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1 Introduction

The variations in regime durability and state capacity among revolutionary authorities pose a profound theoretical puzzle for political scientists (Lachapelle et al. 2020). Revolutionary forces face the challenge of how to conduct orderly state building after acquiring power through violent social revolutions and civil wars (Clarke 2023; Huntington 1968). Some parties maintain political order through co-opting existing elites and building a grand coalition (Arriola 2009; Gandhi and Przeworski 2006). However, this strategy is conducive to political capture by vested interests, leading to a compromise on political authority and hindering the development of state capacity. In other cases, revolutionary parties have overcome elite capture and pursued ambitious policy agendas, despite their devastating effects on traditional values and the social structure. How have revolutionary regimes maintained resilience and developed state capacity in this process?

This paper examines the importance of land reform in the political-economic dynamics of state building by revolutionary parties. Studies show that land reform can be used as an instrument for stimulating development, reducing economic and social inequality, promoting grassroots support for the government, and defusing local rebellions (Albertus 2020; Albertus and Kaplan 2013; Domènech and Herreros 2018; Kung, Wu and Wu 2012; Mason 1998). This paper highlights land reform as a key strategy of state building, particularly through its impacts on a revolutionary party’s political recruitment.

The substantive focus of this study is China in the early 1950s, when the Communist Party of China (CPC) launched a massive land reform movement in all the “newly liberated regions”¹. The movement intended to bring forth a complete social transformation, not only through redistribution of land, but also through reconstruction of the grassroots-level power structure. Specifically, the CPC used the land reform movement to identify millions of rural elites as “class enemies,” and mobilized the mass rural population to launch the class struggle against them. The campaign allowed the party to mobilize the support and participation of radical activists among poor peasants, who demonstrated strong commitment to the party line.

¹The term “newly liberated regions” refers to the regions the CPC acquired after defeating its rival, the Kuomintang (KMT), during the Chinese Civil War in 1946-49.

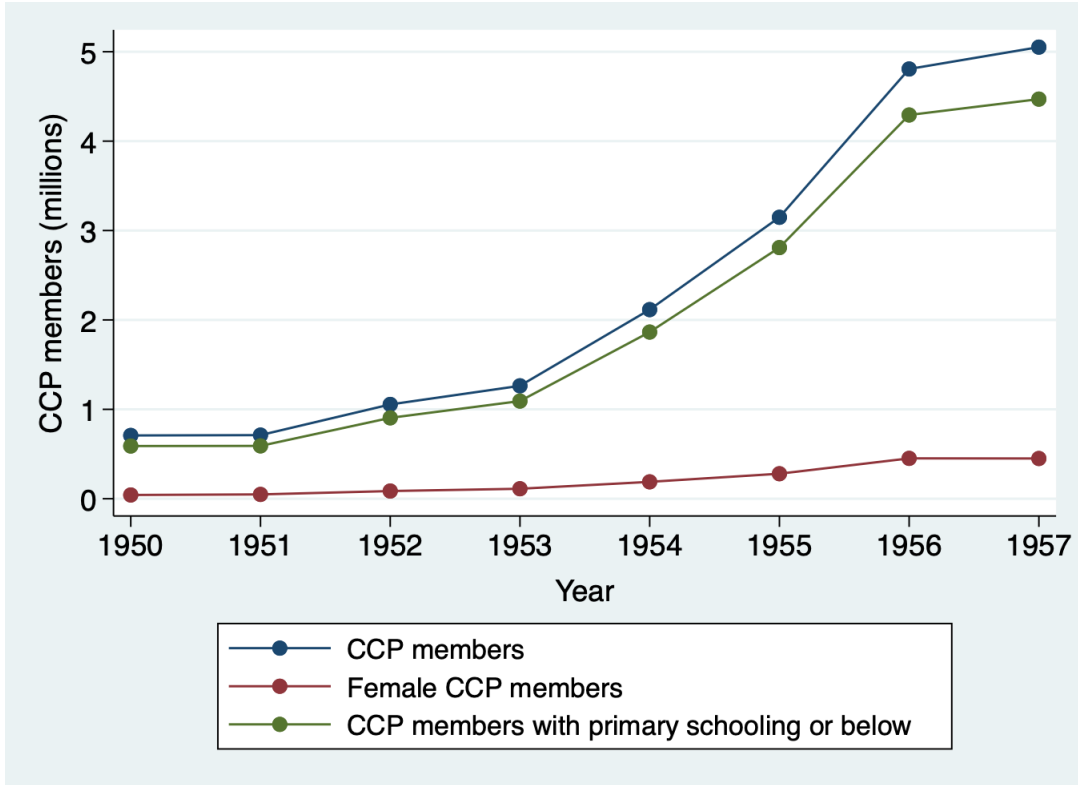


Figure 1: CPC Member Recruitment in Southern Provinces, 1950-1957

Notes: This graph shows the total number of CPC members, members with primary education or below, and female members across 12 southern provinces (Section 4 provides a list of provinces). Most areas in these provinces were newly “liberated” following the CPC’s Yangtze River Crossing Campaign (April 1949 and onward). The total number of CPC members is sourced from the provincial Organizational History of the Chinese Communist Party (Zhongguo Gongchan Dang Zuzhi Shi Ziliao) and provincial gazetteers. Figures for female members and those with primary education or below are estimated by applying proportions from sample counties within each province to provincial membership totals.

Consequently, the land reform gave rise to a large expansion of grassroots-level party strength. As Figure 1 shows, the number of CPC members increased on average by 7.2 times in counties within newly militarily liberated regions between 1950 and 1957. Meanwhile, the share of CPC members with primary schooling or below increased from 83% to 88%, and the share of female CPC members increased from 5.9% to 8.9%. With the aid of newly recruited party members and officials, the CPC regime successfully procured 23.5% of agricultural products at state-set prices², and then launched rural collectivization.

²The statistic is derived from the average grain procurement rate in our sampled counties from 1954 to 1957.

This paper proposes and empirically tests four hypotheses on the political-economic dynamics related to the land reform movement in the 1950s. First, completion of the land reform was associated with significant increases in the numbers of CPC members and local branches. Exploiting county-level variation in the timing of the land reform across newly liberated areas, we find that the land reform completion was associated with a 10% increase in CPC members per capita and a 26% increase in CPC branches in rural areas. The impact was next to zero before the completion of the land reform, but became positive and significant after it was completed.

Second, counties with a stronger presence of pre-revolutionary elites registered a faster growth in the number of CPC members and local branches. Empirical evidence show that the impact of land reform on CPC membership was stronger when a larger size of landlords and rich peasants was identified in the movement, which was correlated with the rival Kuomintang (KMT)'s membership. By contrast, the impact of the reform was unrelated to pre-reform land inequality. Taken together, these results suggest that it was more likely that the land reform served the purpose of replacing the old elites with new state agents, rather than enhancing redistribution per se.

Third, the land reform facilitated recruitment of loyal agents via class identification and performance evaluation. On the one hand, the newly recruited CPC members were concentrated in the lower classes. Completion of the land reform was associated with a 14% increase in the number of CPC members with primary schooling or below, while there was no increase in the number of CPC members who had completed schooling beyond primary school. On the other hand, the launch of the land reform was not associated with a rise in the number of lower-class CPC members. These results illustrate how land reform acted as a screening process to select agents with a strong and persistent commitment to the party's revolutionary agenda.

Fourth, the recruitment of new CPC members was associated with further growth of extractive capacity and other state-led campaigns. The intensity of CPC members in 1954, when the vast majority of counties had completed land reform, was positively associated with the agricultural procurement rate as well as early agricultural collectivization in 1954-57. We do not find a similar correlation between party members and revenue collection for the 1950 CPC members or the 1935 KMT members. These results are consistent with the reasoning that the

recruitment of loyal and competent state agents through the land reform played an instrumental role in promoting state capacity.

This paper speaks to several strands of literature. First, the existing literature on land reforms has widely identified land ownership as a critical factor shaping power configurations and distributive conflicts in society (Baland and Robinson 2008; Fergusson, Larreguy and Riaño 2022; Lee 2019; Albertus, Brambor and Ceneviva 2018; Russett 1964; Midlarsky 1992; Lichbach 1989). Therefore, land reform is regarded as a key policy instrument to mitigate conflicts and contain potential challenges to the ruling authorities (Albertus and Kaplan 2013; Albertus 2015; Lapp 2004; Russett 1964; Swinnen 2002). Most of these studies point out that land reform was implemented by the ruling party, but they do not discuss the fundamental power structure of the society. This paper enriches the literature by illustrating the unique role of the land reform in enhancing grassroots political recruitment, and conducting a county-level empirical investigations to disentangle the potential political-economic mechanisms.

The empirical analysis of land reform from the grassroots political perspective echoes the conventional wisdom in the comparative politics literature, which emphasizes the instrumental role of grassroots mobilization against the old elites in social revolutions (Moore, Lindström and O'Regan 1996; Skocpol 1979). In addition, studies suggest that grassroots mobilization can be an effective strategy to increase popular support for the ruling party (Brockett 1991; Kadivar 2018; Strauss 2006) and countervail elite capture, largely drawn from the context of electoral politics (Chaves, Fergusson and Robinson 2015; Garfias and Sellars 2022; Kenny 2015). By contrast, this paper focuses on answering how the conjoint efforts of grassroots mobilization and political recruitment may contribute to the growth of organizational capacity and fiscal extraction, particularly in a nascent state. The dynamic patterns of fast expansion of the CPC's membership and local branches after the land reform shed light on the literature examining the interaction between party strength and a country's development and governance outcomes (Bizzarro et al. 2018; Coleman 1996; Fjelde 2020; Zeng 2024).

The remainder of the paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 proposes a theoretical argument about the importance of land reform for political recruitment and state building, and develops several empirically testable hypotheses. In concordance with the discussion in section 2, section

3 provides qualitative evidence from the early history of the People’s Republic of China (PRC). Section 4 introduces the county-level panel data on the land reform and the CPC’s recruitment. Sections 5 and 6 report systemic empirical findings in light of the hypotheses proposed in section 2. Section 7 concludes the paper.

2 Theoretical Argument

2.1 The Importance of Land Reform

The issue of land ownership lies at the heart of the literature on comparative political economy. Studies argue that land inequality is closely associated with political patron-clientelism, where landlords and their political agents wield power over poor peasants (Powell 1970; Scott 1972). The literature reports that the concentration of land ownership provides opportunities for vote rigging in favor of conservative parties (Baland and Robinson 2012; Beg 2021; Dower and Pfutze 2015). Landlords may further leverage political power to deter redistribution and fiscal extraction (Anderson, Francois and Kotwal 2015; Fergusson, Larreguy and Riaño 2022). In addition, in societies that are large in geographic size and diversity, landlords have tended to hide information on the local population, landholding status, and agricultural products (Sng and Moriguchi 2014; Kuhn 2003). Hence, a strong landlord group and highly concentrated land ownership may dampen the development of state capacity.

To relieve the constraint of land inequality on state capacity, rulers have often targeted land reform as a first step in state building. Yet, the effects of land reforms have depended on the specific socioeconomic and political situations in different countries (Albertus 2015; Lipton 2009). The success of Scandinavian land reform through relatively peaceful negotiation was largely due to the presence of a merit-based bureaucratic central state (Andersen 2024). Land reforms have been found to help counter-insurgency activities and enhance bureaucratic capacity in Latin American countries (Albertus and Kaplan 2013; Albertus 2020). Meanwhile, land reforms could be stalled by internal governance problems in various circumstances, for example, in states that had to rely on elites and their patron-client networks to maintain

political support and collect revenue from local communities (Hall and Kepe 2017; Moyo and Chambati 2013).

Moreover, ruling parties with different objectives (political ideology and the blueprint for social transformation) and constraints (organizational and fiscal strength) tend to pursue land reform differently. When a ruling party faces a tight revenue constraint, it is strongly incentivized to increase fiscal extraction and adopt radical policies to pursue land reform (Macmillan 2000). Those policies lay the foundation for further institutional change and political centralization. By contrast, abundant revenue may mitigate the urgency of increasing state capacity (Hong 2018; Ross 2001). The radicalism of land reform also depends on political contingencies, particularly ruling parties' military prowess and organizational capacity (Fieldhouse, Fisher and Cutts 2020; Gibson et al. 1983; Self 2023). Putting these factors together, it is reasonable to expect that revolutionary parties would tend to pursue land reform more aggressively when they are endowed with high organizational capacity and scarce revenue.

2.2 Political Recruitment and State Building

For land reform to be successful, it is important that the reform enjoys wide-ranging political support and the party has sufficient personnel resources to implement its policies. The ruler may resort to various mechanisms to garner political support. A large literature on comparative politics focuses on the mechanisms of elite co-optation through the legislature, party system, ethnic power-sharing, and bureaucratic recruitment from the elites (Arriola 2009; Boix and Svulik 2013; Cross 2018; Gandhi and Przeworski 2006; Magaloni 2008). In such cases, the ruler must compromise on revenue extraction and redistribution for political stability, conceding economic rents to socially and economically influential elites.

By contrast, the ruling party may take a hardline policy position and seek to increase the party's strength through recruiting loyal and non-elite grassroots agents. This is a more appealing strategy when complicated vested interests and scarce resources render it difficult to maintain a grand coalition through rent sharing and policy concession, and when the ruling party is endowed with high military prowess and thus is less willing to compromise on policies.

In such cases, the ruling party is sufficiently capable of controlling the society through increasing grassroots recruitment and committing to its blueprint for modernization.

We argue that the CPC’s grassroots-level recruitment was an essential strategy, and arguably more effective than elite co-optation, for state building in China. The selection of local activists from poor peasants ensured the political support of the majority of the rural population. Land redistribution was conducted along with the “class struggle” launched by activists against the elites, depriving them of economic and political privileges. Throughout the process, only candidates with exceptional revealed commitment and capacity would stand out, be accepted as CPC members, and continue to extract revenue for the state and implement other items on the party’s policy agenda.

2.3 Hypotheses

The discussion so far has demonstrated the pivotal roles of land reform and political recruitment in the process of state building for nascent revolutionary states. This paper argues that a revolutionary party’s policy choices in state building are likely to be shaped by the synchronization of land reform and political recruitment. Land redistribution from the rich to the poor provides a legitimate course of political recruitment. On the other hand, increasing personnel resources through new recruitment would help speed up other policy agendas for state building, such as revenue extraction, education, and the suppression of counter-revolutionaries. Hence, we expect that the CPC’s state-building efforts would translate into an expansion of local CPC membership and party organizations following the land reform. Hence we propose the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1 *Completion of the land reform was associated with increased numbers of CPC members and local branches.*

The CPC’s strategy of political recruitment may have been shaped by economic and political motives. On the one hand, the party may have primarily used the land reform to reshape the power landscape in rural society through grassroots mobilization against the old elites, as the literature suggests (DeMare 2019; Skocpol 1979). If the reform was largely due to political

motives, to countervail the political influence of the old elites, there should have been a larger increase in the party's recruitment in regions where the old elites had stronger influence. From the party's perspective, this necessitated grassroots recruitment of party cadres to replace the old elites as state agents. By labeling these old elites as "class enemies," the party-state could successfully deprive them of their landholdings and, more importantly, political and cultural power, which would have hindered political recruitment and fiscal extraction after the land reform. From the grassroots participants' perspective, cleansing the old elites cut off their patronage bonds and ensured that they would not be retaliated by the old elites.

Studies also highlight the instrumental role of land redistribution in addressing the grievances of the poor and increasing their support for the new leadership (Gurley 1975; Strauss 2017). If the land reform was primarily driven by economic motives, to redistribute the means of production from the rich to the poor, it would have had a larger impact on political recruitment in areas with a higher degree of land concentration. For the time being, we do not have a definite answer for which motive dominated the party's strategic consideration of the land reform. This question is left for empirical examination. We hence propose the following pair of hypotheses:

Hypothesis 2a *If the land reform was primarily driven by political motives, the numbers of CPC members and local branches should have grown faster in counties with a stronger presence of pre-revolutionary elites.*

Hypothesis 2b *If the land reform was primarily driven by the redistributive motive, the numbers of CPC members and local branches should have grown faster in counties with greater land inequality.*

The implementation of land reform policies provides an ideal test for identifying and recruiting loyal agents. By loyalty, we mean a strong and persistent commitment to the party's revolutionary agenda. Class origin and performance were the most important screening criteria. First, the land redistribution campaign provided a list of candidates from the poorest strata of rural communities, whose economic and political power came solely from the party-state. This led to a great number of members who were willing to dedicate themselves to the party.

At the same time, the “class struggle” served as a screening process to select the “most revolutionary activists,” who were willing to cut off their patronage bonds with the old elites and participate in the “struggle sessions” against them. In addition, to ensure that candidates had resolute commitment to the party’s revolutionary agenda, most of the activists did not acquire CPC membership until after the reform, and they were under prolonged supervision and performance evaluation by the party-state. Thus, we have the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 3 *To ensure loyalty, newly recruited CPC members were concentrated in the lower class, and the recruitment took place after the completion of the land reform.*

Finally, we hypothesize that political recruitment enhanced the fiscal extraction and other campaigns related to state building. After the land reform, the newly recruited CPC members after land reform helped obtain information on the local population, agricultural products, and other socioeconomic data, and they provided other public services on behalf of the party-state. In addition, party membership was not only a quid pro quo for supporting land reform, but also provided long-term incentives for grassroots-level participation in state-led campaigns. Our hypothesis is the following:

Hypothesis 4 *Recruitment of CPC members was positively associated with the growth of extractive capacity and other campaigns related to state building.*

3 Qualitative Evidence from History

3.1 Land and Power before the Communist Revolution

In Imperial China, the central authority relied on the “scholar-gentry” group, which was largely landed elites with state recognized social status, to manage local affairs (Fei 2013; Fei and Wu 2015; Skocpol 1979). The gentry and landlords acted as agents of the state, helping government officials to accomplish tax collection, infrastructure investment, and disaster relief and maintain social order (Ch’u 1962; Hsiao 1967). They leveraged their collaborative participation in local

affairs to safeguard community welfare, as well as to advance their own interests (Bernhardt 1992; Duara 1991).

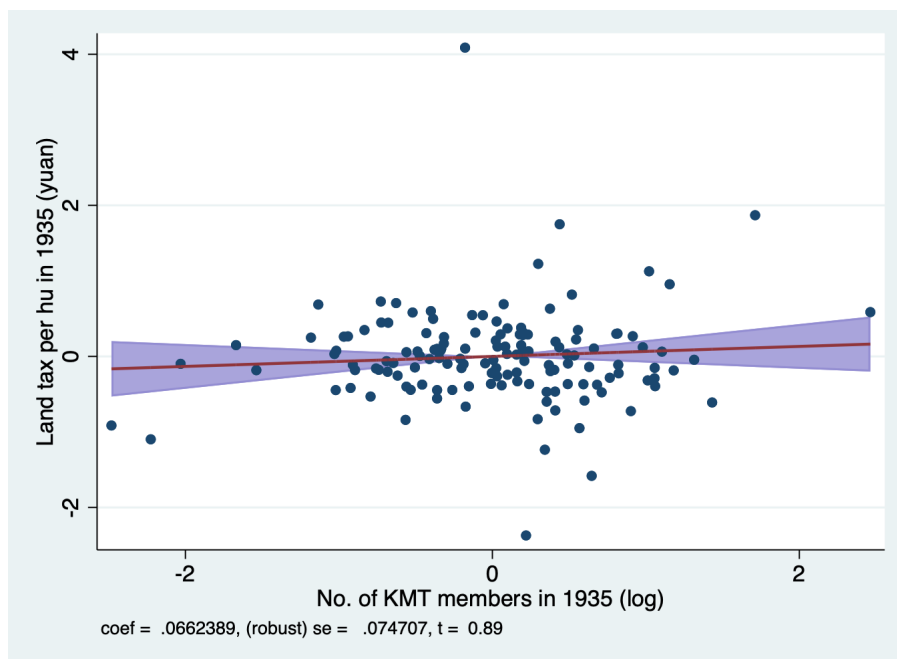


Figure 2: KMT Members and State Capacity

Notes: This figure plots the number of KMT members and land tax per capita in 1935. Each dot represents a county. The solid line is a fitted regression line with slope and standard error reported below. The control variables include elevation, distance to the nearest treaty ports (in logarithm), population in 1920 (in logarithm), rural household share in the 1930s, and land per rural household in the 1930s. The shaded areas represent the 95% confidence interval. Data sources: County gazetteers and (Zheng 2016).

The collapse of the Qing dynasty gave rise to a shift of social and political power from the gentry class to “local despots,” who had obtained an advantage in military prowess. The transfer of power led to a deterioration of rural governance (Hao et al. 2022; Kuhn 1970). After the establishment of the Nanjing National Government, the ruling Nationalist Party (KMT) endeavored to enhance its role in grassroots-level governance. However, instead of exerting direct control over local policies and appointing qualified personnel to occupy key positions in local governments, the KMT regime continued to delegate powers to landlords and local despots and rely on them for revenue extraction (Wang 2001). This gave rise to further capture and dominance in local affairs by landed elites, hampering the development of state capacity (Duara 1991; Xu et al. 2018). As shown in Figure 2, the tax revenues

collected by the KMT government from rural sectors were not strongly associated with its party strength, as measured by the number of KMT members in 1935.

3.2 Land Reform after 1949

Before the establishment of the PRC in 1949, the CPC had implemented land reform in the northern provinces under its political control. In the 1950s, the CPC continued to extend the land reform into the South, which previously had been under the KMT's control. The motive for the land reform was twofold. The primary goal was to transform the highly skewed land ownership. As reflected by the CPC's vice chairman, Liu Shaoqi, "less than ten percent of the rural population, comprising landlords and rich peasants, owned about seventy to eighty percent of the land... while ninety percent of the rural population, including poor peasants, tenant farmers, middle-class peasants, and other people, owned only about twenty to thirty percent of the land."³

In addition to addressing land inequality, power consolidation was a fundamental strategic concern of the land reform. While the old liberated zones were the main military strongholds for the People's Liberation Army (PLA), the Southern regions had relatively weak presence in local party organizations. Local elites and family lineages remained a stronghold in the governance of local affairs. The pro-communist guerrilla fighters and underground party members also posed a challenge to political loyalty (Yang 2009; Zhang and Liu 2019). As a result, the CPC's cadre deployment in the newly acquired regions relied widely on the revolutionary cadres from the party's old power base.

3.3 Quelling the Old Elites

Ample evidence from historical archives suggest that, simultaneously with the implementation of land redistribution, local political authorities launched mass purges against landed elites. In January 1951, Mao Zedong stated in instructions on land reform work that, "the main thing to pay attention to in land reform work is whether the masses have been truly mobilized to take

³Some recent works by historians suggest that there was relatively moderate land inequality at the country level. For example, Pang, Xu and Guan (2021) report that landlords and rich farmers made up 9.39% of the rural demographic and owned 42.8% of the land prior to the reform.

action themselves (with help from above) to overthrow the landlord class and distribute land” (Mao 1996). To this end, Du Runsheng, the Deputy Director of the Land Reform Committee in the Central South Military and Political Commission, refuted the idea of “peaceful land distribution,” putting forward the imperative to “ideologically mobilize the masses and organize them into the struggle” (Du 1950).

The proactive engagement of the masses, from classifying social classes, to organizing grievance and struggle sessions, to redistributing land and reassessing the redistribution outcomes, was vital throughout the land reform process. By involving peasants in the public denunciation and humiliation of landlords, the concept of “class” was deeply instilled in their minds, effectively eroding the legitimacy of traditional authority. Part of a social revolution, the movement of mass purges targeted not only the wealthy, but also “the powerful”. Peasants with medium-size land holdings were often identified as landlords or rich, and they were violently targeted, if they had held an administrative position under the KMT regime (Yang 2009).

It is difficult to obtain a unified and direct measure of the radicalism of the land reform. However, the previous discussion leads us to speculate that the proportion of people who were designated as landlords and rich peasants may be used as an indicator of the radicalism of the land reform in a region. In principle, the numbers of households and individuals in each class were determined by the standards of class designation published by the State Council. Meanwhile, the local authorities’ discretion in implementing class identification often deviated from the standards, due to factors such as political mobilization, ideological radicalization, the capacity of work teams, and the local socioeconomic situation. This resulted in instances of both “leftist dogmatism” where class struggle escalated, and “rightist opportunism,” characterized by localism, relatively peaceful reform, or halfway reform (“Jia Sheng Fan”) (Kung, Wu and Wu 2012).

In some villages in the old liberated areas, the proportion of designated landlords and rich peasants exceeded 60%, and in many other villages in North China, it reached as high as 20-30% (Dong 1987). A large number of middle-class peasants and even poor and landless farmers were thus misclassified. In provinces like Guangdong, by contrast, local cadres were

accused of regional favoritism for intentionally protecting certain groups in class designation, such as overseas Chinese, homeowners (“Lao Wu Zhu”) who had contributed to the local revolution, and military martyrs’ dependents (Yang 2009). Recognizing the difficulties and potential arbitrariness in specific implementation, the higher-level authorities had mandated strict control over the proportion of designated landlords and rich peasants to around 8%-10% in the newly liberated areas. However, less than half of the counties in the newly liberated areas strictly adhered to the quota requirements. Our data show significant disparities across regions. There was on average a fivefold difference in the proportion of landlords and rich peasants between the counties with the top 5% and bottom 5% proportions. We attribute the higher proportions of designated landlords and rich peasants to political motives rather than a reflection of real strengths of landed elites, and expect to observe larger expansion of the party’s strength in those counties.

3.4 Political Recruitment

Along with the eradication of old rural elites, a new political force with lower economic and educational backgrounds emerged. Chen Boda, a senior party leader, remarked, “during the land distribution process, it is possible to identify those who are the true activists, who are selflessly dedicated, and who genuinely have the trust of the masses and possess solutions. Thus, following a successful land distribution, there’s a significant opportunity to expand membership, elect or re-elect committee members, restructure groups, and develop party membership (incorporating active members from the peasant associations as party members).”⁴ This strategy was adeptly applied on the ground. One of the primary responsibilities of the land reform work teams involved assessing the enthusiasm of peasants participating in the land reform and struggle activities.

In the land reform movement, competent and committed activists, particularly those among the poor and middle-class peasants, were often inducted into the party or integrated into the

⁴Refer to Chen Boda: “The General Process and Steps of Mass Movements and Mass Organizations (Qunzhong Yundong Yu Qunzhong Zuzhi De Yiban Guocheng Yu Buzhou),” included in the East China Bureau Propaganda Department’s compilation, *Historical Documents on China’s Land Issue (Zhongguo Tudi Wenti Lishi Wenjian)*, p. 102, Jinan: Shandong Xinhua Bookstore (publication year unknown).

nascent grassroots political structures. Granted positions and status by the new regime, the poor and middle-class peasants were inherently more inclined toward unwavering enforcement of the state's policies. In the meantime, the CPC also conducted inspections and rectifications of grassroots party members and cadres during the land reform. Individuals who remained entwined with landlords, engaged in corruption, showed signs of opportunism, or failed to align as faithful implementers of state directives were systematically weeded out in the mass mobilization (Zhang 2012). This careful recruitment and rectification of party membership substantially strengthened the CPC's grip on rural communities, signifying the deep entrenchment of state authority at the grassroots level.

Consistent with Hypothesis 3, qualitative evidence from historical archives illustrates that the activists were under prolonged supervision and performance evaluation by the party-state. Figure B2, in Appendix B, shows an evaluation form of members of a production brigade (Shengchan Dui) from X county, Jiangsu province. The evaluation covers the land reform, rural collectivization (1953-57), and the people's commune period. The archives include each farmer's class and performance in the land reform and other subsequent movements. The contents in the archives indicate that the farmers were classified into different classes, including poor farmers, middle-class peasants, and so on. The peasants' attitudes toward the movement were classified as positive, normal, or negative. In Panel A in Figure B2, the 13th head of household was considered as an opportunist. By contrast, Panel B in Figure B2 shows that the 10th household head showed consistent, active participation in the land reform and subsequent political campaigns. Consequently, during the people's commune period, this individual was elected as the local production team leader. It is evident that the party-state closely observed activists' performance throughout the turbulent changes in the 1950s, and their performance would be closely linked to their political achievements and social status.

3.5 Enhancing State Capacity

The CPC's political recruitment during the land reform enhanced the state's ability to carry out mass mobilization and revenue extraction in rural areas. In 1953, shortly after the reform was completed in a majority of rural areas, the party implemented a centralized grain procurement

system at depressed prices. Consequently, the state’s grain procurement increased by 80% in 1954, notwithstanding grain production rising only by 1.8% compared to the previous year (Liu 1985).

The instrumental role of rural cadres and activists in the economic transformation should not be underestimated. Even before the cooperative surge that began in the second half of 1955, some rural areas already showed a strong tendency toward collectivization, with many advanced cooperatives spontaneously initiated by local cadres and party members. Apart from their political enthusiasm for the CPC’s blueprint for state building and modernization, the collectivization provided them a new career path, allowing them to extend their influence from simple rural governance to economic management and relieving them of the heavy burden of agricultural labor (Xiao 2014). These grassroots cadres and party members consequently became a crucial driving force behind the promotion of collectivization.

The campaign of agricultural collectivization accelerated after the land reform, culminating in the establishment of the People’s commune system during the Great Leap Forward campaign. Small-scale peasant landownership was thoroughly transformed into collective ownership, which was tightly controlled by the state, with production, distribution, and even consumption in rural areas becoming subject to state orders. Leveraging its formidable capacity to extract agricultural surplus, the state provided crucial support for the capital accumulation of heavy industry. From 1953 to 1978, as estimated by (Wu 2001), the state transferred a substantial amount, totaling 280 billion yuan, from the agriculture sector to the industrial sector by depressing agricultural prices (known as the “price scissors”) in procurement. This represented about 17% of agricultural gross income, while the formal agricultural tax during that period only accounted for 5.4% of agricultural income.

4 Data

This section provides a description of the data used in the empirical analysis and their resources. We begin with the land reform data, followed by measures of the CPC’s grassroots recruitment and state capacity, and then introduce other control variables.

4.1 Land Reform

This paper analyzes the impact of land reforms implemented in the early 1950s, focusing on counties in southern provinces that did not undergo these reforms until that period. Most of these counties, referred to as “Newly Liberated Areas,” were occupied by the PLA only after its decisive victory over the KMT. We manually collect county-level data from county gazetteers, which provide details about land reform wherever the information is available. The data cover 901 counties in 12 southern provinces.⁵ For each county, we document the start and completion years of the land reform, the population size of each designated class—landlords, rich peasants, middle peasants, poor peasants, and tenants—along with the amount of land owned by each class before and after the reform.

Figure 3 illustrates the timing of the completion of the land reform across the southern counties. The completion year of land reform is correlated with the timing of the CPC’s military occupation, which was primarily influenced by its march route and the counties’ geographic locations. The eastern provinces were the first to be “liberated” after the Yangtze River Crossing campaign, resulting in the earliest implementation of land reform among the newly liberated areas. In contrast, the central-south and southwest provinces were liberated later, leading to a delayed start of the land reform. The southwest provinces in particular faced an extended period of suppressing remnant KMT forces, making it the last area to initiate land reform. Figure B1 shows the number of counties that completed the reform each year. Over 90% of the counties in our sample had completed the land reform by 1953.

4.2 Political Recruitment in 1949-57

We collect annual data from county gazetteers on the numbers of party members and, urban and rural party branches, to assess the extent of CPC recruitment and penetration in each

⁵The provinces include Anhui, Fujian, Guangdong, Guangxi, Guizhou, Hubei, Hunan, Jiangsu, Jiangxi, Sichuan, Yunnan, and Zhejiang. For Anhui and Jiangsu provinces, their northern regions along the Yangtze River served as the most important bases for the New Fourth Army during the Civil War. Although some counties in these areas officially began land reform only in 1950 or later, the activities of the New Fourth Army may have already influenced land distribution and rural power structure. Therefore, for these two provinces, we only consider counties that were liberated after the Crossing of the Yangtze River Campaign (April 1949) and initiated land reform in 1950 or later.

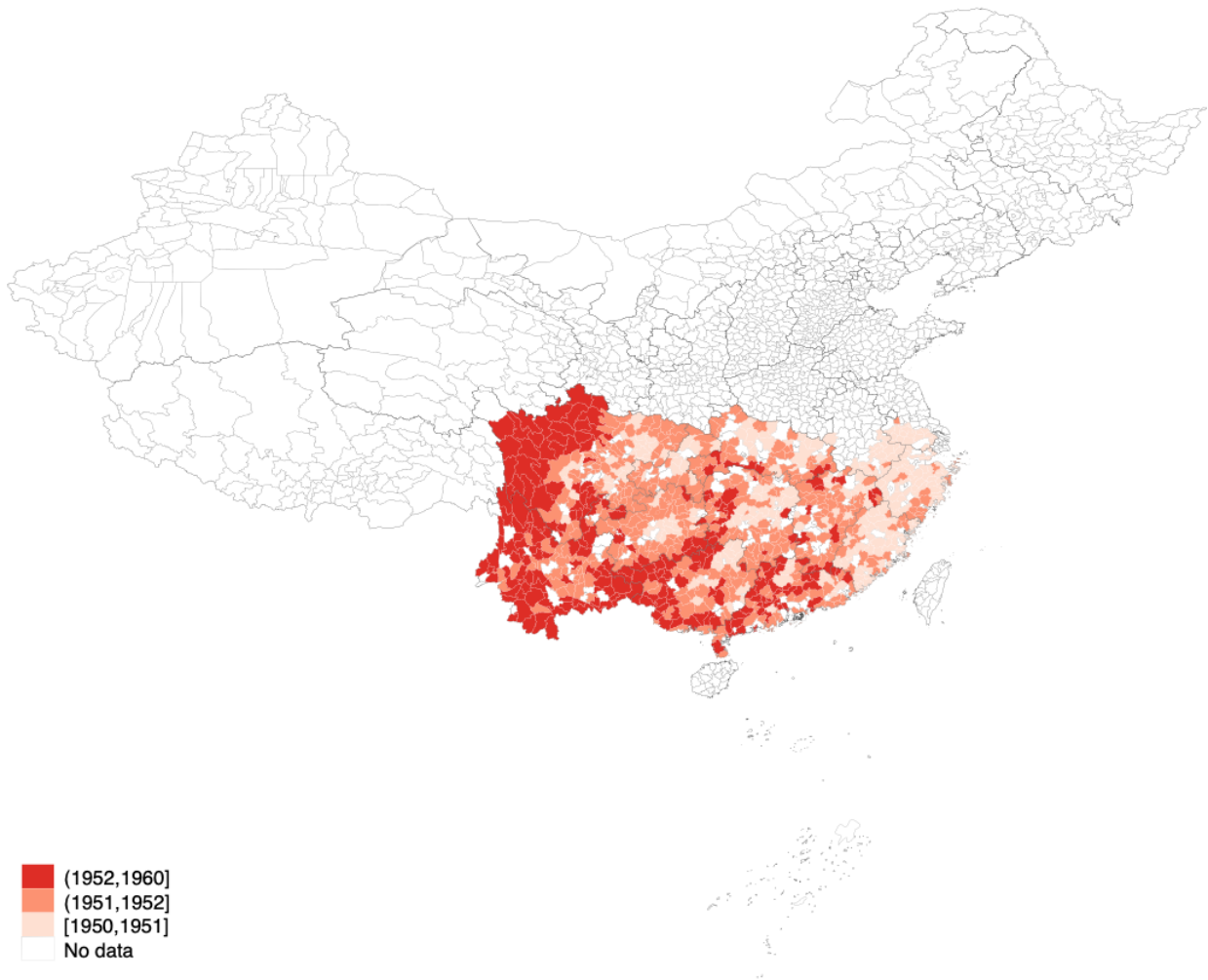


Figure 3: The Timing of the Completion of Land Reform

Notes: This graph illustrates the completion years of land reform for the sampled counties.

county. To analyze specific recruitment patterns, we gather data on the educational and gender composition of the party members. Table 1 shows that from 1949 to 1957, the average number of CPC members in the sampled counties was 1,518, with an average county population of 265,246. This translates into approximately 57 CPC members per 10,000 individuals.

4.3 State Capacity

We also assemble from county gazetteers a set of indicators of state capacity and policy implementation in the 1950s, including annual grain procurement, the timing of agricultural collectivization (1953-57), and the number of “rightists” during the Anti-Rightist Campaign (1957-58)⁶. As Table 1 summarizes, on average, 23.5% of grain was procured by the government between 1954 and 1957, 180 individuals were labeled as “rightists” per county, and 41% of the counties in the sample established advanced cooperatives by 1955.

4.4 Other Variables

The local stock of human capital and economic conditions may have affected both land reform implementation and party member recruitment. We measure human capital using average adult years of schooling, inferred from the 1% sample of the 1990 population census, and assess economic conditions using annual industrial and agricultural output data from county gazetteers. We also document the timing of the “liberation” of each county from county gazetteers, to capture the impact of the military acquisition on the pace of land reform and party recruitment.

Geographic controls are included to account for regional heterogeneity. We calculate the county centroid’s longitude and latitude, elevation, proportion of hilly terrain, and distance to the provincial capital, using a historical 1990 map of China from the China Historical Geographic Information System (CHGIS) 2016 version. Additionally, to measure the political power of the old elites before the land reform, we collected the number of KMT members in 1935 and 1946 from county gazetteers. We also calculate the proportion of rural households and rural land area per household in 1930, population density in 1920, distance to the nearest treaty port to capture the historical level of urbanization, and land endowment at the county level. The raw data are sourced from Yin (2010), Stauffer (1922), and Jia (2014), respectively.

⁶The Anti-Rightist Campaign was a political campaign to purge alleged “rightists” within in the CPC and the country as a whole.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics

	Mean	Min	Max	Std.Dev.	Obs	Data sources
<i>Time-variant Variables (1949-1957)</i>						
CCP members	1518	0	70025	2218	6949	A
CCP members with primary education or below	1564	0	64379	2462	2975	A
Female CCP members	147	0	5336	218	4407	A
Total population	265246	4040	1221529	199906	7633	A
CCP branches	116	1	5690	175	4974	A
CCP rural branches	110	0	943	135	738	A
Per capita industrial and agricultural output value (yuan)	168.39	11.59	908.10	82.79	5719	A
Average schooling years of adults	1.64	0.00	5.57	0.90	7699	B
<i>Time-invariant Variables</i>						
The year land reform completed	1952	1950	1960	1	901	A
The year land reform launched	1951	1950	1959	1	901	A
The year of liberation	1949	1947	1952	0	900	A
CCP members in 1950	308	0	7461	604	729	A
CCP members in 1954	1487	8	24769	1449	833	A
CCP members with primary education or below in 1954	1343	3	22867	1496	393	A
Female CCP members in 1954	133	1	1832	127	560	A
KMT members in 1946	1823	26	27061	2141	493	A
KMT members in 1935	530	3	7546	656	333	A
Number of Rightest	180	7	3854	205	733	A
Advanced Cooperatives founded before 1955	0.41	0.00	1.00	0.49	894	A
Landlords and rich peasants' land share (%)	39.52	4.23	84.86	17.26	728	A
Landlords and rich peasants' population share (%)	9.17	0.84	30.75	3.04	743	A
Mean value of procurement rate between 1954 and 1957	23.47	8.62	44.95	8.13	716	A
Share of rural households in 1930	71.57	17.80	98.93	14.48	852	C
Land per rural household in 1930 (are)	113.94	8.03	787.69	99.65	776	C
Land tax per rural household in 1935 (yuan)	1.08	0.03	10.35	1.26	339	D
Distance to Provincial Capital (km)	209.48	15.09	559.76	113.36	901	E
Elevation (m)	753.23	0.07	4352.00	875.30	901	E
Total population in 1920 (10,000 people)	27	0	171	25	715	F
Distance to the nearest treaty port (km)	260.44	6.26	1065.49	218.42	901	G

Notes: The data sources are the following: A, County gazetteers; B, National Bureau of Statistics of China (2005); C, Yin (2010); D, Zheng (2016); E, CHGIS (2016); F, Stauffer (1922); G, Jia (2014).

5 Empirical Results

We empirically examine the association between the land reform and political recruitment using the constructed county-level panel dataset. The dependent variable, political recruitment, takes two measures: the number of CPC members and the CPC's local branches per 10,000 people. We first estimate the baseline model using a standard difference-in-differences (DID) strategy, then extend the baseline result to the dynamic setting.

5.1 Testing H1: Land Reform and Political Recruitment

The baseline model adopts the following DID approach to test Hypothesis 1.

$$CPC_{it} = \alpha Complete_{it} + \beta X_{it} + c_i + \delta_{prov} \times \gamma_t + \epsilon_{it}, \quad (1)$$

Our analysis focuses on counties located in the “newly-liberated” areas in South China, where land reform had not been implemented prior to 1950. The observation period spans from 1949 to 1957. In the equation, i is an indicator for county i among newly-liberated areas, and t is the indicator for year. The outcome variable, CPC_{it} , indicates the (log) number of party members per 10,000 people, the (log) number of party branches per 10,000 people, or the (log) number of rural/or non-rural party branches per 10,000 people. The estimation strategy exploits the temporal variations in completion of the land reform across the newly liberated areas, $Complete_{it}$. The coefficient of $Complete_{it}$, α , captures the association between the land reform and political recruitment.

The controlled variables, denoted as X_{it} , consist a set of socioeconomic indicators that vary across counties and over years, such as the per capita industrial and agricultural output values in logarithm and the adults’ average years of schooling. We also include a dummy variable indicating whether this county had been liberated/acquired by the PLA in this year. The local economic conditions, the existing human capital stock and the presence of the PLA military forces are factors that may have affected the implementation of the land reform and recruitment of party members.

In addition, c_i denotes the county-specific fixed effect, and $\delta_{prov} \times \gamma_t$ denotes the interactions between provincial dummies and year dummies. We include county fixed effects to control for time-invariant unobserved factors at the county level that may have influenced both the land reform process and CPC member recruitment. The interaction between provincial and year dummies captures differential temporal shocks across provinces.

Table 2 presents the baseline regression results. In the baseline result of column (1), the completion of the land reform is associated with a significant increase in the number of CPC members. The estimated results are robust when additionally controlling for the province-year fixed effects, the average years of schooling of county population, and the per capita industrial and agricultural output values, as shown in columns (2) and (3). Finally, in column (4), we

Table 2: Land Reform and Increase in Political Recruitment

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)
	CCP members per 10k people(log)			CCP branches per 10k people (log)	CCP rural branches per 10k people (log)	CCP non-rural branches per 10k people (log)	CCP members per branch		
Reform completed	0.197*** [0.038]	0.115*** [0.039]	0.090*** [0.040]	0.095** [0.041]	0.078*** [0.029]	0.054* [0.032]	0.256*** [0.126]	0.084 [0.079]	-0.467 [1.340]
Average schooling years of adults			0.016 [0.100]	0.024 [0.100]		-0.015 [0.080]	-0.106 [0.331]	0.303 [0.349]	-0.141 [3.506]
Per capita industrial and agricultural output value (log)			-0.054 [0.086]	-0.059 [0.085]		0.140* [0.077]	-0.108 [0.480]	-0.022 [0.238]	-1.597 [2.779]
Liberated				0.659** [0.332]		-0.105 [0.170]	0.000 [.]	0.000 [.]	33.917** [13.820]
Year FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
County FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Province × Year FE	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	6760	6760	5024	5024	4897	3720	451	382	3600
R-squared	0.877	0.902	0.915	0.915	0.877	0.887	0.891	0.779	0.527

Notes: The unit of analysis is a county-year pair. Standard errors are clustered at the county level. ***, **, and * indicate statistical significance at the 1, 5 and 10 percent levels, respectively. “Reform completed” is a dummy variable that equals 1 if county i in year t has completed the land reform. “Liberated” is a dummy variable that equals one if county i in year t has been militarily “liberated.” The density of rural CPC branches is only available for a small number of counties, where the variation in the year of liberation is limited. Therefore, we only display the result when the “liberated” dummy is not controlled in columns (7) and (8).

control for the dummy variable indicating whether a county had been taken over (“liberated”) by the PLA. It is understood that the year of liberation was highly correlated with the year of the land reform. Controlling for the year of liberation helps alleviate the confounding effects of the military presence on political recruitment. The estimated results remain qualitatively similar. With the full set of controls, the coefficient on the completion of land reform is 0.095. It estimates that the completion of land reform was associated with an increase of approximate 10% in the intensity of the number of CPC members. The results are consistent with Hypothesis 1.

We also examine whether completion of the land reform was accompanied by an expansion of party branches. As a Leninist-style party, the CPC relies on its party branches at various levels of hierarchy to convey the party’s directives and enforce discipline among its members (Jin and Liu 2010). Therefore, the expansion of party branches can be a direct measure of increased party strength. Columns (5) and (6) in Table 2 show that the land reform increased the density of party branches by 5.4%. In contrast, the military “liberation” did not have an immediate impact on the development of party branches.

Columns (7) and (8) in Table 2 show that the land reform was associated more strongly with party branches in rural areas, but not in urban areas. Historically, the land reform occurred overwhelmingly in rural areas. This result lends support to the strategic importance of the land reform for political recruitment. Finally, column (9) shows that the land reform did not give rise to an increase in the size of the party branches, as measured by the number of party members per branch. Our interpretation is that in the early stages of the revolutionary regime, the CPC primarily leveraged land reform to rapidly establish party organizations in areas without an existing party presence, rather than expanding the scale of existing organizations.

5.2 Dynamic Patterns of Political Recruitment

Our identification strategy relies on the assumption that the timing of the land reform implementation was independent of other unobservable factors that varied across counties and years, and influenced the CPC’s recruitment pattern. To test whether the political recruitment

followed a common trend prior to the land reform, we construct a dynamic estimation model as follows:

$$CPC_{it} = \alpha_0 + \sum_{\tau} \alpha_{\tau} \times I(LR_{it} = \tau) + \beta X_{it} + \delta_{prov} \times \gamma_t + c_i + \epsilon_{it}, \quad (2)$$

In Equation (2), the dependent variable remains the (log) number of party members per 10,000 people. We expand $Complete_{it}$ in the baseline regression to a set of time dummies ($LR_{it} = \tau$), indicating the time relative to the year of reform completion. The control variables are the same as in column (4) in Table 2.

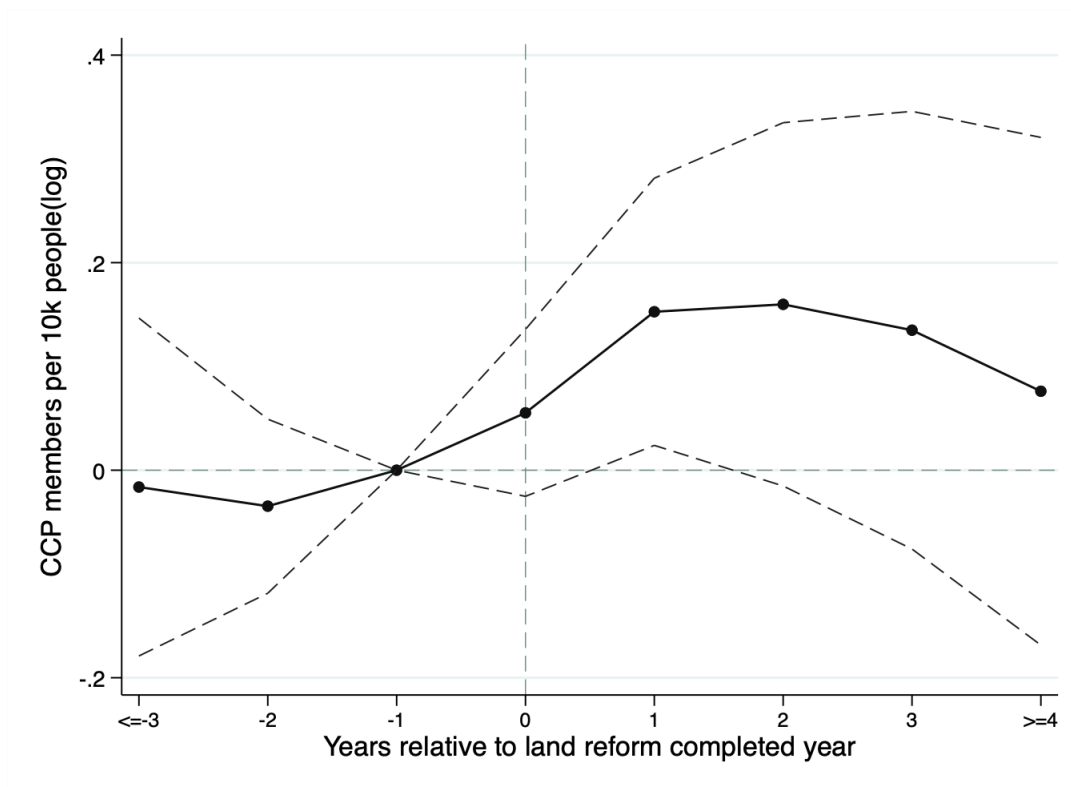


Figure 4: Land Reform and Political Recruitment: Dynamic Pattern

Notes: The horizontal axis indicates the years relative to the land reform’s completion. The points connected by the solid line indicate the estimated coefficients of α_{τ} in Equation (2). The bounds indicate the 95% confidence intervals.

Figure 4 presents the point estimates of α_{τ} and the 95% confidence intervals, using “one year before completion” as the comparison group. It indicates that there was no significant

increase in political recruitment in the county until the completion of the land reform. In many regions, the land reform spanned over several years and involved a time-consuming process of reviewing and correcting land redistribution policies. The finding that the number of CPC's members increased after, but not before, completion of the land reform sheds lights on the CPC's strategic consideration in state building. Instead of using the recruitment of party members as a one-shot incentive for pushing forward the land reform, the party may have waited on the recruitment decisions until after the successful completion of the reform. The process of waiting and scrutinizing helped the party screen out opportunistic participants in the movement and select loyal and qualified party agents. Consequently, expansion of the numbers of party members primarily took place only after completion of the land reform. We also observe that the impact of land reform on party recruitment was significant only in the year immediately following its completion, which helps rule out, to some extent, the influence of subsequent political movements, such as the surge in agricultural collectivization, on party recruitment.

5.3 Alternative Estimation Approaches

Recent literature indicates that DID estimates may be biased when treatment timing varies, due to comparisons between groups treated earlier and those treated later (Goodman-Bacon 2021; De Chaisemartin and d'Haultfoeuille 2020; Callaway and Sant'Anna 2021). Specifically, in such cases, the coefficient of a given lead or lag in conventional event studies can be confounded by effects from other periods, and apparent pre-trends may emerge solely due to heterogeneity in treatment effects. We use the method proposed by Callaway and Sant'Anna (2021) to address this concern and test the assumption of parallel trends.

Callaway and Sant'Anna (2021) propose a group-time average treatment effect in staggered DID setups. We define groups based on the year in which a county completed its land reform, while counties that had not yet completed land reform serve as the untreated group. The results for the group-time average treatment effects are reported in Figure B3, which shows a positive effect of land reform completion on the density of CPC members. Table A1, in Appendix A,

reports the aggregated treatment effects. The results suggest that our results are robust after accounting for treatment heterogeneities.

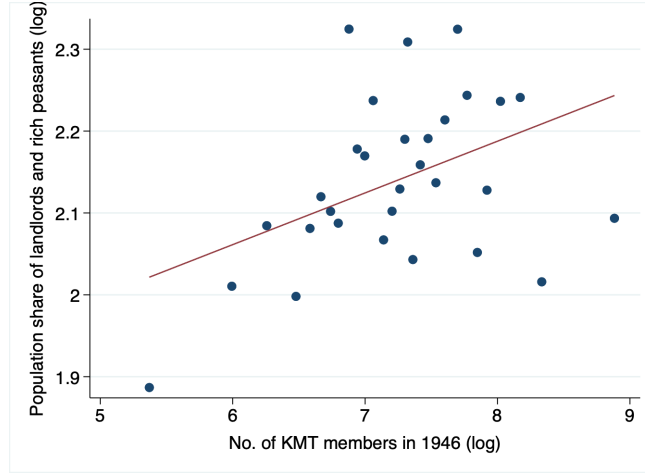
6 Strategies of Political Recruitment

Our analysis supports Hypothesis 1, which states that the completion of land reform was associated with increases in the numbers of CPC members and local branches. This section further investigates the political-economic mechanisms of the reform. The analysis speaks to Hypotheses 2, 3, and 4. Section 6.1 tests Hypothesis 2, discussing the interplay between the presence of the old elites and the drive for recruitment of new party members. Section 6.2 tests Hypothesis 3, demonstrating the party’s recruitment preference in terms of the candidates’ socioeconomic backgrounds. Section 6.3 examines Hypothesis 4, showing that the newly recruited party members played an instrumental role in promoting the state’s capacity.

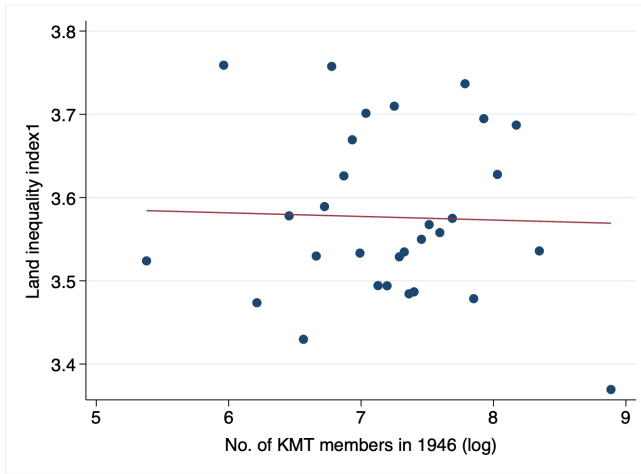
6.1 Testing H2: Old Elites and Political Recruitment

Hypothesis 2 in section 3 presents a pair of political-economic motivations for the land reform. First, the party may have wanted to identify elites in the old regime and use the land reform as a strategy to reshape the power landscape. As we elaborate in section 3, landholders under the old regime often served as state agents, such as tax collectors and petty administrators, and were co-opted into the KMT during the late Republican Era (Wang 2003). This led to a larger increase in political recruitment in counties with stronger pre-revolutionary KMT presence. Alternatively, the party may have intended to use the land reform to address economic inequality. If that is the case, the land reform would have been more strongly associated with political recruitment in areas with greater land inequality.

We first test these arguments by examining the correlations between pre-revolutionary KMT strength and several socioeconomic indicators. Consistent with the intuition, panel (a) in Figure 5 verifies a positive correlation between the number of KMT members in 1946 and the proportion of classified landlords and rich peasants in the land reform. (The regression results are shown in Table A2). Panels (b) and (c) show that the number of KMT members was not



(a) KMT members and CLR



(b) KMT members and land inequality index 1



(c) KMT members and land inequality index 2

Figure 5: KMT members, CLR, and land inequality

Notes: These are binned scatter plots of the proportion of classified landlords and rich peasants (CLR) and land inequality versus the number of KMT members (with 30 equal-sized bins). Panel (a) regresses the CLR and the number of KMT members (in logarithm) on a set of control variables and plots the residuals. The solid line is the best linear fit line, constructed from an ordinary least squares regression of the CLR residuals on the residuals of the number of KMT members. Panels (b) and (c) present binned scatter plots using similar approaches. The control variables include elevation, distance to the nearest treaty ports (in logarithm), average years of schooling among adults, rural household share in the 1930s, and land per rural household in the 1930s. Land inequality index 1 is the land share of landlords and rich peasants (in logarithm). Land inequality index 2 is the multiple of the average land per capita of landlords and rich peasants relative to the total population's average land per capita (in logarithm).

significantly associated with the proportion of land owned by landlords and rich peasants, and it was even negatively correlated with the ratio of landholdings per capita among landlords and rich peasants relative to the average landholding. Taken together, the results show that during

the land reform, class designation was used not only to implement the land redistribution, but also to help the party to identify the old elites with political power under the old regime.

Table 3: Old Elites, Land Inequality and Political Recruitment

	CCP members per 10k people (log)		
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Reform completed	-0.269 [0.178]	-0.305 [0.257]	-0.305 [0.257]
Reform completed# Population share of lords and rich peasants	0.170** [0.078]	0.165** [0.083]	0.178** [0.090]
Reform completed # Land inequality index1 (log)		0.013 [0.064]	
Reform completed # Land inequality index2 (log)			0.013 [0.064]
Baseline Controls	Yes	Yes	Yes
County FE	Yes	Yes	Yes
Province \times Year FE	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	4343	4177	4177
R-squared	0.915	0.915	0.915

Notes: The unit of analysis is a county-year pair. Standard errors are clustered at the county level. ***, **, and * indicate statistical significance at the 1, 5, and 10 percent levels, respectively. Reform completed is an indicator variable for whether this county in this year has completed land reform. Socioeconomic controls include per capita industrial and agricultural output value (in logarithm) and average years of schooling among adults. We also add an indicator variable for whether the county in this year has been militarily “liberated.” Land inequality index 1 is the land share of landlords and rich peasants (in logarithm). Land inequality index 2 is the multiple of the average land per capita of landlords and rich peasants relative to the total population’s average land per capita (in logarithm).

We test Hypothesis 2a by interacting the land reform dummy with the population share of classified landlords and rich peasants. As shown in column (1) in Table 3, the land reform was more strongly associated with the increase in the number of CPC members where the share of the old elites was larger. This is consistent with the anecdotal evidence presented in section 3, indicating that individuals who held certain social power in rural society under the KMT regime were classified as targets of the “class struggle.” In the context of the land reform, individuals who were identified as landlords and rich peasants may not have been large landholders; instead, they may have been tax collectors, neighborhood heads (baojia zhang), clan elders, or public land managers who served as state agents in the KMT regime.

Columns (2) and (3) in Table 3 present the test for Hypothesis 2b. To test this hypothesis, we add to the explanatory variables in our baseline regressions an interaction term between completion of the land reform and land concentration before the reform. We use two indexes

to measure land concentration. The first index is the land share held by landlords and rich peasants. The second index is the proportion of land owned by landlords and rich peasants divided by their proportion of the population, which can also be interpreted as the multiple of per capita land owned by landlords and rich peasants relative to overall per capita land ownership. The coefficient of the interaction between land reform and the proportion of classified landlords and rich peasants remains significantly positive, while the interactions between land reform and land inequality are insignificant.

Overall, the results in Table 3 lend more supports to Hypothesis 2a than to 2b. To the extent that the number of landlords and rich peasants identified in the land reform movement was correlated with the strength of the KMT, the land reform achieved more than redistribution. Political recruitment during the movement served the larger strategic goal of power consolidation and state building. On the demand side, the party needed new activists to launch the class struggle against the old elites and replace them as state agents. On the supply side, cleansing the old elites cut off the patronage bonds between the old elites and the peasants, so that the activists would be loyal to no one but the party-state. As such, the campaign gained the activists' strong commitment and assured them that they would not be subject to retaliation for their participation in the class struggle.

6.2 Testing H3: Socioeconomic Backgrounds of New Recruits

We now turn to the empirical evidence examining Hypothesis 3, focusing on the socioeconomic backgrounds of the party members who were recruited during the land reform. As established in section 3, restricting the recruitment of party members to individuals from humble socioeconomic backgrounds was consistent with the party's ideology. Moreover, the land reform may have enhanced support for the party, particularly among impoverished peasants who were the primary beneficiaries of the land allocation. This led the peasants to support the party enthusiastically. Candidates from the lower class were more likely to be persistently committed to the revolutionary agenda, since their power stemmed solely from the party-state.

We provide several pieces of empirical evidence in support of Hypothesis 3. Columns (1) to (3) in Table 4 indicate that completion of the land reform led to a significant increase in

Table 4: Testing H3: Recruitment from Lower Socioeconomic Backgrounds

	CCP members with primary schooling or below per 10k people (log)	Female CCP membersper 10k people (log)	CCP members with middle schooling or above per 10k people (log)	CCP members with primary schooling or below per 10k people (log)	Female CCP membersper 10k people (log)
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Reform completed	0.146** [0.067]	0.140*** [0.041]	0.033 [0.049]	0.142** [0.065]	0.126*** [0.037]
Reform launched				0.031 [0.104]	0.103** [0.051]
Baseline Controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
County Fixed Effects	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Province \times Year FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	2214	3302	2224	2214	3302
R-squared	0.929	0.927	0.907	0.929	0.927

Notes: The unit of analysis is a county-year pair. Standard errors are clustered at county level. ***, **, and * indicate statistical significance at the 1, 5, and 10 percent levels, respectively. Reform completed is an indicator variable for whether this county in this year has completed land reform. Reform launched is an indicator variable for whether this county in this year has launched land reform. Socioeconomic Controls include per capita industrial and agricultural output value (in logarithm), and average schooling years of adults. We also add an indicator variable for if the county in this year has been military “liberated.”

the numbers of lower-educated and female CPC members, but not those with relatively higher education (middle school or beyond). In addition, columns (4) and (5) suggest that it was the completion of the land reform, instead of its launch, that had an impact on the increase in the number of CPC members from lower class. This finding indicates that most activists were under prolonged supervision and performance evaluation during the process of land reform and then were recruited by the party.

6.3 Testing H4: New Recruits and State Capacity

The empirical analyses support that political recruitment after the land reform served the strategic purpose of quelling the old elites and incorporating new state agents, who came primarily from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. In turn, we hypothesize that the newly recruited party members were loyal to the revolutionary agenda and capable of mobilizing local support for the state’s policies. The empirical prediction is that the greater number of CPC members should be associated with greater fiscal exaction and greater responsiveness to the state’s policies after the land reform.

The CPC’s campaign for “unified grain purchase and sale” in late 1953 provides a case in point. This policy led to the closing of free grain markets and imposed low-price purchase plans on the peasants. The campaign encountered wide resistance on the part of the peasants, leading to a reduction in total grain production. The grassroots party members and cadres played an instrumental role in terms of propaganda, mobilization, and organization to ensure procurement. Some party members overreported grain production and assumed a greater share of the procurement.

Table 5: Testing H4: CPC Organizations and State Capacity

	Mean value of procurement rate between 1954 and 1957				Advanced Cooperatives founded before 1955	Rightests per 10k people (log)
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
CCP members per 10k people in 1954 (log)	1.752** [0.778]	2.117** [0.903]			0.090** [0.044]	0.207*** [0.054]
CCP members per 10k people in 1950 (log)		-0.638 [0.474]				
Female CCP members per 10k people in 1954 (log)			2.819*** [0.808]			
CCP members with primary or schooling below per 10k people in 1954 (log)				2.239* [1.149]		
Socioeconomic controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Geographic controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Province FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	504	446	356	244	579	509
R-squared	0.316	0.318	0.376	0.381		0.444
Pseudo R-squared					0.132	

Notes: The values are ordinary least squares estimates in columns (1), (2), (3), (4), and (6), and probit estimates in column (5). The unit of analysis is a county. ***, **, and * indicate statistical significance at the 1, 5, and 10 percent levels, respectively. We report the marginal effect in column (5). The samples are restricted to counties where land reform was completed before 1954. Socioeconomic controls include per capita industrial and agricultural output value (in logarithm) and average years of schooling among adults. Geographic controls include elevation and distance to the provincial capital (in logarithm). Robust standard errors are reported in parentheses.

Columns (1) to (4) in Table 5 present evidence from counties that had completed the land reform before 1954. It is evident that the number of newly recruited CPC members was positively associated with the grain procurement rate. Doubling the number of CPC members per capita in 1954 was associated with a 2% increase in the grain procurement rate (column (2)). This is a relatively large impact, considering that the average procurement rate in that era was 23.5%. The analysis finds similar effects focusing on the impacts of female CPC members or members with lower educational attainment. Interestingly, the CPC members who were recruited before the land reform did not increase the procurement rate (column (2)). This

result provides further evidence that recruitment of party agents during the land reform was crucial for the development of state capacity.

We also explore the impact of the number of newly recruited CPC members on early implementation of agricultural collectivization (1953-57) and the number of “rightists” classified during the Anti-Rightist Campaign (1957-58). We collected data on the earliest year of establishment for advanced cooperatives (referred to as “Gaoji She”) in each county, and the dependent variable is whether the earliest advanced cooperatives were established by 1955.⁷ After the land reform, the party-state encouraged the counties to “strike for the socialist regime” voluntarily in a bottom-up manner, by merging individual households into small-scale cooperatives, and later into large-scale cooperatives of about 150 households. In our sample, 4% of the counties founded advanced cooperatives in 1954, and 59% did so after 1955. An early transition suggests greater responsiveness to the state’s policies. Column (5) in Table 5 shows that in 1954, the number of CPC members was strongly associated with early collectivization.

We also examine the impact of the number of newly recruited CPC members on the number of “rightists” in the Anti-Rightist Movement. The party-state initially set an upper limit on the proportion of individuals classified as rightists. However, the number of “rightists” tended to exceed the limit. Local CPC members were important in stimulating and steering the movement.

Column (6) in Table 5 shows that a 1% increase in the party density in 1954 was associated with a 21% increase in the number of “rightists” per capita. Altogether, the results in columns (5) and (6) demonstrate that political recruitment embedded in the land reform nurtured a more loyal and responsive grassroots party, which amplified the impact of radical state policies. This finding is in contrast with the pattern presented in Figure 2 in section 3, which shows that the number of local KMT members was not associated with the state’s fiscal capacity. The differentiated impacts of the two parties on fiscal capacity may be attributed to their party-building strategies.

⁷The establishment of advanced cooperatives occurred during the rural “socialist upsurge” that commenced in the latter half of 1955. Advanced cooperatives did not allow private ownership of land.

7 Conclusion

This paper conducted an in-depth investigation of the path of state building and growth of the CPC's organizational strength in the early years of the PRC. The paper focused on the role of the CPC's land reform in enhancing grassroots political recruitment and the capacity of the nascent revolutionary state. We drew from the literature on comparative state building and abundant qualitative studies on the revolutionary history of China. We argued that the significance of the land reform was more than a policy instrument for land redistribution—it was a key step toward comprehensive social and economic transformation as well as state building under the leadership of the ruling CPC. The land reform campaign reassured the mass population that the CPC was committed to social revolution and the eventual establishment of a strong and modernized country. At the local level, the land reform created continuous political momentum through grassroots mobilization and participation in the campaign, largely by poor peasants and tenants. The land reform also provided an opportunity for the party to scrutinize, recruit, spread out, and increase the numbers of local party members and organizations in just a few months.

The paper proposed four hypotheses in line with the theoretical argument and found empirical evidence in support of the hypotheses. The county-year-level econometric analyses established that completion of the land reform in a county was associated with a significant increase in local party strength, as measured by the numbers of party members and local branches. The growth of party strength was largely a response to the share of pre-revolutionary elites in the rural population, which itself might have been a political construction due to the radicalism of the movement and the threat posed by the KMT forces. Furthermore, the increasing political recruitment was concentrated in the population with lower socioeconomic backgrounds and education levels before the revolution, but not in other groups in the population. Finally, empirical evidence suggests that political recruitment contributed to revenue extraction and other items on the party's policy agenda in the subsequent decade.

Identifying the importance of land reform as a pivotal step in state building does not disregard the highly controversial and socially destructive policy consequences associated with it.

Ample research has demonstrated the enormously negative economic and social consequences due to state predation and the radicalism of the revolutionary agenda in the early years of the PRC (Chen, Peng and Wang 2024; Kung and Chen 2011; Meng, Qian and Yared 2015; Wang 2021). However, it is important to bear in mind that in many cases of fragile and failed states, liberal and illiberal regimes included, disruptive policies have stemmed from a lack of meaningful state building to transform the existing social and economic structures into a strong and cohesive polity. Through a case study on the dynamics and policy consequences of political recruitment related to the land reform in China, this paper theorizes and demonstrates a tangible mechanism of state building and shed light on the importance of party strength in shaping state capacity.

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A Appendix Tables

Table A1: Robustness Checks for Staggered DID

	<u>GAverage</u>	<u>G1950</u>	<u>G1951</u>	<u>G1952</u>	<u>G1953</u>	<u>G1954</u>	<u>G1955</u>	<u>G1956</u>
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
Group-specific effects	0.086* [0.052]	0.287*** [0.094]	0.474*** [0.055]	-0.222** [0.101]	0.207** [0.080]	0.464 [0.291]	0.470** [0.221]	0.286 [0.180]
	<u>Pre_avg</u>	<u>Post_avg</u>	<u>Tm1</u>	<u>Tp0</u>	<u>Tp1</u>	<u>Tp2</u>	<u>Tp3</u>	<u>Tp4</u>
Event study	0.020 [0.062]	0.362*** [0.070]	0.158** [0.075]	0.028 [0.045]	0.046 [0.039]	0.134* [0.069]	0.752*** [0.120]	0.518*** [0.119]
	<u>CAverage</u>	<u>T1950</u>	<u>T1951</u>	<u>T1952</u>	<u>T1953</u>	<u>T1954</u>	<u>T1955</u>	<u>T1956</u>
Calendar time effects	-0.011 [0.043]	-0.433*** [0.058]	-0.083* [0.045]	0.095 [0.061]	0.546*** [0.078]	0.539*** [0.123]	0.486*** [0.124]	-0.549*** [0.054]

Notes: The table reports aggregated treatment effects under the conditional parallel trends assumptions and with clustering at the county level. The row “group-specific effects” summarizes average treatment effects by the timing of the land reform; here, G indexes the year that a county is first treated. The row “event study” estimates the dynamic average treatment effect on the treated. Average treatment effects on the treated are estimated using periods relative to the first treatment. Only events occurring between three years before and three years after the first treatment are estimated. Tm means years before the completion of land reform, and Tp means years following the completion of land reform. The row “calendar time effects” reports average treatment effects by year; here, t indexes the year.

Table A2: KMT Members and Classified Old Elites

	Population share of landlords and rich peasants (log)	Land inequality index1 (log)	Land inequality index2 (log)
	(1)	(2)	(3)
# KMT in 1946(log)	0.063** [0.030]	-0.004 [0.032]	-0.070** [0.028]
Average schooling years of adults	0.026 [0.027]	-0.045 [0.034]	-0.061 [0.039]
Share of rural households in 1930	0.003*** [0.001]	0.002 [0.001]	-0.001 [0.001]
Land per rural household in 1930	0.003** [0.001]	0.004*** [0.001]	0.001 [0.002]
Geographic controls	Yes	Yes	Yes
Province Fixed Effects	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	371	364	358
R-squared	0.249	0.351	0.230

Notes: The table reports linear regressions. Geographic controls include elevation and distance to the provincial capital (in logarithm). We report robust standard errors.

B Appendix Figures

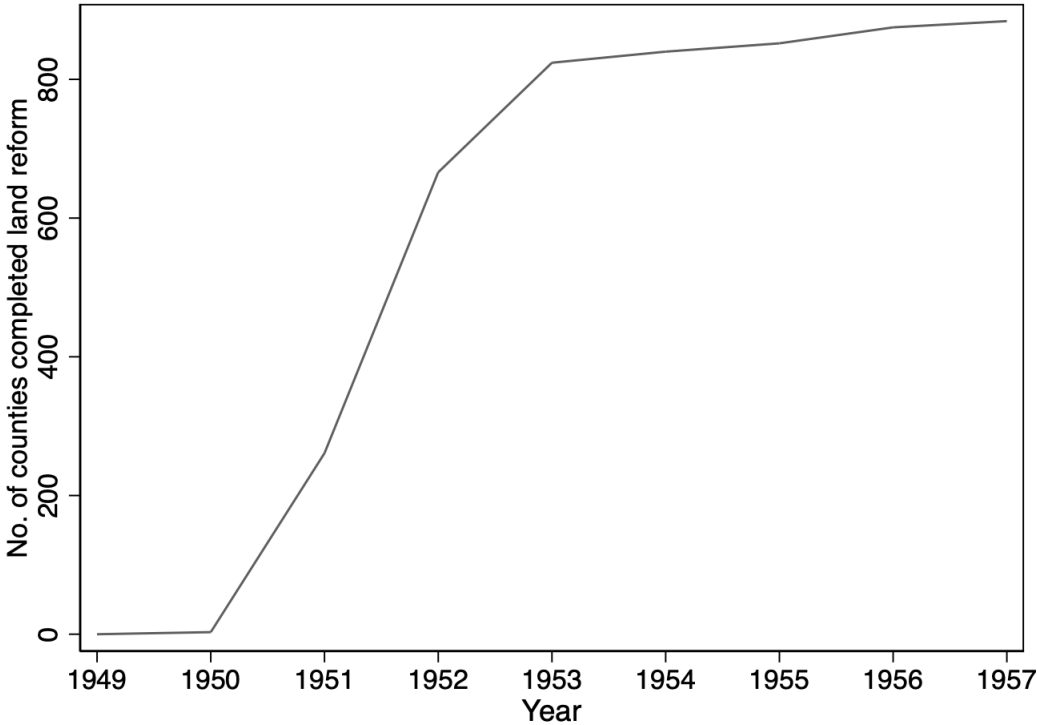


Figure B1: Number of counties that completed land reform from 1950 to 1957

Data source: County gazetteers.

顺序号	户主	性别	年龄	成份	职业	运动中的表现	解放前的经济情况	备注
13	[redacted]	男	38	中		积极支持运动，运动初期表现积极。	解放前为富农，土地较多。	此人一贯表现积极，运动初期表现积极。
14	[redacted]	男	41	贫	下中	运动中表现一般，运动后期表现积极。	解放前为贫农，土地较少。	此人一贯表现积极，运动后期表现积极。
15	[redacted]	男	41	地		运动中表现一般，运动后期表现积极。	解放前为地主，土地较多。	此人一贯表现积极，运动后期表现积极。
16	[redacted]	男	37	地		运动中表现一般，运动后期表现积极。	解放前为地主，土地较多。	此人一贯表现积极，运动后期表现积极。
17	[redacted]	男	26	贫		运动中表现一般，运动后期表现积极。	解放前为贫农，土地较少。	此人一贯表现积极，运动后期表现积极。
18	[redacted]	男	66	地		运动中表现一般，运动后期表现积极。	解放前为地主，土地较多。	此人一贯表现积极，运动后期表现积极。

说明：'贫法'框内可证明政治问题
 工帐组 [redacted] 蔡 [redacted] 蔡 [redacted]

(a)

顺序号	户主	性别	年龄	职业	成份	运动中的表现	解放后的经济情况	备注
1	[redacted]	男	49	贫农	贫农	运动中表现积极，运动后期表现积极。	解放后经济困难，生活艰苦。	
2	[redacted]	男	32	记工	中农	运动中表现积极，运动后期表现积极。	解放后经济困难，生活艰苦。	
3	[redacted]	男	34	保管	中农	运动中表现积极，运动后期表现积极。	解放后经济困难，生活艰苦。	
4	[redacted]	男	48	贫农	贫农	运动中表现积极，运动后期表现积极。	解放后经济困难，生活艰苦。	
5	[redacted]	男	42	贫农	贫农	运动中表现积极，运动后期表现积极。	解放后经济困难，生活艰苦。	
6	[redacted]	男	32	会计	中农	运动中表现积极，运动后期表现积极。	解放后经济困难，生活艰苦。	
7	[redacted]	男	57	贫农	贫农	运动中表现积极，运动后期表现积极。	解放后经济困难，生活艰苦。	
8	[redacted]	男	31	队长	中农	运动中表现积极，运动后期表现积极。	解放后经济困难，生活艰苦。	
9	[redacted]	女	36	中农	中农	运动中表现积极，运动后期表现积极。	解放后经济困难，生活艰苦。	
10	[redacted]	男	37	队长	中农	运动中表现积极，运动后期表现积极。	解放后经济困难，生活艰苦。	
11	[redacted]	男	32	中农	中农	运动中表现积极，运动后期表现积极。	解放后经济困难，生活艰苦。	
12	[redacted]	男	67	中农	中农	运动中表现积极，运动后期表现积极。	解放后经济困难，生活艰苦。	

说明：各注框内可证明政治问题
 工帐组 [redacted] 蔡 [redacted] 蔡 [redacted]

(b)

Figure B2: The Archives of Land Reform

Data source: The class designation archives (*Jieji Chengfen Dangan Ce*) of the X Production Brigade in a southern Jiangsu county, documented by the local Socialist Education Work Team. For each sample page, the left block displays the order of household heads, followed by their full names, household size, gender, age, appointed occupation, class, and their performance in the campaigns. While these archives were compiled in the 1960s, the recorded performance assessed the overall enthusiasm of peasants in each political movement, which provides valuable first-hand historical material for analyzing the process of party recruitment during the land reform.

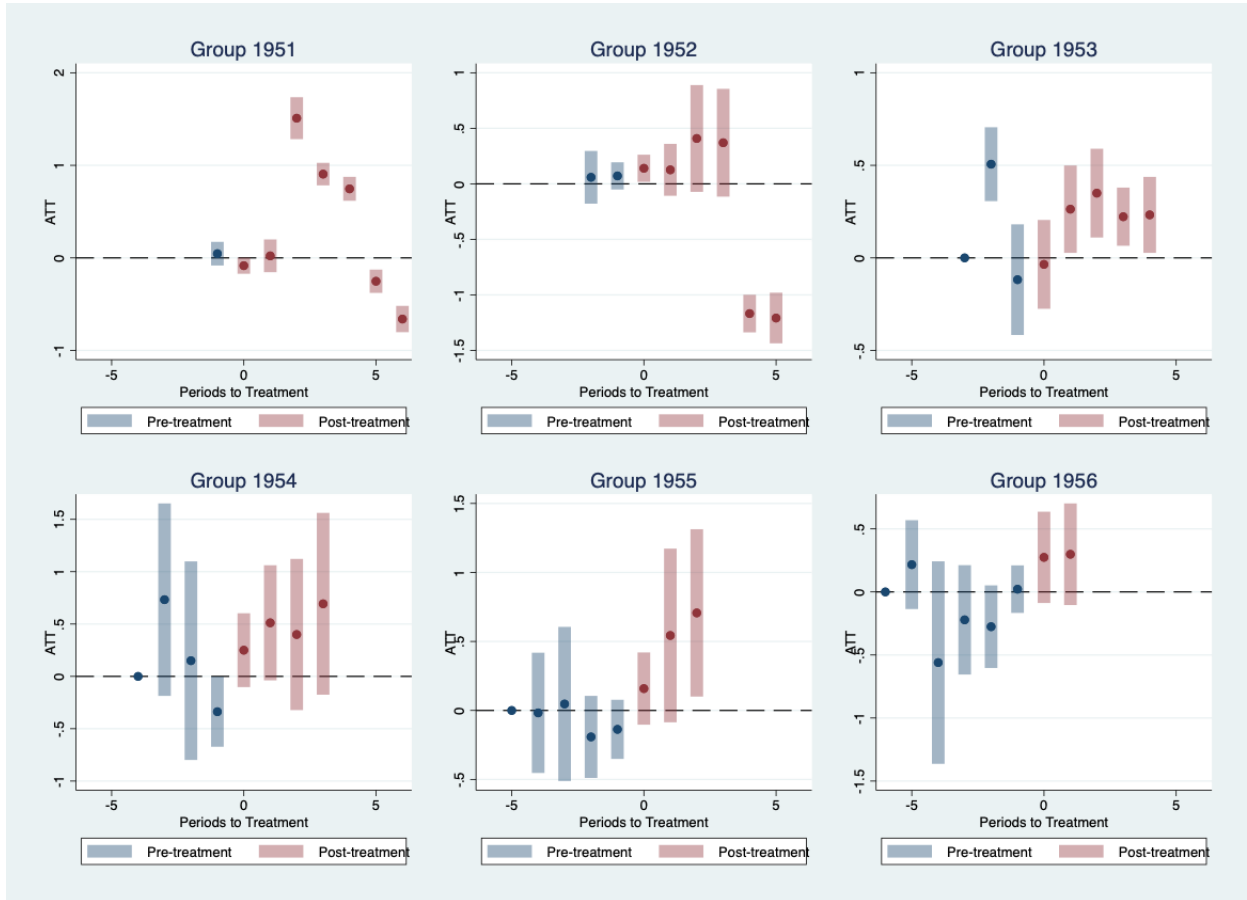


Figure B3: CPC Density Group-time Average Treatment Effects

Notes: We define groups based on the year in which a county completed its land reform, while counties that had not yet completed land reform serve as the untreated group. The effect of the completion of land reform on CPC density is estimated under the conditional parallel trends assumption. Blue bars give point estimates and simultaneous 95% confidence bands for pre-treatment periods allowing for clustering at the county level. Under the null hypothesis of the parallel trends assumption holding in all periods, these should be equal to 0. Red bars provide point estimates and simultaneous 95% confidence bands for the treatment effect of land reform allowing for clustering at the county level.

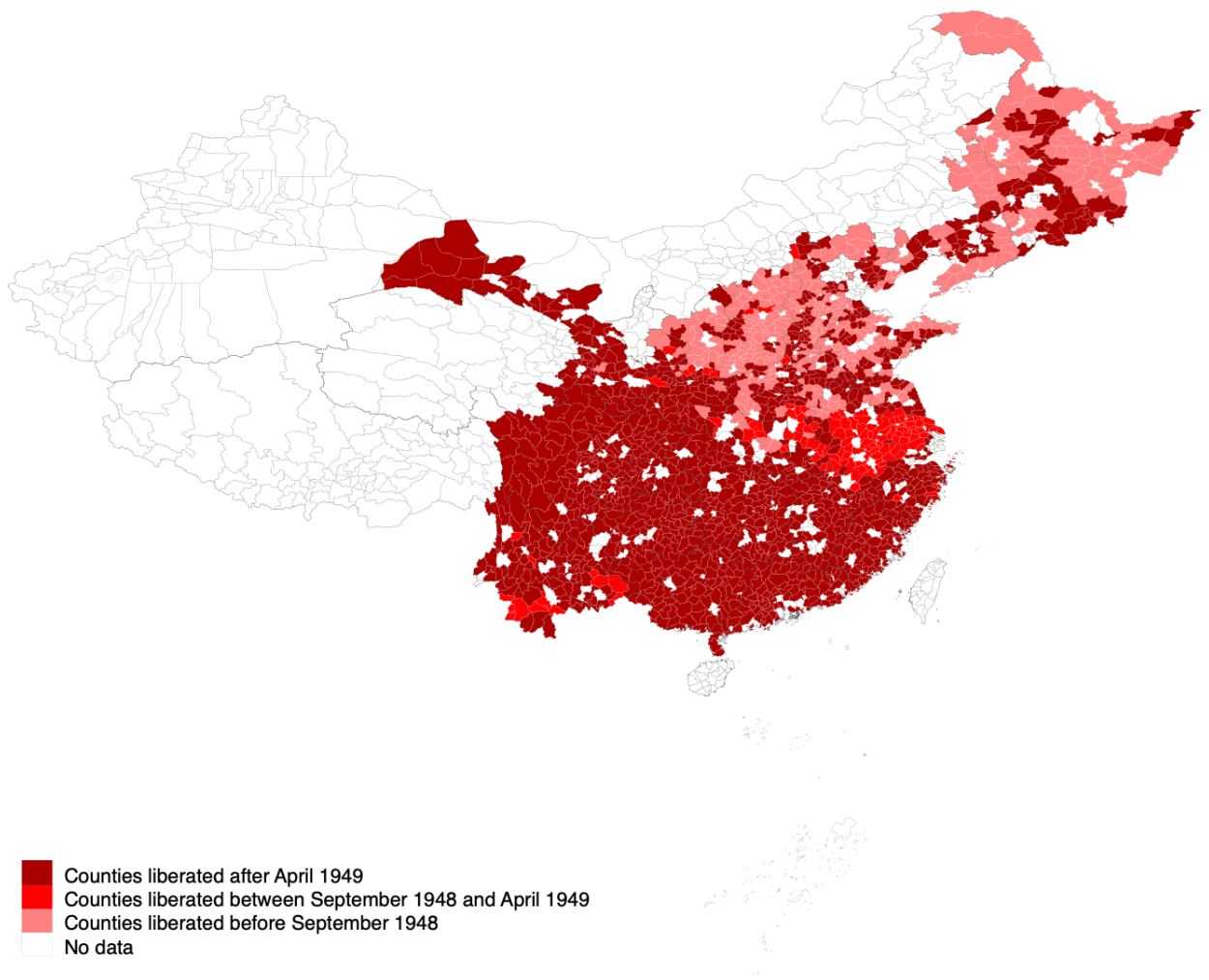


Figure B4: The Timing of Military Liberation

Notes: This graph depicts the year that each county came under CPC control. The sample consists of 901 counties across 12 provinces in Southern China. The 12 provinces are Anhui, Fujian, Guangdong, Guangxi, Guizhou, Hubei, Hunan, Jiangsu, Jiangxi, Sichuan, Yunnan, and Zhejiang. These counties were taken over by the principal armies of the CPC after the “Crossing-the-Yangtze-River-Campaign” in April 1949.

Data source: County gazetteers.