts and Sciences, 1974); and John Wong, *Land Reform in the People’s Republic of China: Institutional Transformation in Agriculture* (New York: Praeger, 1973). For more historical and policy-centric accounts, see Dong Zhikai, *Land Reform During the War of Liberation* [解放战争时期的土地改革] (Beijing: Beijing Daxue Chubanshe, 1987); Du Runsheng, ed., *China’s Land Reform* [中国的土地改革] (Beijing: Dangdai Zhongguo Chubanshe, 1996); Yang, “Peaceful Land Reform”; Zhao Xiaomin, ed., *The History of Chinese Land Reform, 1921-1949* [中国土地改革史, 1921-1949] (Beijing: Renmin Chubanshe, 1990).

<sup>48</sup> See Pepper and Selden.

<sup>49</sup> Shue, *Peasant China*, 2, 325.

have not engaged in a systematic, comparative exploration of how this violence was mobilized and unfolded.<sup>50</sup>

Aside from its significance as a major episode of collective violence, the mass mobilization of violence in the early Maoist period is a particularly revealing case for understanding mobilization because it defies two major conventional explanations for collective action: the provision of selective material incentives and the exploitation of existing social cleavages and grievances.

Unlike an Olsonian approach to collective action that would predict that the Party mobilized violence through the provision of selective economic incentives, there is little documented evidence of locals receiving more land or other assets because of their participation in violence during this period. Over sixty percent of the rural population received some land during the land reform campaign,<sup>51</sup> and this land was redistributed to villagers regardless of their actual participation in violent class struggle. Significantly, official Party policy forbade the use of selective economic incentives as a mode of mass mobilization. As Bernstein observes, the Party was particularly worried about how short-term economic gains brought by land reform might generate political apathy and demobilize the local leadership and create a bloc of resistance to the further socialization of the rural economy.<sup>52</sup> There was also an ideological aversion to the use of selective material incentives: officials derided peasants who were solely interested in the Communists' promise of land for their "small peasant mentality" (小农意识) and viewed their mindset as an obstacle to political mobilization.

Moreover, selective material incentives did not work without first changing the peasantry's normative appraisal of the existing political and social system. Many peasants had moral reservations about land reform and had to be convinced that it was morally acceptable for them to till confiscated land. Unfortunately for the Party, this sentiment was widespread among the very group that they wanted to empower to lead rural communities: poor peasants and farm workers. Officials noted that some poor peasants refused to take land because they simply could not imagine living in a new social order. Li Huaiyin recounts a story in Qin village, Dongtai

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<sup>50</sup> For descriptive accounts of land reform violence, see Dikötter, *Tragedy of Liberation*; Edwin E. Moise, *Land Reform in China and North Vietnam* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1983); Stavis, *Agricultural Mechanization*; and Yang, "Peaceful Land Reform."

<sup>51</sup> Lippit, *Economic Development*, 95.

<sup>52</sup> Thomas P. Bernstein, "Problems of Village Leadership after Land Reform," *The China Quarterly* 36 (1968): 3-4.

county where an officer asked an old villager about receiving redistributed land, to which the latter replied, “I don’t dare receive it...[b]ecause it would be even more troublesome for us to figure out the rent we would owe to our boss.”<sup>53</sup>

Ideological appeals to class interests did not work either, though the Party was loathe to admit this. The CCP claimed to have mobilized class struggle during land reform by simply revealing to the peasantry the “factual truth” (事实真相) of their class oppression, which galvanized their “spontaneous organization to carry out struggle against the landlords” (自发地组织起来, 向地主进行斗争). An editorial in the Party-run *Guangming Daily* declared that, “When talking with the peasants about the matter of struggling against the landlords not a single one was not filled with glee (兴高采烈), as this precisely accorded with their needs.”<sup>54</sup> Yet it is puzzling why the peasantry would have responded so enthusiastically to the Party’s Marxist-Leninist ideology considering the relative non-salience and complexity of class boundaries in pre-1949 Chinese society. There is little evidence that ordinary villagers viewed the inequality of the pre-revolutionary landholding system as inherently unjust; indeed, there were significant moral norms that undergirded the maintenance of this system. As Kuhn observes, in the traditional Confucian system inequality was not unjust; rather, the way in which the rich treated the poor was of much greater concern.<sup>55</sup> Fei Xiaotong notes that many villagers viewed paying rents to landlords and taxes to the state as a moral duty, while Zhou Xiaohong argues that the CCP during land reform had to use extensive propaganda work to dispel the peasantry’s notion that the socioeconomic status quo was “right and proper” (天经地义).<sup>56</sup> Rural villagers simply did not view the socioeconomic order through a Marxist lens; this perspective was inculcated in them during the process of land reform mobilization.

Moreover, a class conflict explanation, like other grievance-based arguments, views mobilization from the angle of Carl Schmitt’s friend-enemy distinction, which presupposes the

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<sup>53</sup> Li Huaiyin, *Village China Under Socialism and Reform: A Micro-History, 1948-2008* (Redwood City: Stanford University Press, 2009).

<sup>54</sup> Zheng Linzhuang, “Is Struggling Against the Landlords the Result of Cadres’ Sowing Discord?” [斗争地主是由干部挑拨起来的吗? ] June 1951, *CCPM*.

<sup>55</sup> Philip A. Kuhn, “Chinese Views of Social Classification,” in *Class and Social Stratification in Post-revolution China*, ed. James L. Watson (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 16-28.

<sup>56</sup> Fei Xiaotong, *Chinese Village Close-up* (Beijing: New World Press, 1983), 91; Zhou Xiaohong, *Tradition and Change: The Social Psychology of the Peasantry of Jiangsu and Zhejiang and Its Modern Evolution* [传统与变迁: 江浙农民的社会心理及其近代以来的嬗变] (Beijing: Shenghuo Dushu Xinzhi Sanlian Shudian, 1998), 150.

existence of an impersonal category of “the enemy” that lacks any moral valence. Since “[the enemy] need not be hated personally,” the land-poor masses, once mobilized, should have participated in violence as members of a collective group—“the masses”—and directed their violence against an undifferentiated category of “landlords” (Schmitt [1932] 2007, p. 29). This formulation assumes that villagers already had class consciousness or had quickly imbibed the official class struggle framework. If the Party did successfully mobilize the peasantry to accept the notion of class struggle, that in and of itself needs to be problematized. As Guo Yuhua and Sun Liping (2002) write: “While distinctions in rural society and the hardships peasants experienced before land reform objectively existed, the key [question] is how were they transformed into class concepts.”<sup>57</sup>

## Research Design and Data

To illustrate how the Party used moral mobilization to foment collective violence, I conduct a most different case comparison between two regions in eastern China: the wealthy, unequal region of Jiangnan in the south and poor, relatively equal region of Huaibei in the north (see Figures 2 and 3). Because Jiangnan and Huaibei both were under the jurisdiction of the East China Bureau, this case pairing holds macro-level political variables constant—most importantly central-level leadership, policy environment, and the timing of campaign implementation—while allowing for considerable variation in local socioeconomic context. County-level data shows that landholding inequality in Jiangnan was almost double that of Huaibei: Jiangnan’s ratio of landlord per capita landholdings to average per capita landholdings was 8.83 compared to Huaibei’s 4.76; while Jiangnan’s ratio of landlord per capita landholdings to poor peasant was 37.64 to Huaibei’s 22.14. Table 1 reveals that agricultural productivity—i.e. grain output per *mu* of land—in Jiangnan was about double that of Huaibei, which reflects, in part, the superiority of the former region’s soil quality and irrigation infrastructure. Importantly, the regions differed in their pre-revolutionary patterns of conflict: Jiangnan was a hotbed of rent-based resistance in China, while Huaibei was more notorious for its many anti-state and anti-tax rebellions.

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<sup>57</sup> Guo, Yuhua and Sun Liping. “Speaking Bitterness: A Type of Mediating Mechanism in the Formation of the Concept of the Peasant State,” [诉苦：一种农民国家观念形成的中介机制] *Zhongguo Xueshu* 3, no. 4 (2002): 130-157.

Table 1. Regional Descriptive Statistics for Jiangnan and Huaibei as Most Different Cases<sup>58</sup>

Variable	Jiangnan Region	Huaibei Region
Central Bureau	East China	East China
Landholding Inequality	8.83	4.76
Agricultural Productivity	112.14 kg/mu	50.5 kg/mu
Major Crops	Rice; Cotton	Wheat; Sorghum
Predominant Social Structure	Lineages; High Tenancy	Small landholders; Low Tenancy
Predominant Mode of Peasant Resistance	Anti-Rent	Anti-Tax

By analyzing the mobilization process within and across these two regions, I show how the process of moral mobilization undergirded the mobilization of collective violence in *both* Huaibei and Jiangnan, despite their wildly different political economies. Using within-case “systematic process analysis,”<sup>59</sup> I find that socioeconomic grievances—i.e. inequality, economic development, etc.—cannot explain popular willingness to participate in violent class struggle. Instead, the Party successfully mobilized collective violence in poor and wealthy, equal and unequal localities alike by leveraging popular morality to elicit outrage against a minority of elites framed as moral transgressors.

This analysis draws on data from archival documents (档案), internally published Party materials (内部资料), policy directives (指示), oral histories (口述史), and county gazetteers (县志) gathered in China over twelve months of field research between 2014 and 2015. Because the archival materials were authored by Party committees, work teams, and inspection groups, they provide valuable insights into the perspectives of the Party at various levels of the political hierarchy. Triangulating reports from these different levels of the Party hierarchy enabled me to sketch out a fuller picture of the Party’s mobilization process and revealed and helped resolve

<sup>58</sup> Statistics calculated using author’s county gazetteer dataset. For an excellent, succinct comparison of the socioeconomic characteristics of the North China plain and Lower Yangzi Delta regions, see Philip C. Huang, “Rural Class Struggle in the Chinese Revolution: Representational and Objective Realities from the Land Reform to the Cultural Revolution,” *Modern China* 21.1 (1995): 105-143.

<sup>59</sup> Peter A. Hall, “Aligning Ontology and Methodology in Comparative Politics,” in James Mahoney and Dietrich Rueschemeyer, eds. *Comparative Historical Analysis in the Social Sciences* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 373-406; Peter A. Hall, “Tracing the Progress of Process Tracing,” *European Political Science* 12, no. 1 (2013): 20-30.

discrepancies in the data. I supplement these archival materials with documents from rare internally published compilations of Party materials that the Party published and circulated in the 1950s for internal reference. A tremendous advantage of using these compilations is that they include reprints of archival materials from Party committees and, rarely, work teams. Considering the severely limited access to archival material in China currently, these internal publications help fill in the many gaps in the archival record. The data cover a broad geographic range within the Jiangnan and Huaibei regions, as Figure 3 illustrates.

Figure 2. 1950 Provincial and County Borders for the East China Bureau (Shaded), with the Case Study Area of Huaibei and Jiangnan Designated by the Dotted Square

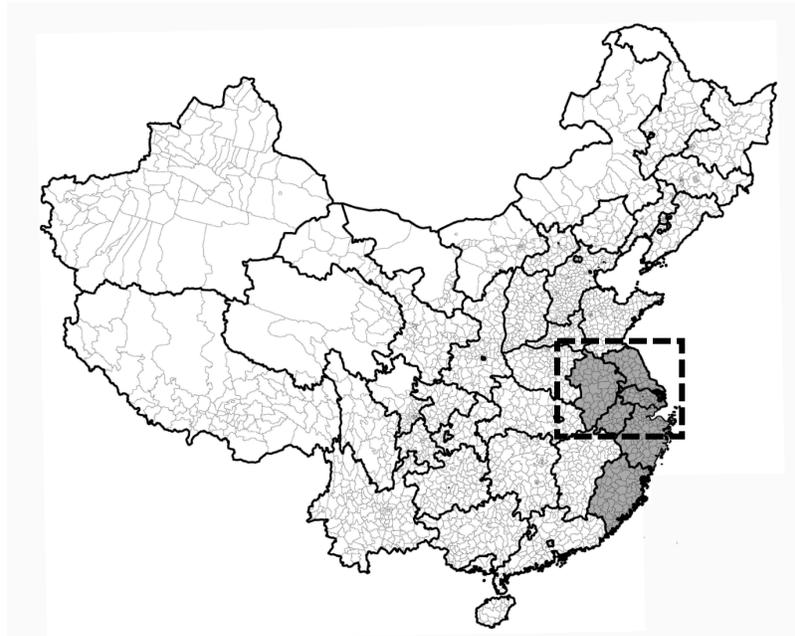
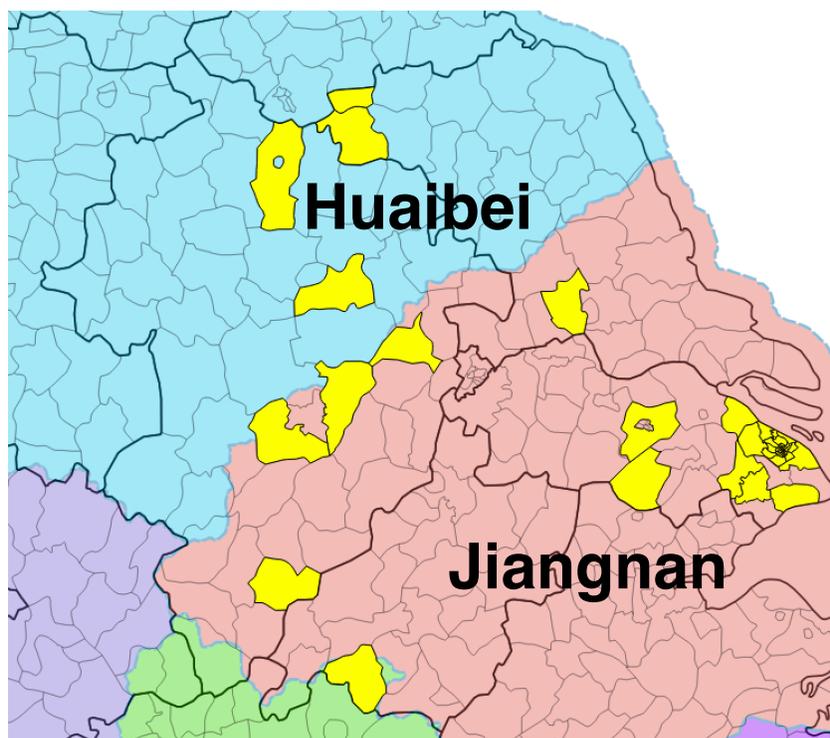


Figure 3. County-Level Sources of Data from Huaibei and Jiangnan (Highlighted)



## Mobilizing Violence in Jiangnan and Huaibei

The land reform campaign in the early 1950s began with extensive investigatory work of local conditions, both economic and social. Work teams and cadres took inventory of landholdings and investigated the political and social boundaries that defined community life to understand the potential obstacles to their mobilization work. Contrary to their expectations, officials operating in both Huaibei and Jiangnan discovered that they could rarely rely on pre-existing class consciousness as the principal foundation for political struggle. Not only did locals not view themselves in terms of class categories, they were afraid of challenging the status quo. In lieu of class hatred towards the landed elite, locals had significant reservations (顾虑) about the Party's longevity and the justness of confiscating and redistributing the property of local elites. In both Jiangnan and Huaibei, class lines were unclear and the locals apathetic.

According to the East China Bureau leadership, out of all of the regions under its control, Jiangnan was home to the most “wily” (狡猾) landlords, whose methods of exploitation and oppression were also the most varied.<sup>60</sup> Despite these colorful claims, Party inspection teams sent to survey the region struggled to understand local economic relations using official class definitions. A Southern Jiangsu Regional Party Committee survey of pre-land reform economic conditions stated that the region's interdependence of urban and rural markets in Southern Jiangsu made “making sense of [local] class relations extremely complicated” (搞成阶级关系十分复杂).<sup>61</sup> More shocking was the discovery that class consciousness was weak among Jiangnan villagers.<sup>62</sup> A local report bemoaned that “the peasants, having been under exploitative feudal

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<sup>60</sup> See Liu Ruilong, “Liu Ruilong's Report on Land Reform Work in East China” [刘瑞龙关于华东土地改革工作的报告] *CCPM*, March 19, 1951. Curiously, this is contradicted by the CCP's own behavior in the region before 1949. Once the Communists returned to the region following the Japanese invasion in 1937, they mobilized locals *across* class lines and called for “class unity” against the Japanese, promising to help landlords collect rents from their tenants in exchange for their loyalty and a modest reduction in rent. See Liu Chang, “Making Revolution in Jiangnan,” *Modern China* 29, no. 1 (2003): 12-18.

<sup>61</sup> Southern Jiangsu Regional Party Committee, “On the Basic Situation and Economic Situation of the Countryside in Southern Jiangsu before Land Reform,” [关于苏南区土改前农村基本情况和经济情况] March 14, 1951, *JSPA*, no. 3006-0265.

<sup>62</sup> Though these findings accord with what other scholars have argued about landlordism in Jiangnan. Namely, local landlords who lived in the countryside tended to be tied to the local community through kinship ties; and most landlords rarely were in direct conflict with their tenants because they lived in the cities. See Zhou Xiaohong, *Tradition and Change: The Social Psychology of the Peasantry of Jiangsu and Zhejiang and Its Modern Evolution* [传统与变迁: 江浙农民的社会心理及其近代以来的嬗变] (Beijing: Shenghuo Dushu Xinzhi Sanlian Shudian, 1998), 151.

rule for so long, have low political awareness (政治认识低落) and are culturally backwards (文化落后).”<sup>63</sup> In Jiading County, which bordered Shanghai and where landlords had twenty times more land than poor peasants,<sup>64</sup> a land reform cadre remarked that she had become an activist during the land reform campaign, not only because she was one of the few literate people in the village, but also because “other people weren't very [politically] active and their political awareness was low.”<sup>65</sup> An investigative report from Wu County in Southern Jiangsu found that, “In the surveyed areas [of the county], the peasants and the landlords do not know one another. . . [the peasants'] political consciousness is low.”<sup>66</sup>

Cadre reports from the north mirror those from the south. The Communists discovered for themselves the feebleness of class identity in Huaibei back in the early- to mid-1940s during their protracted campaign of rent reduction, when both tenants and landlords resisted their efforts to reduce rents.<sup>67</sup> Regional inspection reports conducted after 1949 uncovered that class remained a weak cleavage. A summary report by the Northern Anhui Regional Party Committee reported that “some parts of the countryside, due to the dispersion of land, have few landlords and no “feudal forces” (封建势力); [instead] the small peasant economy is predominant.”<sup>68</sup> Tan Qixiang, the famous Chinese historical geographer who served as a land reform work team official in Su County in Northern Anhui, wrote in his diary about the lack of class consciousness among the peasants: “The work over the past several days was difficult; the masses’ hatred towards the landlords is not high, though they bitterly hate the local former officials (顽干) and vagrants (二流子).”<sup>69</sup> Cadres in Northern Anhui were warned to take their time mobilizing locals

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<sup>63</sup> Southern Jiangsu Peasant Association, “Southern Jiangsu Peasant Association Investigation of the Rural Economic Situation in Jurong, Wujin, Wu, and Wuxi Counties,” [苏南农协会关于句容、武进、吴县、无锡县农村经济情况的调查] July 30, 1949, *JSPA*, no. 3006-0248.

<sup>64</sup> Shanghai Municipality Jiading County Gazetteer Compilation Committee, ed. *Jiading County Gazetteer* [嘉定县志] (Shanghai: Shanghai Remin Chuban She, 1992).

<sup>65</sup> Oral history JD13, July 2015.

<sup>66</sup> Southern Jiangsu Peasant Association, “Southern Jiangsu Peasant Association Investigation of the Rural Economic Situation in Jurong, Wujin, Wu, and Wuxi Counties,” [苏南农协会关于句容、武进、吴县、无锡县农村经济情况的调查] July 30, 1949, *JSPA*, no. 3006-0248.

<sup>67</sup> Bianco, *Peasants*, 234.

<sup>68</sup> Northern Anhui Regional Party Committee, “The Northern Anhui Regional Party Committee’s March and April Two-Month Summary Report on Land Reform Work Submitted to the Center and the East China Bureau” [中国共产党皖北区委员会三、四两月份向中央及华东局关于土地改革工作的综合报告], *Tugai Tongbao*, no. 2-2-82, 19. Quoted in Ma, *The Sacrificed Land*, 343.

<sup>69</sup> Tan Qixiang, *The Diary of Tan Qixiang* [谭其骧日记] (Shanghai: Wenhui Chubanshe, 1998): 3-4.

to participate in class violence because “counterrevolutionary leaders had employed ‘backwards feudal ways’ [封建落后的办法] to confuse some of the ‘backwards’ masses.”<sup>70</sup>

### **Moral Boundary Work: Using Sympathy and Outrage to Define Ingroups and Outgroups**

In the face of low class consciousness and ubiquitous fear, officials could have chosen to emphasize class, revenge motives, or moral transgressions to create new participation identities that they could use to mobilize mass participation. Committing to a class struggle approach, the Party could have drawn class boundaries based purely on economic definitions of class. Alternatively, it could have exploited revenge impulses and divided communities along pre-existing factional lines. Instead, authorities in Jiangnan and Huaibei resolved to draw class boundaries, albeit roughly, on which they then grafted moral boundaries that set apart victims from transgressors. To do so, they ordered the collection of materials on landlord wrongdoing and the convened of face-to-face meetings with locals that would use of these materials to provoke moral-emotional responses that could reorient the symbolic boundaries that divided local communities *before the formal imposition of economic class boundaries*. Through face-to-face mobilization, the Party explicitly sought to draw new moral boundaries between the landed elite and the rest of the community by discussing episodes of perceived moral transgression that had been collected during the investigation stage or that had been revealed in the course of these meetings. Through their extensive accounting of landholdings and exhaustive investigation of local social relations, cadres gathered ammunition that they could use to separate out an outgroup of “bad” landlords to juxtapose against the vulnerable and suffering masses. Waging a “war for sympathy,” cadres unearthed examples of moral malfeasance by landed elites to provoke outrage against them and to cultivate sympathy for ordinary villagers they allegedly abused.

In Jiangnan, the Southern Jiangsu Regional Party Committee released a notice (通知) regarding the collection of personal information and other materials on the “historical [pre-1949] crimes and illegal saboteur behavior” of landlords in the region, with a particular focus on their “methods and styles of feudal exploitation, tyrannical behavior, etc.”<sup>71</sup> Indeed, it encouraged

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<sup>70</sup> AHSTDGGZL, 188.

<sup>71</sup> Southern Jiangsu Regional Party Committee, “Notice on Collecting Materials on the Landlord Class’s Historical Crimes and its Unlawful Behavior of Sabotaging Land,” [关于收集苏南地主阶级的历史罪恶和破坏土地改革不法行为材料通知] January 29, 1951, BSDA, no. 1-2-001-064.

locals to report any information that could expose the landlords' "shameless plots" (无耻阴谋). The Party was particularly concerned by the landed elites' and intellectuals' attempts to portray the rural power structure in a sympathetic light. It accused the landlord class in Southern Jiangsu of actively "muddling" the class consciousness of the masses with "absurd arguments" (谬论) like "there is no feudalism in Southern Jiangsu" (苏南无封建), and it aimed to counter these spurious claims through "the use of a massive amount of material on the crimes of the feudal system" (用大量的封建剥削制度的罪恶材料).<sup>72</sup> The Regional Party Committee instructed cadres to focus their collection efforts on "evil tyrants," especially those accused of having committed murder.<sup>73</sup> Cadres attempted to locate vivid, detailed stories of landlord abuse. In Southern Anhui, Qimen County's land reform work report highlighted an example of an abusive landlord who beat a peasant for not carrying his sedan chair and flipped a table of food and wine at another peasant's daughter's wedding.<sup>74</sup> These kinds of revelations of landlord wrongdoings, the Party wagered, would help break through villagers' apathy.

Cadres in the north proceeded in a similar fashion. Fengyang County's November 1949 summary work report, in a section entitled "How to Organize Key-point Struggles," spelled out the proper procedure for collecting materials on bandits and evil tyrants, a meticulous process of researching local grievances and channeling them into organized struggle sessions. In particular, it ordered cadres to figure out "the political situation in the entire village," how sympathetic each village was to the Communist cause, and which "bandits and tyrants the masses hated" (群众对哪些匪霸仇恨) to use as preliminary potential targets for class struggle.<sup>75</sup>

The collection of these incriminating materials figured heavily into how the Party conducted moral boundary work to inculcate in the peasantry a new participation identity as the oppressed "masses" vis-à-vis the oppressive "landlord class." At small face-to-face meetings

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<sup>72</sup> Jiangsu Province People's Committee Rural Forestry and Water Office, "An Introduction to the Situation of Land Reform Work in Jiangsu Province," [江苏省土地改革工作情况介绍] June 17, 1963, JSPA, no. 4068-001-0023.

<sup>73</sup> Southern Jiangsu Regional Party Committee, "Southern Jiangsu Regional Party Committee Directive on Going All Out to Mobilize the Masses and Organizing the High Tide of the Land Reform Movement," [中共苏南区委关于放手发动群众组织土地改革运动高潮的指示] December 27, 1950, *JSTGYD*.

<sup>74</sup> Qimen County Party Committee, "Summary of Land Reform Work in Qimen County" [祁门县土改工作总结] in *Qimen County Gazetteer* [祁门县志], 813.

<sup>75</sup> Fengyang County Committee. "November Summary Work Report for the Urban Districts of Fengyang County, Anhui Province," [关于安徽省凤阳县城区十一月工作总结报告] December 2, 1949, *CCDC*, no. 1949XW08\_42-61.

known as “informal chats” (漫谈会; 座谈会) and “small groups” (小组), Party work team members, cadres, and villagers in Jiangnan reviewed collected materials and listened to locals’ grievances. These meetings were nominally for the purpose of propagandizing land reform policy, but they also involved a process of “emancipating the heart” (翻心): cadres used these meetings to “enlighten” (启发) the masses as to how their poverty was ultimately rooted in their exploitation by the landlord class; these efforts would then “advance and incite their desire for revenge against the landlords” (进而激发其对地主的复仇心理).<sup>76</sup> In these meetings—which could last hours at a time over several days—cadres guided locals to dredge up old and recent grievances and to share them with the small group. This was a remarkably time-intensive process: working in Su County of Northern Anhui, Tan Qixiang records in his journal that his land reform work team first met with the poor peasants and farmhands to listen to their grievances, then convened several other meetings, and returned to speak again with those who had grievances, staying up with them until late into the night. The work team, Tan remarks, was overwhelmed by the intensity of the work (应接不暇).<sup>77</sup>

Through informal chats and small group meetings, the Party explicitly sought to draw a moral boundary between the landed elite and the rest of the community by discussing episodes of perceived moral transgression that had been collected during the investigation stage or that had been revealed in the course of these meetings. In the north, the Fengyang County Committee instructed cadres to use them as opportunities to bring out pre-organized materials on evil tyrants “to whip up the broad masses into a craze” (给广大群众造成热潮). One example taken from Lushan District noted that cadres had used cartoons to illustrate how an evil tyrant had brought thugs to beat a villager to death, which had made the masses particularly amenable to subjecting him to harsh political struggle.<sup>78</sup> In Chengbei Township of Fengyang County, the Party also had

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<sup>76</sup> Li Lifeng, “Speaking Bitterness in Land Reform: A Microanalysis of a Kind of Mass Mobilization Technique,” [土改中的诉苦：一种民众动员技术的微观分析] *Nanjing University Bulletin* 44, no. 5 (2007): 99.

<sup>77</sup> Tan Qixiang, *The Diary of Tan Qixiang* [谭其骥日记] (Shanghai: Wenhui Chubanshe, 1998), 3.

<sup>78</sup> Fengyang County Party Committee, “Summary of Mass Movements in Fengyang County,” [凤阳县群众运动总结] *XCSSN*, May 21, 1950, 21.

the masses “mull over” (酝酿) the incriminating materials they had collected on those landlords suspected of the “most heinous crimes” (罪大恶极).<sup>79</sup>

In drawing moral boundaries, the Party sought to translate individual suffering or virtue into group suffering or virtue, and individual transgression into group transgression through “speaking bitterness” (诉苦)—i.e. the public venting of one’s woes. Informal chats and small groups provided safe spaces for poor peasants and farmworkers—and middle peasants—to “speak bitterness” in focus group-like settings before their fellow villagers. Speaking bitterness collectivized suffering as a way of building ingroup solidarity while simultaneously building hostility toward the landed elite. “Speaking bitterness is the fundamental method of organizing the masses to demolish the power and influence of the landlord class,” a leading official from the Northern Jiangsu Regional Party Committee declared. “[Its] objective is to inspire the class consciousness of the masses, reveal the crimes of the landlord class, and to unite and organize the masses to consciously struggle against the landlord class.”<sup>80</sup> Cadres used individual instances of landlord malfeasance to establish hostility towards landlords *as a group*. In Jiangnan, the Baoshan County Party committee emphasized that during speaking bitterness sessions cadres were to clarify for villagers that “bitterness is *what the landlord class has given us*,” ensuring that not only did they realize who was to blame for their woes but that the woes of one were the woes of all.<sup>81</sup> A cadre from a township from that same county remarked on the efficacy of “using the landlords’ schemes and tricks to educate the peasants.”<sup>82</sup>

Moral boundary work not only leveraged outrage to create an outgroup of class enemies, it simultaneously used sympathy to build ingroup solidarity. Speaking bitterness in small groups and informal chats sought to generate ingroup solidarity among “the masses” by eliciting villagers’ sympathy toward the suffering. Officials designated those who spoke suffering as “the

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<sup>79</sup> Fengyang County Party Committee, “Summary Report on the Situation of Village Associations Approving Class Labels and Linking with Key-point Struggles in Fenglin District,” [凤临区(六个乡)村民会通过阶级成份结合重点斗争情况综合汇报] September 7, 1951, *CCDC*, No. 1951XW11\_82-85.

<sup>80</sup> Gao Feng, “A Basic Summary of the Land Reform Movement in the Northern Jiangsu Region over the Past Two Years,” [苏北行政区二年来土地改革运动基本总结] Winter 1952, *JSTGYD*, 331.

<sup>81</sup> Baoshan County Party Committee, “The Specific Process for the Anti-Black Land Struggle,” [反黑地斗争具体过程] December 17, 1949 *BSDA*, no. 1-1-001-001.

<sup>82</sup> Panshi Township Cadre, “Baoshan County Changxing District Panshi Township Summary Report on the Anti-Black Field Struggle,” [宝山县长兴区潘石乡反黑田斗争汇报总结] January 19, 1950, *BSDA*, no. 1-1-001-060. The report is authored by an unnamed Panshi Township cadre.

aggrieved” (苦主) —literally, “masters of bitterness”— and guided and trained them to deliver their stories in the most effective way possible. Successful speaking bitterness entailed exhuming one’s past suffering and conveying it in great detail and context to an audience so that they themselves could feel suffering. In Huaibei, cadres noted when this contagion of sentiment appeared to succeed. Township cadres in Fengyang County reported that speaking bitterness succeeded to the extent that when “a single person spoke bitterness, everyone sympathized” (一人诉苦, 大家同情).<sup>83</sup> Elsewhere in the same county, a township’s small group meeting had thirteen people speak to the group about their plight and how they lived on the brink of starvation without land or draft animals. Touting the success of this session, the report notes that “there were three people at the meeting who ‘spoke bitterness’ until they were in tears. Class consciousness, therefore, greatly increased.”<sup>84</sup>

Lastly, moral boundary work empowered this newly-created ingroup to take political power and exact justice from those who allegedly wronged them. Aside from providing a space for the expression of one’s suffering, informal chats and small group meetings actively situated these grievances in a larger political context and sought to empower peasants to feel that they could act on the conviction that they, as victims, had the right to seek vengeance against their oppressors. It was standard practice for cadres leading these meetings to bring up fundamental questions about why the poor are poor and “who provides for whom (谁养活谁)?”<sup>85</sup> Through these guided discussions, cadres sought to empower villagers, to “establish among [the poor

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<sup>83</sup> Fengyang County Party Committee, “Summary Report on the Situation of Village Associations Approving Class Labels and Linking with Key-point Struggles in Fenglin District,” [凤临区(六个乡)村民会通过阶级成份结合重点斗争情况综合汇报] September 7, 1951, *CCDC*, No. 1951XW11\_82-85.

<sup>84</sup> Fengyang County Party Committee, “Yaowan Township Land Reform Work Summary,” [姚湾乡土改工作总结] October 1950, *XCSSN*, 43.

<sup>85</sup> These questions appear in many accounts of land reform as well as archival documents. See Southern Jiangsu Regional Party Committee. “The Rural Committee of the Regional Party Committee’s Comprehensive Report on the Inspection of Land Reform Work in Eight Townships in the Five Counties of Taicang, Jiangyin, Yixing, Shanghai, and Fengxian,” [区党委农委关于太仓, 江阴, 宜兴, 上海, 奉贤, 五县八个乡土改运动检查综合报告] Nov. 15, 1951, *BSDA*, no. 1-2-001-052; Northern Jiangsu Regional Party Committee, “Materials on Fangxiang Village, Huaisi District, Jiangdu County,” [江都县槐泗区方巷村材料] November 13, 1950, *JSPA*, no. 7001-003-0108; Fengyang County Party Committee, “Yaowan Township Land Reform Work Summary,” [姚湾乡土改工作总结] October 1950, *XCSSN*, 43; and Fengyang County Party Committee, “Report on the First Stage of Land Reform Work in Six Townships in Fenglin District of Fengyang County, Anhui Province,” [关于安徽省凤阳县凤临区六个乡土地改革第一阶段工作报告] August 31, 1951, *CCDC*, No. 1951XW11\_50-57. For a great account of how these questions were used in small group meetings during the Chinese Civil War, see William Hinton, *Fanshen: A Documentary of Revolution in a Chinese Village* (New York: Monthly Review, 2008 [1966]), 128.

peasants and farmworkers] a mentality of being masters of their own fate (当家做主的思想).”<sup>86</sup> Repeated education, officials in Wu County reported, dispelled the poor peasants and farmworkers’ moral reservations regarding taking other people’s land, as they could now speak of doing so “confidently, with justice on their side” (理直气壮).<sup>87</sup>

Contrary to what a revenge-based argument might predict, cadres used commiseration and outrage build collective identities, eschewing examples of transgression that were overly specific to a handful of feuding locals. As the People’s Liberation Army marched southward into Shanghai and the territories that would comprise the East China Bureau, central leaders commanded local cadres to intervene to prevent revenge-based violence. Mao himself ordered cadres to “forbid peasant organizations to enter the city to seize landlords and settle scores with them.”<sup>88</sup> At the county and village level, Party reports cautioned work teams to avoid becoming entangled in local factional and interpersonal conflict, as it would weaken the Party’s control over the mobilization process. In the north, the Fengyang County Party Committee lamented that some struggle sessions had devolved into chaos, in some cases because “impure village cadres” had turned the struggle sessions into clan-based factional conflicts (宗派斗争).<sup>89</sup> In the south, the Baoshan County Party Committee reminded its cadres that it was their duty to be “impartial and not factional...and not to serve [merely] as the mouthpiece of the masses.”<sup>90</sup> Importantly, the Party sought participants whose “bitterness” represented a transgression that applied to the entire community—“the masses” (群众)—as opposed to petty interpersonal conflict. Official policy discouraged tapping into purely interpersonal or factional conflict precisely because these revenge-based accusations would not be inclusive enough to mobilize the community as a whole against the struggle target. Collective identities of “the masses” and “class enemies” could not

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<sup>86</sup> Southern Jiangsu Regional Committee, “The Southern Jiangsu Regional Committee’s Summary of Land Reform Work in Southern Jiangsu,” [中共苏南区委关于苏南土地改革工作的总结] August 28, 1952, *JSTDGGYD*, 201.

<sup>87</sup> Wu County Gusu Township Land Reform Classic Experiment Work Committee, “Initial Summary Report on Classic Experiment Work in Land Reform in Gusu Township, Wu County,” [关于吴县姑苏乡土地改革典型试验工作的初步总结] August 21, 1950, *JSSTDGGYD*, 69.

<sup>88</sup> Frederic Wakeman Jr., “‘Cleanup’: The New Order in Shanghai,” in *Dilemmas of Victory: The Early Years of the People’s Republic of China*, ed. Jeremy Brown and Paul Pickowicz. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 22.

<sup>89</sup> Fengyang County Party Committee, “Notice on a Few Major Problems in the Present Land Reform Campaign,” [对当前土改中几个主要问题的通知] August 28, 1951, *XCSSN*, 43.

<sup>90</sup> Baoshan County Party Committee, “The Specific Process of the Struggle Against Hidden Land,” [反黑地斗争具体过程] December 17, 1949, *BSDA*, No. 1-1-001-001.

cohere around indiscriminate violence that did not fit into a plausible narrative about class struggle.

### **Orchestrating Moral Theatrics and Collective Violence at Mass Rallies**

After weeks of boundary work, the Party set about to galvanize the local community's righteous indignation and participation in violence against selected offenders through moral theatrics. Because targets of violence were defined in terms of their moral turpitude and less so in terms of their socioeconomic status, cadres could readily violence against them in northern and southern localities. These well-orchestrated, highly-theatrical public meetings played directly to the moral sentiments of the local community, aiming to inflame outrage toward class enemies and sympathy for those who spoke out against them.<sup>91</sup> Cadres orchestrated moral theatrics at struggle sessions in three ways: by carefully curating target and audiences at struggle sessions, using provocative evidence of moral transgressions to elicit powerful emotional responses, and sequencing targets to maximize outrage.

#### *Selecting Egregious Targets and Sympathetic Audiences*

While Party work teams and Peasant Associations worked together to choose struggle targets—those who would be subjected to collective violence at mass meetings—the criteria for doing so were unclear and allowed considerable leeway; cadres were encouraged to choose struggle targets who could easily enrage the crowd and avoid those who could appear sympathetic.

Targets who could easily elicit outrage, and thus prioritized as targets for collective violence, were labeled as “evil tyrants” (恶霸), a term that the CCP borrowed from the peasantry and had a long cultural precedent.<sup>92</sup> In many cases, “evil tyrant” described local strongmen, because they had amassed land and power by serving as “entrepreneurial brokers”

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<sup>91</sup> Julia Strauss, “Morality, Coercion and State Building by Campaign in the Early PRC: Regime Consolidation and After, 1949-1956,” *The China Quarterly* 188.1 (2006): 891-912

<sup>92</sup> The term “evil tyrant” was a modification of the term “local tyrant” (土豪), whose linguistic predecessors trace as far back as the Western Han period (206 BCE – 9 CE). For example, the terms 豪强 and 豪猾, which refer to local despots or bullies from powerful families, appear in Sima Qian's *Records of the Grand Historian* (史记) and later in the *Book of Han* (汉书), written in the Eastern Han period. See Guo Yingde and Guo Changbao, *Ancient China's Evil Tyrants* [中国古代的恶霸] (Beijing: Shangwu Yinshuguan Guoji Youxian Gongsi, 1995), 2-5.

who collected taxes and maintained the public order for the Nationalist state or the Japanese;<sup>93</sup> but their socioeconomic status was not necessarily higher than that of other villagers, especially in the north. This moral differentiation of landlords was explicitly outlined and encouraged in Party documents. In Jiangnan, the Songjiang Prefectural Party Committee cautioned that “power-holding landlords are not all evil tyrants because they have not held power for very long and *have not had enough time to commit all kinds of crimes (胡作妄为)*.” The Committee emphasized instead that “the landlords and evil tyrants *who are hated bitterly by the masses are the main power-holders* but not [necessarily] the current power-holding clique (当权派).” The report continues: “[we] must proceed from concrete situations, people, and facts, especially the masses' demands [underlining in the original]...and not from abstract concepts (抽象的概念).”<sup>94</sup> Oral histories from land reform participants in the south corroborate this practice. A former worker, who lived in Baoshan County in Southern Jiangsu, noted that many of the local landlords were small landholders, but that they were subdivided into three types: evil tyrant landlords (恶霸地主), destitute landlords (破落地主), and unlawful landlords (不法地主). Evil tyrant landlords were characterized mainly by their power and cruelty: “they were the local people who had power, whom you’d have to kiss up to (需要拍他们马屁). They often didn’t work themselves and exploited the local folk, making them help them till the fields; the local folk would have to treat their land as their number one priority, regardless of whether it was a windy and rainy or extremely hot day.”<sup>95</sup> Another resident stated bluntly that “it was usually landlords and bad people (坏人) who were dragged onto stage to be struggled against.”<sup>96</sup>

The Party and local communities spared sympathetic figures from class struggle, regardless of class label, because landlords who lacked any clear wrongdoing—or who could not be framed as such—were not amenable to moral theatrics. In the south, a land reform report from Fengxian County to the Southern Jiangsu Regional Party Committee claimed that it implemented the policy of “striking correctly” (打得准) by differentially punishing targets according to their crimes; those who were “innocent” of any such crimes escaped any kind of punishment: “Those

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<sup>93</sup> Prasenjit Duara, *Culture, Power, and the State: Rural North China, 1900-1942* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988).

<sup>94</sup> Songjiang Party Prefectural Committee, “Problems Regarding the East China Bureau’s Definition of ‘Evil Tyrant.’” [华东局关于‘恶霸’的定义问题], November 14, 1949, *BSDA*, no. 1-2-001-045.

<sup>95</sup> Oral history BS09, May 2015.

<sup>96</sup> Oral history BS11, May 2015.

who were...spared were mainly small landlords, [and] orphaned or widowed landlords.”<sup>97</sup> In the north, regional-level authorities instructed cadres to “sort out the bad elements from the average law-biding landlord,”<sup>98</sup> and to spare “average landlords who have not committed major evil acts and are not hated by the people,” as long as they “apologized to the masses” before or during the land reform campaign.<sup>99</sup>

To ensure that the audience would be outraged, work teams curated who would be in attendance, mobilizing people to attend struggle sessions that they believed would appeal to them on some personal level. In the south, five-hundred people showed up to a struggle session of a “vagrant woman” accused of sowing discord between husbands and wives, selling women, and being “morally loose”; two-thirds of the audience mobilized to attend were women. The document noted that the attendees were “*unusually outraged*” by the woman’s behavior and that the struggle experience was especially “moving” for the female attendees.<sup>100</sup> In the north, struggle sessions were organized at different levels—district, township, or village—according to the gravity of the targets’ crimes and the “scope of their influence” (影响范围). Cadres adjusted the scale of their struggle sessions to accord with the size of the community they were deemed to have wronged, the idea being that the audience at the struggle session would have been personally affected by the offenders’ alleged misdeeds.<sup>101</sup>

### *Selecting Evidence, Sequencing Targets, and the Elicitation of Sympathy and Outrage*

Cadres sought persuasive materials—those that could incite powerful feeling of outrage against the struggle target and sympathy for the accuser—to use at struggle sessions, in the form of physical evidence and personal testimonies—i.e. speaking bitterness. Evidence against class enemies was meant to be extremely detailed and rich. A Southern Jiangsu Regional Party

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<sup>97</sup> The report indicates that over half of those executed had some sort of “blood debt” (血债). Zhang Yan, “Zhang Yan’s Report to the Party Committee on Land Reform Work,” [张彦关于土改工作向区党委的汇报] December 31, 1950, *JSPA*, no. 3006-0081.

<sup>98</sup> 中共苏北区党委办公厅关于淮阴地委在土改中保卫工作指示的批示 *JSPA*, no. 7001-03-0008.

<sup>99</sup> Li Shinong, “Diligently Completing the Second Period of Land Reform Work,” [认真做好二期土地改革工作], November 20, 1951, *AHSTDGGZL*, 29. Also see Si County Gazetteer Compilation Committee, *Si County Gazetteer* [泗县志] (Hangzhou: Zhejiang Renmin Chubanshe, 1990), 51.

<sup>100</sup> “Initial Summary of Classic Experiments in Land Reform in Juhua, Xinglong, Jihe Townships and Wugui Town (Draft),” [菊花, 兴隆, 集合乡, 五贵镇土改典型试验的初步总结 (草稿)], *JSPA*.

<sup>101</sup> Fengyang County Party Committee, “Yaowan Township Land Reform Work Summary,” [姚湾乡土改工作总结] October 1950, *XCSSN*, p. 44.

Committee report emphasized that cadres and locals should collect extensive “eyewitness material” on landlords, including the time and location of the offense. “The more vivid, concrete, and detailed the better (越生动具体详细越好),” the report continued. “Be sure not to have holes [in the evidence] or stray from reality (切忌空洞不符实际).” The report even called for the careful photographic documentation of material evidence, such as bloody clothing, murder weapons, rent receipts, hidden wealth, granary placards, burnt-down houses, organized riots, etc., which was then to be sent to the county government for storage and inspection.<sup>102</sup>

These materials would be used for dramatic effect at struggle sessions. For example, in Youzhu Township in the southern county of Jiangyin, a father and mother riled up the crowd by presenting to them the bones of their son who was slain by a spy.<sup>103</sup> The importance and effectiveness of physical materials at struggle sessions were such that a southern prefecture report instructed cadres to not recruit too many people to speak bitterness and rather to amass persuasive and moving materials to present at struggle sessions.<sup>104</sup> Particularly moving stories with vivid evidence were saved for use in public exhibitions after the land reform movement ended. An elderly woman in Baoxi Township, Chongming County presented the bloody clothing of her son whom had been killed by an evil tyrant landlord twelve years prior, leaving behind three orphaned children; in recounting the story she cried herself hoarse on stage, prompting others to break down sobbing, after which they subjected the man to ferocious struggle (做到变仇恨为力量).<sup>105</sup> The bloody clothing was then saved and used in a public exhibition, where the evidence and story could be shared with a wider audience (see Figure 4).

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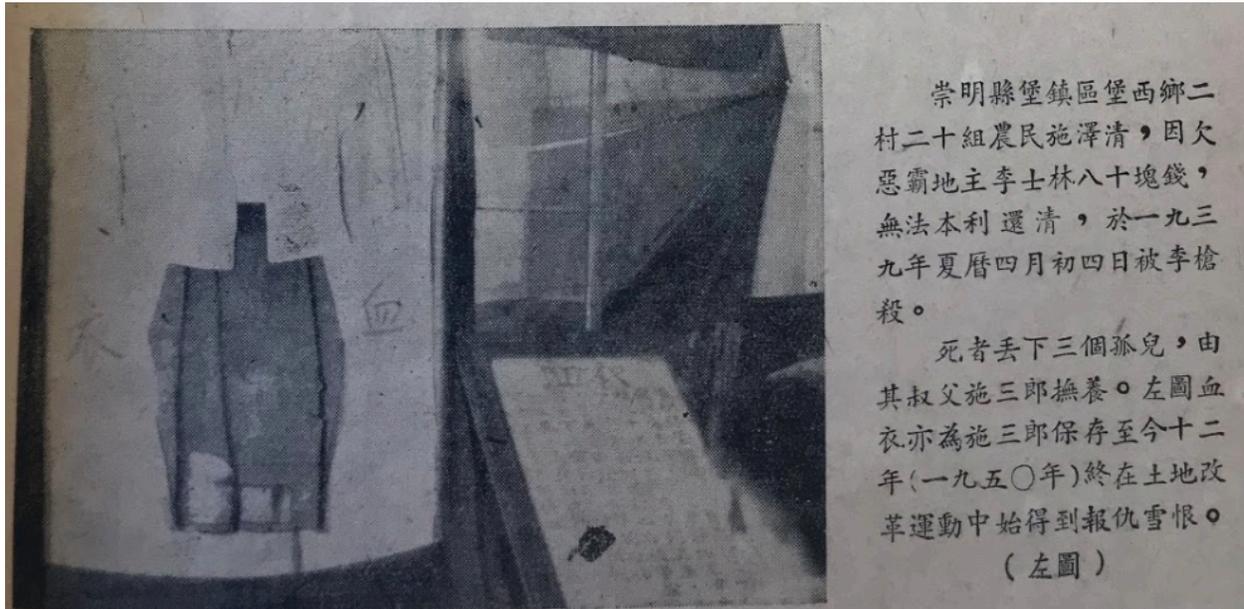
<sup>102</sup> Southern Jiangsu Regional Party Committee, “Notice on Collecting Materials on the Landlord Class’s Historical Crimes and its Unlawful Behavior of Sabotaging Land,” [关于收集苏南地主阶级的历史罪恶和破坏土地改革不法行为材料通知] January 29, 1951, BSDA, no. 1-2-001-064.

<sup>103</sup> Luo Ruiqing, “Luo Ruiqing’s Report on Campaign to Suppress the Counterrevolutionaries Work and Land Reform Work in Southern Jiangsu,” [罗瑞卿关于苏南镇压反革命工作土改工作的报告] March 18, 1950, *CCPM*.

<sup>104</sup> 巢湖专区土地改革运动初步总结 (草稿), p. 126.

<sup>105</sup> Gao Feng, “A Basic Summary of the Land Reform Movement in the Northern Jiangsu Region over the Past Two Years,” [苏北行政区二年来土地改革运动基本总结] Winter 1952, *SBTDGGWX*, 54-58.

Figure 4. Photograph of Bloody Clothing from Baoxi Township in Chongming County Used at a Public Exhibition on Land Reform<sup>106</sup>



Speaking bitterness testimonials enraged the crowd against the transgressor but importantly also elicited sympathy for the accusers—the “aggrieved.” The CCP clearly viewed speaking bitterness as a well-calibrated process. A regional-level official in the north cautioned that “speaking bitterness cannot be used recklessly...[and may only be used] at a proper time and against a proper target (一定的场合使用一定的对象).”<sup>107</sup> To ensure that it provoked the desired emotional responses, accusers were coached on how to best deliver their stories of woe. In the north, accusers were organized into small groups and given training before struggle sessions, in which work team cadres individually gave the participants policy instructions and explained to them how to “speak bitterness.” The work team emphasized that they should provide concrete reasons and details and quickly get to the “bitter parts” (速出苦处) when relating their tales of personal woe before the crowd.<sup>108</sup> Work teams specifically tried to recruit women and the elderly to speak bitterness at struggle sessions because they believed their stories could more easily

<sup>106</sup> Photograph from *SBTGWX*.

<sup>107</sup> Gao Feng, “A Basic Summary of the Land Reform Movement in the Northern Jiangsu Region over the Past Two Years,” [苏北行政区二年来土地改革运动基本总结] Winter 1952, *JSTGYD*, 332.

<sup>108</sup> Fengyang County Party Committee, “Report on the First Phase of Land Reform Work in Six Townships of Fenglin District”<sup>108</sup>, Fengyang County, Anhui Province,” [关于安徽省凤阳县凤临区六个乡土地改革第一阶段工作报告] August 30, 1951, *CCDC*, No. 1951XW11\_50-57.

attract the sympathy of the masses. A notable example of this comes from Liyang County in Southern Jiangsu, where cadres, in their collection of speaking bitterness material, discovered that nearly two hundred local women had been raped by Japanese soldiers. They used these women's stories to "educate the broad masses" about the evils of the old feudal order, but, more importantly, to help locals "understand the roots of their own suffering" (使群众认识了自己受苦受罪的根源). From this, the Southern Jiangsu Regional Party Committee concluded that "in the struggle against feudal evil tyrants and landlords, women are the most powerful force in sparking the class consciousness of the masses" (在整个反封建恶霸, 地主的斗争中, 妇女是启发群众阶级觉悟的的最大动力).<sup>109</sup> These sympathetic figures helped create feelings of commiseration that cadres could shape into violent outrage. In Feidong County, on the Huabei-Jiangnan border, the deft use of materials during a public sentencing of a counterrevolutionary made peasants to sympathize with the accuser and call for "chopping off the head of this poisonous snake" (斩去这条毒蛇).<sup>110</sup>

Well-orchestrated moral theatrics easily roused the crowd to anger and triggered a violent emotional response that, as one eye-witness account from the south described, "was impossible to hold back, once triggered."<sup>111</sup> Numerous accounts of collective violence at struggle sessions depict uncontrollable violence following well-orchestrated moral theatrics. In Qingpu County, in the south, there was an episode of extreme violence where, at the beginning of a struggle session, the crowd flew into such a fury that they beat to death fifteen landlords; the County Party Secretary had to put a stop to the violence and called on other districts to take measures to prevent violence from spiraling out of control.<sup>112</sup> At a "struggle session" (斗争大会) in Shenshe Township of Jiangyin County, it was reported that "over fifty people had wanted to denounce the former District Head and "evil tyrant" (恶霸), Mr. You, but because they had started beating him

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<sup>109</sup> "Initial Summary Report on Working with Women in the Southern Jiangsu Land Reform Campaign," [苏南土地改革运动中妇女工作的初步总结], May 10, 1951, *SNTDGGWX*, p. 469.

<sup>110</sup> 巢湖专区土地改革运动初步总结 (草稿), p. 126.

<sup>111</sup> Sunan Renmin Xingzheng Gongshu Tudi Gaige Weiyuanhui, *The Land Reform I Witnessed in Southern Jiangsu* [我所见到的苏南土地改革] (Shanghai: Sunan Renmin Xingzheng Gongshu Tudi Gaige Weiyuanhui, 1951), 94-95.

<sup>112</sup> Shanghai Shi Qingpu Xian Xian Zhi Bianzuan Weiyuanhui, *Qingpu County Gazetteer* [青浦县志] (Shanghai: Shanghai Renmin Chubanshe, 1990).

as soon as the session began, they had already beaten him to death after only two people had finished making their accusations against him.”<sup>113</sup>

While one can argue that official reports of uncontrollable violence may have been exaggerated or fabricated by cadres to impress their superiors, unbridled violence was actually against official CCP policy, which proscribed “reckless beatings and killings” (乱打乱杀), and often a cause for official criticism and discipline; the Party was anxious to lose control over the violence it mobilized. Instead, cadres were ordered to manage the emotions of the crowd once they became enraged. A directive on land reform mobilization in the south recommended caution in restraining angry villagers: “When some peasants in the course of struggle are agitated by *righteous indignation* (义愤) and spontaneously attack landlords, we do not right then and there pour cold water [on them], which would hurt the masses’ mood...”<sup>114</sup> A land reform report from the north cites two examples of “spontaneous” violence induced by the morally charged atmosphere of struggle sessions and public sentencings:

At the public sentencing of landlord XX in Suining County, an old grandma beat a landlord twice with her cane while sobbing and speaking bitterness [against him], because her family fell apart after her son was killed. In XX Township of Pisui County, the little sister of a village head spontaneously slapped a landlord who raped her and called him an animal.<sup>115</sup>

Yet CCP officials attributed these instances of violence to the understandable outrage of those who had been wronged by these struggle targets; they suggested cadres tolerate and sympathize with this violent behavior, which they claim was also widely supported by the spectating crowds.<sup>116</sup> A northern report similarly argued that the excesses of violence during struggle sessions came from a place of irrepressible outrage and excused the villagers’ behavior—in particular, forcing struggle targets to crawl on the floor—claiming that this behavior was not all that “vicious” (打得不狠).<sup>117</sup>

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<sup>113</sup> Southern Jiangsu Regional Party Committee, “Dispatch on Strengthening the Inspection of Land Reform Work,” [关于加强土改工作检查的代电] Nov. 15, 1951, *BSDA*, No. 1-2-001-052.

<sup>114</sup> Southern Jiangsu Regional Party Committee, “Southern Jiangsu Regional Party Committee Directive on Going All Out to Mobilize the Masses and Organizing the High Tide of the Land Reform Movement,” [中共苏南区委关于放手发动群众组织土地改革运动高潮的指示] December 27, 1950, *JSTGYD*.

<sup>115</sup> Northern Jiangsu Regional Party Committee, “Northern Jiangsu Regional Party Committee Circular to All Prefectural Party Committees on Some Problems in the Current Land Reform Movement,” [中共苏北区委员会对当前土地改革运动中的几个问题向各地委的通报] January 4, 1951, *CCPM*.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>117</sup> *AHTGWX*, pp.119-20.

### *Sequencing Targets to Maximize Outrage*

An important component of moral theatrics was its sequencing of targets to maximize its emotional impact. Cadres were meticulous in their sequencing of struggle targets according to the severity of their alleged transgressions: cadres used targets who could be best portrayed as contemptible to kick off waves of violence and to generate outrage that could be harnessed and sustained to use against subsequent targets, often those who were accused of much milder, often political, offenses or against whom there was weak evidence.<sup>118</sup> In Huaibei, a land reform report from township in Fengyang County stated that cadres “struggled against big ones first” (先斗大的).<sup>119</sup> In the South, a land reform report from Fengxian County explained that struggling against the “power-holding clique of evil tyrants” first, before moving on to targets with “lesser” crimes, helped raise the “fighting spirit of the masses” (斗志).<sup>120</sup> County-wide statistics on executions of land reform “criminals” from Baoshan County reveal that cadres organized the public executions of four “evil tyrant landlords” just before the official launch of the land reform campaign, after which an additional twenty-one “evil tyrants” were executed, along with eight spies, two counterrevolutionaries, and other assorted political offenders.<sup>121</sup> In Feixi County, which straddles the Huaibei-Jiangnan border in Anhui, cadres claimed that the public execution of an evil tyrant spurred locals to participate more fervently in the land reform campaign: “[Following the execution], before finishing their meals, the masses went to attend the People’s Courts to sentence unlawful landlords...”<sup>122</sup> If targets had both moral and political offenses, cadres emphasized the lurid accusations. A meeting in Northern Anhui on experiences in mobilization argued that: “Heads of reactionary secret societies and undercover spies, if they are also evil tyrants, bandit leaders, or unlawful landlords, should be suppressed and handled as evil

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<sup>118</sup> This recalls Goldberg et al.’s (1999) “intuitive prosecutor mindset” and the spillover effect of outrage, where feelings of outrage persist to shape how participants judge subsequent, unrelated offenders, whom they are far more likely to punish more harshly than if they were not outraged.

<sup>119</sup> Fengyang County Party Committee, “Yaowan Township Land Reform Work Summary,” [姚湾乡土改工作总结] October 1950, *XCSSN*, 43-44.

<sup>120</sup> Zhang Yan, “Zhang Yan’s Report to the Party Committee on Land Reform Work,” [张彦关于土改工作向区党委的汇报] December 31, 1950, *JSPA*, no. 3006-0081.

<sup>121</sup> *BSDA*.

<sup>122</sup> Zhou Ziyin, “The Function of People’s Courts in the Land Reform Campaign of Feixi County,” [肥县人民法院在土改运动中的作用], *AHSTDGGZL*, 38.

tyrants, bandits, or unlawful landlords, as this can more easily enlighten the masses' class consciousness and secure the public's sympathy."<sup>123</sup>

## **Losing the War for Sympathy: When Moral Mobilization Fails**

Were moral emotions really integral to the Party-state's mobilization process? The preceding analysis illustrates that cadres invested significant resources in an elaborate process to impugn the moral character of local elites. It is difficult to demonstrate definitively that this mobilization process *caused* violence, and this analysis certainly does not rule out the possibility that the Party-state could have used other, more directly coercive means to exact compliance from villagers. The best, most feasible way of addressing these concerns is to look at negative cases where mobilization faltered and locals were loathe to cooperate with the Party. I find that cadres struggled to mobilize violence where they had failed to exclude the local elite from the community's "span of sympathy." These areas either improperly carried out moral boundary work and moral theatrics and/or experienced significant backlash from local elites who sought to save themselves using the Party-state's mobilization strategy against them by appealing to villagers' sympathy. This section divides failed mobilization into instances of failed boundary work and failed moral theatrics.

### *Failed Boundary Work*

The mobilization of collective violence struggled in the absence of moral boundary work. In face-to-face meetings and propaganda work, inspectors from Southern Jiangsu's Rural Committee complained that in township cadres in Taicang County "haven't been trained to be patient with the locals."<sup>124</sup> The report also chastised cadres for failing to hold small group meetings and for the low attendance rates at the ones that they did hold. Notably, in one village in the same Township, only fifty-eight percent of Peasant Association members had received any propaganda education.<sup>125</sup> Having not undergone moral boundary work, locals questioned the

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<sup>123</sup> Northern Anhui, 对有领导的放手发动群众的几点体会, p. 188.

<sup>124</sup> The Rural Committee of the Southern Jiangsu Regional Party Committee, "On the Rural Committee of the Regional Party Committee's Report on the Second Meeting of the Land Reform Inspection Teams," [关于区党委农委关于第二次土地改革检查队会议的报告] April 9, 1951, *BSDA*, no. 1-2-001-054.

<sup>125</sup> Southern Jiangsu Regional Party Committee, "Telegram on Strengthening Land Reform Work and Inspection," [关于加强土改工作检查的代电] November 15, 1951, *BSDA*, no. 1-2-001-052.

justness of land reform and its use of violence: “The landlords' land is passed down from their ancestors, now you've divided their land and want [us] to struggle against them; frankly, it's just too much.”<sup>126</sup> In an investigative report on eighteen townships across Northern Anhui, inspectors from the Regional Party's Rural Committee found that in some localities where mobilization work was poor, cadres had failed to raise class consciousness to the extent that locals widely sympathized with or feared struggling against landlords.<sup>127</sup>

Cadre corruption or inactivity was often at the root of poor or nonexistent boundary work. Dacheng Township in Feidong County of Northern Anhui was labeled a “third-type” (第三类) township because of the poor state of its mobilization work. Similar to its failed counterparts in Southern and Northern Jiangsu, the region's Land Committee blamed this failure on the inexperience and “impure” (不纯) backgrounds of the cadres. Despite the existence of fifty landlords in and around the township, none had been subjected to political struggle; alarmingly, the landlords counter-organized and intimidated locals who “did not dare to speak” (不敢言) against them. Unlike the other cases, however, Dacheng's failure was reportedly rooted in the corruption and inactivity of local cadres: they took gifts and bribes from landlords and apparently conducted little mobilization work. Six of the seven Peasant Associations were headed by vagrants or decommissioned soldiers who used the campaign to attack ordinary peasants. The inspection team's method of overcoming these problems and mobilizing violence is revealing. Aside from purging negligent and corrupt cadres, they quickly set to conducting moral boundary work with the locals. They brought together poor villagers and farmworkers for propaganda work and sent cadres to visit peasants' homes and collect their stories of suffering (访苦). They then used small group meetings to bring together peasants to share their grievances. After apprehending four landlords who were accused of “the most heinous crimes” (罪大恶极) and five cadres who had colluded with them, locals held a public sentencing in which over fifty

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<sup>126</sup> The Rural Committee of the Southern Jiangsu Regional Party Committee, “On the Rural Committee of the Regional Party Committee's Report on the Second Meeting of the Land Reform Inspection Teams,” [关于区党委农委关于第二次土地改革检查队会议的报告] April 9, 1951, *BSDA*, no. 1-2-001-054.

<sup>127</sup> Northern Anhui Regional Party Committee Rural Committee, “Inspection Report on the Situation of Land Reform in Eighteen Townships,” [关于十八个乡土地改革的情况检查报告] n.d., *AHSTDGGZL*, 178.

aggrieved villagers spoke bitterness against the struggle targets, culminating in the execution of two “evil tyrants.”<sup>128</sup>

### *Failed Moral Theatrics*

Moral theatrics could backfire and impede mobilization if cadres did not frame targets as morally transgressive or chose targets who were perceived to be good. During a struggle session against a landlord accused of hiding grain, a member of the land reform work team went on stage and hit the landlord for refusing to admit his guilt. In response, villagers at the meeting called out, “You can’t beat him! He’s a *good landlord* who rose out of poverty! (不能打，他原来是苦出来的好地主)”<sup>129</sup> A Regional Party Committee report criticized township cadres in Taicang County for their “crude” and “superficial” implementation of struggle sessions. It blamed cadres for carrying out reckless and extreme violence against seemingly random and inappropriate—i.e. sympathetic—targets, which alienated and demobilized villagers. The report cited the following incident as one of the most egregious examples:

Women ran away in tears when they saw a female landlord *being unjustly struggled against*. One of them said, ‘Landlord Cao was *very friendly* to people and barely received anything in rent; to struggle against her was *really wrong* (真作孽).’<sup>130</sup>

Cadres had also held struggle sessions against a seventeen-year-old student and son of a landlord, whom they stripped naked and forced to kneel on rocks while yelling, “Down with landlord Cao XX!” While some locals did attend and call for his violent punishment, many others were disturbed that a student was chosen as a target. Villagers were also concerned about struggling against landlords whose behavior was not particularly egregious. In Xiaoqiao Township, cadres avoided tackling powerful elites and instead struggled against a landlord “who lacked many big crimes,” which caused the locals to complain that they were “struggling against the small fish instead of the big fish” (大鱼不斗斗小鱼).<sup>131</sup>

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<sup>128</sup> Northern Anhui Regional Party Committee Land Committee Work Group, “Land Reform Conclusory Work Experiences in Dacheng Township (Third-Type Township),” [大成乡（第三类型乡）土改结束工作的经过] n.d., *AHSTDGGZL*, 211-212.

<sup>129</sup> Mo Hongwei, *Southern Jiangsu*, 217.

<sup>130</sup> Southern Jiangsu Regional Party Committee, “Telegram on Strengthening Land Reform Work and Inspection,” [关于加强土改工作检查的代电] November 15, 1951, *BSDA*, no. 1-2-001-052.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*

A report on problems with the conduct of People's Courts alleged that cadres were targeting people inaccurately, focusing on sympathetic figures and sparing more ignoble ones, which was inhibiting the mobilization of collective violence. It offers two examples of failed moral theatrics in Songjiang County. In the first instance, cadres had tried to sentence an unlawful landlord, even though the villagers all knew that he was always under the thumb of his “domineering” mother, whose “crimes” were greater than his. The landlord, in contrast to his mother, was known as an “honest” (老实) fellow, and so only one person spoke against him at his trial; meanwhile, his mother was never apprehended. In the second case, authorities were unable to apprehend an evil tyrant, but they were able to arrest his two wives. The masses thought that the evil tyrant bullied his first wife, who was an honest person, and that it was unfair that she was brought to the People's Court along with the second wife. In all of these cases, the report concludes, some of the villagers sympathized with the accused.<sup>132</sup>

Strikingly, local elites could counter-mobilize against the cadres' efforts to paint them as villains by presenting themselves as innocent and vulnerable to gain villagers'—and cadres'—sympathy. One such tactic was to appear particularly pitiful or compliant during struggle sessions to gain the community's sympathy. A People's Daily editorial accused critics of violent land reform for their gullibility at being duped by the “bitter and sad faces” (苦相, 可怜相) some landlords wore when they were being struggled against.<sup>133</sup> In Wuxi, one individual, having just been labeled a landlord, flew into crying fit and threatened to jump into the river with their child and commit suicide. During a struggle session, a former township head guilty of many “evil deeds” readily admitted to all of these accusations as a way of defusing the crowd's anger.<sup>134</sup> Another common tactic by landed elites was “to pretend to be poor” (装穷) or to even go begging for food. In Danyang County, over forty landlords went out together on the same day to beg for food and curry sympathy from villagers.<sup>135</sup> Local elites' appeals to sympathy could

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<sup>132</sup> Southern Jiangsu Regional Party Committee, “Southern Jiangsu Regional Party Committee's Response to Comrade Zhou Side's Report on Problems in the People's Courts,” [中国共产党苏南区委员会 批转 周思德同志关于人民法庭问题的报告的通报] Nov. 21, 1950, *SNTGWX*, pp. 132-33.

<sup>133</sup> Shi, Wenqi. “Resolutely Crush the Voices of the Landlords.” [坚决粉碎“地主之音”] *People's Daily* May 26, 1951.

<sup>134</sup> Wuxi County Fangqian Township Land Reform Classic Experiment Work Committee, “Initial Summary of Classical Experiment Work during Land Reform in Fangqian Township, Wuxi County,” [无锡县坊前乡土地改革典型试验工作委员会关于无锡县坊前乡土地改革典型试验工作的初步总结] August 20, 1950, *JSTGYD*, 46-55.

<sup>135</sup> Shi, “Resolutely Crush.”

even cause cadres to hesitate labeling them as class enemies. In a revealing incident from a village in Fengyang County in Northern Anhui, one cadre did not believe that the person whose land he was instructed to confiscate was a landlord because “she cried and yelled and kowtowed to the cadres,” which prompted the cadre in charge to remark that she “did not resemble a landlord.”<sup>136</sup>

This was indicative of a more general pattern. Landlords who were able to acquire pity from cadres or villagers could earn side favors. In Northern Jiangsu, some cadres felt pity for landlords who had been struggled against and gave them some extra land when redistributing land; or, in one case, to even help people given the damning class label of “landlord” find spouses.<sup>137</sup> This is one reason why the CCP was averse to the use of torture or extreme violence during struggle sessions. A report on problems during land reform in Anhui called for the immediate rectification of reckless beatings because they could cause the Party-state to lose “societal sympathy” (失掉社会同情).<sup>138</sup> For example, during a struggle session against a Mr. Sun, a notorious evil tyrant accused of murdering eleven people, the presiding cadre kept tightening the rope binding Sun because he refused to admit to his misdeeds. Once he started screaming, some villagers in the attendance began to pity and sympathize with him.<sup>139</sup>

## Summary and Conclusion

I have argued here that Chinese Communist Party’s use of moral discourse to delineate moral boundaries that designated victims and oppressors and the dramatization of the perceived moral transgressions of those defined in the latter category was the major impetus behind the mass mobilization of violence during its land reform campaign. I have stressed that the provocation—or “incitement” (激发), to use the Party’s own term—of moral outrage against landed elites and sympathy for their alleged victims constituted the cornerstone of the Party’s

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<sup>136</sup> Fengyang County Party Committee, “Yaowan Township Land Reform Work Summary,” [姚湾乡土改工作总结] October 1950, *XCSSN*, 50.

<sup>137</sup> Liu Woyu. “The Reconstruction of Rural Power Relations: The Case of Land Reform in Northern Jiangsu,” [农村权力关系的重构: 以苏北土改为例 1950-1952] *Jiangsu Shehui Kexue* 2 (2012): 221.

<sup>138</sup> Ma Tianshui, “Report on Problems in Land Reform,” [关于土改问题的报告], May 25, 1951, *AHSTDGGZL*, 22.

<sup>139</sup> Fengyang County Party Committee Inspection Group, “A Comprehensive Inspection Report on the Land Reform Work Situation in Changhuai District, Fengyang County,” [检查凤阳县长淮区土改工作情况综合汇报] October 2, 1951, *XCSSN*, p. 46.

mobilization work. Looking at the regions of Jiangnan and Huaibei, I find that the Party-state mobilized violence via moral mobilization in the absence of salient class conflict and in wildly different local socioeconomic contexts because of its reliance on moral emotions, not class cleavages or economic incentives, to mobilize violence.

This analysis encourages a reassessment of theories of mobilization in three ways. First, it reveals the limitations of neo-Marxist approaches to mobilization that fixate on class consciousness and material class interests as salient “participation identities” and means for gaining popular support.<sup>140</sup> Instead, it builds on a Gramscian approach to mobilization and class by examining how the state constructs and mobilizes communal class identities using moral appeals rather than material ones.<sup>141</sup> Second, it shows the importance of and relationship between practice and discourse in mobilization. While this study emphasizes the discursive power of a narrative of moral transgression in mobilizing violence against an outgroup, it also elucidates the concrete practices—of boundary work and social performance—by which political actors use discourse to shape behavior. Third, it underscores the importance of moral norms as a resource for mobilization. Instead of viewing morality as a component of meaning making<sup>142</sup> or an exogenous impetus for social mobilization,<sup>143</sup> it demonstrates how actors incorporate morality into their mobilization tactics, especially for violent mobilization.

This study merely provides an entry point for the study of the links between morality, mobilization, and violence. Future research should investigate the kinds of local social structures and individuals who are more or less amenable to moral mobilization. How do age, class, gender, race, and education affect how convincing individuals find moral appeals that attempt to convince them of their victimhood and the misdeeds of others? Do moral theatrics solicit outrage more easily in some individuals than others? What undergirds the persistence and reproduction of moral boundaries?

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<sup>140</sup> Gould, *Insurgent Identities*.

<sup>141</sup> Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*.

<sup>142</sup> Lamont, *Manners*; Lamont, *Dignity*.

<sup>143</sup> Jasper 1998.

## Appendix A. Abbreviations for Major Archival and Documentary Sources

<i>AHSTDGGZL</i>	《安徽省土地改革资料》 *
<i>BSDA</i>	Baoshan District Archives
<i>CCDC</i>	Fengyang County Archives, Contemporary China Documents Center
<i>CCPM</i>	Database on the History of Contemporary Chinese Political Movements, CUHK
<i>JSPA</i>	Jiangsu Provincial Archives
<i>JSNMYD</i>	《江苏农民运动档案史料选编》 *
<i>JSTGYD</i>	《江苏省土地改革运动》
<i>QJCA</i>	Quanjiao County Archives
<i>SBTGWX</i>	《苏北土地改革文献》 *
<i>SNTGWX</i>	《苏南土地改革文献》 *
<i>SHMA</i>	Shanghai Municipal Archives
<i>XCSSN</i>	《乡村三十年：凤阳农村社会经济发展实录（1949-1983）》 *
<i>ZGTDGGS�XB</i>	《中国土地改革史料选编》 *

\* = Internal publication (内部资料 / 内部印行)