

Farmers, Mao, and Discontent in China

From the Great Leap Forward to the Present

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There are widespread misconceptions about numerous aspects of the Chinese revolution. These include a misreading of the Great Leap Forward, the Cultural Revolution, and the “reforms” of the post-Mao era, and the reaction of the overwhelming mass of the peasantry to these movements. Although the revolutionary programs/movements resulted in significant hardships—on the rural population (the Great Leap Forward, 1958-61) or the intellectuals (the Cultural Revolution, 1966-76)—they both produced concrete achievements in the countryside that led to impressive gains in agricultural production and in people’s lives. In contrast, the post-Mao era “reforms” have resulted so far in a huge growth of inequality in China, with the rural population suffering greatly by the dismantling of public support for health and education. In addition, local and regional officials have sold farmland for development purposes, usually lining their own pockets, with inadequate compensation for the farmers. This has resulted in the current massive unrest in rural areas, involving literally hundreds of thousands of incidents with protesting farmers.¹

The Great Leap Forward

The Great Leap Forward, the second five-year plan of the Chinese revolution, was an attempt to develop rapidly both industry and agriculture. This was the period during which the communes were formed and some 600,000 “backyard,” small-scale steel furnaces were built to supply local

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needs all over the country. This was also the era of massive irrigation projects—local, regional, and national in scope—that were to result in impressive gains in crop yields in subsequent years. However, the extra work burden that necessitated increased food consumption by the rural population was not accompanied by sufficient enhanced calorie intake.

The current widespread rural, as well as urban, discontent in China is in sharp contrast to the relative absence of unrest during the Great Leap Forward, when grain shortages led to severe hunger in some parts of rural China as a result of harsh weather conditions and mismanagement by various governmental levels. There is considerable disagreement as to whether or not mass starvation occurred and, if it did, how many people died. Nevertheless, it is clear that significant hardships were created by grain shortages induced, at least partially, by the policies of the Great Leap Forward. However, during my research in rural China over the past twenty-five years—including extensive interviews with farmers in Jimo County in Shandong Province—I have not come across a single farmer who believed that Mao lost popularity because of the Great Leap Forward. Nor have I encountered any farmer who contemplated rising up against the government during the Great Leap Forward, or any literature mentioning that there were serious peasant protests during this period. (However, a significant number of farmers, particularly younger ones, express their willingness to join a rebellion now if there was one against the government.) And, as difficult as conditions may have been during the Great Leap Forward, farmers were apparently not too emaciated or too weak to build a large number of national, provincial, regional, and local irrigation projects.

The Communist Party and the People

The Party compared its relationship with the Chinese people to that of fish and water. The Communists argued that water (people) can live without fish (Communist Party members). But fish cannot live without water, thus stressing the importance of popular support for the success of the revolution. This special relationship between the Chinese Communists and the Chinese people was built through a long process of trial and error, not always without failures. And there were many failures during the Great Leap Forward, leading to attempts at rectification through the Socialist Education Campaign in 1964 and the Cultural Revolution in 1966.

The argument that people might not have other recourse except to engage in individual and everyday types of resistance (or coping) in the

social context of the Great Leap Forward seems convincing. Chinese farmers, like all other people, would not lightly rise to the serious undertaking of trying to overthrow the government. But between the choice of starving to death and rebellion, the choice should not be hard to make. If the death toll of millions claimed by the critics of the Great Leap Forward were true, then why would the Chinese farmers submit to death by slow starvation rather than rising up and giving themselves some hope of survival?

While civil society was disarmed throughout most of China's history, this did not prevent Chinese farmers from rising up time and again with whatever they had in their hands. The Chinese term *jiegan erqi* (rise up with bamboo sticks) was created to describe the peasant rebellion during the Qin dynasty in particular and other peasant rebellions in general when Chinese farmers, under the duress of social injustice, rose up, using anything they could lay their hands on as weapons. However, during the Great Leap Forward, the Chinese population was more armed than ever. That was the time when Mao called for large-scale organization of militia divisions (*daban minbingshi*). Young villagers in production teams were organized into militia platoons. In each production brigade there was a militia company. At the commune level, there were militia battalions. The department of military affairs in the county government was in charge of arming and training the militia. Chinese farmers worked in the fields with their rifles stacked nearby during the Great Leap Forward years.² How difficult would it have been for a farmer to pick up a rifle, shoot his or her leader and start a rebellion if that person so desired?

Past Accomplishments and Future Goals

There are a number of factors discussed below that led to acceptance and wide, active participation of farmers in the projects of the Great Leap Forward. One of the principal ones was that farmers knew that the projects were going to benefit them and their villages in the future. In addition, many farmers had received land and other assets during the land reform and felt a responsibility to the government. The majority of the Chinese farmers benefited from the revolution's land reform. For example, in Jimo County, the landlords and rich peasants, who accounted for 4 percent of the population, lost over 11,000 hectares (165,732 mu) of land, 33,524 houses, 2,441 horses and other farming animals, 4,377 pieces of farming implements, and 6,891,715 kilos of grain because of land reform. But at the same time, poor peasant

households, which accounted for 60 percent of the total population, got land, farming animals, and houses as a result of land reform.

Food Shortages

The Great Leap Forward got its name partly because of the unprecedented scale of its irrigation projects. These projects, which were designed to increase grain yield, contributed, ironically, to the short-term grain shortage of the Great Leap Forward.

Most agrarian societies work closely with the cycle of seasons. In Northern China, the seasonal cycle involves the following: a busy mid-spring planting season, followed by a less intense late spring and early summer season, followed by a busy mid-summer harvesting and planting season, followed again by a less intense late summer and early fall season, followed by a busy late fall harvesting and planting season, and finally by an idle winter and early spring season. In this region, fewer than three months are considered busy seasons, and the rest of the year is considered either a “slow” or “idle” season.

Until recently, rural households in China would budget their grain supplies according to the cycle of their work in the fields. They would eat more and better food when they had to work strenuously in the fields, and would eat much less and lower quality food during the slow and idle seasons. Most farmers in northern China would get up very late in winter and early spring, and go to bed very early at night to save energy. They only ate two meals a day, and the foods they ate were mostly porridge or sweet potatoes during the idle seasons. As a result, the food consumption was kept to a minimum during the winter and early spring seasons. During the busy seasons, when farmers had to engage in intensive manual labor, they would eat as much wheat or corn bread as they could possibly afford. As a result, the food consumption during these busy seasons could be three to four times higher than the idle and slow seasons.

The Great Leap Forward turned the idle and slow seasons of rural China into busy seasons. During the winter and spring of 1958, 1959, and 1960, rural people worked on building reservoirs, digging wells, dredging river bottoms, and building irrigation channels. There were national projects, provincial projects, regional projects, and local projects being built at the same time. Some of the more well-known examples of these projects are: the Shisanling Reservoir (The Ming Tombs Reservoir) in Beijing; the Hai River Project, which connected five major rivers in Northern China; the Yellow River Sanmenxia Project in Henan and Shanxi Province; and the Yellow River Liu Jiaxia Project. The world famous Red

Flag Irrigation Channel in Lin County, Henan was started during the Great Leap Forward and was not finished until ten years later.³

In Jimo County, Shandong Province, the farmers put in several million days of labor to build four medium-size reservoirs and several other irrigation projects: Shipeng Reservoir in the southern part of Jimo County; Wangquan Reservoir in the central part; Songhuaquan Reservoir in the midwestern part; Yecheng Reservoir in the west; and the Chahe Irrigation Project in the north.

Apart from these big projects, there were also numerous minor projects launched by communes and villages in Jimo County. Among these were the Xiazhang Reservoir in Wangcun Commune; the Fangjia Reservoir in Woli Commune; and the Yushitou Reservoir in Duncun Commune. In 1959, Jimo County also dug, for the first time, thirty-three big and deep electric-powered irrigation wells.

There were undoubtedly very severe management problems during the Great Leap Forward. People were being asked to participate in physically demanding projects, but were not consistently provided with sufficient extra food rations. Without these gigantic irrigation projects, there would probably not have been any starvation in Jimo; the grain shortage and the aftermath would have been much less severe. It was, at the very least, overzealous to engage in such a gigantic investment of labor in such a short time and without sufficient food rations. Clearly, Jimo County government leaders were guilty of miscalculation and mismanagement of human and financial resources during the Great Leap Forward.

Looking back, the leaders might blame the fervid social environment created by the central government or the pressure they received for more and quicker results from their higher-ups in the provincial or central governments. The slogan of the time was: “*duo kuai hao sheng de jianshe shehuizhuyi*” (build up socialism in a faster, better, and more economic manner). But, at the grassroots level, leaders were supposed to know their local conditions better than the upper-level government, and they were ultimately responsible for the lives of the local people.

While we can fault the county leaders' management, we cannot fault their intentions. There was a general consensus among local government leaders, local community leaders, and ordinary farmers that enhanced irrigation was needed in order to improve crop yields. Therefore, most farmers saw the connections between these irrigation projects and a better life for themselves in the near future. Even though they went through a great deal of hardship in constructing these projects at the

time, farmers said they could not deny the fact that the purpose was to make their lives better in the future. This contrasts sharply with farmers' attitudes toward many massive projects from earlier eras, such as when they were drafted to build palaces for the elite.

Farmers' Means of Coping

We know that many farmers engaged in individual acts of coping during the Great Leap Forward, such as “*moyanggong*” (pretend to work but actually not working), and *chiqing* (eating green crops before they matured). As someone who worked on a collective farm for many years, *moyanggong* and *chiqing* appear to me to be a necessary part of dealing with daily life during the Great Leap Forward, rather than individual forms of resistance against government policies or officials. What else could people do, when they were exhausted from hard work but did not feel it was right to stop working completely while others worked on? It was appropriate to engage in *moyanggong* as a way of taking a break, and other farmers understood.

Chiqing was another accepted and widespread practice during the Great Leap Forward, necessitated by the long working hours and short supplies of food. Farmers ate whatever they could lay their hands on to satisfy their hunger, not to demonstrate their anger or resistance to the government's policies and officials. When I was working on a collective farm after the Great Leap Forward, it was an acceptable practice to eat a limited amount of green wheat, green corn, tender sweet potatoes and tender peanuts, turnips, and cabbages. We sometimes cooked green corn, soybeans, and even sweet potatoes in the fields. Farmers in Shandong called this *shao pohuo* (build a small fire in the field). Afterwards, we would start a game of *chi yao mohui* (trying to darken each other's face with our blackened hands). Boys tried that with girls, and girls tried that with boys. Production team leaders engaged in this game with ordinary villagers, as well. Without understanding the social context of these practices, it is easy to see them as everyday resistance.

Societal Support for Farmers

The social climate of the time also helped farmers make the connection between these irrigation projects and a better future. The government gave great attention to rural areas during the Great Leap Forward—the whole nation and Party members were told they should help agriculture, rural areas, and farmers. It was a common practice for local government, office and factory workers, army units,

and high school and college students to come to help farmers during the busy seasons.

An old farmer I interviewed in Henan told me with great fondness how excited he and his fellow farmers were to see the nationally famous artists who came to perform for them on the irrigation sites during Great Leap Forward. He said that their work hours were long, and the food they ate was not particularly good. But the farmers persisted, because Chairman Mao and the government cared about farmers. "These artists," he said: "were sent to us by Chairman Mao." He heard these words from the artists at the time. Forty years later, he used these same words as his own. Only in Mao's China, would nationally famous artists perform for farmers at an irrigation site.

Post-Mao publications branded these initiatives by the government to send artists and intellectuals to work with farmers and workers as part of the Maoist persecution of intellectuals. But these government initiatives served to enhance national solidarity and spirit. Farmers who were at the bottom of Chinese society acquired a sense of importance and empowerment when government officials, professors, and college students were working side by side with them. Mao and other national leaders worked on the Shisanling Reservoir on May 25, 1958, giving rise to waves of government officials participating in this kind of activity.⁴ On October 11, 1959, 12,000 college and high school students and professors from Qingdao City came to Jimo to help with fall harvesting and planting. In September 1960, 28,000 students and teachers from Qingdao City came to Jimo to help with harvesting and planting.

Another factor that helps explain the Chinese farmers' behavior and attitude during the Great Leap Forward was the personal behavior of the leaders. From his recently published memoirs, we know that, once Communist Party Chairman Mao Zedong realized the difficult situation of rural China during the Great Leap Forward, he gave up eating meat. He also refused to act upon the suggestions of people around him that he should allow his daughters to get a little more food. Some might argue that it was not a major sacrifice for Mao to give up his pork when hundreds of thousands of farmers were suffering because of his questionable policies and mismanagement. But most farmers at the time could not possibly know what Mao did or did not do. What farmers did know at the time was the behavior of county, commune, and village leaders.

Leadership by Local Officials

Farmers in Jimo believed that the quality of national leaders is defined by the quality of grassroots officials (*guojia lingdai ren de pingde cong difang guanyuan de pingde zhong biao xian chulai*). During the Great Leap Forward, Jimo County leaders, including the head leader, County Party Secretary Xu Hua, Head of County government, Li Anshi, and other county government leaders, were busily traveling around the county to work with people at irrigation project sites. Each county and commune leader assumed responsibility for at least one village. Leaders came to visit and work in the “home” village regularly; villagers knew them and they knew the villagers well. More importantly, they ate the same food with ordinary villagers at their homes, and always paid the standard cost for the meals, which was often higher than the real value of the food. Song Wenying, who hosted the commune leaders a few times, said that Wang Shuchun, who was the head of Chengguan Commune Government, came to his village frequently. At lunchtime, he would eat at villagers’ houses randomly. At the time, farmers ate mostly sweet potatoes, and Wang Shuchun would eat the same food with them. After the meal he would leave thirty cents and a three-liang grain coupon for his meal.

Indeed, most village leaders during the Great Leap Forward were actively present in the daily lives of the people. They worked at the construction sites with the villagers most of the time, and ate the same kind of food as the ordinary villagers.

Maqiao Village Party Secretary, Wu Changxing, worked with farmers on the irrigation sites day and night during the Great Leap Forward. He refused to eat more than anybody else, and in the end he died of a combination of exhaustion and malnutrition—the only person to die on the construction site from Maqiao village. Other people driven by hunger began eating green crops, but he felt that, as a Chinese Communist Party (CCP) member and the village party secretary, he could not lower himself to that level. Other people could cheat a little by taking longer bathroom breaks, but he felt that, as a leader, he had to be a role model for others. Wu Changxing left two children behind, and villagers in Maqiao took very good care of his children, out of their respect for their honest and hardworking leader.

In September 1960, with students, professors, and others, 2,100 provincial and city officials also came to work with farmers in Jimo. Most farmers I interviewed in Jimo were pleased to see government officials working side by side with them. “We were so happy to see officials of the people’s government and urban intellectuals eat the same food and do

the same job with us. We felt close bonds with them at the time.” This often overlooked aspect of Chinese society and politics is an important factor behind people’s high morale during the Great Leap Forward.

During this period, most people were skinny, and the county and commune leaders were as skinny as everybody else. Based on their body size, it was almost impossible to tell these leaders apart from ordinary farmers. “County Party Secretary Xu,” Zhang Yingfa, a farmer from South River, said, “was as tall as I was, but he was definitely thinner than I was when he came to work with us in the village.” This, again, was sharp contrast with the traditional image of Chinese officials. Farmers said that it was very hard to perceive these Communist officials as oppressors and bad people. They simply did not arouse anger among farmers. This does not mean that there were not many bad and corrupt local officials at the time. But in the eyes of many rural people today, Mao’s officials were drastically different from the “younger and more educated” crop of Chinese government officials of the later “reform” era, who came to the village only in cars, and ate lavish banquets at the expense of the villagers. An important factor in preventing peasant rebellion during a period of severe hardship was the leadership style and personal integrity of the Communist officials.

There were very few differences in wealth or background between local leaders and the people being led. The village leaders of the 1950s understood the poor villagers much better than their preceding and succeeding counterparts in Chinese history. This understanding was a strength for the Communist Party, and it played a significant role in preventing government decay during the aftermath of Great Leap Forward. Farmers are likely to follow village leaders that come from the same socio-economic background as the overwhelming majority of villagers, and demonstrate concern for their needs. Mao became the great leader of Chinese people exactly because he was able to see the revolutionary potential of peasant leaders. It was these peasants and peasant leaders who accomplished the fundamental goals of the Chinese revolution and rejuvenated Chinese society.

During the Socialist Education Campaign of 1964, following the Great Leap Forward, many local village leaders were charged with petty corruption and misdemeanors, such as eating more than their fair share of food, stealing small amounts of money from the collective purse, and dividing a small amount of grain among themselves during the Great Leap Forward. In the eyes of the Communist Party, which demanded that its members suffer hardships first and enjoy benefits last (*chi ku zai qian, xiangshou zai hou*), this kind of devious behavior could not be allowed. But judging by

today's standards, or the standards of traditional China, the village leaders' corruption was minor. It is natural that, amid a grain shortage, people who were closer to the food would eat a little more in order to survive.

From the Cultural Revolution to Rural "Reforms"

In light of the widespread minor corruption among village leaders during the Great Leap Forward, one of the important goals of the Cultural Revolution was to empower ordinary villagers to participate in village politics.⁵ Village leaders' authority was greatly curbed as a result of the empowerment of ordinary villagers during this period, and local government became more legitimate in the eyes of people than during the Great Leap Forward. The central, provincial, regional, county, and commune governments gave a great amount of attention to agriculture, rural areas, and farmers. Many farmers were selected to participate in all levels of government. Officials were urged to work with farmers, and the urban population was urged to support the rural people. Seventeen million urban, educated youth were sent to live and work in rural areas during the Cultural Revolution years. Consequently, in the eyes of the farmers, the government cared about them.⁶

Contemporary Rural Unrest

Chinese media was filled with success stories about the rural reform ever since Deng Xiaoping's government started the "reforms" in the early 1980s. Chinese and western scholars basically echoed the Chinese government's claims about the successes of the rural reforms. According to the official story, crop yields increased dramatically, and farmers' income rose significantly. (Crop yields *did* increase, partially because of the irrigation projects, crop breeding, and fertilizer factories built during the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution.) People who studied rural China postulated that the increase of grain yields was due to change from collective to private farming. It is also true that China has not experienced any serious natural disasters in the last twenty-five years that have had widespread effects on agricultural production, and farmers have in their possession more grain than ever before. In the villages I visited in Henan and Shandong Provinces, most rural families have around 1 to 1.5 metric tons (two or three thousand jin) of grain stored in their houses, which would usually be sufficient for two years' consumption.

According to the standard view, the rural revolts occurring in China today are hard to explain. In 2001, Yu Jianrong's *Politics in Yue Village* was published, documenting contemporary rural protests in Hunan Province.

In 2004, Chen Guili and Chun Tao reported Chinese farmers' anger at the government policies and CCP official conduct in rural China. (These writings made a big stir in China, because they caused a major lawsuit.) In fall 2004, two huge protests in Sichuan Province involving hundreds of thousands farmers shocked the world. In one incident, over one hundred thousand farmers surrounded local government buildings for three days; over a dozen police cars were set on fire, and the government sent over one hundred thousand armed police to pacify the crowd. In the other incident, the angry crowd held the Provincial Governor hostage for a few days. Since then, nobody has doubted that the Chinese government faces a serious crisis in the rural areas.

There has been a major shift in farmers' perceptions of the CCP from the time of the Great Leap Forward and Cultural Revolution. As discussed above, farmers then viewed the CCP and local, regional, and national officials as working in their best interests. But when I first interviewed farmers in Jimo regarding their reaction to rural reorganization in 1982, the most common response was that *gongchandang bu guan women la* (the Communist Party does not care about us anymore). "Women jiuyao cheng moniangde haozila" (we are going to become orphans) one farmer told me at the time. This simple answer is pregnant with many implications. It means that some farmers considered the government's collective farming policy as an indicator that the Communist Party cared about their livelihood. But, as a result of the rural "reforms," the government could not be seen as being on their side—it could, at best, be regarded as neutral. This change in the farmers' perception of CCP policies and actions, together with a change in leadership styles of Communist officials at various levels of government, have had a huge impact on farmers' perception of and interactions with the state.

Privatization, Corruption, Inequality, and Crime

In the process of rural reorganization, some collectively owned means of production ended up in the hands of former village leaders. In Jimo County, most collectively owned village industrial enterprises were first contracted to the managers and then sold to them. The village factory I managed before I went to college in 1978 was sold to its subsequent manager, Liu Dunxiao. In less than twenty years, Liu and his family acquired assets of over 200 million yuan (about US\$30 million). Liu's younger brother, with his help, controls the public transportation system in the county, and has assets of hundreds of millions yuan as well. The same process has transferred many state and collectively owned enterprises

to private ownership by a system based on cronyism. The Chinese people now refer to this process as the original sin of the Chinese capitalist class that has arisen since the mid-1980s. This acquisition of collectively owned or state-owned assets was unconstitutional and illegal. It also violated the sense of social justice widely held by Chinese farmers. One capitalist told me in an interview that most of the Chinese capitalist class had a criminal beginning, which is like a sword hanging over their heads. Many villagers now call into question the political legitimacy of the government that has encouraged the criminal acquisition of collectively owned property and state-owned means of production.

Since the rural reforms, the different levels of government no longer organize large-scale irrigation projects in China, and the presence of the government in farmers' lives has become minimal. Township governments now do only two things: collect the grain tax and enforce the family planning policies. Farmers believe that the township government only wants money (tax) and lives (family planning) from them (*yao qian he yao ming*). They do not believe that the township government does anything positive for them.

The retreat of the national government from rural areas is considered progressive by the liberal free market economic mindset. It appears that the state is giving society in general, and rural people in particular, the power to take control of their own livelihood. Farmers should have welcomed the rural reorganization. But the reality is more complicated.

During the collective era, commune leaders lived in the rural areas where they worked. They would come to the village on bikes. Today, the township government leaders are more educated and do not want to live in rural areas. They have built luxurious, western-style houses in the county government seats. Therefore, the township government has to buy a car for each of the top four government officials: township party secretary, deputy party secretary, township government head, and deputy township government head. They also need drivers to chauffeur them to work every day. Because they do not have much to do, they are often bored. Therefore, they visit restaurants and entertainment facilities. "Rural restaurants in the surrounding areas," one farmer said, "have begun to provide *xiaojie* services (prostitutes) because township government leaders want them."

As expenditures of the township government increase, the ways to extract money from farmers multiply, now that the agricultural tax has been eliminated. Many township governments use family planning as a way to get money from farmers. In order to get a permit to have a child,

farmers have to bribe the village and township government officials. Some township and village leaders sell birth permits to farmers who have money. In some places, local officials even encourage rich farmers to have more children so that they can get “fines” from them. In such a social context, farmers question the political legitimacy of the central government, as well as county and village officials. Another way of making money is the confiscation of land by local and regional officials, who then sell the land at a profit for “development,” without adequately compensating the farmers—thus adding greatly to the rural ferment.

The change in farmers’ perception of government legitimacy and official conduct has transformed farmers’ interaction with the state. Interviewees in South River village, Jimo County, told me that farmers refused to storm the unguarded government granaries adjacent to their village during the grain shortage of the Great Leap Forward. But now, they have begun to engage in all kinds illegal and illicit activities. Several villagers have been in prison for stealing at markets and from other villagers. They fight with the tax collectors. In one incident, two brothers beat up a tax collector, and ended up in prison for two years.

Some daring individuals organized a gang of thieves, stealing on a large scale. They have built a network with collaborators in the big cities, who identify targets: mostly homes of corrupt officials and rich business owners. They come to the big city, commit their crimes with precision, and then return to their village to divide the spoils with their urban collaborators. This way, they are able to live a “good life,” and reduce the risk of being caught. Most people, even the local police, know how these people make their living.

Another group of villagers have organized a secret society that engages in smuggling and provides assassins for hire. They will kill or hurt people for the right price. Some of these farmers, who were timid and obedient during the Great Leap Forward, hard working but aggressively demanding during the Cultural Revolution, have become bandits, thieves, and thugs during the reform period.

Chinese society during the Great Leap Forward and Cultural Revolution was relatively poor. People barely had enough to eat and wear. But many farmers remember that time with fondness. There was a general equality of condition, very little corruption, very few crimes, no drugs and no prostitution

Today, most people in rural China have become more affluent. In Jimo County, the primary area of my research, some people have a lot of money. A number of households claim to own millions. But, at the

same time, people's lives are filled with crime, corruption, prostitution, drug abuse—and there is a huge gap between the rich and poor.

Government Response to Rural Conditions and Unrest

The Chinese government has begun to admit, for the first time since the rural reform of the 1980s, that it faces a serious, three-fold crisis regarding agriculture, rural areas, and farmers (*san nong wenti*). Scholars and government officials have started to discuss the crisis openly. Yu Jianrong's *Yucun Politics* (*Yuecun Zhengzhi*) describes an incident in Hunan, in which over ten thousand farmers stormed the township government building. A sixty-two-year-old farmer broke six government signs, quoting Mao Zedong's words: "rebellion is justified." Cheng Guili and Chun Tao, in their *Zhongguo Nongmin Diaocha* (*Investigating Chinese Farmers*), record numerous cases of official oppression against farmers.

The number one Central Government directive in 2004 was aimed at increasing the rural population's income. To this end, the Chinese government, by the summer of 2006, had completely eliminated agricultural taxes for the rural population.

However, the crisis that the Chinese government faces in rural China is not simply an issue of increasing farmers' income. It is a very complex issue, involving government legitimacy, official conduct, and many other issues. While many people applaud the Chinese government's elimination of agricultural taxes, this action is more sensational than effective, and may even be dangerous. The elimination of the agriculture taxes further weakens government presence in rural areas. But rural China today needs a stronger, not weaker, government presence. The rural areas need the government to provide free education and medical care. Farmers need the government to protect them from greedy developers—backed by local officials—who grab farmers' land. Rural China needs progressive taxing—taxing the rich to protect the weak and poor. Simply eliminating all taxes leads to more corruption, as local officials devise other ways to gain income.

The Chinese central government has blamed local officials for the problems in rural China. Similarly, the Chinese media has made the township government officials the scapegoats for the rising problems in rural China. Chinese scholars in the West also tend to blame the local officials for the rising tension between government and farmers in China. One of the township government officials I interviewed told me he felt that it was both easy and dangerous to use township government officials as scapegoats: they are the symptom, not the cause

of the problem, which is systemic, and much deeper than the central government realizes. Scapegoating township government officials will only conceal the real problem and lead to more social disturbances. And, once the rural people rise up, they will not think carefully about whom to rise up against. That is the nature of popular riots.

Looking Back at Mao

After the Third Plenary Meeting of the CCP Eleventh Central Committee (December 1978) passed the resolution to criticize Mao's mistakes during the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution, the Chinese media, controlled by anti-Mao elites, have not hesitated to publish books and articles denouncing the Great Leap Forward as well as the Cultural Revolution. For the last thirty years, anti-Mao, anti-Great Leap Forward, and anti-Cultural Revolution sentiments have dominated Chinese intellectual discourse. However, many people have written their own memoirs under the auspices of the Chinese Political Consultation Committee, in an effort to gather cultural and historical memoirs of the Great Leap Forward. In essence, these authors—whose essays directly contradict the official denunciations—have protested the “rewriting of the history” by Mao's opponents.

In December 2006, Deng Pufang responded to a Reuters reporter, saying that the Cultural Revolution brought disaster not only to himself and his family but also to the Chinese nation. However, this almost routine characterization of the era triggered an avalanche of comments from the Chinese people, eliciting, in little more than a month, over 35,000 Internet objections. The overwhelming majority of these comments praised Mao's contribution to the Chinese people and criticized the serious consequences caused by the reform measures Deng Xiaoping introduced. Some people commented that the new elite should “stop lying about Chairman Mao. People are waking up, and it is no longer possible to deceive people with lies about Chairman Mao.” Many said that “history is written by the people, not by the elites.” For many Chinese, “Chairman Mao worked for Chinese people all his life, and he continues to live in the people's heart.” It seems that the efforts of government and elite to discredit Mao's legacies have backfired, with significant implications for Chinese politics in the future.

How is it possible to explain the high esteem in which Mao—long after his death—is held among many Chinese people, despite the official and semi-official onslaught on his legacy and image?⁷ Chinese elites and Mao's enemies have produced numerous publications to

discredit Mao. But if the sufferings and brutalities allegedly imposed on the Chinese farmers by Mao's government were true, the farmers would have known them, first hand. Why do so many farmers still hang Mao's picture in their houses, and hold his memories dear, and, in some places, build temples to worship him?

These farmers remind me of my U.S. colleagues and students, who came to China with me for my college's worldwide experience courses. The long lines outside Mao's Mausoleum on Tiananmen Square always surprised them. The workers and farmers who lost the benefits they received under Mao's socialist policies came to show respect to their leader, often with tears in their eyes. This is another indicator of Mao's continuing popularity among the Chinese working class.

Conclusion

How does one explain the change in state and society interaction from the Great Leap Forward and Cultural Revolution to the reform era? Mencius once said: *Yi shi dao shi min, sui ku er bu yuan, yi sheng dao sha ren, sui si er bu yuan* (the people will not complain if the ruler employs the people with good intention, and people will not complain if the ruler causes the people to die with the intention to ensure their survival). That means that, when a government is considered legitimate, and official conduct resonates with that legitimacy, people will follow government policies and endure hardship. Thus, the government will survive tough challenges and difficulties. However, when government legitimacy is in question, or official conduct is repugnant, people will be less likely to follow government policies, and, when crises arise, will be more likely to rebel. The large amount of peasant unrest in China today is the result of a loss of government legitimacy. To reverse this trend, the government needs to do more than simply increase farmers' income.

The Chinese Government can curb official corruption in the rural areas in two ways. It can resurrect the Communist Party's self-criticism and disciplinary mechanism of the old days, in which party leaders and ordinary party members hold regular meetings to examine their own behavior, according to Party policies and regulations. At the same time, the government can empower ordinary farmers by encouraging them to criticize government officials and policies by different means, including big character posters, which were widely used during the Great Leap Forward and Cultural Revolution, and have proven effective in curbing official corruption. More importantly, the government needs to select

more farmers to government positions, and encourage local officials to live and work with farmers whenever possible.

The gap between rich and poor has become a huge problem in China, particularly in the rural areas, and has caused many serious social problems, such as the increase of crime. Too big a gap between the rich and poor will tear the society apart and threaten China's stability. More egalitarian practices will enhance China's internal coherence and enable the country to deal more effectively with its challenges.

Notes

1. The extent of rural protests in China is rarely reported in a coherent fashion in the Western media. But, according to the Chinese news agency Xinhua story published in *People's Daily* ("China grapples with thorny issue of rural land rights," http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/200609/01/eng20060901_298824.html), there were "87,000 protests, riots and other 'mass incidents'" related to land loss in 2005, up 6 percent from 2004, and 50 percent from 2003. Thus, in these three years alone, there were well over 100,000 such actions! The article points out, "Once the backbone of the Communist Party of China, which won widespread support in the countryside six decades ago on protecting the rights of farmers who joined its fight to overthrow the landlord class, many Chinese farmers now feel alienated from their own land, formerly the fruits of the revolution." In the seven years before the January 2006 story was written, some 6.7 million hectares of farmland (5 percent of all of China's farmland) had been converted into other uses—roads, factories, etc. People are also protesting industrial pollution of air, water, and soil. In 2007, the last year that the Chinese government released data on "mass incidents," protests involving over one hundred people, there were 80,000 such incidents.

2. New China News Agency: "National Militia Work Conference was held in Beijing on February 8, to Discuss and Study the Experiences and

Accomplishments of Large Scale Organization of Militia Divisions since 1958." Zhonghua renmin gongheguo dashiji, *The Chronology of People's Republic of China*, (Beijing: Xinhua Press, 1982), 282.

3. *The Chronology of People's Republic of China*, 209, vol. one (Beijing: Xinhua Press, 1982), 210-14.

4. *The Chronology of People's Republic of China*, 209, vol. one, 208.

5. For a detailed discussion of change and progress in rural areas during the Cultural Revolution, see Dongping Han, *The Unknown Cultural Revolution: Life and Change in a Chinese Village* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2008).

6. See Dongping Han, "Hukou System and China's Rural Development," *Journal of Developing Areas*, Spring 1999, and "Impact of the Cultural Revolution on Rural Education and Economic Development," *Modern China* 27, no. 1, January 2001.

7. Jacob Heibrunn, "Mao More than Ever," *New Republic*, April 21, 1997, 20; and Orville Schell, "Once Again, Long Live Chairman Mao," *Atlantic*, December 1992, 32.



All sociology worthy of the name is "historical sociology." It is, in Paul Sweezy's excellent phrase, an attempt to write "the present as history."

—C. Wright Mills, *The Sociological Imagination*, 146

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