



Written by [Bob Adelman](#) on January 23, 2012

## The Beauty of Private Property — from China?

A farmer in the communist collective of Xiaogang, a small village in eastern China, was starving, along with his family and his neighbors. At one of the political indoctrination classes he was forced to attend, Yan Junchang had a revolutionary idea: why not try privatizing the farms and letting the farmers keep what they grow?



He huddled together in his hut with a number of other farmers and, in 1978, signed a secret agreement to establish the beginnings of a private property society. It had to be kept secret because if they were found out, they would be considered “[capitalist roaders](#),” a pejorative term first used by Mao to describe anyone who dared introduce any principles of private capitalism into his collectivist society.

Prior to the agreement, starvation was the rule. There was never enough food. Children went hungry, and wives were forced to make soup from tree leaves and bark. They went to other villages to beg only to discover that they were suffering as well. In 1958 the village population was 120. After Mao’s “Great Leap Forward” 67 of them had died of starvation.

Yan’s agreement divided the collectivist farm into individual pieces with the understanding that any excess food crop beyond what was required by the collective they could keep for themselves. As Yan explained:

Villagers tended collective fields in exchange for “work points” that could be redeemed for food. But we had no strength and enthusiasm to work in collective fields due to hunger. We even didn’t have time because we were always being organized by governmental work teams who taught us politics. It was then that I began to consider contracting land into individual households...

I made up my mind to contract land to individual households no matter what penalty would be imposed on me. We didn’t want to starve anymore.

Since the collective was based upon “from each according to his ability, to each according to his need,” it was bound to fail. When the morning whistle blew, farmers reluctantly and slowly began to work the collective, knowing that there was no reward for working hard as all gains belonged to the state. Yan said that nothing was owned privately, not even his teeth: “Back then, even one straw belonged to the group. No one owned anything.” During a political meeting one of the farmers asked: “What about the teeth in my head? Do I own those?” No, your teeth belong to the collective. [Yan said](#) “Work hard, don’t work hard — everyone gets the same. So people don’t want to work.”

But the risks of being discovered were high. Yen Hongchang, one of the original signers, said that most people wanted to do it, “but there were others who said ‘I don’t think this will work — this is like a high



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voltage wire.' Back then, farmers had never seen electricity, but they'd heard about it. They knew if they touched it, you would die."

The year before the secret agreement, Yan's collective produced 15,000 kilograms of grain, less than enough to feed the village. But once the agreement was signed, Yan said that every farmer was out working his plot before dawn and worked until they couldn't see any more in the evening. He added: "We all secretly competed. Everyone wanted to produce more than the next person." The harvest in 1979 was an astounding 90,000 kilos, six times the harvest of the year before, and more than the past five years' harvests combined.

And that was when the secret agreement was exposed. Yan was dragged down to the local Communist Party secretary's office for questioning. He thought he was going to be sent to a concentration camp or sentenced to death. Instead, he was surprised by the party secretary, Wang Yuzhao, who said he would allow Yan three more years of operating under the agreement, but not to tell any other villages about the plan. Further up the Communist Party chain, Wan Li, the Party chief for the Anhui province, let it go to see what would happen. This coincided with the decision by the new Chinese Premier, Deng Xiaoping, to allow free market principles to begin to restore China's starvation economy.

As word of the success of Wan and his farmers in Xiaogang village began to spread, the concept of private property and ownership of one's production started to transform China's economy. According to NPR, some 500 million people have risen out of poverty since then.

And it hasn't treated Wan too badly either. He says:

I have five children. My family used to live a poverty-stricken life in an old tumbled-down thatched cottage with doors made of straw. In 1993 we moved into a brick house. We had money to purchase farm machines, watches and a TV set.

The parallels to the challenges faced by William Bradford and his Pilgrims in 1620 are illuminating. In his [History of the Plymouth Plantation](#) Bradford wrote that his colonists starved because they refused to work in the fields. They preferred instead to steal food from the common storehouse: "Much was stolen both by night and day, before it became scarce eatable." The "common course" initially agreed to was failing. Bradford explained: "All profits and benefits that are got by trade, working, fishing, or any other means" were to be placed in a common storehouse and that "all such persons as are of this colony are to have their meat, drink, apparel and all provisions out of the common stock." The experiment in the "common course" or voluntary communism, was failing.

And so Bradford "began to think how they might raise as much corn as they could, and obtain a better crop." Under the new agreement Bradford abolished the "common course" and gave each household a parcel of land and told them they could keep what they produced or trade it away, as they saw fit.

The change was [nearly instantaneous](#). Bradford noted: "The women now went willingly into the field, and took their little ones with them to set corn; which [women] before would allege weakness and inability; whom to have compelled would have been thought great tyranny and oppression."

The harvest of 1623 was abundant. Wrote Bradford, "Instead of famine now God gave them plenty and the face of things was changed, to the rejoicing hearts of many, for which they blessed God...any general want or famine hath not been amongst them since to this day." In 1624 the colony [began exporting corn](#).

With these examples of Yan Junchang and the farmers of Xiaogang, and of William Bradford and his



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Plymouth colonists, such principles really ought to be applied to the current declining economy of the United States. It certainly couldn't hurt.



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