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**‘ROBBERY OF THE MASSES’:  
NOVEL THEORIES OF PRIMITIVE ACCUMULATION IN THE WORKS OF WEN  
TIEJUN AND QIN HUI**

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## 1. Introduction

Was capitalism's origin peaceful or violent, and has its subsequent spread across the world been voluntary or by force? Such questions have largely been considered a matter of settled history, with capitalism's origin being located everywhere from the class struggles of 15th century England to human nature at the dawn of civilization, and in this age of global 'late-stage' capitalist hegemony, where even the revolutionary socialist states of the 20th century have transformed into towering centers of global trade, it may seem almost incoherent to attempt to find modern answers to such seemingly ancient questions. Yet, amidst the pastoral landscapes and small-peasant farms of contemporary rural China, it is possible to today observe the same kind of social-economic processes that were once present at the dawn of capitalism itself: known as 'primitive accumulation', these processes involve dramatic changes in land ownership, class relations, and economic productivity that constitute the shift from non-capitalist to capitalist modes of production and exchange. While primitive accumulation has historically typically been conducted through violent dispossession and exploitation, in rural China today it has had to proceed by alternative means due to the country's novel land rights system, a legal holdover from the Maoist era which prevents the complete dispossession of the peasantry from their land. Due to its unique form, such modern Chinese primitive accumulation provides a rare case study against which to compare established theories and preconceived notions of capitalist development, and indeed a number of scholars from around the world have produced investigations of many of the economic, social, and political results of this distinctly Chinese style of accumulation. Few, however, have sought to analyze the new theories of primitive

accumulation produced by those Chinese academics who have actually witnessed these processes first-hand.

Two such theorists are Wen Tiejun and Qin Hui, both well-known scholars of peasant studies and economics in mainland China whose almost diametrically opposing views of primitive accumulation have significantly shaped both public and state discourse. Wen, a father-figure for the Chinese New-Left famous for his rural activism, is credited with having reintroduced primitive accumulation to the public lexicon in the late 1980s following the end of the Maoist regime under which it was a deeply taboo topic; Qin, a leading thinker of Chinese liberalism and a civil rights advocate, is himself credited with having produced a thoroughgoing critique of primitive accumulation written as a response to the *overuse* of the term in contemporary Chinese media and politics, following its rebirth by Wen (Hayward 2019, 204-205). While some Western scholars including Hayward (2019), Sargeson (2012), and Day (2013) have already begun examining Wen and Qin's work, none yet have produced an analysis of the theoretical implications of their thought on existing conceptions of primitive accumulation. Faced with a wide gap between classical theories of primitive accumulation and China's unique developmental experience over the past century, both Wen and Qin have redefined the concept in ways that include the state-led modernization of the Maoist period as a form of primitive accumulation: Wen views primitive accumulation as a step necessary for all modernizing economies, including both capitalist and ostensibly socialist nations, while Qin argues that primitive accumulation is actually contrary to capitalist principles and is more suited to authoritarian forms of government and society such as the communist states of the 20th century. Even if one disagrees with Wen and Qin's characterization of Maoist modernization as a type of primitive accumulation, their novel theorizations of the term still provide useful lessons

for properly understanding the processes presently reshaping the Chinese countryside, and by doing so help to construct potential answers to those fundamental questions about capitalism's origin and spread posed at the beginning.

By combining Wen's structural model of primitive accumulation with Qin's critique of its anti-market character, it becomes possible to conceptualize the changes occurring in modern rural China as a form of "Voluntary" primitive accumulation made possible by the economic and legal legacies of the Maoist period. Against both those liberal paradigms which naturalize capitalism as a peaceful inevitability and those reductionist Marxist theories which assume primitive accumulation must always take the same violent form, this model of "Voluntary" primitive accumulation attempts to account for the relatively non-violent case of modern Chinese primitive accumulation without undermining how essential forced dispossession was to capitalism's origin. It does so by emphasizing the importance of historical context, learned from Wen, and recognizing the fundamental gap between mere market exchange and the capitalist mode of production, learned from Qin. Before such lessons can be drawn from Wen and Qin's contributions, however, it is first necessary to explore the theoretical and historical landscape both scholars have been working in, in order to properly understand the legacies of thought and material experiences they make extensive reference to.

## **2. Literature Review**

### *2.1 Primitive Accumulation*

Rather than attempting to provide a unitary definition of 'primitive accumulation', this section instead aims to map out the contours of the historical debates that have shaped the

complicated web of meaning behind the term. Since the overarching goal of this paper is to analyze the competing definitions of primitive accumulation offered by two Chinese theorists with extremely differing perspectives, beginning with an arbitrary singular definition of the term would only distract from the content of their work and obscure the legacies of debate they draw from.

While it is today widely associated with Karl Marx, the intellectual origins of primitive accumulation lay in the work of Adam Smith. In his introduction to Book II of *The Wealth of Nations*, Smith (1776) considers how the circuitous loop of exchange started spinning; that is, how people began to specialize their labor and exchange goods between themselves. He opens by describing how “in that rude state of society in which there is no division of labor, in which exchanges are seldom made, and in which every man provides everything for himself, it is not necessary that any stock should be accumulated or stored up beforehand in order to carry on the business of the society” (212). Since every man can sustain himself with just the products of his own labor, there is no need to accumulate stock in order to sell products on the market for money to pay for goods. Such stock accumulation only becomes necessary once man is no longer able to sustain himself outside of the market, that is, when “the produce of man’s own labour can supply but a very small part of his occasional wants,” and those wants are “supplied by the produce of other men’s labour, which he purchases with the produce...of his own [labor]” (ibid). In such conditions of market reliance, access to most goods is determined by one’s ability to purchase them with money, which is obtained through the selling of one’s own goods. But, as Smith points out, the money required to purchase goods can only be obtained from the completed sale of the product of one’s labor, therefore requiring “a stock of goods of different kinds...must be stored up somewhere sufficient to maintain him...till such a time...as both these events can be brought

about” (ibid). For a weaver to “apply himself entirely to his particular business”, he requires an already accumulated stock of resources that will keep him alive and supply the materials for his work until the time that he is able to sell the products. Since man requires the materials and tools to create his products and the goods to sustain himself *prior* to their sale, “this accumulation must, evidently, be previous to his applying his industry” (ibid). For Smith, then, this ‘previous accumulation’ must be prior to any generalized market exchange and division of labor, for without it, man would not have the resources necessary to enter the market as a specialized producer himself. As for the causal mechanism which produced such a previous accumulation, Smith credits a gradual, peaceful process of differentiation whereby successful workers saved up their wealth to the point that they could pay others to supply them with goods they themselves no longer created, encouraging all involved to specialize their labor and exchange its products rather than producing everything themselves (213).

Marx (1867) similarly seeks to uncover the origins of the “never-ending cycle” of commodity production and exchange, and argues that “we can only get out of [this cycle] by assuming a primitive accumulation (the ‘previous accumulation’ of Adam Smith) which precedes capitalist accumulation” (873). Marx’s great innovation, and the reason primitive accumulation is today primarily associated with him instead of Smith, was to take the ostensibly extra-historical concept of previous accumulation and expose its irreducibly historical character. Smith’s concept is ‘extra-historical’ because it is based not on any specific historical event or processes, but rather on an ‘innate’ human drive that exists outside of history: “the propensity to truck, barter and exchange one thing for another...is common to all men, and to be found in no other race of animals” (Smith 1776, 15). This is why Smith assumes that, given a certain degree of previous accumulation and division of labor, people will tend towards market exchange as the

specific mechanism for ordering the economy. For Smith, the particular politico-economic structure and broader social context, which is to say, the *history* of a society, does not matter, as at all times everywhere humans are driven by this inherent drive towards division and exchange. If it were ever to be located at a precise moment in the real timeline, Smith's previous accumulation would have happened so early in human economic development as to be entirely irrelevant to modern society. Smith's answer to the question "What caused the circuit of exchange to start?" is simple: human nature.

Marx responds to the question with one of his own: *When* did it start? For Marx, particularly in his later work such as *Capital*, capitalism was not the result of some inevitable human propensity to exchange, but was rather the product of particular politico-economic conditions that caused it to emerge at a specific moment in history (Wood 2002, 35). By placing primitive accumulation firmly within the realm of history, which Marx famously argued was driven by class conflict, Marx also revealed primitive accumulation's class character. Rather than being the results of human nature, primitive accumulation and capitalism were the products of a class conflict, specifically the class conflict between feudal landlords and peasants, and instead of capitalism simply being the continuous expansion of markets, it was defined by Marx in class terms: "the capital relation presupposes a complete separation between the workers and the ownership of the conditions for the realization of their labour" (Marx 1867, 874). What, then, is the content of a primitive accumulation that must create a class of workers who own nothing "except their own skins" (873)? Marx gives an answer: "So-called primitive accumulation, therefore, is nothing else than the historical process of divorcing the producer from the means of production" (874-875). Contrary to the "insipid childishness" of Smith's gradual, peaceful view of previous accumulation, Marx pointed out that "the methods of primitive accumulation are



anything but idyllic,” and that “the history of their [producers made into wage-laborers] expropriation, is written in the annals of mankind in letters of blood and fire” (ibid).

One helpful way to conceptualize the difference between Smith and Marx’s theories of primitive accumulation is by contrasting their positive and negative characters. For Smith, previous accumulation was a positive phenomenon, in that it was based on an increase in human productivity leading to specialization and the division of labor; everyone involved became dependent on the market of their own violation, and doing so was an *opportunity* to better their own standard of living. Conversely, Marx sees primitive accumulation as essentially negative, in that it was a process of forcing people to enter market relations by taking away their ability to survive otherwise; through the imposition of a market in land rents by landlords and the enclosure of common land by the state, previously market-independent peasants lost their ability to survive outside of the market and were forced to sell the only thing they had left: their labor-power (Wood 2002, 100). As Marx explains the transition from serfdom and the guild system to wage-labor, “these newly freed men became sellers of themselves only after they had been *robbed of all their own means of production* [emphasis added], and all the guarantees of existence afforded by the old feudal arrangements” (Marx 1867, 875). For Marx, primitive accumulation and market dependence were not an opportunity, they were an *imperative*. This difference between Smith’s positive view of previous accumulation and Marx’s negative view of primitive accumulation can in part be explained by a difference in their unit of analysis: Smith is examining the conditions necessary for the basic division of labor, which he assumes will lead to market exchange, while Marx is examining the conditions necessary for the capitalist mode of production to arise, which both comes out of and is defined by class conflict. Even with the historical terminological eclipse of Smith’s previous accumulation by Marx’s primitive

accumulation, the debate between positive and negative theories of capitalism's origin has continued both inside and outside the Marxist tradition, and echoes of this fundamental division continually reappear throughout many of the most important works subsequently analyzed in this paper.

In sum, Marx's view of primitive accumulation can best be understood as the process by which "great masses of men are suddenly and forcibly torn from their means of subsistence, and hurled onto the labour-market as free, unprotected and rightless proletarians" (Marx 1867, 876). Since the first publication of *Capital* in 1867, however, the term has undergone something of an expansion in meaning: temporally, primitive accumulation has expanded to include not just pre-capitalist accumulation but also imperial accumulation, as theorized by Rosa Luxemburg in *The Accumulation of Capital*, and accumulation *within* capitalism, as theorized by David Harvey's notions of "accumulation by dispossession" and the "spatial fix" (Luxemburg 1913; Harvey 2004; Harvey 2001). Today, primitive accumulation is conceived of as an ongoing "transformation in the social relations of work," occurring "whenever capitalist forms of production take over production that had been organized under other social relations," and encompassing such varied phenomena as privatization, neo-colonialism, slavery, and the dismantling of the welfare state (Webber 2008a, 301-2). As definitions of primitive accumulation have grown more general, however, the identification of the historical origin of capitalism has become more specific.

## 2.2 Agrarian Capitalism and the Agrarian Transition

The origin of capitalism, and its corollary primitive accumulation, is in Marx's work closely associated with changes in peasant production and agriculture: "the expropriation of the

agricultural producer, of the peasant, from the soil is the basis of the whole process” (Marx 1867, 876). Rather than just being one part of a broader society-wide transition to capitalism, Marx sees rural primitive accumulation as the historical starting point for all of capitalist class relations, as the formation of the landless proletariat requires the dissolution of the peasantry. This peasant-oriented thread has been picked up and elaborated on by a number of contemporary Marxist scholars, particularly Robert Brenner and Ellen Meiksins Wood, who argue that the origins of the capitalist mode of production can be specifically located within the class struggles of landlords and peasants in 15th to 16th century England (Brenner 1976, 61; Wood 2002, 98). Wood’s incisive *The Origin of Capitalism: A Longer View* expanded this historical argument by introducing the language of “market as opportunity” versus “market as imperative” used above, which has been picked up on by some of the analysts of Chinese primitive accumulation reviewed below (Wood 2002, 6). Building on the previous versus primitive accumulation distinction, Brenner and Wood’s arguments for capitalism’s historical contingency and forcefully dispossessory origin were explicitly directed against the ‘Smithian commercialization model’, which assumed capitalism’s inevitability and located its origin in peaceful accumulation and differentiation. While Brenner and Wood’s specifically class-struggle-centered origin of rural primitive accumulation has been disputed by authors who argue for the explanatory supremacy of other factors such as demographic change or colonial accumulation, the transition from smallholding peasant agriculture to large-scale capitalist agrarian production has remained central to modern discussions about the origin of capitalism (Ladurie Le Roy 1966; Postan 1966; Blaut 1994; Frank 1969).

Key to these discussions of capitalist rural transformation has been the concept of the ‘agrarian transition’, also referred to as the ‘agrarian transformation’ and the ‘agrarian question’.

Central to the field of Peasant Studies, the agrarian transition refers to “those changes in the countryside necessary to the *overall* development of capitalism,” specifically the process by which a country moves from a predominantly smallholder peasant rural economy to a large-scale capitalist rural economy (Byres 1986, 4). The ‘agrarian question’ is not a new one: Kautsky wrote a book under that very name in 1899, and the agricultural theory of Lenin and other Russian Marxists is foundational for both Western peasant studies and Chinese peasantry theorists. Soviet theories and experiences of their peasantry are particularly relevant for Chinese authors, as not only did both countries attempt socialist revolutions in predominantly peasant societies, the latter actively attempted to learn from the former’s history while creating its own development policies (Lin et al. 2003, 32-33). One of Lenin’s most often-cited theories in both Western and Chinese peasant studies is his identification of the “two types of bourgeois agrarian revolution”: the ‘top-down’ “Prussian path” and the ‘bottom-up’ “American path” (Lenin 1907, 239). The Prussian path was top-down because it was driven entirely by the feudal landlords who became the new capitalist Junker landlords, “which condemns the peasants to decades of most harrowing expropriation and bondage”; The American path was bottom-up because it was driven by peasants themselves evolving into bourgeois farmers, which was made possible “because there is no landlord economy” (ibid; Byres 1996, 27-30). While not explicit, this division between a forced Prussian path and a self-developing American path echoes the difference between Marx’s primitive accumulation and Smith’s previous accumulation identified earlier — and as will be examined in more detail later on, Chinese liberal intellectuals like Qin Hui have actually invoked Lenin’s two paths to argue *against* the relevance of primitive accumulation.

Far from simply being a distant historical phenomenon, however, the agrarian question assumed new importance with the spread of decolonization in the 20th century and the ensuing

desire of Third-World nations to ‘catch-up’ with their previous oppressors by developing their rural and industrial economic systems. Even today, in a world largely defined by hegemonic capitalist globalization, the agrarian question remains crucially relevant to many nations struggling to integrate their large rural populations into the market system - including China (Byres 2016, 448).

### *2.3 The Unique Situation of Contemporary Rural China*

It may come as a surprise to learn that China, a country widely-recognized as a global powerhouse of capitalist industrial production, still has an agricultural system largely defined by the existence of a smallholding peasantry. In 2009, China surpassed Germany as the largest exporting nation worldwide, but it would still be another two years until its urban population finally surpassed its rural population (Ma 2022; Bloomberg News 2012). Then, in 2016 China’s population reached 1.39 billion and its GDP hit \$11.47 trillion, making it the largest country in the world by population and second largest by economy - and yet, in that same year, the average size of a farm in China was only 0.96 acres, less than half the size of a baseball field (Li et al. 2018). A wide variety of scholars from both inside and outside of China have sought to examine this massive urban-rural developmental disparity using a broad array of demographic, cultural, economic, legal, and geographic analyses that attempt to both explain the continued existence of the Chinese peasantry and predict its future. To begin understanding the present condition of rural China, some historical context is first required.

Rural China since the end of the Civil War in 1949 has undergone a series of dramatic upheavals in its land rights system, which has rapidly moved the peasantry through a variety of modes of production - often at extreme cost to the peasants themselves (Wen et al. 2012, 78). In

their 2021 investigation into the history of land rights in China, Zhou et al. identify four phases of the rural land rights system between 1949 and the present: Phase 1, peasant's private land ownership, 1949-1952; phase 2, rural collective ownership, 1953-1978; phase 3, the Household Responsibility System and Two Rights separation period, 1978-2012; phase 4, the Three-Rights separation period, 2013-present (Zhou et al. 2021, 5). Phase 1, the private ownership of land by the peasantry from 1949-1952, was a brief period during which the newly founded People's Republic of China (PRC) confiscated landlords' large holdings and distributed them among the peasantry "on an egalitarian basis" (ibid). Farmers' private ownership of the land was protected by law, and the allocation of land to the peasants themselves increased rural productivity and strengthened the peasant-worker political coalition that the CCP (Chinese Communist Party) relied on. However, this parcelization of the land resulted in fragmented small farms that were considered unsuitable for large-scale production, agrarian modernization, and even national industrialization (ibid).

That the CCP analyzed the rural land system in terms of its ability to help or hinder national industrialization is significant for understanding the entire trajectory of rural land reform in China since 1949. As stated above, the CCP actively attempted to learn from the Soviet experience of rural modernization and industrialization and implemented a heavy-industry-oriented development strategy that they believed could overcome the obstacle of an overwhelmingly poor rural population who "could not generate the demand needed for industrial development" (Lin et al. 2003, 32). Convinced that small-scale fragmented peasant agriculture could not produce enough surpluses in food, labor, and raw materials to enable the sought-after rapid heavy-industrial accumulation, the Chinese state began a new phase of the land rights system: rural collective ownership.

Rural collective ownership (called “Phase 2” by Zhou et al.) lasted from 1953-1978 and was characterized by a back-and-forth process of collectivization that expanded and contracted in response to varying political and agricultural phenomena (Zhou et al. 2021, 5-6). In the initial years following the adoption of the first Five Year Plan in 1953, collectivization was “cautious and gradual,” as “peasants were encouraged and induced to join small agricultural collectives on a voluntary basis” (Lin 1997, 204). While initially successful, such small-scale communes still failed to provide the kind of mass labor mobilization needed for rural infrastructure projects such as irrigation and damming, leading the government to form massive “people’s communes” in 1958 whose average size was around 5,000 households (ibid). Such massive communes did not last long however, as the devastating famine in China from 1959-61 forced the government to adopt “a more realistic approach towards agricultural development,” which took the form of the existing communes being divided into much smaller “production teams” of “about 20-30 neighboring households” (ibid). In terms of legal land rights, the collectivization period was marked by the outlawing of private land ownership in 1956, and by 1958 all land was either owned by the state, if it was classified as urban, or owned by the collective, if it was classified as rural (Zhou et al. 2021, 6). This dual land ownership structure and its accompanying *hukou* household registration system, which legally codified the division between rural and urban households and prevented most movement between the two areas, was a crucial part of the state’s broader goal of using rural collectives “to achieve the industrialization of the country by taxing agricultural surpluses for the development of industry” (ibid).

It was not until 1980, following the death of Mao and the rise of Deng Xiaoping, that the commune system was finally replaced with a novel combination of private and collective rights dubbed the Household Responsibility System (HRS). Unwilling to completely abandon their

communist heritage, but unable to continue the low-incentive structure of the commune system, the Chinese state crafted a land-rights system that attempted to combine private use and collective ownership by splitting land ownership rights and land use rights (Lin 1997, 205). Rural land would still be fundamentally owned by ‘the collective’, which was effectively the local village, but the use-rights for particular parcels of that land would be contracted out to individual peasant families on 15-year contracts. By giving peasant families control over their own parcels of land and allowing them to keep or sell any surplus produce over their procurement quota, the HRS re-incentivized peasant work and resulted in a massive growth in agricultural output, causing Chinese economist and former World Bank Senior Vice-President Justin Yifu Lin to describe it as “China’s most successful reform” (206). The rapid achievements of the HRS in increasing agricultural output led the central government to continue to expand the system throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, including extending the length of new household contracts to 30 years in 1998 and nominally granting peasants rights of land inheritance and exchange in 2002 (Zhou et al. 2021, 6-7). Even with its massive boost to productivity, however, the HRS still had limitations: namely, the belief among analysts that “the land holding system was...too small and fragmented, and thus not suitable for modern industrial agriculture” (ibid). While similar to the criticisms leveled against the private ownership system by heavy-industry developmentalists in the early 1950s, twenty-first century critiques of the HRS came from an extremely different political background and accordingly had very different social goals and policy recommendations. While the Communist developmentalists of the ‘50s sought to jumpstart heavy-industry development by collectivizing agriculture and siphoning off its surpluses through the state, the modern critics of the HRS primarily attacked it for limiting the free-market and preventing the natural accumulation of land by successful farmers and the



dispossession of unsuccessful farmers - that is to say, preventing the primitive accumulation of rural land (ibid; Hairong & Yiyuan 2015, 367; Zhang & Donaldson 2012, 257).

By 2013 the central government had largely come to agree with this criticism of the HRS, and at the Third Plenary Session of the 18th Central Committee of the CPC the government introduced the policy of “Accelerating the building of a new type of agricultural operation system”, inaugurating Zhou et al.’s Phase 4 known as the Three-Rights Separation period (Zhou et al. 2021, 7). Where the HRS period was defined by the ‘two-rights separation’ of collective ownership and private use, the three-rights separation further divided rural land rights by introducing a distinction between a peasant’s contract right and their use right: “The collective still has the property right, farmers have the contractual right and, in addition, farmers are now allowed to transfer their land use right—the management right—to others, including private enterprises” (ibid). Whereas previous rural land transfers mostly took the form of either state expropriation, wherein the property right was transferred from the village collective to the state, or land contractual right transfer, wherein the contractual right was transferred to the village collective for management, the three-rights separation has created the form of the land *management* right transfer, which allows peasants to transfer their use right to other private entities while still retaining their land contractual right from the village collective (ibid).

While the legal protection of their use right has provided the peasantry with a novel degree of protection from dispossession, it is important to emphasize that the government’s main goal in enacting the three-rights separation was to “encourage the transfer of contracted land-use right to big, specialized operators...and agricultural enterprises, so as to develop large-scale agricultural operations in diverse forms” (Zhou et al. 2021, 7). To understand whether or not the three-rights separation has successfully prevented peasant dispossession and created

“capitalization without proletarianization”, or if it actually “signals a policy shift towards depeasantization”, a close analysis of its effects on the rural economy and social structure is necessary (Huang et al. 2012; Hairong & Yiyuan 2015, 368).

The three-rights separation policy continues today, and has been credited with sparking a massive wave of land transfers in rural China, significantly altering rural class dynamics and demographics. While China’s urban population did only surpass its rural population in 2011, the rural-to-urban shift has continued to accelerate under the three-rights separation, with over 65% of China’s population living in urban regions by 2022 (Textor 2023). Similarly, while the size of single-family farms has remained quite small, the total number and average size of “family farms” - a term used by the CCP to refer to the medium-to-large scale private agriculture enterprises they seek to replace family farms with through the three-rights separation - has massively increased, with number of family farms exploding from 343,000 in 2015 to over 877,000 in 2017, while their average size has grown from 10.1 hectares in 2015 to 13.3 hectares in 2018 (Li 2019). In terms of rural land transfer, the land management right transfer introduced by the three-rights separation has become far and away the most common form of rural land transfer, with 67.8% of contracted land in China being transferred using this mechanism by the end of 2015 (Zhou et al. 2021, 4).

When compared with certain classical theories of primitive accumulation that assume forceful dispossession to be the essential mechanism by which capitalist relations spread, this explosion in the rate of rural land transfer and rapid marketization of the countryside *alongside* legal protections for the peasantry against full dispossession and proletarianization appears extremely strange. Is this truly ‘capitalization without proletarianization’, a bottom-up flourishing of peasant-entrepreneurs in the style of Lenin’s American path to agrarian capitalism

- or is it an obscured Prussian path, with the top-down force of the state driving rapid farmland consolidation behind the scenes? In their 2015 article “Agrarian Capitalization without Capitalism? Capitalist Dynamics from Above and Below in China”, Yan Hairong and Chen Yiyuan argue that rather than fitting neatly into either path, the spread of capitalism in rural China has come from both above and below, through state promotion of large-scale market-oriented agents and the natural differentiation of rural petty commodity producers (370). “Petty commodity production” is a Marxist term referring to those producers who retain ownership of their means of production and primarily produce commodities rather than simply self-reproducing, typically relying on unpaid family labor and not hiring wage workers on a large scale. The capitalist small farmer is the archetypal petty commodity producer, and forms the “seedbed for the dynamics of agrarian capitalism from below” as they naturally differentiate according to their individual successes or failures on the market (ibid). Yan and Chen point out that because the Chinese landlord class was abolished by the radical land reform between 1949-1952, decollectivization in the post-Mao period “created a vast number of petty commodity producers” who, through first the HRS and later the three-rights separation, effectively had control over their own means of production (ibid). Simultaneously, capitalism from above has come in the form of the Chinese state actively promoting the development of large-scale agriculture by subsidizing the growth of private ‘dragon-head’ enterprises, which by 2013 were linked with 40% of China’s rural households. Yan and Chen go on to show that “While the check on private property rights in land has played some stabilizing role...rural households are clearly experiencing significant differentiation, owing both to the functioning of the market and the role of the state in nurturing ‘big producers’” (370-371). This significant peasant differentiation has been thoroughly documented by a number of Chinese economists and agronomists who have

revealed how China's unique land rights system has produced entirely novel forms of class differentiation.

Historically, peasant differentiation during agrarian transitions has been primarily dichotomous, with the peasantry dividing into a large landless proletariat at one end and a small successful bourgeoisie at the other. This binary division of the peasantry occurs in both the Prussian and American paths to agrarian capitalism, as in the former "a small minority of *Grossbauern* ('big peasants') arises" and the latter "*also evolves in a capitalist way and gives rise to a rural bourgeoisie and rural proletariat*" (Lenin 1907, 241). However, because of the collectivized ownership of rural land and the HRS contract system inherited from the commune and early reform eras, China's increasingly marketized peasantry has differentiated into a much broader array of class forms.

Qian Forrest Zhang has, often alongside John A. Donaldson, produced a "classification of the emerging agrarian class positions in China today" by "analyzing the central dynamics of agrarian change that drive class accumulation - namely, accumulation of capital, commodification of subsistence and the state's intervention in these two processes" (Zhang 2015, 338). To Zhang, a proper analysis of class "in the materialist sense as distinct positions in social relations of production and reproduction" had been "entirely missing" from the existing literature on rural differentiation in China, which instead primarily viewed class as a gradient of individual income positions (339). His 2015 paper, "Class Differentiation in Rural China: Dynamics of Accumulation, Commodification and State Intervention", fills this materialist gap by identifying 5 agrarian classes, defined by their market positions and relations to each other: "the capitalist employer class, the petty-bourgeois class of commercial farmers, two labouring classes of dual-employment households and wage workers, and a residual category of sustenance peasant"

(340). It is important to note that while this array of new class positions does not map neatly onto the classically binary model of peasant differentiation, it still falls within its boundaries by increasingly polarizing rural society between the capitalist employer class and wage workers. The three-rights separation has not completely altered the core class relations that define capitalism; rather, it has expanded the gray area between the two extremes of bourgeois and proletarian by giving peasants alternative modes of income besides just pure wage labor, hence Zhang's delineation between semi-proletarianized and fully proletarianized wage workers being that the former lease out their land while the latter have no land to lease (346). While Zhang provides an in-depth analysis of each of these five rural classes, for the purposes of this paper and the sake of brevity it is only necessary to recognize that the peasantry has been undergoing significant differentiation in recent years, especially as the three-rights separation has rapidly accelerated transfer of rural land (Ye 2015, 324). The three-rights separation therefore appears as something of a contradiction: compared to the two-rights system and other previous rural land regimes in China, it represents a marked effort to expand the market in rural areas by encouraging land transfer and economic differentiation; yet, compared to the conditions of full privatization typical to Western experiences of primitive accumulation, the three-rights separation represents a continued defense of the peasantry *against* dispossession and proletarianization. That many of Zhang's differentiated peasants find themselves in positions somewhere between being fully bourgeois or fully proletarian is a reflection of this fundamental contradiction at the heart of the three-rights separation, as it seeks to both encourage the capitalist transformation of the countryside and protect the large rural peasant population.

## *2.4 Primitive Accumulation in Rural China & the Discourse Surrounding It*

Modern rural China's novel land rights structure and rapidly marketizing agriculture present a unique opportunity to compare theories of primitive accumulation and the agrarian transition against a case study happening in real time. What follows in this section is an exploration of recent analyses of primitive accumulation in rural China by scholars such as Webber (2008a,b), Post (2008) and Zhang (2015), as well as a review of the existing literature by Sargeson (2012), Hayward (2019), and Day (2013) that analyzes Wen and Qin's work and provides the research base that this paper builds upon.

Michael Webber has extensively examined primitive accumulation in modern China, and his 2008 article "Primitive accumulation in modern China" provides a thorough introduction to the topic. Webber begins by reviewing existing literature on primitive accumulation and noting that "rather little attention has been paid within this literature to modern China", and seeks to correct this oversight by deploying "evidence about the history of China since Mao to develop an understanding of its primitive accumulation" (Webber 2008a, 300). Webber defines primitive accumulation as the process through which the constitutive classes of capitalism - capitalists and workers - emerge from pre-existing conditions of work, which occurs "whenever capitalist forms of production take over production that had been organized under other social relations" (301). Following this definition, he acknowledges that "reality is not so tidy" and that the differentiation of the peasantry in China has created a range of class positions that include those "who are partially proletarianized; they are not 'pure' workers but neither are they any longer independent commodity producers" (302). Webber then identifies a variety of ways in which rural people lost the ability to support themselves outside the market, including the privatization of communal assets such as land and formerly village run enterprises, but takes care to note that

landless rural residents are “still only a small minority” - and, in fact, “not all of the changes in the social relations of production within the countryside are caused by dispossession” (305). He cites market-based land consolidation as one such non-dispossessing change in production, as “the original peasants still have rights to their land” (ibid).

In a separate paper called “The Places of Primitive Accumulation in Rural China” also published in 2008, Webber expands on this distinction between forced and voluntary accumulation by arguing that primitive accumulation in rural China primarily occurs in two ways: appropriating the means of production and purchasing people’s allegiance to wage labor (Webber 2008b, 402). The former he identifies with the state, as it is based on the state’s development goals and through the state’s power that such appropriation of land occurs; the latter he identifies with market mechanisms such as “migration, inducing people to enter the market to sell commodities, and contract farming,” and argues that “people’s enrollment in the new social relations of production is purchased, for the new forms of production can offer higher returns to labor” (407). That entering the market can result in a higher standard of living for peasants is a result of China’s peculiar historical path, which saw the development of high-industrial consumer capitalism in the cities at the expense of rural advancement - something which historically elsewhere tended to occur *after* rural primitive accumulation, not before. The allure of the market is indeed so strong in rural China that “the more important process of removing people from their means of production involves market mechanisms”, rather than state-led dispossession (ibid). This prevalence of market-based primitive accumulation leads Webber to conclude that “primitive accumulation is not the same as either dispossession or accumulation by force” (Webber 2008a, 309-310).

In a response to Webber's first article, Charles Post critiques his "theoretical imprecision" of conflating accumulation of wealth stocks with primitive accumulation, and charges that this confusion leads Webber to "under-analyze the limited emergence of capitalist social property relations in the contemporary Chinese countryside" (Post 2008, 321). Post contends that since "Chinese rural producers' possession of landed property is not dependent on successful market competition", capitalism has yet to properly take hold: "the Chinese countryside remains decidedly non-capitalist" (324). Qian Forrest Zhang responds directly to this 'non-capitalist countryside' claim in his paper examining rural class differentiation mentioned above, arguing that it is actually Post's definitions that obscure the reality of rural China. Where Post sees capitalist relations as requiring absolutely proletarianized landless labor, Zhang asserts that proletarianized 'free' labor is not the only way in which labor can be exploited by capital, and in China agrarian capitalism has primarily grown through the spread of commodity relations and market imperatives transforming family-based farming (Zhang 2015, 344). Echoing Webber's view of capital buying peasant's allegiance to wage labor, Zhang remarks that "even for family farmers, their entitlement to farmland based on village membership is turning into a market-mediated access, which they would part with when their expected combined returns on land-rental market and wage income exceed that from family farming" (ibid). Citing his own research on rural class differentiation to illustrate the large extent to which market forces have reshaped agrarian life, Zhang repudiates Post by saying that "the conditions for studying class differentiation in a Chinese countryside that is 'decidedly capitalist' - to reverse Post (2008) - are ripe" (ibid). Rather than just being an academic issue, a wide array of actors have taken up this call to study and discuss the changing dynamics of the countryside: Chinese politicians, activists, and state media have all contributed to the ongoing national discourse surrounding the concept



and practice of primitive accumulation, each presenting distinct perspectives that offer their own analyses of the situation.

While English-language documentation of the primitive accumulation debate in China is sparse, Jane Hayward's chapter on the topic in *The Afterlives of Chinese Communism: Political Concepts from Xi to Mao* is an superb overview of the term's history in modern China. Hayward begins with the Mao period, and writes that "the Chinese Communist Party's relationship with the concept of primitive accumulation has been conflicted": CCP doctrine considered primitive accumulation to be "the root of all capitalist evil" and a scourge to be avoided at all costs in the building of their new socialist society - yet, "paradoxically, it continued to be regarded as a necessary component for the realization of socialism" (Hayward 2019, 202). This is because the Chinese communists of the time subscribed to a "universalist, stagist version of history" in which the birth of the proletariat at the dawn of capitalism was considered "the basis of social dynamism and revolutionary possibility" (ibid). While some historians attempted to locate moments of primitive accumulation hidden in Chinese history, discussion of the topic became increasingly taboo as Mao cracked down on any scholars who suggested that the CCP's heavy-industry oriented development strategy "was, in fact, a form of state primitive accumulation based on the exploitation of the Chinese peasantry" (203).

It was not until 1989, 13 years after the death of Mao, that primitive accumulation finally re-entered the mainstream of Chinese thought, thanks to a pair of articles published by a left-wing agricultural economist named Wen Tiejun. In them, Wen openly described Maoist industrialization as primitive accumulation and even hinted that primitive accumulation in a new form, based on migrant peasant labor rather than commune surpluses, "was the new foundation of China's economy" (204). He also made the influential argument that rather than being specific

to capitalist modernization, primitive accumulation was normal and necessary for all modernizing states, including China, rendering the divide not between capitalist primitive accumulation and socialist communal development, but rather between *Western* primitive accumulation and *Eastern* primitive accumulation. By stripping primitive accumulation of its conceptual capitalist baggage and instead associating it with Mao's modernization, Wen facilitated the term's "passage into mainstream socialist discourse" (ibid). In fact, the term has become so popular within mainstream political discourse in China that some have complained that it is now being *overused*, including another well-known scholar of China's peasantry named Qin Hui. Qin observes that "primitive accumulation was being bandied around quite casually by local officials and in the media, sometimes used in a positive sense to denote rapid economic development", and today primitive accumulation in China has become "naturalized as a feature of early capitalism – the first stage of the market economy, and therefore something to be embraced" (205). While Hayward focused on the history of the concept of primitive accumulation in China, other authors have sought to map the modern discursive landscape in which it presently resides.

One such author is Sally Sargeson, and in her 2012 essay "Villains, Victims and Aspiring Proprietors: framing 'land-losing villagers' in China's strategies of accumulation" she identifies three frames that "policy entrepreneurs" have been using in the media to discursively establish "the conditions for...alternative strategies of accumulation" (759). The three frames are statist, neo-collective, and liberal, and each frame crafts a different rural land regime based on its unique understanding of the Chinese peasantry. The statist frame views peasants as villains, "feckless hicks" who are "incapable of responding rationally and constructively to land development", and therefore require the paternalistic hand of the state to guide them towards urbanization and

modernity (766-767). The neo-collective frame positions peasants as victims, suffering under undue attempts to apply Western-style growth and urbanization to a context where it doesn't fit, and believes peasant can only be "spared from the brutality of coerced dispossession" if they become "collective property owners and participants in accumulation" (772). The neo-collectivist vision for rural China is one of peasants becoming an "economically and political progressive class of collectivized share-owning landlords, entrepreneurs and commercial farmers, as well as members of the working class", and as will be shown further later on, the frame's emphasis on indigenous peasant knowledge and the inapplicability of Western models of growth to China overlap heavily with the positions of Wen Tiejun (ibid). The liberal frame sees peasants as aspiring proprietors and entrepreneurs "suppressed by an authoritarian state and the anachronistic property institutions...foisted upon them", for whom the only salvation is the privatization of rural land (ibid). Similar to Wen's connection with the neo-collectivist frame, Qin Hui has much in common with the liberal frame, himself arguing that the only question yet to be decided about rural land privatization "is one of scale" (773). Sargeson's tripartite analysis of this debate reveals that rather than being a single homogenous model, China's modern primitive accumulation strategy is "decentralized, highly contested, variegated and experimental" (777).

Another author who has significantly contributed to documenting the ongoing debate around primitive accumulation and agrarian transition in China is Alexander Day, whose 2013 book *The Peasant in Postsocialist China: History, Politics, and Capitalism* examines the changing discursive position of the peasant across the post-socialist era. Similar to Sargeson's attention to the different views of the peasantry each frame had, Day focuses largely on how various important intellectuals and strands of thought in modern China have sought to reshape

the meaning of the peasantry, and in doing so touches on a wide number of relevant topics, including primitive accumulation. Day's book features chapters detailing the thought of both Qin Hui and Wen Tiejun, identifying the former with Chinese liberalism and the latter with the Chinese New-Left. In his section on primitive accumulation, Day identifies three ways the term was used in reform-era China: first, as a positive stage necessary for the formation of the market, typically used this way by the media and some mainstream economists; second, as a negative detour from natural capitalist development, when used by liberals critiquing the state's intervention in the economy; and third, as "the transfer of wealth from the countryside to the city for the purpose of industrialization", which was how the "left-leaning postsocialist discourse" described it (Day 2013, 61). Taken together, Hayward, Sargeson, and Day's research serve as an introduction to the work of Wen and Qin, as well as the discursive and historical contexts within which they operate.

### **3. Rationale for Case Selection**

From this literature review we are left with a century-old theoretical paradigm and a modern case study that doesn't seem to easily fit into it - how are we to reconcile the two? Some scholars have bridged the gap using historical review or class analysis, while others have opted for examinations of the legal structure and media discourse (Zhou et al. 2021; Zhang 2015; Hairong & Yiyuan 2015; Webber 2008a; Sargeson 2012). Few have yet focused on the theories of primitive accumulation proposed by Chinese scholars *themselves*, with the closest such analyses being Sargeson's, Hayward's and Day's mentioned above. Even still, each of these three

analyses are not thoroughgoing examinations of primitive accumulation in modern Chinese political theory, leaving open space in the literature for such an intervention.

While Hayward provides an introduction to the concept of primitive accumulation's position in Chinese society, her primary focus on its history, and overall short length of the chapter, prevents her contribution from constituting an in-depth analysis of the topic. For Sargeson, her primary object of research was not primitive accumulation in political theory but rather the discursive forms that "policy entrepreneurs" and "leading bureaucrats" have adopted in news media (2012, 764). Finally, while Day does look at both Wen and Qin's views on primitive accumulation, it is primarily as part of a larger overview of their thought, and does not receive extensive specific analysis. One of the main goals of this paper is to pull on this thread of primitive accumulation in Chinese political theory identified by Day, Hayward, and Sargeson, to see where it leads and what conclusions can be drawn from it about the modern rural Chinese situation specifically and primitive accumulation more broadly. Rather than arguing against or attempting to supplant their work, this paper can be read as an extension of it in a hitherto under-researched direction.

Wen Tiejun and Qin Hui are the primary subjects of study in this paper due to their prominence, relevance, and theoretical opposition to one another. Hayward, Day, and Sargeson all cite both Wen and Qin when discussing primitive accumulation, and historically both theorists have played a significant role in shaping primitive accumulation's position within modern Chinese discourse: Wen is credited with reviving the term in the post-Mao era, while Qin is credited with advancing a thoroughgoing Chinese liberal critique of the concept (Hayward 2019, 203-205). Beyond primitive accumulation, both scholars are well known for their work studying the Chinese peasantry, as Wen's concept of *sannong wenti* (three rural issues) "re-centered the

discussion about rural China and Chinese development on the peasantry” while Qin “renarrativizing the peasant as a dependent figure in need of liberation... had [by the 1990s] become the dominant framework in which to understand the peasant” (Day 2013, 92-93, 65). Wen and Qin are also known for their political activism: Wen has been described as the founding father of the New Rural Reconstruction Movement, which brings together peasants and intellectuals to promote rural self-development and sustainability, and Qin is known for his fervent advocacy for civil rights in China, even earning the ire of CCP censors on a few occasions. By virtue of their strong influence on primitive accumulation discourse in China, and the conflicting nature of their views, Wen and Qin are excellent subjects for examining how contemporary Chinese theorists have conceptualized primitive accumulation.

## **4. Wen Tiejun and Qin Hui’s Theories of Primitive Accumulation**

### *4.1 Wen Tiejun*

Wen Tiejun’s theory of primitive accumulation begins with his seminal 1989 piece “Minjian ziben yuanshi jilei yu zhengfu xingwei [Primitive Accumulation of Civil Capital and Government Behaviour]”, in which he describes Maoist industrialization as a form of “state primitive accumulation of industrial capital”, and distinguishes it from the “process of non-governmental primitive accumulation of capital” that occurred during the reform era (Wen 1989a, 59-60). A second article published shortly after titled “Guojia ziben zai fenpei yu minjian ziben zai jilei [State Capital Redistribution and Human Capital Re-Accumulation]” continues to develop Wen’s view of primitive accumulation by arguing that “China is a typical state which carried out Eastern-style primitive accumulation. It did not, as did Western states, carry out

plunder and expansion externally, but mainly deployed internal ‘self-exploitation’ ... extracting accumulation from the countryside” (Wen 1989b, 35). Wen’s argument here is significant in a few ways: First, as Day and Hayward note, Wen’s redefinition of primitive accumulation as something not essentially pre-capitalist but rather simply pre-modern allows it to take on the role of a necessary stage of development for all modernizing societies, thus paving the way for its widespread use by state media and “mainstream economists to denote the necessary initial accumulation of capital that would instigate a proper capitalist accumulation process” (Day 2013, 62). Second, his differentiation of Western and Eastern primitive accumulation as the former being primarily external - taking the form of colonial exploitation - and the latter being primarily internal - taking the form of peasant exploitation - is foundational to the model of history he develops in later works.

For Wen, China’s history from the late 19th century through today can be understood as the nation attempting “four rounds of endogenous primitive accumulation of capital for industrialization at high costs” despite significant domestic and international restrictions (Wen et al. 2012, 78; Wen 2003, 43). The two main domestic restrictions on Chinese industrialization that Wen identifies are a geographic scarcity of resources and a structurally fragmented small-peasant economy produced by China’s history, both of which significantly increased the costs required to begin the earliest stage of primitive accumulation (Wen 2003, 44). Wen argues that whatever their ideologically ‘socialist’ justifications may have been, the highly fragmented smallholding peasant economy’s incompatibility with large-scale industrialization was really what caused the government to establish “the collective system in rural areas in order to conduct capital accumulation for urban industries” (ibid). He describes this as “unprecedented self-exploitation led by a highly centralized government”, during which “thousands of peasants perished in the

process of the capital-accumulation of state industrialization” before “China finally crossed the threshold...and completed the formation of an industrial infrastructure” (Wen 1999, 7). It was only with the completion of this initial capital accumulation for industrialization in the mid 1970s that “China naturally entered a new stage of industrialization” and “needed to open to the world”, spurring on the dissolution of the commune system and the opening of the country to international markets (Wen 2003, 44-45). Wen summarizes this transition as “before the 1970s, the state was at a stage of capital accumulation; after the 1970s, however, it moved to the stage of the growth and development of the capital itself” (51). In accordance with his distinction between external Western primitive accumulation and internal Eastern accumulation, Wen contends that the “core mechanism” of China’s industrialization process has been the “introversive primitive accumulation of capital” (Wen et al. 2012, 78). This “introversive” primitive accumulation was primarily accomplished by centralized purchase and distribution of low-priced agricultural products to subsidize heavy-industry development, as well as manipulating China’s “richest resource”: its labor force (ibid).

Wen makes repeated reference to the imbalance between China’s large population and its scarce resources: “The Chinese population is 20 percent of the world’s population, but its cultivated land is only 7 percent of the cultivated land in the world” (Wen et al. 2012, 79; Wen 2007, 21; Wen 2003, 43). The implications of this gap are very serious for Wen, as “because of the shortage of domestic resources, China cannot follow the path of traditional Western industrialization” (Wen 2003, 51). While the “peasant economy and the tension in land-population ratio actually complemented each other”, Western-style marketization and privatization would only result in “the few major metropolitans...modernizing themselves with the mushrooming of slums” (Wen 1999, 4, 8). Wen uses the examples of Mexico and Brazil to



illustrate this point, as both have achieved a high degree of “privatization, liberalization, democratization, and marketization”, yet rural problems still exist and have in many ways intensified as “millions of people in Mexico [and Brazil] live in the slums...prostitution, gambling, and drug use run rampant in the slums and there is a severe problem with gang control” (Wen 2007, 18). “If we do not consider the contradictions of Chinese conditions,” Wen asserts, “and simply copy the western development mode of modernization, then the above mentioned problems can never be resolved”, and China’s rural issues will only become worse over time (Wen 2004, 9).

Another reason China cannot follow Western models of development is that such models are fundamentally based on settler-colonial extraction and migration that helped relieve land & population tensions in industrializing Europe. In “The Theoretical Framework and Experience of Institutional ‘Being Poor’”, Wen and his co-authors present a model of global capitalist transition that seeks to explain why a small core of Western countries have become rich while the rest of the world has remained poor. They argue that “right from the beginning of early capitalist primitive accumulation, an institution had taken shape...whereby the core nations (then European countries) partook the gains and transferred the cost to other peripheral nations” (Wen et al. 2011, 61). They divide the history of capitalism into three stages: “early colonization facilitating primitive capital accumulation, the expansion of industrial capital...and the late globalization of finance capital” (62). In the first stage, the power of the state and capital were “conjugated directly in...primitive accumulation, i.e. in the criminal process of violence against human beings”, taking the form of monarchies and early nation-states patronizing colonial expeditions, and point out that those nations who took part in early colonial expansion were “exactly those nations with narrow territories and limited land resources” (63). Wen and his

coauthors argue that primitive accumulation of capital in the West was successful “only upon the foundation of large-scale colonial expansion”, and that settler-colonial migration also alleviated population and land ratio tensions in the West by allowing “the mass exodus of the European poor population toward the colonies” (64-65). Because of the relative impossibility for 20th century China to pursue primitive accumulation through colonization like Western Europe had some centuries before, it had to resort to the ‘introversive’ self-exploitative primitive accumulation described above.

Following his distinction of Western and Eastern primitive accumulation, Wen argues that the form of primitive accumulation undertaken will shape the type of society that results: “different ways of primitive accumulation of capital will lead to different institutional forms and affect the subsequent path dependence of institutional change” (Wen et al. 2012, 80). While China’s introversive primitive accumulation has led to “a relatively centralized institution”, Western colonial accumulation has resulted in the “liberalist system of Western nations”, and these political superstructures were “predetermined” by their economic bases (ibid). Examining how post-Mao China specifically has been shaped by state primitive accumulation for industrialization, Wen asks “What do we inherit from this period? It is the gigantic state capital in the name of ‘people owned property’” (Wen 1999, 7). These fundamental differences in the forms of primitive accumulation and the societies they have produced leads Wen to conclude that “western economics does not apply to China’s experience of development” (Wen et al. 2011, 67).

#### 4.2 *Qin Hui*

If for Wen Tiejun primitive accumulation is the necessary precondition for industrialization and modernity, then for Qin it is their antithesis. Qin began his sustained

critique of the concept with his 2000 polemic “Shehui gongzheng yu xueshu liangxin [Social Justice and the Scholarly Conscience]”, originally published as an introduction to fellow liberal economist He Qinglian’s book *Zhongguo De Xianjing [Primary Capital Accumulation in Contemporary China]*. In this essay, Qin advances a criticism of the overuse of the term primitive accumulation in Chinese discourse by arguing that it is based on a fundamental misunderstanding of the concept that is “terribly unfair to Karl Marx” (Qin 2000, 16). He begins by pointing out that the phrase ‘primitive accumulation’ in China is “somewhat elusive”, as state officials and the media have treated it in “somewhat laudatory terms” and even characterized Chinese modernization as “the most noble version of the primitive accumulation of capital in the entire history of mankind!” (15). This view of primitive accumulation as an “inevitable component of ‘the preliminary stage of a social-market economy’” is, for Qin, completely separate from how Marx originally conceived the term: “the reality is that Marx himself never actually employed the exact words ‘primitive accumulation of capitalism!’” (16). Qin contends that Marx attempted to stay true to Smith’s term ‘previous accumulation’, as “‘previous’ refers to anything that occurs before the fact and so ‘previous accumulation’ refers to accumulation that preceded the advent of capitalism”, and credits the transformation of the term into something “that was treated as inherent to all forms of contemporary capitalism” to a series of misunderstandings and mistranslations between the original German edition of *Capital* and the subsequent Russian and Chinese editions which “went about translating the term into Chinese as ‘the primitive accumulation of capital’” (16-17). This cross-lingual slippage of meaning is more than a mere semantic mistake for Qin, who sees the movement of accumulation from being *previous* to capitalism to being *inherent* to it as a complete reversal of meaning which obscures primitive accumulation’s fundamentally “anti-market” character (17).

To explain how primitive accumulation, which has been so thoroughly theoretically intertwined with the formation of capitalism, is in fact antithetical to market exchange, Qin distinguishes between capital accumulation and primitive accumulation. “Capitalist accumulation is the transformation of surplus value into capital under the market mechanism”, writes Qin, “the so-called primitive accumulation, according to Marx, is purely robbery that has nothing to do with the market mechanism logically” and takes the form of “forced labor, land enclosure, slave hunting and piracy, seizure of public property by power, and gold robbery”, “in other words, activities that are unrelated to and, indeed, alien to market principles” (Qin 2019; Qin 2000, 17). “True capitalist accumulation”, both in its early and developed stages, occurs under conditions of formal equality, in which all involved are legally considered citizens and given the same rights (ibid). Primitive accumulation, on the other hand, involves “a kind of beastly behavior that tramples upon the most basic rules of social regulation and fairness”, and “involves huge doses of economic coercion and reliance on ‘pure power to seize wealth’” (17-18). Because of this inherent opposition between the formal equality of market exchange and the unequal use of force that constitutes primitive accumulation, Qin remarks that “a clear distinction must be drawn between the ‘original sin’ of capitalism, that is, the sometimes harsh inequalities that lie behind its ‘formal equality,’ and the ‘blood and other filth’ of primitive accumulation” (18).

After theoretically separating primitive accumulation from capitalism, Qin seeks to separate it historically as well. He recognizes that while ‘true capitalism’ and primitive accumulation are “not of the same phenomenological genre, they may have been closely connected in terms of actual experience”: “there have been ‘snatching capital for business’ in history, that is, the use of non-capitalist barbaric means to create the ‘prehistoric’ foundation of

capitalism” (ibid; Qin 2019). Qin dismisses this historical connection, however, arguing that “does anyone really believe that each and every business was financed with stolen money? Of course not! And does anyone really think that most thieves make good businessmen? Hardly”, and continuing that “mere common sense makes us realize that ‘conducting business’ and ‘stealing’ are contradictory phenomena since commercial activity could never be conducted in a world ruled by bandits and thieves” (Qin 2000, 18). He then uses the historical examples of various European nations to illustrate the antithetical relationship between primitive accumulation and capital, arguing that “The Nordic countries, Switzerland, and even Germany” have “not gone through any stage of primitive accumulation”, but nonetheless their economic development has “come from behind and is better than the countries that have engaged in primitive accumulation” (Qin 2019). Similarly, while Portuguese and Spanish settlers in South America “engaged in acts of primitive accumulation far worse than their English counterparts to the north”, “the latter development of the New World has formed a stark contrast between the prosperity of the North and the decline of the South”, which he explains primarily through, what must be noted is an extremely questionable, reference to the cultural backgrounds of each settling population: “the main body of North American immigrants is Puritan farmers who adhere to Protestant ethics...while the main body of South American immigrants is Latino. A group of powerful ruffians with a monarchy charter, they are good at ‘robbing money’ but not good at ‘doing business’” (Qin 2000, 19; 2019). If it is true, as Qin insists, that markets do not require primitive accumulation to form, then it follows that primitive accumulation does not necessarily or even likely lead to market formation - rather, its extra-economic character in fact lends itself towards the creation of controlled economies.

Qin extends this historical critique of primitive accumulation into more modern times by comparing the Soviet and Chinese experiences of primitive accumulation. In Russia during the 1920s, regime economists argued for a form of “socialist primitive accumulation” which led to industrial development via “surplus grain collection...forced labor, forced unequal exchange, forced collectivization, and the ‘elimination of rich peasants’” at great cost to the Russian people, as the “famine caused by collectivization alone caused about 8 million people to starve to death” (Qin 2000, 19; 2019). Compared to the enclosure movement in Britain which caused “suffering, but no mass loss of population” as the Soviet ‘socialist primitive accumulation’ did, “is it any wonder, then, that in order to avoid the pain and suffering that come with primitive accumulation, so many people have embraced the market economy?” (Qin 2019; 2000, 19). Primitive accumulation under Mao followed a similar path in China and resulted in “our social wealth [being] transferred into the ‘state treasury’”, where, since the Reform Era, it has undergone “risk-free plunder” by treasury keepers engaging in “second primitive accumulation” (Qin 2000, 19; 2019).

It is this second primitive accumulation, carried out by privatization and plunder of concentrated state wealth, that has been described as the ‘most noble version of the primitive accumulation of capital in the entire history of mankind’ - but, as Qin points out, it is only because the openly violent form of primitive accumulation constituted by the seizure of “wealth scattered in the hands of many traditional small private owners” had already been carried out during the socialist era that this second primitive accumulation could proceed peacefully and without facing resistance (ibid). Indeed, because the “scattered traditional wealth of the agricultural society” has already been concentrated by socialist primitive accumulation, this

secondary primitive accumulation is far more “parasitical” and has “produced virtually zero benefits” (ibid; Qin 2000, 20).

By positioning primitive accumulation in direct opposition to capitalist principles and associating it primarily with the extra-economic force of the state, Qin maintains the liberal defense of the market and civil society against government overreach and argues that democratic privatization is the best way to protect peasant's rights and livelihoods. In “Dividing the Big Family Assets”, Qin considers the ongoing debate between Chinese New Left, “who want to revive collective traditions to resist the spread of Western-style individualism”, and Chinese Liberals, who believe that “state assets are booty to be plundered, according to the principle, ‘to each according to his power’”, and asserts that both share a fundamental predilection towards the use of force: “The first can still rob people’s private property for the coffers of the state, while the second can rob the coffers of the state for the private fortunes of power-holders” (Qin 2003). He rejects this binary between populism and oligarchism, arguing that “the issue we confront today is not whether to choose between capitalism or ‘socialism’” but is instead rather the choice between Lenin’s Prussian and American paths, that is to say, the “expropriation of the peasantry from above, by big land-lords or companies...or the emergence of independent small-to-medium modern farmers from below” (ibid). Qin defends the American path, and posits that the only way it can be achieved in China is through a combination of private property and civilian rights as “one without the other will lead to much suffering and disaster”, and “if privatization is an operation done in the dark, under authoritarian rule, whether by ‘division’ or ‘sale’ it will inevitably be robbery of the masses” (ibid). Qin sees China’s lack of civilian rights as shaping the entire economy: in arguing against those Western economists who attribute China’s post-Mao growth to either Western marketization or Keynesian large-state intervention, Qin contends that

the real reason for China's explosive growth has been its "low human rights advantage", which has allowed it to "push down the costs of the four key factors of production" by "refusing democratization, suppressing public participation, ignoring ideas, deriding beliefs, scorning justice, and stimulating the appetite for material things" (Qin 2009, 85-86). To those who "are under the illusion" that China's post-communist transition has been "more 'gradual' and 'socialist' than the Eastern European" transition, Qin replies that "In reality, the process of 'dividing up the big family's assets' has been proceeding as relentlessly in China as in Eastern Europe" - Qin's problem with this process, however, lies not with its relentless privatization, but rather with its "oppressive expropriation of peasants" (Qin 2003). In China today, "what needs to be stopped is not the distribution of land to peasants as private property, but the abuse of existing peasant rights to land by political authorities", and Qin believes such abuse would in fact be prevented by peasants having strong private property rights to their land (ibid). Once again, the problem lies not with the market, which operates based on formal equality of actors, but rather with the anti-market intervention of the state continuing so-called primitive accumulation by force.

## **5. Analysis**

By analyzing and critiquing primitive accumulation through the lens of China's unique developmental experience, Wen Tiejun and Qin Hui's novel formulations of the concept question existing assumptions of the relationships between such commonly associated concepts as capitalism, markets, and class, and reveal how a lack of precision in meaning leads to theoretical



confusion and practical mistakes. Wen's examination of the various forms of primitive accumulation and their differing social results challenges views of the concept that ignore historical context, while Qin's polemic against its non-market character demands a reckoning with the longstanding divide between the views of Smithian primitive accumulation and Marxian primitive accumulation. Together, their critiques of existing monolithic models of primitive accumulation create space for a new conceptualization that properly identifies the modern Chinese experience as a form of "Voluntary" primitive accumulation, distinct but related to classically "Involuntary" primitive accumulation, without undermining the theoretical and historical coherence of primitive accumulation as a whole.

Wen Tiejun's differentiation between Western primitive accumulation and Eastern primitive accumulation has been read by both Hayward and Day as having "helped pave the way for other scholars and policymakers to use this concept when referring to various elements of China's modernisation" by conceptualizing it as a "positive" necessity of industrialization stripped of its negative capitalist baggage (Hayward 2019, 204; Day 2013, 62). Indeed, both authors argue that Wen's work "normalized primitive accumulation as a universal process deployed by modernizing states globally", whose "positive usage of the category as necessary for industrialization... was unique to Wen at the time" (Hayward 2019, 204; Day 2013, 62).

While the status of primitive accumulation and industrialization's 'inevitability' remains ambiguous in Wen's work, his writing since the turn of the century actually seems largely to view both Western and Eastern primitive accumulation as types of capitalist accumulation, rather than local variations of a non-essentially capitalist historical process. In "Centenary reflections on the 'three dimensional problem' of rural China", Wen describes how "China had no choice but copy the Russian model of industrialization in order to 'stand up'," which took the form of

“‘State *Capitalist* Primitive Accumulation’ [emphasis added]” (Wen 1999, 7). Similarly, in “China Experience, Comparative Advantage, and the Rural Reconstruction Experiment” Wen and his coauthors characterize the Chinese system of the past sixty years as “state capitalism in substance”, and argue that “both China and the West have marched into capitalist civilization” (Wen et al. 2012, 78, 80). While this more recent change in Wen’s thought does not discount Hayward and Day’s readings of his earlier work, which was certainly far more ambiguous about China’s state-capitalist character during the socialist era, it is nonetheless important to note this shift as it creates the space for one of Wen’s most interesting and relevant theories: that primitive accumulation is best categorized not by the specific mechanisms through which it operates, but rather by its structural position within history.

Wen’s concepts of Western and Eastern primitive accumulation form the basis of a structural model that differentiates types of primitive accumulation based on their context rather than their content. As mentioned above, primitive accumulation today encompasses “a huge variety of phenomena: the conversion of common, collective and state property rights...into exclusive property rights; the slave trade; public debt; colonial, semi-colonial, neo-colonial and imperial appropriations of assets and natural resources, including the conservation of forests and biodiversity; dismantling of welfare states”, but “the historical and spatial range of this work has made it difficult to discern what is common, what is happenstance” (Webber 2008a, 300). Instead of simply identifying the various mechanisms through which primitive accumulation operates, Wen examines how differing countries’ various historical environments have produced different structural processes of primitive accumulation that themselves determine the kinds of political and social superstructures that follow. For Wen, the difference between Western and Eastern primitive accumulation is not just that the former mostly relied on colonialism while the latter

primarily exploited peasant communes, but that which mechanism of accumulation each used was conditioned by the politico-economic world systems in which they existed, and the use of those specific mechanisms resulted in the creation of wildly different institutional superstructures. The structural and historical character of Wen's model is also similar to Lenin's concepts of Prussia and American agricultural transitions, in that Lenin's concepts are also defined by the contexts that produce them and the social conditions they themselves produce, rather than just defining their mechanisms ahistorically. It must be noted, however, that Wen's model of Western and Eastern accumulation is primarily determined by international 'world systems', while Lenin's is more domestic - nonetheless, their arguments both have a historical and systemic character that transcends their specific geographic scopes. Similarly, even though Wen's model of Eastern primitive accumulation is based on the Maoist period of state-led modernization rather than contemporary rural China, his insights about accumulation's structural character are applicable to both, and indeed Wen himself has often classified the modern marketization of the Chinese countryside as its own form of context-dependent primitive accumulation (Wen 1989a).

Wen's structural differentiation of primitive accumulation has a number of explanatory and analytic advantages over the mechanistic classification listed above. For one, it is far more rooted in history than the list of mechanisms, as it defines forms of primitive accumulation based on what came before and after them, rather than simply how they were carried out. This historicity is especially relevant for those theories of the origin of capitalism which emphasize its historical contingency, such as the 'political Marxism' of Brenner and Wood, who have heretofore unduly limited what counts as primitive accumulation in order to counter ahistorical explanations of capitalism's origin.

Many of Brenner and Wood's critiques are targeted at what they refer to as the "Commercialization Model" of capitalism's origin, which is based on Smith's notion of previous accumulation and views capitalism as arising from a gradual build-up of capital from commodity exchange that always trends inexorably towards expansion (Wood 2002, 13). Against this ahistorical commercialization model and its Smithian origins, Brenner and Wood distinguish primitive accumulation from previous accumulation by limiting the former to just the "transformation of social property relations", which are qualitative shifts that can be located at a specific point in the timeline and are therefore within history (31). While such a narrow definition of primitive accumulation has served well in explaining capitalism's historically novel origins, its limits have been revealed by its inability to properly theorize the social and economic changes currently occurring in rural China: in Charles Post's critique of Webber mentioned above, he explicitly cites Brenner and Wood's definition of primitive accumulation as evidence that because "rural land property has yet to be transformed into capital", "the Chinese countryside remains decidedly non-capitalist" (Post 2008, 323-324). Since "Chinese rural producers' possession of landed property is not dependent on successful market competition", they have not undergone the transformation of social property relations that define primitive accumulation, and therefore are not yet properly capitalist (323). However, as Qian Forrest Zhang's response to Post has shown, China's countryside has shown clear signs of becoming "decidedly capitalist" even without most peasants losing access to their land, as evidenced by widespread peasant differentiation and marketization of agricultural inputs and products (Zhang 2015, 344).

Wen's structural differentiation of primitive accumulation provides a method for understanding these changes in rural China since the late 1970s as a form of primitive

accumulation without relying on the ahistorical commercialization model. By emphasizing that the specific forms primitive accumulation takes are always born out of their historical context, and are not simply a fixed set of mechanisms that could be applied at any time, Wen's structural differentiation allows for both the land-rental market imposed on English peasants and the increasing marketization without privatization of land occurring in the Chinese countryside to be forms of primitive accumulation. As Brenner and Wood argue, in late medieval rural England capitalism was born out of the imposition of a market in land rents upon the peasantry by the landlord class, for whom the marketization of land ownership was the most effective tactic for increasing the surpluses produced in their specific political and economic context. Similarly, in the vastly different context of modern China, where markets have already become hegemonic almost everywhere *except* rural society and pre-existing urban capital seeks to enter agriculture from the outside, primitive accumulation has primarily taken the form of marketized accumulation - what Webber describes as capital purchasing people's allegiance to wage labor - since that is the path of least resistance for Chinese capital presently. Because of China's past century of land retribution and reform there is today no landlord class to impose a market in rents, and combined with the CCP providing the peasantry with a novel level of legal protection against such dispossession due to their long standing fear of rural unrest and urban slums, Chinese capital has been forced to rely on other means to expand into the countryside and transform the peasantry. By understanding primitive accumulation as a historical process that changes form based on context, rather than just a single mechanism or a list of mechanisms that are applied ahistorically, it is possible to accurately identify a wide variety of forms that primitive accumulation has taken across different societies without undermining the contingency of capitalism's origin. But to what extent does defining the predominantly non-violent processes

currently unfolding in the Chinese countryside as a kind of primitive accumulation also entail accepting the peaceful Smithian view of capitalism's spread - that is to say, is primitive accumulation merely being expanded to also include previous accumulation, or is there a fundamental difference between this new "voluntary" Chinese accumulation and the peaceful process imagined by Smith?

Qin Hui's critique of primitive accumulation's non-market character is extremely useful in discovering some answers to this question, as by following the distinction between previous and primitive accumulation to its logical conclusion, Qin inadvertently reveals how untenable such a theoretical divide really is. As previously mentioned, one of Qin's main criticisms of the concept of primitive accumulation is what he sees as its undue association with capitalism: since it is primarily conducted through the extra-economic force of the state, and runs counter to the free-market principles of formal equality between sellers, Qin declares that not only is primitive accumulation not required for capitalism, but it is in fact completely opposed to it. Explicitly citing Smith and Marx's terms of previous and primitive accumulation, Qin argues that both thinkers believed primitive accumulation to be entirely prior and external to capitalism, with their later association only being the result of historical coincidence. While Qin primarily cites Smith and Marx in order to point out their supposed similarity in considering primitive accumulation exterior to capitalism, his larger argument about the differences between fair market accumulation and anti-market primitive accumulation can be read as an extension of the fundamental divide between previous and primitive accumulation first produced by their writings. For Qin, the only form of accumulation that is properly capitalist is that which is conducted in accordance with free-market principles and does not feature forced dispossession - this is effectively the same as Smith's conception of previous accumulation as peaceful

differentiation naturally resulting from specialization and market competition. Similarly, Qin's conception of primitive accumulation as the use of anti-market force to dispossess and exploit others is very similar to the common Marxist view of primitive accumulation as the dispossession of the peasantry through acts such as the Enclosures and the Poor Laws. Where Qin's argument falters, however, is in its implicit assumption that markets and capitalism are one and the same phenomenon.

Market exchange has existed in myriad forms in most societies across human history, but capitalism has not. As Brenner and Wood's historical account of capitalism's origin has shown, capitalism was not an inevitable expansion of the market driven by its own logic, but was rather the product of rural landlord-peasant class struggle and was defined by the class relationship that arose between landless workers and the bourgeoisie. Indeed, the foundational event that birthed capitalism was the formation of a dispossessed proletariat who had to sell their labor-power for wages, and such a class could only be created out of feudalism by the removal of the peasantry from their land - that is to say, the foundational event behind capitalism was dispossessive primitive accumulation, not peaceful previous accumulation.

Capitalism cannot constitute a free market made up of equal competitors, as Qin defines the market to be, because capitalism's very basis is the existence of a class forced to sell their labor-power to an ownership class for wages in order to survive. Even in situations where the peasantry or working class has won some degree of independence from the market, such as through the development of a robust welfare state or through legal protection from land dispossession, as in contemporary rural China, access to the vast majority of the goods and services that are required for a decent standard of living is still gated behind one's ability to purchase them on the market. Qin's belief in a peaceful, previous accumulation-esque road to

capitalism separate from primitive accumulation is not accurate to the history of capitalism, and even causes him to confuse real examples of primitive accumulation for idealized forms of previous accumulation. His misreading of Lenin's American path to agrarian capitalism is one such case: Hui argues that the American path of "independent small-to-medium modern farmers" emerging from below was always defended by Lenin - yet, only a few paragraphs after first identifying it, Lenin forcefully made the argument that peasant farming along the American path "*also evolves in a capitalist way and gives rise to a rural bourgeoisie and a rural proletariat,*" attacking the Narodniks' "cardinal mistake" of believing that "landlord farming was the only source of agrarian capitalism" (Qin 2003, "Dividing the Big Family Assets"; Lenin 1907, 241).

Contrary to Qin's view of the American path as independent farmers dividing "existing assets democratically", Lenin always recognized that the American path resulted in the existence of bourgeois and proletarian classes just like the Prussian path, with the main difference being the extent to which that new bourgeoisie descended from either an existing landlord class or successful independent peasants. Lenin even goes so far as to argue that a revolutionary overthrow of the landlord class and the transformation of the peasantry into independent farmers would only make the development of capitalism even "*more rapid* than peasant reform, carried out in the landlords' way", since the rising farmer-capitalist class would not have to contend with the dead weight of an existing landlord class leeching off of them (Lenin 1907, 240). That both the American and Prussian paths result in the creation of a rural proletariat indicates that both involve a degree of dispossession, whether that be through the imposition of a market in land-rents leading to evictions, state privatization of communal land, or less-successful farmers gradually reaching the point where selling their labor-power would be more profitable than continuing independent farming - this last of which is exactly the primary mechanism of



primitive accumulation in rural China today. Smith's idea of previous accumulation ultimately has no relevance for really-existing capitalism, as even those cases of capitalist development most associated with such utopian liberal visions of peaceful growth and differentiation, like the American path, are ultimately still reliant on some form of dispossession to create a proletariat.

By combining Wen's structural categorization of primitive accumulation with the lessons learned from Qin's work about the relationship between dispossession and capitalism, it becomes possible to identify two broad forms that primitive accumulation has historically taken around the world. The first of these is Involuntary Primitive Accumulation, which is characterized by the forced removal of peasants from their land through such mechanisms as land-rental markets and enclosures, and is exemplified by the Prussian and English paths of primitive accumulation; the second is Voluntary Primitive Accumulation, which is characterized by peasants opting-into the proletariat by selling or renting their land, and is exemplified by the current rural Chinese situation and to a certain extent the American path of primitive accumulation. The latter form is deemed 'Voluntary' only in a relative sense, as while peasants are not absolutely forced to lose their land as in the first form, it is typically the case that they nonetheless do so so that they can achieve a decent standard of living. Voluntary Primitive Accumulation is considered voluntary in the same sense that Marx considers the proletariat to be free, in that just as the proletariat has the freedom to choose between selling their labor-power or starving, the peasantry can voluntarily choose to either stay as increasingly-impooverished peasants or sell their labor-power. It must be recognized that Voluntary Primitive Accumulation only becomes possible *once capitalism already exists*, as peasants are unlikely to willfully become landless workers unless the expected returns from such wage work exceed their current standard of living procured by independent farming, and prior to the generalization of wage-work and establishment of the hegemony of the

market under capitalism, to be a landless ‘wage slave’ was typically much less desirable than being a largely self-sufficient peasant. Brenner and Wood were right to argue that primitive accumulation always involves dispossession, but they were wrong to limit it to *forced* dispossession just because that was the kind needed for capitalism’s birth - as capitalism has grown, developed, and changed the world, Voluntary Primitive Accumulation has become not only a possibility but even a likelihood, particularly for those swaths of the world population who have historically been forcefully excluded from the core of capitalist development.

## 6. Conclusion

Wen Tiejun and Qin Hui demonstrate that the Chinese experience of primitive accumulation cannot be easily understood through pre-existing frameworks inherited from the West and instead require new models that account for the vast difference in context between 15th Century England and 21st Century China. The above differentiation of Voluntary and Involuntary primitive accumulation attempts to craft one such new model, and aims to include the contemporary Chinese experience without making recourse to ahistorical explanations of capitalism’s origin.

The conditions of modern rural China, and particularly Wen Tiejun and Qin Hui’s analyses of them, provide an excellent case study for examining this phenomenon of ‘Voluntary’ accumulation. As Wen has explained, China, following the example of the Soviet Union, attempted a theoretically socialist form of primitive accumulation that was meant to develop heavy industry without disintegrating the peasantry. The development of large-scale industry

requires an agricultural surplus sizeable enough to feed the growing urban population, and rather than achieving this through land privatization and dissolution of the peasantry, as in the West, China collected its peasantry into great communes from which the state itself could extract massive surpluses to feed their new heavy industries. Since rural China primarily served only to feed the growing industrial centers, and because the strict *hukou* household registration system prevented rural-urban intermovement, rural China stagnated while urban China modernized, and by the time leadership passed to Deng Xiaoping, the gap had become quite significant. As markets re-entered Chinese society during the reform era, the situation was ripe for Voluntary Primitive Accumulation: the peasantry, long excluded from the modernization and development carried out in urban centers at their expense, took every opportunity to try and catch up themselves, ingratiating themselves with markets eagerly and even eventually going on to willfully enter the wage market, both at home in the countryside and by migrating to cities. The state, for its part, has contributed Involuntary Primitive Accumulation to the cause of marketizing the countryside, primarily through the expropriation of collective village land without sufficient input from or restitution to the now dispossessed peasants - but, as Webber and Zhang note, the primary form of primitive accumulation in the modern Chinese countryside has been relatively voluntary entry into markets, what Webber calls capital “purchasing people’s allegiance to wage labor” (Webber 2008b, 402). It seems Qin Hui was correct when he wrote that “is it any wonder, then, that in order to avoid the pain and suffering that come with primitive accumulation, so many people have embraced the market economy?” - though perhaps not entirely in the way he originally intended.

This conceptualization is by no means comprehensive, however, and is best understood as a starting point for further research rather than a definite conclusion to the questions raised

here. One such promising avenue for further study is an examination of the unexplored parallels between Wen's concepts of China's introversive primitive accumulation in the socialist era and the West's extroversive primitive accumulation during colonialism: both took the form of forced extraction of surpluses from primarily agrarian societies that were then invested in external industrialization, leaving those exploited areas woefully underdeveloped and eager to catch up. That many nations have sought to enter the world market and rapidly develop their own market economies following decolonization seems like evidence for the existence of a kind of international voluntary primitive accumulation parallel to that undertaken by the peasantry in rural China - but that is an argument best left for another paper with a wider scope.

As capitalism has spread and become globally hegemonic, it has become imperative to similarly expand the theoretical canon on the subject to a global level, so that the unique and instructive experiences and perspectives of those living through capitalism around the world can contribute to the international discourse. To limit analysis of capitalism to primarily Europe and North America is both arbitrary and unjustifiable when the majority of the world population now living under this mode of production - over 2.82 billion people just in India and China alone - exist outside of the imperial core. The work of Wen Tiejun and Qin Hui demonstrates that to understand modern capitalism, in all its varying contexts and permutations, it is necessary to not only include but actively center the theories and analyses of those whose experiences do not fit neatly into Western paradigms. Only by expanding the borders of scholarship to match the global range of capitalism today can it be properly analyzed, critiqued, and potentially even surpassed.

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