

# **Moral Mobilization: Morality and Mass Violence in the Forging of State Authority after the Chinese Communist Revolution**

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While states must eliminate their internal rivals to establish a coercive monopoly over a territory, striking down competitors cannot, by itself, explain how states build legitimate authority. This study offers a generative theory of state authority that elucidates how states consolidate authority by typecasting their internal rivals as morally retrograde. Specifically, it considers how states leverage existing norms of right and wrong behavior to dislodge and undercut the symbolic foundations of internal competitors, thereby facilitating and justifying their physical destruction. This theory emerges from the case of the Chinese Communist Party's land reform campaign after the 1949 revolution, demonstrating how existing accounts of state formation and mobilization do not explain how the Party-state mobilized locals to dispossess and engage in collective violence against the landed elite.

## **I. Introduction**

Regardless of whether the state arises through revolution, conquest, or some other path to power, all state builders face the same, seemingly insurmountable task of establishing a political apparatus capable of projecting its authority across the territories to which it lays claim. For most theories of state formation, this process entails, at the very least, the subjugation or cooptation of the state's internal rivals. Bellicist approaches to state-building contend that the state builds extractive institutions as a byproduct of its elimination of external competitors and, sometimes, its internal foes (Dincecco and Wang 2018; Ertman 1997; Hintze 1975; Olson 1993; Tilly 1985); this "infrastructural power," forged through conflict, enables states to carry out their will (Mann 1984). Likening the state to a "protection racket" or a "stationary bandit," the bellicists assume that authority comes with subjugating one's opponents; as their thuggish metaphors imply, the opinions of the governed are of little consequence.

Yet states invest considerable resources in shoring up their normative power (Etzioni 1964): few states view themselves as organized banditry, and even fewer wish to project that

image to their citizenry or the international community. States seek to monopolize authority that is not only legitimate in the Weberian sense that it is accepted but also in the sense that it is right, just, and good. Legitimate authority is, ultimately, moral authority (Beetham 1991). Although the bellicists elide morality from their accounts of state formation and consolidation, it is clear that physically subjugating the various internal rivals who have traditionally monopolized political, economic, and social power at the local level does not automatically diminish their influence. A capable state must still obtain “social control” by enforcing the primacy of its own rules and norms over the “people’s own inclinations of social behavior or behavior sought by other social organizations” (Migdal 1988, p. 22). Culturalist critiques of the bellicist model argue that states establish this control by coopting or forming an alliance with communal elites who possess significant symbolic resources (Gorski 2003; Loveman 2005). But indirect rule is not always a viable option: new states may have transformational goals that fundamentally conflict with the interests of local elites with moral authority, or previous spells of conflict and state-building may have wiped local sources of moral authority from the political stage (Slater 2009).

This study offers a positive, generative theory of state authority that explains the way in which the mobilization of symbolic and physical violence against internal rivals facilitates the accrual of state authority. It considers how states leverage popular notions of good and bad behavior to dislodge and negate the symbolic foundations of their opponents by typecasting them as morally retrograde; and, in doing so, position themselves as the leaders of a new moral order that still resonates with normative understandings from that which preceded it. Through this process of *moral mobilization*, states forge new collective identities that bind a virtuous ingroup to the state and set them against a morally tainted outgroup.

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 landed elite and other members of the community, while simultaneously emphasizing the virtue and victimhood of the masses. 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” (Cosser 1969). 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 empathy, with the ultimate goal of mobilizing collective violence and consolidating state authority.<sup>1</sup>

This analysis addresses four limitations of existing theories of state-building and mobilization. First, it shows how weak communal elites can obstruct or aid the construction of the state’s symbolic power. While the weak symbolic power of existing challengers facilitates their elimination, it presents a challenge to a state that must somehow construct moral authority *de novo* in opposition to what came before it. Instead of simply eliminating elites deficient in symbolic resources, the state generates its own symbolic power through the systematic

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<sup>1</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).

degradation of the moral image of existing elites and the presentation of itself as the righteous defender of the public. Second, it criticizes neo-Marxist approaches to state-building and mobilization that fixate on class consciousness and material class interests as salient “participation identities” (Gould 1995) and means for gaining popular support. Instead, it builds on a Gramscian approach to state power, class, and mobilization by examining how the state constructs and mobilizes communal class identities using moral appeals rather than material ones (Gramsci 1971). It underscores how a crucial component of the state-building process is the state’s use of symbolic violence to vie for a position of moral leadership from which it can create and validate ways of understanding who and what constitutes right and wrong. Third, it shows the importance of and relationship between practice and discourse in state building. 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. Finally, it underscores the importance of moral norms as a resource for mobilization. Instead of viewing morality as a component of meaning making (Lamont 1992, 2000) or an exogenous impetus for social mobilization (Jasper 1998), it demonstrates how actors incorporate morality into their mobilization tactics. By situating morality in a broader process of mobilization, this analysis explores how political actors alter the moral imaginary of their target audience—i.e. how they exploit or create new moral convictions, present their cause as righteous, and elicit emotional responses that rouse audiences to action.

The rest of this article proceeds as follows. Section II begins by describing the dynamics of moral mobilization and its component mechanisms. Section III introduces the puzzle of mobilization during China’s post-1949 land reform campaign and addresses the major alternative

arguments. Section IV empirically demonstrates the Party's use of moral mobilization using a crucial case study of land reform in the region of Jiangnan, and Section V concludes.

## **II. The Dynamics of Moral Mobilization**

Moral mobilization is a recursive 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 (Carroll 2006). 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.

I define morality as shared understandings of what constitutes proper behavior and good character. Obviously, these shared understandings vary by culture and time, and they do not in any way represent an absolute or universal good. Importantly, I distinguish morality from justice, for two reasons. First, justice implies an impartial, rational, and institutionalized adjudication of what is or is not fair. In contrast, morality often begins from emotion, which is retrospectively rationalized (Haidt 2001). Morally-tinted emotions like outrage, sympathy, and disgust influence

how people determine what is or is not “right.” Second, justice principally concerns norms of fairness, while morality encompasses a range of norms regarding sanctity, loyalty, fairness, care, and tradition (Haidt 2012). One may consider nepotism morally acceptable if one values familial loyalty more than fairness to strangers, for example.

### *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 proper and improper behavior to delineate between “us” and “them.”<sup>2</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” (Lamont 1992, 4), 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>3</sup> To use Wimmer’s (2013, p. 9) 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. It is this process of moral boundary work that not only imposes new boundaries between targeted groups and the public,

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<sup>2</sup> On boundary work, see Lamont (1992, 2000); Lamont and Molnár (2002); Tilly (2005); and Wimmer (2013).

<sup>3</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).

but also changes their socio-behavioral valence by using moral norms to exclude target groups from the public's "span of sympathy"—that is, to frame them as an evil, degenerate minority who, by virtue of their allegedly nefarious and inappropriate behavior, are deserving of punishment. So while political actors often impose new categorical boundaries rooted in their ideological scripts—e.g. landlords versus the masses; heretics versus the devout; Communist sympathizers versus patriots—these boundaries take on moral meaning through elite appeals to the audience's sense of right and wrong behavior.

Unlike resource competition theories of intergroup conflict (Horowitz 1985), 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 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 (Lamont and Molnár 2002). 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" (Lamont 1992, p. 11). Mobilizers face a similar concern: a movement's appeals must somehow resonate with the audience's social reality (Gould 1995, p. 18).

Members of newly constituted ingroups need not believe that they are actually victimized or oppressed in order for these boundaries to matter; it is enough that they are *recognized* as victims. While the repeated performance of victimhood entrenches one's identity as a victim (Wedeen 2008, pp. 16-17), just as or even more important is that others regard one's behavior and group affiliation as belonging to the victim side of the victim-oppressor boundary; in this

sense, group boundaries work from the “outside in” to influence individual behavior and affect their life chances (Swidler 1995).

### *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. Through the public display and performance of transgressions, political actors “overcome the distance between actor and script” (Alexander 2017), and create sympathy for the “victim” and outrage against the “perpetrator” or “oppressor.” 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” (Stets 2012, p. 330), chief among them being outrage and sympathy. Outrage is an emotion that “motivates people to shame and punish wrongdoers” in response to perceived violations of moral norms (Crockett 2017). Unlike fear, which tends to demobilize, anger and outrage rouse people to action (Valentino et al. 2011), reduce people’s risk thresholds (Lerner and Keltner 2001), and heighten desires for punishment (Crockett 2017; Goldberg, Lerner, and Tetlock 1999; Horowitz 2001; Petersen 2011). 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>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Goldberg, Lerner, and Tetlock’s (1999) experimental work on outrage demonstrates the importance of morality in provoking and *sustaining* a desire for retributive reprisal. They find that priming outrage through the revelation of unpunished “normative violations” triggers an “intuitive prosecutor” mindset, whereby affected individuals will more readily accept and propose harsh punishment, not just of the original transgressors but future, unrelated transgressors as well. Significantly, they do not find this effect when they prime anger without embedding it in a moral frame.



Through sympathy, moral theatrics builds political solidarity between civilian perpetrators on the same side of a symbolic boundary. Sympathizing with another's pain triggers the same affective responses in an individual as if he or she were the recipient of pain (Singer et al. 2004). In *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Adam Smith's ([1759] 2016, pp. 13-16) 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." Sympathy for those allegedly harmed by transgressors strengthens cohesion within the pool of potential participants through the cultivation of a sense of shared fate. 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 vulnerable and protecting a morally legitimate social order" (Viterna 2014, p. 191). In contrast, sympathy for the targets of violence is a potential obstacle for political actors attempting to mobilize collective violence. During the mass mobilization of violence during the Chinese Civil War, the CCP bemoaned that where landlords were able win the empathy of the masses, the masses refrained from participating in violence against them (Li 2013, p. 77). To be sure, sympathy and outrage often intertwine: sympathy for a suffering individual involves outrage toward the cause of suffering.

Moral theatrics does not merely refer to the 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 (Jasper 1997). 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 (Goldman 2007). Senator Joseph McCarthy's public 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 (Johnson 2004).

The use of theatrical performance of moral transgression to provoke outrage is a mainstay of many mass campaigns of violence and persecution. During China's Civil War-era land reform campaign, William Hinton, in his eye-witness account of a struggle session, illustrates how officials held the assembly in a courtyard filled with mildewed grain to elicit moral outrage against a man who hoarded grain while his fellow villagers starved (Hinton [1966] 2008, pp. 133-134). During the Spanish Inquisition, the Holy Office punished many of its targets in private *autos particular*, reserving its most flagrant examples of moral transgression for public display at spectacular *autos-de-fé*, "morality plays, at which large numbers of outsiders, dressed in penitential costumes, underwent public humiliation, acknowledging their guilt while prostrate before the green cross of the Inquisition" (Monter 2002, p. 322). These public spectacles "served as a means of reinforcing the faith of those who observed them as much as a means of celebrating the penitence of those who participated in them" (Peters 1988, pp. 93-94). Through

these “rituals of social cohesion, where evildoers were separated from the Christian community” (Monter 2002, p. 322), the Inquisition deepened the moral boundaries it established and repeatedly emphasized the distance between true Christians and heretics by mobilizing the disgust and anger of the former against the latter.

### *Moral Mobilization as a Recursive Process*

As Figure 1 illustrates, moral mobilization is a recursive process that imposes, activates, and crystallizes boundaries, initiating a positive feedback loop that promotes and sustains violence over time. Mobilizers repeatedly engage with their target audiences to draw moral boundaries and galvanize them through the dramatic revelation of transgressive behavior, which further consolidates these boundaries. Repeated participation in “righteous” violence crystallizes the symbolic boundaries—e.g. between the “exploited” masses and the “exploiter” class, etc.—that political actors initially impose (Gould 1995, p. 15), and builds in-group solidarity between those on the side of the moral boundary that views itself as victimized. Moral mobilization strengthens feelings of solidarity between political actors who mobilize violence and their civilian constituency by making the latter complicit in the execution of “rough justice” against those deemed morally transgressive.<sup>5</sup>

[Figure 1 approximately here]

### **III. The Puzzle of Land Reform Mobilization in the Aftermath of the Chinese Communist Revolution**

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<sup>5</sup> This is similar to Frantz Fanon’s (1963) argument about the unifying function of violence. On violence and solidarity within political parties, see LeBas, (2011) and Levitsky and Way (2013).

Launched merely one year after the Party assumed power, China's land reform campaign was the world's largest and most violent episode of land reform, wherein millions of so-called "landlords" (地主) perished or endured extreme psychological and physical violence at the hands of local villagers in the name of "class struggle" (阶级斗争).<sup>6</sup> 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.

The success of this mobilization effort is remarkable considering that the ascendant Chinese Communist Party (CCP) inherited a vast territory over which the preceding Nationalist state had little direct control, since it had delegated much of its power to rural elites. In the aftermath of the revolution, the regime exercised uneven coercive control across the country and spread Party and state personnel thinly across these territories. To govern a population of over

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<sup>6</sup> There are no precise estimates for the number of deaths during China's land reform campaign, though most estimates place the figure in the low millions. Mao himself claimed that out of China's 36 million landlords, one million landlords were executed, one million were imprisoned, and another two million were put under house arrest (Yang 2007). Stavis (1978, pp. 29-30) provides an estimate of over one million deaths, Teiwes (2011) cites a figure of between 1 to 2 million executed, while Domes (1980, p. 8) believes that 5 million were killed during the campaign. Julia Strauss (2006, p. 901, fn. 17) presents a nice overview of the various estimated figures for deaths during land reform (and the concurrent campaign to suppress counter-revolutionaries), giving a figure of one to five million in total for both campaigns. For a more recent assessment of violence during land reform, Dikötter (2013).

500 million people, the Party's 4.5 million members fanned out across the country to establish its rule, often in places to which they were outsiders (Teiwes 2011). Despite these inauspicious conditions, the CCP managed to carry out massive land redistribution and project state authority, albeit unevenly, down to the village level. Conscription and agricultural socialization swiftly followed, raising the question of how the new Party-state so quickly established authority at the local level across such a large and diverse territory. 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>7</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 (Ash 1976; Dong 1987; Du 1996; Lippit 1974; Wong 1973; Yang 2007; Zhao 1990). Selden (1971) and Pepper (1999) argue 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. Vivienne Shue (1980, p. 2, p. 325), 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." Even where scholars have alluded to the extreme violence of the campaign, they have not engaged in a systematic, comparative exploration of how this violence was mobilized and unfolded (Dikötter 2013; Moise 1984; Stavis 1978; Yang 2007).

I argue that the Party carried out an elaborate mobilization process that eliminated and delegitimized local elites as alternative sources of authority by using examples of their alleged moral turpitude to rouse righteous rage from the masses, a process I term *moral mobilization*.

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<sup>7</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 (Pepper 1999; Yang 2007).

This mobilization process drew new social boundaries that separated out a morally suspect landlord class from the virtuous and oppressed masses; these moral boundaries became the basis for ingroup and outgroup collective identities that the state leveraged for future mobilization. I then demonstrate that moral mobilization helped promote state authority.

For the Party, the mobilization of collective violence in the early 1950s was fundamentally a state-building effort aimed at the symbolic and physical destruction of elites associated with the old order—particularly the Nationalist regime, the Japanese puppet government, and other pre-revolutionary bases of power in the countryside. In Liu Shaoqi’s (1950) “Report on the Question of Land Reform”—a document that was considered one of the central documents of the post-1949 land reform movement and widely reprinted in land reform cadre handbooks and study materials—he states that the goal of land reform is not to eliminate landlords physically but to destroy their social authority: “[we are] only abolishing their feudal system of landownership and them as a social class; we are not eliminating their bodies” (废除他们这一个社会阶级，而不是要消灭他们的肉体). Indeed, the long-term objectives of the land reform campaign were decidedly Gramscian: to destroy the hegemonic order and create a new revolutionary subjectivity among the peasantry that would establish the Party-state’s authority and facilitate further mobilization (Potter and Potter 1990, p. 57). Violent mass mobilization was a means to psychological transformation, a “reform of the Chinese mindscape” (Wang 2004, p. 165). Party reports summarizing land reform work often used examples of alleged societal transformation as a measure of the campaign’s success. One report by the heads of land reform inspection teams in the newly conquered territories around Shanghai triumphantly declared that after land reform “many peasants hung portraits of Chairman Mao during the Spring Festival, and far fewer burned incense to the Buddha; gambling has nearly disappeared” (Sunan Tudi Gaige Wenxian [hereinafter SNTGWX] 1950, p. 226).

Existing theories of state formation struggle to explain how the CCP mass mobilized violence and established social control after 1949. As one of the great revolutions in modern history, the Chinese Communist revolution is a case that needs to be explained and should make us question existing theories if they do not describe it well. To begin, the Chinese case demonstrates that an institutional approach to state building cannot fully explain the development of state authority; the PRC after 1949 demonstrates that mass mobilization was a far more critical component of state authority than its institutions. In contradistinction to Michael Mann's nebulous concept of "infrastructural power" (1984) as an "institutional capacity," state authority in Maoist China manifested as the capacity to mobilize. Party committees, not official state bureaucracies, organized and led the charge in mobilizing the masses to redistribute land, struggle against alleged class enemies and counterrevolutionaries, collectivize, and later promote agricultural socialization. The classic Weberian view of the modern state as a rational bureaucratic apparatus does not take us far in understanding the post-revolutionary Chinese state because it elides the process behind state building and narrowly understands state authority in terms of bureaucratic capacity. While the Party did eventually establish a legitimate coercive monopoly, the depth of this legitimacy varied across the country depending on well how the Party was able to mass mobilize the local population. Explaining this variation requires, at the very least, an understanding of the mechanisms behind mass mobilization. More importantly, understanding state power in terms of bureaucratic capacity does not explain how the Party was able to mass mobilize in the absence of a meritocratically staffed bureaucratic apparatus. Indeed, it was mass mobilization that helped build and staff the state bureaucracy after 1949. Land reform and other mass campaigns were opportunities to locate promising young activists who could fill Party and state positions at the local level (Bernstein 1968). Attaining state goals of economic production, conscription, and repression continued to rely on mass mobilization more

so than state institutions, as Party committees directed mobilization efforts (Koss 2018). The development of mobilization capacity, not state bureaucracy, was more crucial to state authority in the Maoist period.

The bellicist model of state formation argues that conflict drives the state's institutional expansion, which would predict that the consolidation of state authority in the PRC began with its entry into the Korean War in October 1950. Although China's participation in the Korean War came only one year after the Communist victory, the CCP had already been diligently working to eliminate "bandit" groups and mass mobilize violence against local elites associated with the old regime. Mass mobilized military recruitment intertwined with the ongoing land reform campaign and repression of so-called "counterrevolutionaries." Thus, while the Korean War was undoubtedly an important part of state-building in the early PRC period, war mobilization was in fact part of a larger ongoing mass mobilization effort to consolidate state authority. One could argue that state repression of internal rivals, not external war, drove the entrenchment of state power (Dincecco and Wang 2018), but the state's military repression efforts only set the stage for mass mobilized violence against local elites. Shortly after victory, the People's Liberation Army's engaged in extensive maneuvers to eliminate armed insurgent groups—referred to with the catch-all term "bandits"—that continued to challenge the new revolutionary state "bandits." What followed was a complex mobilization process that aimed to establish state authority, not just coercive dominance, by systematically delegitimizing and fomenting collective violence against local elites. The Party knew that state-led military repression alone could not arrogate social control from local elites, and it was this conviction that motivated the central leadership's decision to use violent class struggle after the revolution.

State-in-society accounts also poorly predict the development of Chinese state's authority after 1949. The scattering of social authority in the Chinese countryside after the founding of the



Republic in 1912 produced a “weblike society” that Migdal (1988) claims is least conducive to the consolidation of the state’s social control. According to Migdal’s theory, societal fragmentation would force a state to coopt and delegate power to local elites, undermining centralized rule. This was indeed the case with the Nationalist regime, which relied heavily on local landed elites to carry out state functions and had a weak presence outside of the cities. The PRC, however, is known for precisely the reverse: it subjugated local elites and extended its authority down to the villages. The driver here was, again, violent mass mobilization. Land reform did not merely strip local elites of their economic sources of power, its use of mass mobilized violence struck down their political and social authority. This challenges Migdal on another front: if mass mobilization is a product of social control, how do we explain the extensive mass mobilization carried out by the Party shortly after the revolution, which was used precisely to consolidate social control? It also goes against Shue’s (1988) idea that the reach of the Maoist state was somehow limited. If we conceive state power in terms of social control, the incredible ability of the Maoist state to shape life outcomes through class labeling alone speaks to its power. Access to public goods, education, and even marriage opportunities were all shaped by the new social boundaries the Maoist state imposed on the population in the first few years after the revolution (and before, in old liberated territories).

Another school of thought emphasizes the cohesiveness of the state’s leadership in successful state building (Levitsky and Way 2013; Slater 2010; Vu 2010). It is true that the unity of the CCP’s central leadership enabled the single-minded pursuit of state-building. Nearly three decades of revolutionary struggle had indeed forged a powerful, centralized party under the leadership Mao Zedong. Unlike their Vietnamese counterparts, as Vu (2010) points out, the Party was strong enough to avoid sharing substantial power with non-communist groups, which removed potential obstacles to implementing its goals of land reform and collectivization.

Although it was important that the elite was able to agree on and implement a strategy of mass mobilization, it is important to understand why this mobilization strategy worked and the considerable subnational variation in its efficacy.

While it is clear that mobilization was crucial to the Chinese Party-state's establishment of its authority, conventional explanations of mobilization—i.e. the provision of selective material incentives (Olson 1965) and the exploitation of existing social cleavages and grievances—do not suffice. 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 (Lippit 1974, p. 95), 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 (1968) 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. 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 (2009, p. 15) recounts a story in Qin village, Dongtai 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.”

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” (Database on the History of Contemporary Chinese Political Movements [hereinafter CCPM] 1951).<sup>8</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 (Chen 1986; Wou 1994, p. 121). 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 (1984) 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. Fei Xiaotong (1983, p. 91) notes that many villagers viewed paying rents to landlords and taxes to the state as a moral duty,

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<sup>8</sup> Zheng Linzhuang, “Douzheng Dizhu Shi You Ganbu Tiaobo Qilai de Ma?” 斗争地主是由干部挑拨起来的吗? [Is Struggling Against the Landlords the Result of Cadres’ Sowing Discord?], June 1951.

while Zhou Xiaohong (1998, p. 150) 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). 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 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." Externally imposed categories mean little outside of the context—or "face-to-face situations"—of social actors; these categories must carry political or cultural significance (Swidler 1995, pp. 35-36). A tenant farmer does not hate a landlord simply because the latter belongs to an abstract group the communist cadres have labeled as an ideological foe; rather, the tenant-landlord split only makes sense when framed in terms that relate to the lived experience of those involved. It is the large landholder who has repeatedly beaten villagers or refused to waive rents during times of famine who becomes the face of the

“landlord” as an object of derision, not simply a person who possesses a great deal of land and extracts income from rents and interest.

#### **IV. Research Design**

To illustrate how the Party used moral mobilization to foment collective violence, I conduct within-case “systematic process analysis” (Hall 2003, 2013) of the Jiangnan region, which I treat as a “least likely” crucial case study.<sup>9</sup> Because of Jiangnan’s rich history of rent-based resistance that pitted landlords against peasants (Bernhardt 1992; Bianco 2001; Huang 1990), this region should have been fertile grounds for class-based mobilization. Along with its high level of socioeconomic inequality, this makes the region a “most likely” case for social cleavage theories that argue that political actors can best mobilize where existing intergroup conflict is salient and strong. In addition, Jiangnan’s relative wealth makes it a “most likely” case for collective action theories that posit the necessity of selective material incentives. Presumably, political actors are best capable of providing such incentives where they have an abundance of economic resources; the confiscation and redistribution of assets in Jiangnan should have provided plentiful resources for selective economic incentives. Moral mobilization, conversely, should be rather unlikely in Jiangnan. Why would officials resort to elaborate and costly strategies that used moral appeals and performance to mobilize villagers when simply tapping into strong intergroup conflict or providing selective economic rewards would do?

Through this case I show that the Party did not rely on class appeals or selective material incentives to mobilize support for and participation in violent class struggle; rather, it drew upon perceived acts of injustice and moral transgression against the community to delineate and

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<sup>9</sup> Though Jiangnan is a nebulously defined region that refers generally to the Lower Yangzi Delta region, for the purposes of this study I restrict my analysis to area of Jiangnan that encompasses southern Anhui and southern Jiangsu. On crucial cases, see George and Bennett (2005).

perform a moral boundary between an immoral minority of targets and the virtuous masses to encourage and justify mass participation in violence. Because the Party intended to target the landed elite, it guided communities to choose targets who existed in *the overlap between moral offenders and landholders*. This meant that while many targets belonged to the landed elite, a sizable number of targets were chosen purely on the basis of their perceived moral transgressions. Furthermore, the participation identities forged through moral boundary work compelled land-poor villagers to participate as “the oppressed” primarily and “poor peasants and farmworkers” secondarily. The Party did in fact mobilize outrage against those labeled as class enemies using their perceived moral transgressions, though they also sought to use these “evildoers” to create, by association with the landed class, a psychological link between wrongdoing and class identity.

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 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.

## V. The Case of the Jiangnan Region

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 (CCPM 1951).<sup>10</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) (Jiangsu Provincial Archives [hereinafter JSPA] 1951, No. 3006-0265). More shocking was the discovery that class consciousness was weak among Jiangnan villagers. In Jiading County, which bordered Shanghai and where landlords had twenty times more land than poor peasants (Shanghai Municipality Jiading County Gazetteer Compilation Committee 1992), 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” (Interview JD13, July 2015). 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 (JSPA 1949, No. 3006-0248).”

In the face of low class consciousness, officials could have chosen to emphasize class, revenge, or moral transgressions to create new participation identities that they could use to

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<sup>10</sup> See Liu Ruilong, “Liu Ruilong Guanyu Huadong Tudi Gaige Gongzuo de Baogao” 刘瑞龙关于华东土地改革工作的报告 [Liu Ruilong’s Report on Land Reform Work in East China], March 19, 1951.

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. Eschewing both class or revenge motives as the basis for new participation identities, the Party could have focused primarily on moral violations as a means of dividing communities into the oppressed and the oppressors. I suggest here that authorities in Jiangnan resolved to draw class boundaries, albeit roughly, on which they then grafted moral boundaries that set apart victims from transgressors. Class alone was insufficient as a participation identity; it was only through imbuing it with moral meaning that the Party was able to overcome locals' apathy towards landlords. 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.

### **Moral Boundary Work: Demarcating Ingroups and Outgroups**

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. This



collection of incriminating materials on landlords and other authority figures occurred throughout the land reform campaign, though much of it was to be done in its earliest stages. 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.” (Baoshan District Archives [hereinafter BSDA] 1951, No. 1-2-001-064). Indeed, it encouraged 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,” 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) (JSPA 1963, No. 4068-001-0023).<sup>11</sup> The Southern Jiangsu Regional Party Committee instructed cadres to focus their collection efforts on “evil tyrants,” especially those accused of having committed murder (Jiangsu Sheng Tudi Gaige Yundong [hereinafter JSTGY] 1950, p. 126). 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 (Qimen County Local Gazetteer Compilation Committee 1990, p. 813). These kinds of

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<sup>11</sup> See Jiangsu Province People’s Committee Rural Forestry and Water Office, “Jiangsu Sheng Tudi Gaige Gongzuo Qingkuang Jieshao” 江苏省土地改革工作情况介绍 [An Introduction to the Situation of Land Reform Work in Jiangsu Province], June 17, 1963.

revelations of landlord wrongdoings, the Party wagered, would help break through villagers' apathy.

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 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 drive their desire to use violence against the landlords (Li 2007, p. 99). 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 group.

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 using individual instances of landlord malfeasance to establish hostility towards landlords *as a group*. 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 (BSDA 1949, No. 1-1-001-001). A cadre from a township in Baoshan remarked on the efficacy of “using the landlords’ schemes and tricks to educate the peasants” (BSDA 1950, No. 1-1-001-060). Elsewhere, in a township in Wu County, a landlord had tried to rip up the list of villagers’ names and class labels and bribe a deputy village head to give himself a less damning class label. After he was caught, his case and the public self-criticism and testimony of the deputy village head in question was used in small group meetings across the township as an example of landlord “wiliness” to kick start “speaking bitterness” sessions among the locals and to raise their “class consciousness” (JSTGY 1950, p. 70).

Moral boundary work not only leveraged outrage to create an outgroup of class enemies, it simultaneously used commiseration 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 aggrieved” (苦主) —literally, “masters of bitterness”— and guided and trained them to deliver their stories in the most effective way possible. Speaking bitterness, as Anagnost notes, was “not the spontaneous flow of pent-up sorrow but the careful reworking of perception and experience into the narrative frame of Marxist class struggle” (Anagnost 1997, 28). Thus, 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.

Next, cadres used meetings to foster sympathy for alleged victims to build ingroup solidarity within the broader peasant community, including so-called “middle peasants.” Before land reform, these various non-landlord strata of peasants—farmworkers, poor peasants, and middle peasants—did not necessarily view themselves as a coherent community bound by a shared identity. Work teams, therefore, worked to guide the poorest members of this

community—the poor peasants and landless farm workers—to view themselves not only as “the oppressed” (被剥削者) but also as leaders at the helm of the revolutionary effort; they were then encouraged to “unite” (团结) with the middle peasantry to form a cohesive front against the landlords and their allies. This bonding was accomplished through additional face-to-face moral boundary work at expanded Peasant Association meetings where everyone, including the middle peasants, could participate in speaking bitterness. A Jiangdu County report suggested cadres help the poor and farmworker peasants bond with the middle peasants by having them jointly “accuse the landlord class” (控诉地主阶级) in these small group sessions so as to help them “closely unite” (密切团结) their ranks (JSPA 1950, No. 7001-003-0108). One township reported that this element of conflict was critical to building solidarity between the middle peasantry and their poorer brethren: it was counterproductive, the report argued, to hold large meetings that simply brought the classes together; rather, it was bringing together the farmworkers, poor peasants, and middle peasants to struggle against landlords that increased the middle peasants’ “enthusiasm” (积极性) (JSTGY 1950, p. 226).<sup>12</sup> This bonding also reassured middle peasants understand that they would not become targets of violence, which helped cultivate the belief that “the farmworkers, poor peasants, and middle peasants are all one family” (JSTGY 1950, pp. 69-78).<sup>13</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

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<sup>12</sup> See Guo Mingxiao, “Huchang Xiang Tudi Gaige Shiyang Zongjie” 胡场乡土地改革试验总结 [Summary of Land Reform Experiments in Huchang Township], September 1950.

<sup>13</sup> See Wu County Gusu Township Land Reform Classic Experiment Work Committee, “Guanyu Wu Xian Gusu Xiang Tudi Gaige Dianxing Shiyang Gongzuo de Chubu Zongjie” 关于吴县姑苏乡土地改革典型试验工作的初步总结 [Initial Summary Report on Classic Experiment Work in Land Reform in Gusu Township, Wu County] August 21, 1950.

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>14</sup> Through these guided discussions, cadres sought to empower villagers, to “establish among [the poor peasants and farmworkers] a mentality of being masters of their own fate (当家做主的思想)” (JSTGY 1952, p. 201).<sup>15</sup>

These meetings sought to alter peasants’ moral outlook on the campaign itself. Cadres in Wuxi used these meetings to explain the “justness and necessity” of land reform and criticized those who were apathetic or wanted to freeride. Importantly, the work team organized speaking bitterness sessions to break through the locals’ “simplistic” (单纯) economic mode of thinking—i.e. being solely concerned with the economic rewards of land reform. The goal of this boundary work, they note, was “to *clarify who the enemy is...*[and] to *help the peasants recognize themselves*” (JSTGY 1950, pp. 46-55). Repeated education, officials in Wu County reported, dispelled the poor peasants and farmworkers’ hesitations regarding land redistribution, as they could now speak of it “confidently with justice on their side” (理直气壮) (JSTGY 1950, p. 69). Cadres spent an extraordinary amount of attention and time to psychologically “breaking through” (打通) the mindsets of the individual villagers. Those who underwent this kind of moral boundary work during the preparatory stage of land reform spoke of it in markedly

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<sup>14</sup> These questions appear in many accounts of land reform as well as archival documents. For an illuminating account of how these questions were used in small group meetings during the Chinese Civil War, see William Hinton ([1966] 2008, p. 128).

<sup>15</sup> See, for example, Southern Jiangsu Regional Party Committee, “Zhonggong Sunan Qu Wei Guanyu Sunan Tudi Gaige Gongzuo de Zongjie” 中共苏南区委关于苏南土地改革工作的总结 [The Southern Jiangsu Regional Committee’s Summary of Land Reform Work in Southern Jiangsu], August 28, 1952.

psychological terms. A local pastor in the suburbs of Shanghai described his experience in land reform as follows: “two months of land reform ‘class’ [大课] has clarified [澄清] my thirty years-old way of thinking and has made me capable of distinguishing between right and wrong [使我能辨别是非]” (Shanghai Municipal Archives [hereinafter SHMA] 1952, No. A71-1-71).

Since cadres aimed to use commiseration and outrage to build collective identities, they eschewed 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” (Wakeman 2007, p. 22). 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. 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” (BSDA 1949, No. 1-1-001-001). 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.

### **Selecting Mobilization Targets: Separating the Good from the Bad**

Central policy directed Party work teams and Peasant Associations to distribute class labels on the basis of landholdings and sources of income; however, the criteria for the selection of struggle targets—those who would be subjected to violent political struggle—were relatively

unclear and localities had considerable leeway in how they chose targets. This process of identification and prescription of punishment went one step further beyond the small group meetings, which attempted to situate grievances in a larger moral context and cultivate a shared identity among the poorest segments of society. This next stage attempted to use these newly moralized social boundaries to separate out the exploited masses and those who had committed real or perceived “crimes” (罪恶) against them—in essence, to reinforce the newly-imposed symbolic boundary that divided oppressors from the oppressed.

One of the most obvious implications of a class-based explanation of collective violence is that communities would have targeted landlords exclusively, mainly according to their wealth. County-level data reveal that target selection was rather selective: approximately nine percent of those given landlord labels and an even smaller proportion of the overall population was subjected to collective violence.<sup>16</sup> Although villagers and work teams did assign class labels using economic criteria, they often added prefixes to class labels or even additional labels that described targets’ perceived transgressions. One of the most common prefixes was a term that the Communists borrowed from the peasantry: “evil tyrant” (恶霸). Evil tyrant was a general label used to describe local strongmen, many of whom were also landlords—and thus labeled “evil tyrant landlords” (恶霸地主)—because they had amassed land and power by serving as “entrepreneurial brokers” who collected taxes and maintained the public order for the Nationalist state or the Japanese (Duara 1988). The locals’ disdain for evil tyrants, however, stemmed not from their class identity but rather the egregiousness of their behavior. Evil tyrant landlords were characterized mainly by their power and cruelty, those powerholders “whom you’d have to kiss

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<sup>16</sup> This number is most likely a high estimate since it assumes that all struggle targets were labeled a landlord, which was not the case in practice. Author’s calculation based on the gazetteer dataset.

up to. They often didn't work themselves and exploited the local folk, making them help them till the fields...regardless of whether it was a windy and rainy or extremely hot day" (Interview BS09, May 2015). This differentiation of the economic category of landlords reveals that, in practice, communities viewed evil tyrants as a category apart from other members of their "class" because of their perceived distasteful behavior. At times, this moral distinction was rather sharp. One resident stated bluntly that "it was usually landlords and bad people (坏人) who were dragged onto stage to be struggled against" (Interview BS11, May 2015). Southern Jiangsu officials observed that locals were using the People's Courts—mock tribunals that usually entailed public denunciations and beatings—to punish "whomever is bad" (谁坏, 就送谁上人民法庭) (BSDA 1952, No. 1-2-001-066). These "bad" people, according to one report that enumerated their "evil deeds" (恶迹), included alleged murderers, rapists, "vagrants," and members of the Green Gang, a criminal organization known for its involvement in the opium and sex trade—and its resistance to the CCP (JSPA n.d.).<sup>17</sup>

This moral differentiation of landlords was explicitly outlined and encouraged in Party documents. 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

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<sup>17</sup> See "Juhua, Xinglong, Jihe Xiang, Wugui Zhen Tugai Dianxing Shiyan de Chubu Zongjie (Caogao)" 菊花, 兴隆, 集合乡, 五贵镇土改典型试验的初步总结 (草稿) [Initial Summary of Classic Experiments in Land Reform in Juhua, Xinglong, Jihe Townships and Wugui Town (Draft)], n.d.



in the original]...and not from abstract concepts (抽象的概念)” (BSDA 1949, No. 1-2-001-045).

The exhortation to focus on “concrete situations, people, and facts” instead of “abstract concepts” suggests that the Party wanted local cadres to flexibly adapt these definitions of class to local social realities.

Cadres spared sympathetic figures from class struggle, even if they were landlords, because they were not amenable to moral theatrics. A report on land reform 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 who were...spared were mainly small landlords, [and] orphaned or widowed landlords” (JSPA 1950, No. 3006-0081).<sup>18</sup>

Drawing a moral boundary to separate “good” from “bad” classes not only facilitated justifying and encouraging violence against those framed as evildoers, it also allowed room for those with bad class labels express their loyalty to the Party and the masses without changing their actual class designation. The Southern Jiangsu Party leadership advocated winning over the support of the majority of those labeled as landlords, while only “attacking a minority, crushing them one by one” (打击少数,各个击破) with a focus on “evil tyrants, large landlords and those ‘obstinate landlords’ (顽固地主) who resisted Party policy, while refraining from attacking “average landlords” (一般地主). Left-leaning landlords could even be used to oppose their ‘obstinate’ counterparts (SNTGWX 1950, p. 25). In the Shanghai suburbs, officials were

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<sup>18</sup> The report indicates that over half of those executed had some sort of “blood debt” (血债)—i.e. they had (allegedly) taken someone’s life. See Zhang Yan, “Zhang Yan Guanyu Tugai Gongzuo Xiang Qu Wei de Huibao” 张彦关于土改工作向区党委的汇报 [Zhang Yan’s Report to the Party Committee on Land Reform Work], December 31, 1950.

instructed to tell landlords: “[You have] three paths: if you sabotage, I will repress you; if you obey, I will be magnanimous; if you are ‘enlightened’ [fully embrace the Communist cause], I will take care of you. It is up to you to choose...” (SHMA n.d., No. A71-1-23). At times, the Party used explicitly moral language to suggest to those with bad class labels that there was still hope for them if they behaved well and, if they had been accused of something, changed their “wicked ways.” The Baoshan County Party Committee directed cadres to gather landlords and rich peasants to tell them that: “Going along with Chiang Kai-shek to do *bad things* (做坏事) is a dead end. Your prospects are good if you *honestly follow the people* (老老实实跟着人民走)...abide by the law and *do good deeds to atone for your crimes* (立功赎罪)” (BSDA 1949, No. 1-1-001-001). This option to express loyalty, however, was only available to individuals with bad class labels whom the Party and the masses deemed were not culpable of significant moral and political transgressions.

### **Staging Moral Theatrics**

After imposing moral boundaries and choosing targets for collective violence, the Party set about to galvanize the local community’s righteous indignation and participation in violence against selected offenders. Because class enemies were defined in terms of their moral turpitude and pushed outside of the community’s span of sympathy, cadres could readily justify violent reprisal against them by tapping into the public’s outrage. To do this, the CCP used struggle sessions and public sentencings to provoke the outrage of the local community against targets of violence. These well-orchestrated, highly-theatrical public meetings appealed directly to the moral sentiments of the local community who were expected to evaluate the behavior and character of those targeted for violence.

Struggle sessions and public sentencings required an enormous amount of preparation. While these events were meant to be mass participatory affairs, the Party heavily managed and staged them like theatrical productions (Strauss 2006). Evidence against class enemies was supposed to be extremely detailed and rich; in fact, those who had plentiful evidence against them were often struggled against first. A 1951 Southern Jiangsu Regional Party 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 (BSDA 1951, No. 1-2-001-064). Of course we cannot assess the veracity of this “evidence,” but the Party’s serious concern with investigating local conditions and finding persuasive evidence of wrongdoings against the community indicates their desire to use reasonable—or reasonable sounding—claims of sufferings and injustice to mobilize moral outrage. These materials would be used for dramatic effect at mass meetings. For example, in Youzhu Township in Jiangyin County, a father and mother riled up the crowd by presenting to them the bones of their son who was slain by a spy (CCPM 1950).<sup>19</sup> In addition, struggle sessions were tailored to specific audiences who would be most receptive to the planned moral theatrics. Work teams appear to have mobilized people to attend struggle sessions that they believed would appeal to them on some personal level, which

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<sup>19</sup> Luo Ruiqing, “Luo Ruiqing Guanyu Sunan Zhenya Fangeming Gongzuo Tugai Gongzuo de Baogao” 罗瑞卿关于苏南镇压反革命工作土改工作的报告 [Luo Ruiqing’s Report on Campaign to Suppress the Counterrevolutionaries Work and Land Reform Work in Southern Jiangsu], March 18, 1950.

could more easily spark outrage in the audience. Five-hundred people showed up to a struggle session of a “vagrant woman” accused of being “morally loose,” sowing discord between husbands and wives, and selling several women; two-thirds of the attendees 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 (JSPA n.d.).<sup>20</sup>

When a particularly odious individual was up for judgment, well-orchestrated moral theatrics easily roused the crowd to anger and demands for violent retribution, usually execution. During the public sentencing of evil tyrant and landlord Chen XX in Huaining County in southwestern Anhui, an old couple entered the stage, sobbing, to tell the crowd their story of how Chen had beaten their son to death while attempting to settle a debt owed to him, hounded their daughter-in-law to death, and rendered them destitute, causing their newly-born grandson to die of starvation. The crowd of over two thousand people were so enraged by the couple’s story that they began to yell, “Down with the evil tyrant landlord, a blood debt must be repaid in blood” (打倒恶霸地主，血债要用血来还) (Huaining County Local Gazetteer Compilation Committee 1996, p. 366). In Qingpu County, 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 put a stop to the violence and called on other districts to prevent violence from spiraling out of control (Shanghai Municipality Qingpu County Local Gazetteer Compilation Committee 1990). The Party leadership blamed the incident on locals’ extreme hatred of the people being struggled against (JSTGY 1951, p. 152). Although the

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<sup>20</sup> See “Juhua, Xinglong, Jihe Xiang, Wugui Zhen Tugai Dianxing Shiyan de Chubu Zongjie (Caogao)” 菊花，兴隆，集合乡，五贵镇土改典型试验的初步总结（草稿） [Initial Summary of Classic Experiments in Land Reform in Juhua, Xinglong, Jihe Townships and Wugui Town (Draft),”], n.d.

leadership labeled this as “class hatred,” those killed had apparently worked with the Japanese to levy grain and were responsible for countless deaths under Nationalist rule:

Because of the numerous “blood debts” (血债) in this region, class hatred burned like fire, *once triggered it was impossible to hold back*; on top of this were the *heinous crimes* of the landlords, local tyrants, and counterrevolutionaries, who *refused to lower their heads before the masses and admit their errors*, which increased the *unbearable fury of the masses* (Sunan Renmin Xinzheng Gongshu Tudi Gaige Weiyuanhui 1951, pp. 94-95).

The severity of the alleged offenses may explain why locals were so eager to beat and kill, though it is important to note that this outrage was mobilized: “once triggered it was impossible to hold back” (Ibid.). 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 as soon as the session began, they had already beaten him to death after only two people had finished making their accusations against him.” Losing an opportunity to act on their outrage did not necessarily stop villagers from expressing it. Elsewhere in the same county, an “evil tyrant” who was slated for political struggle escaped custody and hanged himself, fearing his punishment at the hands of fellow villagers. When the locals heard of this the next day, they found his body and hacked it apart with knives (BSDA 1951, No. 1-2-001-052).

Speaking bitterness testimonials enraged the crowd against the transgressor but importantly also elicited sympathy for the accusers. Work teams specifically tried to recruit women and the elderly to speak bitterness at struggle sessions because they believed they could better earn the sympathy of the masses. In Liyang County in Southern Jiangsu, 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" (SNTGWX 1951, p. 469). These sympathetic figures helped create feelings of commiseration that cadres could shape into violent outrage. In a striking example of this, an elderly woman in Baoxi Township, Chongming County cried herself hoarse, prompting others to break down sobbing, after which they subjected the evil tyrant landlord to ferocious struggle (JSTGY 1952, p. 331).

Cadres' moral boundary work helped justify and legitimize the use of this violence by conferring to public denouncers the title of "the aggrieved" (苦主). As victims, these people were legitimized in "spontaneously" beating, if not killing, the actual victims of violence on stage next to them; and members of the audience were similarly justified in participating. While this contradicted official policy, which proscribed "reckless beatings and killings" (乱打乱杀)—the Party was concerned with losing control of the violence it mobilized—cadres were encouraged to be sympathetic, and often were naturally sympathetic, to the perpetrators of this uncontrolled violence. One directive on land reform mass mobilization recommended not restraining 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" (JSTGY 1951, p. 126). Another report noted that in these instances where righteous indignation drove denouncers to attack their targets

most onlookers typically *sympathized* with the attacker (CCPM 1951).<sup>21</sup> Of course, this violence was hardly spontaneous: it occurred during meticulously organized mass rallies convened after weeks of face-to-face boundary work. Yet it is significant that the Party presents land reform violence emanating from righteous indignation or outrage as “spontaneous,” as it reveals the desired goal of this mobilization strategy to instigate violence in a way that can appear to be both popular—as in coming from the people—and legitimate in its cause.

Cadres were meticulous in their sequencing of struggle targets according to the moral-emotional content of their alleged transgressions. One of the most powerful elements of moral mobilization was its ability to arouse outrage towards perceived moral transgressors, which could be harnessed to use violence against other targets who were accused of much milder, often political, offenses or against whom there was weak evidence. The rationale was that attacking the most hated local figures at the beginning of the campaign could mobilize popular enthusiasm for violence against subsequent targets.<sup>22</sup> By first attacking targets who could be best portrayed as contemptible, officials harnessed and sustained the righteous rage of the crowd to use against several targets during a struggle session. “After increasing [class] awareness through speaking bitterness,” a Southern Anhui report stated, “you may carry out struggle against the worst evil tyrant landlords [最坏的恶霸地主] when the broad masses demand it” (Anhui Sheng Tudi Gaige Ziliao [hereinafter AHTGZL] 1951, p. 25). Significantly, the sequencing or pairing of perceived

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<sup>21</sup> See Northern Jiangsu Regional Party Committee, “Zhonggong Subei Qu Weiyuanhui Dui Dangqian Tudi Gaige Yundong Zhong de Jige Wenti Xiang Ge Di Wei de Tongbao” 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 [Northern Jiangsu Regional Party Committee Circular to All Prefectural Party Committees on Some Problems in the Current Land Reform Movement], January 4, 1951.

<sup>22</sup> This recalls Goldberg, Lerner, and Tetlock’s (1999) “intuitive prosecutor mindset” and the “spillover effect” of outrage: when political actors mobilize outrage against a clearly defined transgressor who is perceived to have escaped justice, these 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.

moral transgressors and those accused of political crimes allowed cadres to mobilize outrage and encourage violence against *both* moral and political offenders, especially if they were being punished at the same struggle session. A report on land reform in Fengxian County in Southern Jiangsu explained the rationale and effectiveness of this sequencing strategy:

At the beginning of the movement, [we] struggled against and suppressed counterrevolutionary bandits and agents (反革命匪特) who had been locked up for a year and the power-holding clique of evil tyrants in the entire county and/or district (全县全区性的恶霸当权派). Quickly taking care of this group of people was very effective in raising the fighting spirit of the masses (斗志). After the campaign was in full gear, the spearhead [of the campaign] was directed towards evil tyrants, power holding landlords, and unlawful landlords. Former cadres at the township level and above were almost all struggled against (JSPA 1950, No. 3006-0081).

Essentially, the Party put the “worst offenders” for whom there was the most compelling evidence to initiate a wave of mass violence. 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 (BSDA 1950, No. 1-2-011-022). In Feixi County, which straddles the Huaibei-Jiangnan border in Anhui, 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...” (AHTGZL n.d., p. 38).



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

Was morality 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" (BSDA 1951, No. 1-2-001-054).<sup>23</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

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<sup>23</sup> These examples are taken from the Rural Committee of the Southern Jiangsu Regional Party Committee's inspection report, entitled "Guanyu Qu Dangwei Nongwei Guanyu Di Er Ci Tudi Gaige Jiancha Dui Huiyi de Baogao" 关于区党委农委关于第二次土地改革检查队会议的报告 [On the Rural Committee of the Regional Party Committee's Report on the Second Meeting of the Land Reform Inspection Teams], dated April 9, 1951.

hold. Notably, in one village in the same Township, only fifty-eight percent of Peasant Association members had received any propaganda education (BSDA 1951, No. 1-2-001-052). Having not undergone moral boundary work, locals questioned the 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” (BSDA 1951, No. 1-2-001-054). 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 (AHTGZL n.d., p. 178).

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 aggrieved villagers spoke bitterness against the struggle targets, culminating in the execution of two “evil tyrants” (AHTGWX n.d., pp. 211-212).

### *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)” (Mo 2007, p. 217). 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 striking 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).’” The report noted that locals reacted poorly to struggle sessions held against a seventeen-year-old schoolboy, whose father was classified as a landlord. Seeing him stripped naked and forced to kneel on rocks—which according to Party policy

constituted excessive violence and was prohibited—locals remarked that they were disturbed that a young student had become the victim of the campaign. Elsewhere in the county, 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) (BSDA 1951, No. 1-2-001-052).

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 (Shi 1951). 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 (JSTGY 1950, pp. 46-55). 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 (Shi 1951).

## **VI. Conclusion**

To summarize, the Chinese Communist Party established and entrenched its authority in the countryside shortly after the revolution by using moral appeals rooted in a narrative of retributive justice to reframe certain members of the landed elite as evildoers deserving of violent punishment. Although moral mobilization used pre-existing social boundaries as its basis, its

significance lay in its ability to change the norms of behavior associated with these boundaries— i.e. how individuals defined by these group boundaries should be viewed and treated. Where once villagers feared, resented, or perhaps felt apathetic towards certain locals who owned more land or possessed formal or informal power in the community, under the Party’s guidance they began to see themselves as both victims and judges of these individuals’ moral degeneracy. By excluding this outgroup from the community’s span of sympathy and placing ordinary villagers in this position to judge their character, the Party empowered locals to carry out rough justice, something that they might otherwise not have viewed as necessary or proper.

Moral mobilization is not the only pathway to state authority; it is one of many. Still, regardless of what means they use, all states that wish to carry out their will must confront the task of delegitimizing those who came before them and their major competitors in society. It should come as little surprise, then, that revolutionary rhetoric abounds with moral appeals. The French revolutionaries sought to establish a “dramatically new political culture” that delegitimized the decadent aristocracy; they decried the French king as a bad father and denigrated the queen with charges of sexual depravity (Hunt 1984, p. 15; Hunt 1992). The Iranian revolutionaries notably portrayed the Shah as “evil,” with Khomeini calling him “satanic” and proffering Islam as a solution (Burns 1996). Long after the revolution, state actors attempt to utilize this moral narrative against their opponents. Stalin engaged in extensive moral delegitimization of his opponents during the Great Purge, mobilizing factory workers to “unmask” industrial “wreckers” thought to have, through their negligence and callousness, allowed hard-working factory workers to die in horrific onsite accidents (Goldman 2007). Nor is this a phenomenon exclusive to authoritarian regimes. During the McCarthyist wave in 1950s America, McCarthy and his followers mobilized public sentiment against suspected communists

in the State Department by decrying their “nasty moral habits” and conflating Communist leanings with homosexuality (Johnson 2004, pp. 16-19).

This study merely provides an entry point for the study of the links between morality, mobilization, and state authority. 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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**Figures**

*Figure 1. The Process of Moral Mobilization*

