This curriculum guide, produced by the National Center for History in the Schools, is intended as a set of lessons to teach middle school students about the problems associated with land ownership, land redistribution, and agricultural organization by using China as a case study. As such, the guide serves as a valuable “real-life” episode, which has tremendous potential for informing students of one of the most crucial issues affecting governments worldwide, especially in the developing world. The curriculum is evidently to be introduced to students by way of a “dramatic moment,” which provides a clear visual and mental focus on the problems of land ownership in early twentieth-century China.

The curriculum guide is divided into four distinct lessons. Lesson One, entitled “Whoever Owns the Land, Eats,” focuses on the tremendous disparity in land ownership in China during the Qing Dynasty. Lesson Two, “Eating Bitterness, Speaking Bitterness,” focuses on the campaign by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to mobilize the peasantry to overthrow the feudal system. The third lesson presents two perspectives, one positive, one negative, regarding the move into the communes in the late 1950s. Finally, the last lesson examines the dismantling of the communal system after the reform program. Each lesson contains clear learning objectives, activities, and evaluation and assessment procedures.

The overall objective of the guide is to present to students the necessity of fair land distribution, and thus introduce students to important economic and political issues, and provide some criterion for making these sorts of decisions. Some minor objectives that are introduced through the lessons include understanding the use of primary and secondary sources and detecting bias in written sources. The guide largely achieves its primary objectives through interesting and informed activities and readings. There are three areas of critique, however, that ought to be noted by those attempting to use the materials in a classroom setting.
The first issue is that the guide suffers from a lack of careful editing. Many of the misspellings are inconsequential (i.e., “diphong” becomes “dipthing”), but at times, this lack of editing has more serious ramifications, particularly for teachers who might not know Chinese history well. For example, in a teacher background essay, the guide states that in the “iron rice bowl,” a worker could be fired. This is obviously a case of a missing “not,” but for a teacher who doesn’t know the difference, there will be certain confusion. In addition, the table of contents specifically states that chapter four will detail the return of capitalism, but a box in chapter four makes an emphatic point that the household responsibility system is not capitalism. This contradicts elements within the chapter itself that specifically refer to the rise of rural capitalism and enterprise. This lack of close editing diminishes the effectiveness of the guide, and forces teachers to rely on other materials in order to understand the issues.

A second, and more damaging, weakness is that the guide does not fulfill its goal of presenting balance in the materials. The authors do assemble a nice collection of essays, reminiscences, and narratives that portray both the negative as well as the positive side of China’s radical transformation, but the material presented errs in leaving out too much of the damning evidence against the forced collectivism. The Great Leap Forward, for example, is mentioned but never explained, along with the estimated thirty million deaths and the almost total disintegration of the rural economy that accompanied it. The policies of retribution, and the politics which necessitated it, are given little treatment that might make a teacher’s job much easier.

Further, the terminology of the curriculum guide undermines any real balance or critical distinction. The problem is that the authors wanted to demonstrate the necessity of the land reforms, and thus present a false dilemma between the inequities of Qing and KMT China and the utopian paradise of Mao. The real land reform policies of the KMT are ignored, and no other alternatives to the CCP’s program are presented for students, although they are given creative freedom to design their own program. This would be more effective, however, if they were given various models. This would also more effectively achieve the unit’s goal of understanding how land reform might work in other developing nations.

Another significant issue associated with the guide is that the material is somewhat dated. With a publication date of 1991, the guide was written before the very radical nature of the economic reforms became glaringly evident. In the past decade, China has sacrificed a significant amount of important material. The land reform and the more recent reform program requires quite a bit of explanation. Further, the terminology of the curriculum guide undermines any real balance or critical distinction. The problem is that the authors wanted to demonstrate the necessity of the land reforms, and thus present a false dilemma between the inequities of Qing and KMT China and the utopian paradise of Mao. The real land reform policies of the KMT are ignored, and no other alternatives to the CCP’s program are presented for students, although they are given creative freedom to design their own program. This would be more effective, however, if they were given various models. This would also more effectively achieve the unit’s goal of understanding how land reform might work in other developing nations.

However, little direction is given to teachers who might find it difficult to facilitate a discussion in this unfamiliar terrain. More focused discussion questions might prove beneficial to teachers without extensive background in modern China or economic organization. Discussion itself is also insufficient as a method of evaluation in that many students do not participate; generally, only the more vocal few are assessed. Several lessons have other types of evaluation, but these could use some improvement. Many of the evaluative mechanisms only ask for a peasant’s perspective, and provide little opportunity for critical evaluation of the land reform movement itself.

In summary, the curriculum guide uses a compelling case study to introduce students to the problems of land distribution. The guide’s weaknesses reflect the difficulty of this project, in that all of the necessary background material to truly understand both the land reform and the more recent reform program requires quite a bit of explanation. In an attempt to achieve brevity, the authors have sacrificed a significant amount of important material. Teachers who use the guide will find themselves well served to supplement the background material with more extensive analyses of the economic and political issues associated with the Chinese economy, and perhaps even narrative treatments of this significant period of world history.

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Editor’s Note:
If you are interested in obtaining either Early Chinese History or The People’s Republic of China, please call the National Center for History in the Schools at 310-825-4702.