

observations rather than from books, Mao highly valued the role of investigations, saying, 'No investigation, no right to speak'.

In his 1927 text, 'Report on an Investigation of the Peasant Movement in Hunan' ([Source 1](#)) Mao Zedong's observations sowed the seeds for what would become official Communist Party land reform policy after the revolution: imposing fines on corrupt landlords, prohibiting increases in rent, enforcing contributions to poor relief, parading landlords for public humiliation, incarcerating landlords, banishing them and in extreme cases, resorting to execution.



Source 2: Speaking Bitterness (诉苦) (Photograph)

The activity of 'Speaking Bitterness' or 诉苦 (suku) was a central element to land reform. In communist controlled areas, before the 1949 revolution, 'people's courts' were erected whereby tenant farmers could directly confront their former landlords and accuse them of crimes in the form of a public trial ([Source 2](#)). Sometimes these meetings were fairly civilised but often could turn violent, as landlords were spat on, insulted, beaten and even executed directly after the court session. For Guo Wu (2014), the act of public humiliation and transfer of collective power from rich to poor was perhaps more important than land redistribution itself:

'Before the masses became the true "masters of the house," they needed to eliminate the fear of landlords in their inner hearts, and the best move to achieve this was "to hold a grievance meeting," which allowed poor peasants to confront landlords as a collective, to right past wrongs, and to look to the future. In this sense, the cultural and symbolic meaning of Land Reform and speaking-bitterness campaigns overrode the substantial meaning of land redistribution.'

However, speaking bitterness was much more than an emotional means through which a peasant could enact revenge upon their former oppressors. Land Reform was centrally organised by committees in communist controlled areas. In many cases, the acts of speaking bitterness did not come directly from the wishes of peasants themselves but after the prompting of work teams who entered villages to supervise land reform. As Xiaobing Tang (2015) comments: 'The work team was itself a novel

stability. Such actions were also criticised by Mao Zedong himself as what became termed 'left deviation.' Agricultural production needed to be stimulated at the time which necessitated the smooth running of commerce and industry owned by landlords. This was just as much of an important goal of land reform as the principle of equality between peoples.



Source 5: A Landlord is executed near Fujiang, Xinjiang Province (1949)

According to Frank Dikotter (2017) 'The exact number of victims killed in land reform will never be known but it is unlikely to have been fewer than 1.5 to 2 million people from 1947 to 1952' (Source 5) Shanxi, where Kang Sheng who had formerly worked with the Soviet secret police and presided over land reform, was one of the provinces where the policy was pursued most enthusiastically. 'In some places, one out of five people was branded a landlord. In Shuo country, nobody dared utter a word when someone was denounced as rich because speaking out may lead to the potentially fatal accusation of 'shielding landlords'. Dikotter goes on to note, 'Families who owned even a pot of sugar or a buffalo to plough the fields could be denounced so that their possessions could be confiscated.' Hence, in certain areas of China land reform became completely arbitrary and out of control with several entirely innocent peasants falling victim to an indiscriminate crowd mentality.